

The Implementation of Literature in Teaching Speaking for Advanced Students

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Abstract

This study aims at supporting the potential values of literature in enhancing language and communication skills for language learners. In other words, the current research attempts to explore the issues on how to effectively teach communication skills in a literature class, and how to develop students' inspirations in studying literature.

In this study, a short story is employed to demonstrate the ways of exploiting a literary work to teach speaking for advanced students. Moreover, the opinions of students from the second year to the final year studying in the English Department are provided. The findings of this research report on students' perceptions on the activities in a literature class as well as the benefits of studying literature, which hopefully raises language teachers' consciousness with regard to the vast benefits that literature can offer in advancing the speaking competence of advanced students.

Keywords: Literature, Speaking, Advanced students

Introduction

Literature was traditionally considered as a means of imparting culture and training aesthetic experience in students and, therefore, as something beyond the practical aims of language teaching and learning. Due to the complexity of literary language, lots of language learners and teachers share deep reservations about the potential of literature in enhancing the communication skills of students. In spite of these arguments against the use of literature in the classroom, I still strongly support the use of literature in teaching communication skills as I strongly believe that literature is a valuable resource to be exploited in the classroom in order to help students explore the language in an interesting and challenging way.

Another interesting point to make is that the teaching and learning of speaking is showing a remarkable improvement in Viet Nam thanks to innovations in new textbooks. It is considered to be a promising sign for students to develop their communication skills. However, most students still lack the knowledge of intercultural communication, the environment and the social system. Therefore, this research is in the quest for highlighting the issues on how to effectively teach communication skills in a literature class. The research was carried out to answer the following questions:

- 1) How is speaking taught in a literature class for advanced learners?
- 2) What are the students' attitudes towards the use of literature to enhance communication skills in terms of literary texts, activities and benefits?

Literature review

This section provides a review of teaching communication skills in a literature class, thus presenting a definition and exploring the benefits of using literature in enhancing students' language and communication skills. In addition, it addresses the different teaching approaches to literature and presents related studies on the use of literature in teaching language and communication skills for students.

Definition of literature

Understanding exactly what literature is (i.e. pinning down a definition of literature) has proven to be a challenge. There have been numerous definitions of literature and each of them is a reflection of its author's view of what the "essence" of literature really is. Therefore, I would like to approach the issue of how a work is considered as literature by bringing together some views and arguments relating to the question.

Literature comes from the Latin word "literra" meaning 'letter' and "litteratura" meaning 'the knowledge of reading and writing'. Many attempts have been made to provide some essential criteria that mark out a piece of writing as literature. There were some definitions which considered literature to be imaginative and not true, i.e. far from fact and reality. However, there is much doubt in this argument. Ha (2002) argued:

Literature is not always fiction; in fact, it is the production of a certain reality. If "imaginative" is exclusively attributed to literature, does it imply that other kinds of writing such as philosophy, history are unimaginative? So, fiction and realism are not essential concepts for the production of literature.

Some people defined literature as a kind of writing in which the language is different from everyday speech. In Jakobson's words, literature is "A deliberate deformation of ordinary language" and "organized violence committed on ordinary speech" (as cited in Ha, 2002).

Another definition of literature as a subject is that it is a kind of activity that gets the students involved and making use of the language. Literature is seen as a medium for the students to develop their appreciation of different language systems. Moreover, studying literature can foster students' interpretations and enhance their language and communication skills.

Even if literature is considered to be fictional as mentioned above, it is obvious that literature as a subject provides students with real life experiences and interactions with the society where the target language is spoken. Therefore, it enhances the students' understanding of the language much better. In this light, literature is regarded as a beneficial medium in language teaching.

Arguments for the use of literature

Although there still remain some arguments against the use of literature in language teaching, I hold a strong belief that literature would be a great potential resource in teaching language and communications skills, especially speaking skills for the language learners. To give a deeper insight into this issue, I would like to quote some arguments for the use of literature in language teaching.

Benefits of literature in enriching language skills

In this part, I will discuss the merits of literature in language learning and the reasons for implementing literature in language teaching. Thus, I will examine some arguments that support the use of literature in enhancing the language and communication skills for EFL students. One study suggested that “the teaching of literature in EFL classes is essential and can be used as a perfect instrument to stimulate and speed up the teaching and learning process.” (Carter & Long, 1991, p.126) Since the middle of the 1980s, literature was reappraised due to considerations on its feasible applications in EFL classes after being neglected for a long period of time; “Literature is back but wearing different clothes” Maley (1989, p. 59). It was observed by Cairney (1988) that literature was not and should not be seen as a “frill” but it should represent “the very heart and soul of the language curriculum” (p. 14). In teaching a foreign language, it is essential that the teachers should incorporate literary texts as literature is a wonderful resource for enhancing and developing the learner’s linguistic competence. Moody (1971) noted “the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation” and “literature can fit into virtually any language methodology.” The use of literature in the EFL classes was also supported by McKay (1982), who argued that:

“... literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and use level. Secondly, to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency.”

Brumfit (1986) shared the same idea that literature was a skill subject, not a content subject and stressed the potential of literature in enhancing reading skills. (p.277) Literature is viewed as a rich resource for language learning. Brumfit and Carter (1986) pointed out “Literary texts provide examples of language resources being used to the full” (p.15). Wilkin (1972) addressed this aspect in a more persuasive way “if one wishes to discover what is finest, what is “most beautiful”, what is quite simply “best”, it is to the written literature that one looks” (p.5).

Literary texts contain lots of meaningful contexts in which linguistic components such as lexical items and grammatical structures are used in a natural way. By this, I mean the students will be able to be exposed to a variety of unexpected uses and types of linguistic expressions. Then they gradually gain familiarity with different linguistic uses, conventional forms of written mode and develop their communicative capacity. With this

aspect, literature offers learners a chance to process and interpret new language in a specific context. Loff (1988) introduced literature as a “conceptualized source of language practice”. Literary texts served as a good foundation for improving the vocabulary and strengthening syntax as in Povey’s study (as cited in McKay, 1982) which found that “literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax”.

Moreover, literature can meet the target objectives of communicative language teaching as it accelerates interpretations, classroom discussions and interactions among students as well as interactions between teacher and students as mentioned in Maley’s research. A study by Van (2009) also showed that literature is full of instances of real-life language in various situations; it provides lots of opportunities for students to ameliorate syntactic, pragmatic, cultural, and discoursal awareness among learners.

Methodology

Quantitative research method

Research site

The research was carried out at the English Department of the University of Education in Ho Chi Minh City. At the time the research was conducted, the students were categorized into 3 sections, depending on their majors, namely ELT, Translation and Business sections.

Among the 10 classes in the ELT section, the students from the six classes of 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B were chosen as subjects for the study. Further description of the participants can be found in subsequent section.

Participants

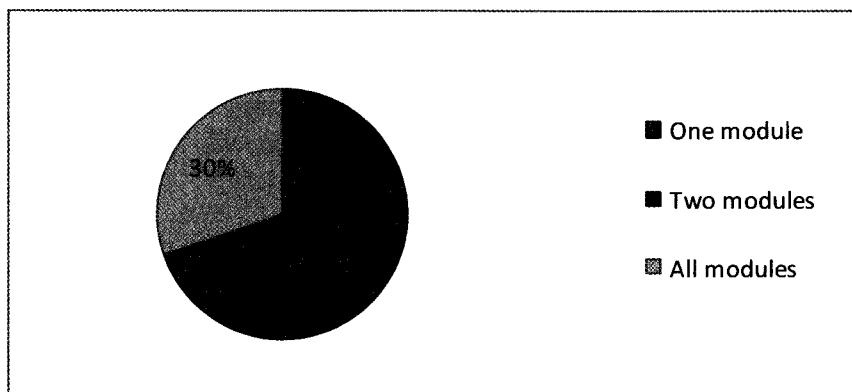
The survey group was composed of 277 university students from 6 classes. However, only 234 students participated in this research. The percentage of answered questionnaires was 84.47%.

Detailed descriptions of the two groups, in terms of their gender and the modules of literature that they have completed, are as follows.

Table 1: Description of the subjects in terms of gender

Students	Male	Female	Total
Sophomore	17	80	97
Junior	13	53	66
Senior	11	60	71

Figure 1: Description of subjects in terms of the modules of literature they have completed.



As illustrated in Figure 1, the proportion of female students dominates that of male students. Also, it is clear from the pie chart that 42% of students who completed one module of literature were second-year students, 28% of third-year students completed two modules, and the rest were fourth-year students who completed all the literature modules.

Materials

As the participants were English major students, the questionnaires were given to the students in English. The questions were designed to be completed in approximately 5 minutes.

Students were given a brief questionnaire (Appendix B) that included the following elements: an element to determine gender, questions in line with the Likert-type scale so that the students could indicate their preferential responses to the 13 questions that were related to the use of activities in the literature class as well as the benefits that literature offers in language teaching and learning and the rest of the questions for additional attitudes towards the use of literary texts as well as skills enhancement.

Procedures

The questionnaires were distributed to the students. Students were then given 5 minutes to complete the questionnaires; most completed the questionnaires in fewer than 5 minutes.

Analytical framework

After the data had been collected, the questionnaire responses were counted, calculated and analyzed to obtain the results in order to answer the research question put forward in the introductory part of this research paper.

Findings

Literature and Language and Communication skills Development

In this part, I will propose some activities that can be employed in a literature class in order to enhance communication skills for the students by using "The Story of an Hour" (Appendix A) as a demonstration. This part serves as the answer to one of the research questions, namely, "How is speaking taught in a literature class?"

Summary of the story

The story is about a wife who has an astonishing reaction to the news of her husband's death.

Mrs. Mallard is afflicted with a heart trouble. Therefore, the people who have told her the news that her husband has died in an accident have to cushion the blow. Mrs. Mallard's sister Josephine and her deceased husband's friend, Richard, have to inform her of the news as gently as possible in order not to make her feel shocked. As Mrs. Mallard discovers what has happened, she acts differently. She cries intensely before heading for her room to be by herself.

The woman is young and pretty with a look of both repression and strength in her eyes. At the news of her husband's death, she instantly abandons herself in grief and weeps a lot. But soon she feels something mysterious, unknown she has never experienced before begins to overwhelm her. She tries hard to resist it in vain. Gradually, she starts to recognize a feeling of hidden joy creeping inside her, the happiness of being able to live her own life without her husband imposing his will on her.

At the end of the story, Mr. Mallard returns home and is waiting at the door. Mrs. Mallard goes downstairs with her sister to answer the door. Josephine shrieks. Richards tries to move quickly in order to block Mrs. Mallard's view of her husband. But it is too late. Mrs. Mallard died because of a heart attack. The story ends with a phrase "of joy that kills".

Speaking activities

In the literature class, the teacher can exploit the literary texts to enhance the students' communication skills. Oral comprehension check questions, role plays, survey, and debates are some effective activities to improve the students' speaking abilities and at the same time maintain their interests and involvements.

Activity 1: Making connections

- Imagine that you are in Mrs. Mallard's position, describe what she has to suffer in her marriage.
- Do you agree that "To some extent, marriage is imprisonment for women"?

- Express your view on the opinion that “Women are likely to suffer from depression rather than men.”

These questions enable the students to approach the literary text in a flexible way and to link what they have read with their own cultural and societal values. The students are asked to share their views on the controversial issues which are raised in the literary texts.

Activity 2: Debate

Debate the following topics:

- “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance”
- “Marriage is the waste paper basket of emotions”

By employing this kind of activity, the students will have a chance to share their views with their classmates, or present their arguments cogently and confidently and the teacher will also have a chance to observe the students’ linguistic competence.

Activity 3: Role play

The students are asked to act out a favorite part in the story. This activity can enhance the students’ communication skills as well as their creativity. Moreover, role play is considered to be a riveting activity in which the students can develop the story in their own way, write their own dialog and bring their own props. This makes the classroom atmosphere become stimulating for all of the students and enhance the students’ appreciations of a literary work.

Activity 4: Presentation

Making presentations in English can be challenging and demanding for the students and this activity is quite suitable for advanced learners. Therefore, the students who are English majors may be encouraged to make presentations on the story. This activity enables the students to enhance not only their linguistic competence but also their public speaking skills.

In conclusion, the new focus on communication skills refreshes our concept of literature teaching. The teacher’s role is a facilitator who helps the students discover the richness of the language and instill in them a love for learning and reading literature. As for the role of the students, by implementing such activities, they will become active participants in the classroom.

All the aforementioned activities are just some suggestions for developing the language and communication skills in a literature class. However, whether the literature teacher will be able to fully exploit the literary texts to serve the language teaching aims depends on some other factors as Baurain (2000) suggested “Knowing what the students need, want, lack, and desire in their study of literature is a key of success.”. When put in the hands of creative and resourceful teachers, literature can provide students with a rich

source for language development and offer a host of pleasures both for teachers and learners.

Data Analysis

This part focuses on analyzing the data obtained from the questionnaires that were distributed to the students. The most general analysis of the data involved computing students' ratings in conformity to the Likert-type scale.

Students' preferences for the use of the activities in a literature class

Students' preferences for the activities employed in a literature class to teach communication skills are presented in the following table:

Table 2: Students' preferences for the use of the activities in a literature class

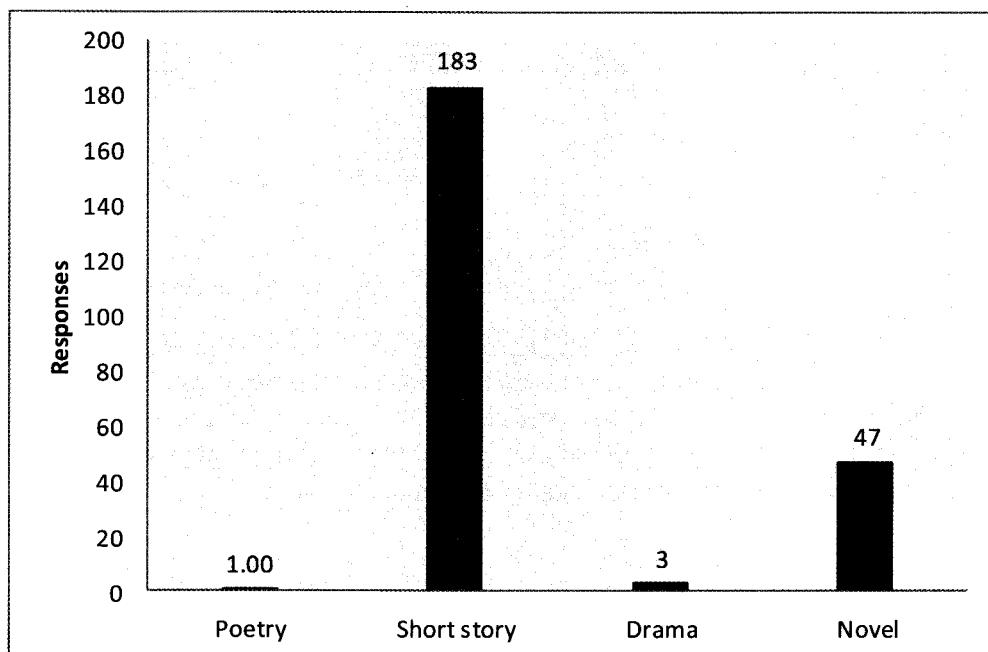
		Strongly like 1	Like 2	Neutral 3	Dislike 4	Strongly dislike 5
1. Group discussion	Responses	32	136	52	9	5
	%	13.68%	58.12%	22.22%	3.85%	2.14%
2. Personal responses	Responses	21	46	121	44	2
	%	8.97%	19.66%	51.71%	18.80%	0.85%
3. Making connections with the real life	Responses	166	47	15	6	0
	%	70.94%	20.09%	6.41%	2.56%	0%
4. Role play	Responses	37	131	46	14	6
	%	15.81%	55.98%	19.66%	5.98%	2.56%
5. Oral presentation	Responses	20	106	14	87	7
	%	8.55%	45.3%	5.98%	37.18%	2.99%
6. Debate	Responses	14	19	132	17	52
	%	5.98%	8.12%	56.41%	7.26%	22.22%

As can be seen in Table 2, the students showed their preferences for the use of the following activities, such as role play, making connections with the real life, oral presentation and group discussion. This may indicate the potentials of literature in teaching speaking for advanced students.

Students' opinions on the kind of literary texts they like to learn most in a literature class

Poetry, Short stories, Dramas and Novels are the most common kinds of literary texts that are employed to teach in a literature class. The following are the students' opinions on the kind of literature they like to learn most in a literature class.

Figure 2: Students' opinions on the kind of literary texts they like to learn most in a literature class.



As can be seen in Figure 2, short stories are the most favorable one (188 respondents). In comparison with short stories and novel, poetry received the least approval (1 respondent). As for drama, only 3 respondents supported the use of it in a literature class.

Students' perceptions on the benefits of literature in general

Table 3: Students' perceptions on the benefits of literature in general.

		Strongly agree 1	Agree 2	Neutral 3	Strongly disagree 4	Disagree 5
8. Literature provides access to other cultures.	Responses	53	117	64	0	0
	%	22.65%	50%	27.35%	0%	0%
9. Literature stimulates language acquisition.	Responses	16	27	85	30	76
	%	6.84%	11.54 %	36.32%	12.82%	32.48%
10. Literature develops students' interpretative ability.	Responses	18	52	154	10	0
	%	7.69%	22.22 %	65.81%	4.27%	0%
11. Literature offers varied authentic	Responses	188	32	14	0	0
	%	80.34%	13.68 %	5.98%	0%	0%

language examples.						
12. Literature enhances language proficiency.	Responses	24	15	186	9	0
	%	10.26%	6.41%	79.49%	3.85%	0%
13. Literature improves the communication skills.	Responses	8	146	51	24	5
	%	3.42%	62.39%	21.79%	10.26%	2.14%

As illustrated in Table 3, the benefits approved by most students are that literature provides access to other cultures, literature enhances language proficiency, literature improves the communication skills, and literature offers varied authentic language examples. Among the positive perceptions, “literature offers varied authentic language examples” constitutes the most significant percentage, at 94.02%.

Summary

In general, the results from the analysis of the questionnaires confirm the positive role of literature in enhancing communication skills for the students. Moreover, the results also indicate the prospects of implementing and promoting specific kinds of activities in a literature class.

Discussion

This section underscores the discussion of findings regarding the aims of the study. In order to address one of the two research questions that has been put forward in the first chapter, this section will discuss the findings in detail as well as provide a brief conclusion for the whole paper presented.

Students' perceptions and relevance of classroom activities

The results in the previous chapter reveal that among the six suggested activities which are usually employed to teach communication skills for students in a literature class, four can be carried out. There are so many activities that all of them cannot be carried out in teaching only one piece of literary work. Therefore, the types of activities can be varied from one to another at different times when teaching literature.

Students' preferences for materials in a literature class

Among the four kinds of literary texts suggested in the questionnaires, short stories and novels were favored by the majority of the students, whereas poetry and drama received very few approvals. The reason could be that the short story suits the majority of the students' capacity due to its size. As for poetry and drama, it is likely that the language of drama and poetry is complicated and full of cultural connotations, which require high language proficiency on the part of the learners to be able to understand.

Students' perceptions on the benefits of literature in general

The findings from question 8 to question 13 supported the potential of literature in enhancing the linguistic competence as well as their communication skill. The students expressed their agreement towards the two factors, namely literature expands the students' language competence and literature improves communication skills. The highest proportion of students also agreed that literature is a good language resource which is full of authentic examples.

The findings highlight the fact that the status quo of teaching literature at the English Department of the University of Education does make clear to the students the potentials of it in enhancing language and communication skills for language learners.

Limitations and Recommendations

Though some positive findings were identified in this study to support the role of literature in enhancing communication skills for language learners, some limitations of this study might be noted before the results could be generalized.

Firstly, the participants in the research were mainly from the ELT major classes. Therefore, the findings in this study cannot be generalized for all the Vietnamese students in all of universities. It would be more persuasive to increase the sample size from other classes and universities in order to ensure a higher degree of representativeness.

Secondly, due to the time pressure, the researcher could not include other kinds of qualitative support, such as classroom observation and interviews with well-experienced literature teachers in the English Department, University of Education. If time had allowed, classroom observation would have been carried out to find out whether the materials chosen to teach in class corresponded with the students' views on literature as seen in the data or not, and interviews with well-experienced literature teachers would have been conducted to ensure the quality of the questionnaire responses. Nonetheless, the practical value of the research gained cannot be denied.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the ways of teaching language and communication skills in a literature class as well as the students' attitudes towards the ways communication skills are taught. Most importantly, the results yielded by the data analysis indicated that the suggested activities and the benefits of literature received positive perceptions from the majority of the students.

It is suggested that the values of teaching literature should be made clear to the students at the very beginning of the course as the students cannot devote their time and abilities to learning literature without a sound understanding of what they can get back from studying it.

The overall aim of teaching literature is to make it possible to achieve a harmonious and interesting integration of literature teaching and language learning. The

research confirms the fact that literature helps to enhance not only the learner's literary competence but also their language development. Moreover, literature is also a great tool for building up the learner's cultural enrichment process and increase their love of the literature from where the language is spoken.

In line with the Language-Based approach to teaching literature, a wide range of classroom activities are recommended for use in a literature class in order to improve the language skills for the students, especially reading and speaking. In other words, the students can improve their discussing ability, increase their range of active vocabulary, establish a reading habit, master such techniques as skimming and scanning, read with a critical mind, recognize the implications and get used to the metaphorical levels of meaning.

This article ends the whole study and confirms the prospects and benefits of literature in enhancing language and communication skills in a literature class. Moreover, the teaching implications as well as the proposal for further research have also been included.

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Appendix A

The Story of An Hour

by Kate Chopin

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will - as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A

kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him - sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being! "Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg, open the door - you will make yourself ill. What are you doing Louise? For heaven's sake open the door." "Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife. But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease - of joy that kills.

Appendix B

Questionnaire

This questionnaire serves as a source of authentic data for me to achieve the purposes of my research. I would greatly appreciate if you can spare just a few minutes of your time to complete this sheet. It is confirmed that your personal identity will remain strictly confidential.

Respondent's background.

1. School: _____ Class: _____

2. Age: _____ Gender: Male Female

Circle the number on the right that best matches your opinion on the activities in the literature class

1 = strongly like, 2 = like, 3 = neutral, 4 = dislike, 5 = strongly dislike

	strongly like	like	neutral	dislike	strongly dislike
1. Group discussion	1	2	3	4	5
2. Personal responses	1	2	3	4	5
3. Making connections with the real life	1	2	3	4	5
4. Role play	1	2	3	4	5
5. Oral presentation	1	2	3	4	5
6. Debate	1	2	3	4	5

7. Which of the following types of literary texts do you like to learn most in a literature class?

- Poetry
- Short stories
- Drama
- Novel

Circle the number on the right that best matches your view on the benefits of literature.

1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree

	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
8. Literature provides access to other cultures.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Literature stimulates language acquisition.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Literature develops students' interpretative ability.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Literature offers varied authentic language examples.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Literature enhances language proficiency.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Literature improves the communication skills.	1	2	3	4	5

END OF THE SURVEY

THANK YOU VERY MUCH