



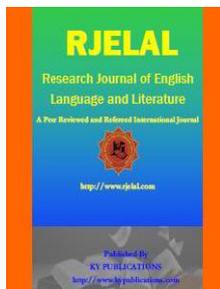
## THE PLACE OF LITERARY AND IMAGINATIVE NARRATIVES IN ESL/EFL CLASSROOMS

INAYAT SHAH

Lecturer, UNIR

Faculty of English and Language Studies, Sohar University

Oman



### ABSTRACT

The aim of this review article is to recognize the potential of imaginative or life-based literary narratives in understanding issues of language, culture, and identity in the context of growing multiculturalism and simultaneously supporting language teachers and students to develop the ability and the desire to work with diverse others in a classroom setting. In English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes a frequently occurring phenomenon and problematic issue for both teachers and students is to comprehend the cultural diversity and to familiarize themselves and others to an environment which might seem foreign to both of them. The present paper is a reflective approach of the researcher that takes a profound insight into the narrative of Hoffman's exile experience, and connects those experiences with the theoretical issues related to second-language acquisition, cultural assimilation and the question of identity development. With a particular focus on language, multiculturalism and identity, the researcher proposes the use of life-based literary narratives written by the significant others. The purpose of selecting such kind of narratives is to involve students and teachers in the lives of others in a completely different environment and to make them feel, understand and comprehend the process of how the authors and the characters struggle with new languages, cultures, and consequently form their new identities.

**Key words:** Language, Culture, Narratives, Identity, ESL/EFL

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On the first day of 'Narrative Contribution in Applied Linguistics' class at DLLL at York University, Toronto, the first assignment given to the students by the professor was to read and discuss Eva Hoffman's magnum opus 'Lost in Translation' (1989). I believe the professor assigned this task to students to develop their understanding about the potential and possibilities that a literary narrative may have for teachers and students alike. The book provides an insight into the experiences of Eva Hoffman, a daughter of Holocaust survivors. In

the book she has created a nuanced portrayal of her life as a Jewish teenage girl - exiled from Poland to North America - as she struggled to find her place, and express who she was in an English-speaking world. Hoffman spent her early years in Cracow, Poland. At the age of 13, she emigrated with her family from Poland to Canada, where she initially lost her sense of place and belonging. Her experience of exile became more complex in college in Texas, where she realized that she was among people who were hostile to her foreignness. Later,

at Harvard, Hoffman found herself alienated not only from her fellow students, but also from her parents, who had difficulty comprehending who she was becoming. Her sense of foreignness was compounded by encounters with childhood friends who had left Poland to grow up in Israel rather than in Canada or the United States.

Reading Hoffman's narrative and thinking that the professor had selected this work as a proper commencement of the course, I started thinking about the importance and efficacy of literary narratives in ESL or EFL classes. Since in her narrative Hoffman portrays the emotional cost and the losses entailed in learning a second language and culture, I also started thinking that learning to speak a new language involves more than acquiring the language, it involves the reinvention of self - a self that is divided, yet enriched by the exile experience.

In the above context the purpose of this written piece is to explore the use of literary narratives in teaching multicultural education in ESL and EFL programs. The purpose of this article is also to understand the potential of imaginative or life-based literary narratives to explore issues of language, culture, and identity in relation to multiculturalism to assist teachers and students to develop the ability and, more importantly, the desire to work with diverse others. In ESL and EFL classes the most common and problematic issue for both teachers and students is to understand the cultural diversity and to acclimatize in an environment which might appear alien to both of them. As I delved into the narrative of Hoffman's exile experience, and reflected on theoretical issues related to second-language acquisition, cultural assimilation, the question of identity development became more evident. Similarly, in her narrative, Hoffman reflects on her experiences and questions the consequences that result from assimilation. Hoffman takes her own exile experience and humanizes it to such a degree that it becomes relevant to the lives of a wide group of readers. Taking her example, I think the life based literary narratives can provide a safe refuge and understanding into the experiences of different people from different cultures- hence the potential

of using literary narratives in promoting multiculturalism in ESL classrooms.

The teaching of literary narratives is the point where language, literacy, culture and cognition intersect. So scholarly discussions about the "teachings of foreign literatures are inevitably connected with the humanistic outlook associated with foreign language study" (Kramsch & Kramsch 2000, 253). Citing Bourdieu (1993), Kramsch, et al. (2000) suggest that the teaching of foreign literatures not only intersects with the social and political history of nation-states and their symbolic cultural capital, it also intertwines with and "is indissociable from other relevant aspects of language study, in particular the teaching of reading and writing, and the teaching of culture" (253). Kramsch et al. (2000), Geok-lin Lim (2003), Tannenbaum (2003) and Steinman (2005) also argue for the inclusion of what is called life-based literary narratives to bring experiential qualities to multicultural theories and to develop students' narrative imagination - the ability to reflect on experience, question assumptions, and actively empathize with others. In the similar context, Geok-lin Lim et al. (2003, 2005) have developed the term life-based literary narratives as a catch phrase for memoirs, autobiographies, and novels that focus on the intimate, daily experiences of diverse families, parents, students, and teachers. They use life-based literary narratives to bring multicultural theoretical literature to life; to engage students in an experience of the lives of "others" - communities, families and students, different from themselves. For Benson (2004) and Steinman (2005) life-based literary narratives tend to foster critical self-examination in students of who they are and how they live and relate to others. This is particularly important, I feel, for students who have grown up and been educated by and with people much like themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status and are studying a foreign language while interacting with foreigners. Kramsch et al. (2000) have already propounded that literary narratives are "the uncontested source discipline for the teaching of modern languages" (254). For them the goal of teaching literary narratives is to enable students to learn to listen to and hear the stories of

others, to experience lives different from their own, not through abstract reasoning, but through developing emotions and empathic understanding, through examining hearts and minds. Literary narratives promise in assisting students to envision multicultural education as a transformative process for social justice and to see themselves as agents of social and educational change.

Similarly, Multiculturalism has been described as the key educational issue of our epoch. Issues of diversity are central to mainstream schooling; educational policy; academic organizations; and, more recently, programming in colleges and universities. To meet requirements for understanding diversity, Doyle (1997), Phillion & Ming (2004) substantiate that many universities have established interdisciplinary courses on multiculturalism. Harper (1988) as cited in Kramsch (2000) suggests that literary narratives' very literariness provides space for learners to voice their responses to the texts they read. Indeed there has been much concern for the learners to develop skills necessary for interacting with literary texts, allowing them to "express, negotiate, and refine personal interpretations" (267) within an atmosphere of mutual respect. Drawing on schema theory and discourse analysis, Kramsch (2005) shows how whole class brainstorming, small group work, and pair work could help students construct and negotiate the appropriate schemata of understanding, on the basis of which they could then interpret the text in its discursive and aesthetic structure.

Many teacher education programs meet this requirement by offering courses in multicultural education. The question of how to teach multicultural education, and for what purpose, is much debated in the research literature. Overall, many researchers (Doyle 1997, Kramsch et al. 2000 Phillion & Ming 2004, Steinman 2005) agree that it is necessary to prepare teachers that are multiculturally competent and can meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations to achieve social justice. Literary narratives have been identified as a means to prepare teachers for the diversity and complexity of classrooms.

Literary Narratives also provide an appropriate source to enhance multiculturalism in ESL and EFL classrooms. Multicultural courses designed to address these gaps often fail to do so and in fact, can reinforce stereotypes held by students. This is because universities appear to be as much a part of the problem as a part of the solution. Although much of the research done on multicultural teacher education classes and what benefits students' understanding of multicultural issues is inconclusive, course work may be most successful when it builds on life experience given in a literary narrative (Tannenbaum 2003). Some narrative researchers (Phillion et al. 2004, Coulter, et al. 2007 Xu, et al. 2009) who focus on understanding experience indicate that there is a break point in multicultural classes, where students initially resistant to ideas of racism and inequality begin to connect issues with their own lives and to engage in discussions openly from the heart. It is to reach the break point that the teachers need to work with students not only at a cognitive level, but also at an emotional level. To address the issue, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest that as educators and researchers should use a narrative approach that focuses on understanding the experiences of their own selves, others, and themselves in relation to others, and by doing that the teacher practitioners can feel it is important that their students experience diversity to engage in these conversations. It is through developing narrative and literary imagination that students will be able to learn to listen to and hear the stories of other students, to enter the realities of others' lives often dramatically different from their own, not through abstract reasoning, but through developing their emotions and empathic understanding, through examining their hearts as well as their minds. Literary imagination is what makes empathy possible. It is what enables the students to cross the empty spaces between themselves and those others. In the Life-based literary narratives students experience the lives of diverse communities, families, and the students they rarely encounter in their own lives. The focus should be on the power of narrative to assist students to increase knowledge of ways diverse students experience the world both inside and outside

schools and classrooms, to make sense of lived worlds, and to see themselves in the stories of others.

In conjunction with reading literary narratives, literary autobiographies, narrative inquiries, and ethnographies that explore the experience of people different from themselves, students should be required to engage in self-examination - the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's tradition. Students are encouraged to reflect on their backgrounds and experiences and critically examine their values and beliefs to develop understanding of the ways in which their personal histories, cultures, and experiences affected who they are, how they interact with others, and how they perceive the world (Bucholtz 1999, Watson 2007, Isaacs 2009). In the process of reading life-based literary narratives and reflecting on their experiences, students develop the ability to critically examine their own traditions, beliefs, and values, enabling them to begin to understand themselves as world citizens - the ability to see themselves as members of not only a local community, but also a world community. The purpose of literary narrative is to engage students fully in a quest to cultivate their humanity, to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group, but also, and above all, as human beings bound to other human beings by ties of recognition and concern. Life-based literary narratives such as Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989) not only continues to develop empathetic understanding toward others, but also makes a transition from imaginary characters in the literary narratives to parents, students, and teachers in real-life situations in diverse classrooms and communities.

Unlike theoretical multicultural literature, life-based literary narratives are filled with people with names and faces, experiences and actions, feelings and emotions. Students reading these texts are able to be enveloped in the complex life of the character, and experience change over time in the character's life. As the students begin to make connections with characters in life-based literary narratives, they are able to relate to the experiences of others, whereas abstract theoretical literature

does not evoke such a connection. As our particular focus in multiculturalism is on language, culture and identity, we can use life-based literary narratives written by immigrants of their experiences in a new land and by minorities living in mainstream cultures (Hoffman 1989). The purpose of choosing these narratives is to engage students and teachers in the lives of others in dramatically different environments and to feel how the characters struggle with new languages, cultures, and identities.

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