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## Stimulating Language Learning through the Use of Literature

Halima Shehu

General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria

### Abstract:

*The relevance of creative literature in relation to effective language teaching and learning, critical analysis, and the production of original writing in English has been overlooked in recent times in Nigeria. The present practice where literature is rigidly separated from language has reached a critical point resulting in a language learning process that has become divorced from the very elements that make language a powerful and an enabling communication tool. There is need to emphasize the linguistic relevance of literature and to reestablish it in the pedagogy of language teaching. This has become necessary as the teaching of literature becomes more sociological in approach and while English language learning is increasingly being reduced into a sterile process that inspires neither teachers nor students with consequent effects on the quality of overall learning. It is here suggested that literature can be employed to stimulate a more productive language learning experience for ESL students through an intimate and immediate engagement with language in diverse literary contexts. The following calls for the integration of language and literature as it examines some of the obstacles that stand in the way of effective language learning. It also highlights some important characteristics and new teaching approaches of literature that can be utilized to bring about improvements in the quality of language learning.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Literature, Language, Integration, Teaching, Learning

### 1. Introduction

At the time David Jowitt (2009) asserted that “if a language is to be taught, it needs to be taught effectively” it sounded like the obvious was being declared. Yet upon reflection, it begged the question of how well this is presently being done in classrooms in Nigeria. How effectively is the English language being taught to students for whom English is a second language (ESL) so as to enable them read and write well, express ideas and opinions, handle information competently, make decisions or solve problems? The poor language skills of students in secondary and tertiary educational institutions are frequently lamented by their teachers while in school as well as the employers who eventually bring them into their workforce. Indeed, year after year, reports issued by the country’s two main examining boards, West African Examination Certificate (WAEC) board as well as National Examination Council (NECO), highlight the extent of the decline in students’ English language skills thereby revealing a discrepancy between the number years students spend studying the English language and the end result in terms of both grades and standards. The problem becomes even more urgent when this decline appears to have a ripple effect on education in general. As pointed out by Maleki and Zangani(2011), difficulty in fully understanding the contents and concepts of the various subjects of the curriculum that are taught in the English appears to be the most serious problem faced by ESL/EFL students.

As far back as the 1930s, English has been the main language of instruction in the modern Nigerian educational system. However, the importance attached to competence in the language has wavered over the decades. In the beginning, it was taught in earnest particularly at secondary school level so that in the 1960s passing the Qualifying English Examination (Q.E.E.) became a prerequisite for taking the Cambridge Examination, and later on, the West African School Certificate Examination that replaced it. But during the nationalist period the policy changed, then, it was argued that the ‘vernacular’ should not only be the basis of a child’s education but must take precedence over the English language. Following that decision, fierce and wide spread criticism eventually led to the discarding of the rule which stipulated that failure in English meant failure in all West African School Certificate Examinations. The 1970s saw the demand that students must score a credit in English being set aside for science students. It became common place to even admit students with a pass grade in English into university arts and social science courses. In recent times, perhaps because of the high rates of failure in national examinations, there is a creeping realization that education failure may in fact be a case of language failure especially in a second language situation such as found in Nigeria. Hence policy makers have begun to reassess the place of English in education realizing that as the basic resource with which we organize and build our world, language is undoubtedly a fundamental part of the educational process. As Hassan (1989, p.91) rightly points out, “to educate is after all to develop language abilities of some kind, whatever the subject, whatever the system”. Therefore if the situation is one where English is the medium that is used for teaching and learning, then in any attempt to prevent the further downward spiral of educational standards in general, it is imperative to first arrest the decline in students’ English language abilities.

For now in Nigeria, it seems that the relevance of English language studies is no longer in contention particularly as necessary investments needed to promote the use of indigenous languages have not been made. Nonetheless, according to Onukaogu (2002), a vigorous and robust language policy is absent and this is manifested in the frequent changes in direction, in teachers without relevant educational qualifications and experiences, in the inadequate materials for the teaching and an English language curriculum that is separated from that of literature. Presently all students are compulsorily required to take English from primary school all the way through to first year of university level studies. But at all levels of education, a clear separation is made in the curriculum between the language and literature aspects of English. While all students at secondary school are required to study the language component only those who belong to the humanities take classes in literature. On the other hand, science students who have a preference for subjects such as Biology, Chemistry, and Physics and so on are excluded from any form of literary studies. In the early part of the 1980s, a halfhearted attempt to reconcile the two was made in the Use of English course offered to all new undergraduate students under the General Studies program. This is a course that is meant to serve a double purpose – provide more grounding in the English language skills that students need for their studies and to offer an interesting course that will help broaden their knowledge base. Passing the Use of English course has remained a compulsory graduation requirement in all Nigerian universities. But here again, the literature component is in many cases limited to the very basics of introducing students to a few literary terms. The underlining assumption and practice at all levels of education is that language and literature can be separated without consequences for the learning experience.

Yet eminent scholars (Widdowson, 1984; Carter and Long, 1991; Maley, 1989; Paran, 2006) have long advocated for integration arguing that ‘the teaching of language can only have meaning when it is integrated with literature’. Widdowson’s (1984,137) suggestion that the two be allowed to exist in “cooperative amity” is supported by other scholars such as McRae (1991,p.120) who also opines that language learning and literary study are interdependent and, in a specialist context, should be seen as complementary at all stages of the educational process. Carter and Long (1991, p.101) similarly assert that the integration of literature and language studies “can do as much for the language development of the students as for the development of their capacities for literary understanding and appreciation”. These views have been embraced by some ESL countries such as South Africa to the extent that there language appears to be taught in predominantly literature- oriented syllabuses (Combrink, 1990, p.3). However in Nigeria, the tendency has been to move away from the Oxbridge model in which the teaching of classical English literature retains a privileged position. But this trend has created a situation where literature has taken a back seat, relegated to a position where it seems to have little or nothing to do with English studies. How is this has happened can be explained by examining a number factors such as government policy, teachers’ attitude and syllabus design that have proved to be obstacles standing in the way of integration.

## 2. To Teach or Not To Teach

Recently the pendulum of government educational policy seems to be swinging in favor of bringing language and literature back together. Unlike in South Africa, what obtains in Nigeria is a clear separation of the two components of language and literature with latter suffering the most in terms of classroom time and resources allocated to it. Yet several indications from the almost non-existent reading culture to the lowering standards of both spoken and written English language abilities of students point to the fact that something is seriously amiss with the way English studies is being handled. For example, WAEC examination records for seven years from 2004 – 2012 show that passes at credit level in English have been below the 50% mark (2004-37.7%; 2005-36.93; 2006-29.65%;2009-25.95%;2010-23.30% 2011-30.90; 2012-38.81%). The conclusion drawn by the WAEC board is that students’ poor grasp of English language is a major factor in the high failure rates in examinations and that the generally poor performance is indicative of a declining quality of education. A number of researchers have discovered that students who did well in English performed better in other subjects (Olayinka, 2011; Carter and Long, 1991). This has led to a call for a review of strategies for teaching and learning by the two main examining boards in Nigeria.

In an attempt to ensure an out-comes based education and also to address a dying reading habit, the Ministry of Education in 2011 revealed that one of the steps being taken to address shortcomings in the quality of education in Nigeria is that, “Literature in English (a reference used to circumvent the ambiguities in the term English literature) is now compulsory for students in all public schools.” This heralds a major change of tack from almost three decades of policy making that virtually relegated the teaching of literature to an inferior position. What is happening in Nigeria appears to follow the three phases of progression in English Studies that has been identified by Durant. The first being the “traditional” phase in which the study of literature was seen as the ultimate goal of all language teaching and was consequently given a higher status. The second phase witnessed a dramatic change as literature was downgraded if not entirely excluded when language courses became more functional in orientation. The third phase, perhaps in reaction against the functionalism of the previous phase, is characterized by “discourse stylistics approaches” (Durant, 1993, p.160). As will be discussed later, this third approach has the potential of yielding benefits for literary appreciation, language learning as well as for education as whole.

But while policy makers are beginning to embrace the idea that integration may yield greater benefits, the obdurate stance of narrow specialists in the area of English language teaching on the one hand and literature on the other may prove to be a major obstacle. Having pursued either the “language” option or the “literature” one while in training, the two sides rarely present a united front. Relations between teachers/lecturers of language and those of literature are usually characterized by indifference to and/or ignorance of the others’ work. Instead, each appears to argue its position exclusively in terms of a limited educational vision with different goals and priorities thereby discouraging the objective assessment of the advantages or otherwise of a more integrated approach. English language teachers are generally more concerned with the analysis of language usages, that is, with the systematic study of the mechanics of grammar, punctuation, lexis, structure and so on. In some instances, some even question why literature should be taught to ESL students who have difficulty in making subjects and verbs agree or who often do not

hesitate to start sentences with subordinate clauses. Should their problems be compounded by introducing them to, for instance, the complexities of Shakespeare?

As far as Marckwardt is concerned there is a “justifiable and profitable place for literature in ESL” because there is a point of interface between language and literature which when utilized purposefully and creatively could yield dividends for both (1978, p.19). In doing so however, there is also need to address issues of syllabus design, standards and teaching methods, testing and evaluation. English studies often reflect the assumptions of syllabus/course designers as well as pedagogical assumptions about the needs of students. While a slavish adherence to the classical Western model of English Studies might not be acceptable in Nigeria, there ought to be a clear understanding of the academic needs of ESL students with regard to the language medium that is used in their studies. Thus an important first step would be for syllabus designers to clearly define what is meant when they refer to “language”. That is whether they are referring to an all embracing knowledge of the language or whether they simply mean the study grammar? If it is the former, then the integration of literature becomes a necessary objective which would then be reflected in the English studies course that is designed. Similarly, according to Martin (2000, pp.13-15), a literature based approach to language teaching would need a re-conceptualization of both the term “literature” as well as a clearer motivation for teaching it.

The eminent scholar Leavis (1975) was one of the first to claim that literature could be utilized to stimulate language learning because it is written by disciplined minds and therefore represents language at its best. However before literature can be put to the service of effective language teaching, a principled approach needs to be formulated by both policy makers as well as by professional teachers. Primarily, there needs to be an emphatic recognition of the nature of literature as being language in use and that it cannot be taught well unless it is conceived of in this way because its impact is achieved through the medium of language (Widdowson, 1984). Consequently the texts that make up literature in English are not only products of the English language but are also an important part of it. Therefore Combrink (p.2) cautions that in order to grasp the subtleties in literary works, students must first have adequate knowledge of the way in which the language functions and is structured. On the other hand, the English language can be not be taught effectively without making use of the literature written in it as only then can learners mediate between the structural and communicative orientations of language.

Thus while literature can be considered an area of study in itself, it can also double as a resource for language study leading Dovey (1999, p.138) to suggest that in any effective English studies programme it is necessary to bridge the gap between language and literature by integrating reading, writing, grammar and interpretative skills. Similarly, Stern (1991, p.330) asserts that the study of a single literary work can effectively combine all the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing and that together with increased literary appreciation meet students’ practical linguistic needs. Sharing the same view, Combrink (p. 4) advocates for an integrated approach involving literary theory and the inculcation of practical language skills with the imaginative investigation of different kinds of texts. This will enable students to manipulate different language modes thereby allowing them to access the texts they encounter as well enable them assess their own writing and interpretative skills. In addition, bringing linguistics and critical literacy together in this manner has the added advantage of creating a sense of continuity that could lead to more effective learning. To further highlight how literature can be utilized for the purpose of improved language learning, there is need to briefly examine some of its inherent qualities.

### 3. Awakening the Imagination

Since Aristotle first described poetry as mimesis (imitation), literature is said to reflect life, that it mirrors the condition of man in every conceivable relation to others, his hopes and dreams as well as his joys and tragedies. Literature awakens the reader’s imagination as it expands his horizon of personal experiences with the secondary encounters described in texts. By exploring man’s relationships in different contexts, as well as suggesting ways of bettering his lot through political and/or social change, it engenders sympathy with the human condition. Thus one of the merits of literature is that it develops readers’ empathy enabling them to form a connection with what they read and in so doing, arouse their curiosity which could lead the habit of reading taking root. In employing the magic of language through the use of subtle diction, rhythms, and the careful arrangement of language patterns, literature in its various guises of poetry, drama and fiction can attract interest and attachment as it transports readers beyond their limited everyday lives. To ignore these elements is to cut the reader especially the ESL student off from an interest in language and the desire to master that usually follows. Therefore not can literature appeal to learners’ imagination and emotions, it could also provide motivation for language learning. The functional approach to language teaching that was adopted in the 1980s and 1990s had a detrimental effect on students’ language competencies but literature has the potential of igniting an engagement with language that can yield dividends for all aspects of learning. In Nigeria it is significant that the period during which literature was downgraded appears to also coincide with the disappearance of a reading culture and to mark the beginning of a general decline in the standard of English language usage.

Widdowson points out correctly that the best language learning books while commendable are often dull when compared to the “compelling force” of creative texts. To cite what may be considered an extreme example, this extract taken from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* demonstrates literary qualities that are distinct and powerful:

If it were done, when it is done, then 't were well  
 It were done quickly: If the assassination  
 Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
 With his surcease success; but that this blow  
 Might be the be-all and the end-all-here,  
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
 We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases  
 We still have judgment here; that we but teach  
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught return  
 To plague the inventor: this even handed justice  
 Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice  
 To our own lips.

This soliloquy in which Macbeth wrestles with his conscience as he plots the assassination of Duncan, the King of Scotland, as a route to political self-elevation may not be the easiest example of literary language but the choice and arrangement of the words convey a story that will engage most ESL readers especially if help is at hand in the form of a well trained teacher who can explicate the material as Kenneth Muir does as in this admirable paraphrase:

If the assassination were ended once and for all as soon as accomplished,  
 Then it were well to do it quickly; if it could prevent any consequence  
 And obtain success by his death, in such a way that this blow might kill  
 Duncan and not lead to any reprisals, here, only in this world, we  
 Would risk what might happen in the world to come.

While the above is written in language that may be archaic and difficult, in what could appear like a foreign language to most ESL students, the reality is that such language is no less difficult for even students of British extraction. However, the plots, intrigues and social conflicts found in many of Shakespeare's plays from *King Lear* to *A Merchant of Venice* deal with the human condition and remain relevant in all places and at all times. If ESL learners are limited to only literary texts that are considered easier, we would be guilty of underestimating not only their intellectual capacity, impoverishing their learning, but indeed of limiting their breadth of experience (Prodromou, 2000). As Deacon and Murphy (2001) affirm, literature provides not only insights into the norms and cultural values of a society embodied in it, but it also educates the "whole person" in a way that a more functional approach to language teaching would not achieve. Of course the experience of literature is not the same as 'real' experience but it can have a strong influence on thought and action even beyond the period of reading. Creative texts such as the above that raise moral questions of personal choice, of power and ambition, of right and wrong are very likely to captivate most readers and in addition stimulate meaningful debates, discussions and other language exercises that can help develop students' linguistic and communicative competence.

#### 4. Language Learning through Literature

Stern (1991, p.330), Carter and Long, (1991, P.101) among others agree that integration has a positive effect on teaching and learning of literature and language. Such an approach suggests using literature to teach language skills, and in turn, using the resources of language (words, collocations, sentence structures, paragraph connectors, metaphorical expressions) to teach literature. This is possible because even as literature provides fresh perspectives on life, it also brings about a reappraisal of the nature of words, and at the same time, fosters an interest in other examples of good writing. However the language learning potentials of literature are often undermined by the sociological approach to literary texts that is preferred by literature teachers whose focus on characterization (who is involved), the plot (what is happening) and the setting (where events occur) leads to an increasing neglect of the language elements embedded in the writing. Nonetheless, as Bates (2000, p.13) points out, literature in its various guises of poetry, drama and fiction lends its self well to language teaching and learning if utilized properly. As authentic models of language use, literature enables learners to develop an overall awareness of and knowledge about language. But in designing a literature based approach to language teaching, a re-conceptualization of both the term 'literature' and clarity regarding the motivation for teaching it becomes a prerequisite.

The integration of literature in language learning can be done by focusing on teachable language skills embedded in the texts. Using literature as resource material that offers students' exposure to a contextualized body of texts enables them to become more familiar with important features of written language such as word choice, sentence formation, sentence function as well as ways of connecting ideas that will ultimately enrich their own writing. For example, with regards to vocabulary Eldridge (1990, pp.648-649) writes that it is "the key to improvement in reading and learning in general because one is better able to deal with a variety of concepts when one has a richer storehouse of vocabulary". Thus reading literary texts will enrich students' vocabulary particularly in a second language learning situation. This is why the teaching and learning of literature and language that is conducted from a point of view that they influence and impact on each other and adopting approaches that allow for integration would go a long way in improving the quality of English studies.

Activities which focus on different aspects and that build upon and complement each other will further contextualize language learning. This can be done in several ways such as by linking the study of literary texts to creative language activities such as rewriting endings to stories, role playing, or rewriting narratives from different perspectives or in different genres - the possibilities are almost infinite if the desire to utilize literature for language learning is fully embraced. For instance, to stay with

Shakespearean texts, Mark Anthony's funeral speech in *Julius Caesar* which begins "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones..." could be used to sharpen students' reading skills by teaching them to follow the structure and development of the passage as well as provide an example of how to set out a persuasive piece of writing. The students are likely to both enjoy and focus on the task because it is a compelling tale. Depending on the language level of the learners, literary texts or extracts from narrative fiction, drama and poetry could be arranged and taught to represent a progression from African to British to American literature and in so doing expose them to different usages of English. Such an approach that integrates the study of literature with a mastery of the language (vocabulary and grammar) and with the development of language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) not to mention an increased awareness and understanding of other cultures would help in building the bridge between "language" and "literary" studies that Dovey advocates. The objective would be to enhance language use through familiarity with a range of vocabulary and structures as used in literary texts. Such an approach to the study of literary texts would turn literature classes into practical workshops for the development of students' language and communicative competence.

### 5. Interpretative and Analytical Skills

While the language of literature undoubtedly differs from that of discourse in significant ways- it sometimes represents realities other than those referred to in everyday language use, the words used often dwell on concepts similar to those found in conventional language. However in literature they can assume different meanings because literary language is also "a deliberate act of artistry designed to achieve a particular meaning" (Widdowson, 1984 p.141). This representational mode of meaning found in literature has the advantage of making students work harder on their language skills as they are compelled to deal with written words as if they are "symbols that create contexts defined by their own particular significance". The themes and plots of literary works could stimulate meaningful debates; discussions and other language related tasks that could help develop learners' linguistic and communicative competence. For instance, questions on ideas introduced in the texts could lead to discussions of more general topics such as issues of social justice, the place of women in society, the use of language and such like which could encourage learners to express personal opinions and reflect on their experiences. We expect literature to be convincing but we know that it is not true and if it is interpreted as being so, then we would be treating it as reference material and not as representational thereby denying its literary character.

But apart from emphasizing creativity, another important role that imaginative materials (representational texts) can play is to stimulate a fifth skill in language learning – that of thinking. The ability to decipher meanings through contextual clues or to simply grasp the main points from a variety of imagery has implications for curriculum development because it is one that can be usefully applied to other language related tasks. By providing opportunities for critical thinking which involves the ability to reflect on a piece of written discourse, to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses in terms of conceptual ideas and language clarity, literature provides practice for interpretative and analytical skills.

Developments within the field of literary studies and pedagogy has through literary stylistics brought about an increased awareness of the reader as an active participant in the construction of meaning and this has had an effect on language teaching as well. Thus Dovey (p.288) and Maley (2001,p.59) in supporting a stylistics approach to the teaching of literature argue that it makes literature more accessible to language learners because it provides them with a way into the text, a starting point for comprehension and appreciation while at the same time raises awareness of language issues. According to Carter (1989:9) 'teaching texts, that allow ideas, intuitions and initial interpretations to be explored by a linguistically principled analysis of functions of grammar, lexis, phonology and discourse in the creation of meaning', serve to enable students to read more competently.

### 6. Implementing Change

However while supporting the call for integration, a few problems need to be taken into account and tackled in order to make the literature component more effective. For instance, the apathy towards reading that is evident among Nigeria students could lead to prescribed texts not being read even when the books are available. Then there is the students' tendency to respond to literature with unreflective moralistic assumptions, an inclination that probably springs from the generally accepted notion that literature, in particular African literature, is always meaningful. Such an attitude emanates from a widespread belief that literary works must have a 'message' the communication which is thought to be the *raison d'être* of the teacher. To identify and to scrutinize this tendency in order to show its ideological affinities and ramifications would be a major part of a teacher's task. There is also need to counter students' tendency for unexamined prejudices, to encourage them to subject themselves to self –scrutiny, to question their own presuppositions and to explore the relation between lived experiences, ideological underpinnings and the various literary, linguistic and cultural forms. The absence of a spirit of genuine critical enquiry in the course of pursuing an integrated approach in English studies would result in a situation where teaching becomes sterile and unproductive as the teacher is forced into compensating for the deficiencies of his students by doling out carefully weighed and packaged dollops of knowledge and critical ideas.

Another problem that could arise is the failure of teachers to make the study of literature and related cultural forms stand in a vital relation to what students can feel as being genuinely important and interesting in their own experience. Thus discussing texts and ideas in a kind of intellectual limbo in which no heed is paid to their experiences, actual assumptions, beliefs or prejudices can at best lead them to disengage with material they read. Some students may recognize that certain ideas have to be isolated and discussed in relation to particular literary works and will make an effort to contribute to discussions, however these may appear contrived if the ideas are unconnected with the felt realities of their own lives. This problem could arise not only when studying works from foreign cultures, but also become apparent when reading and discussing African or even specifically Nigerian texts.

Therefore the answer to this problem does not lie in the 'Nigerianization' of the syllabus but rather depends on the ability to present literary works and cultural concepts within an overall framework which is genuinely meaningful to the average student and which corresponds in palpable ways to his own cultural experience, to issues which he can formulate and investigate on the basis of what he hears and sees around him.

The introduction of an issues- centered literature syllabus may alleviate this problem of creativity among ESL students. However focusing on issues and concepts entails a great deal of careful thought about what precisely the crucial theoretical concerns should be given the nature of the learners' society and culture. The formulations of 'core' issues could be pursued as a collective endeavor by language and literature teachers working in collaboration but such a practice implies team teaching and not merely where one person teaches a part of the course while the other teaches another part. This has the added advantage of providing an opportunity for the productive pooling of critical thought and teaching skills which in itself is important in bringing together a wide range of teaching experiences.

It is possible to devise a course that results out of a process of preparation in which the central issues and concepts are identified and careful thought is given to the relation between them so those vital connections can be located and exploited in the course of the teaching. The main difficulty however is likely to be the large investment of time that must be made in the preparation of an integrated language and literature course of study. However, this difficulty is outweighed by the stimulus that such an approach would offer in terms of creative teaching and quality critical enquiry. Indeed if such an approach is more creative for teachers, it is also likely to bring out the creative potential of students. The work they do in class might be less one where they merely accumulate sufficient information about a text in order to supply just enough to write assignments, or to answer examination questions, but hopefully lead to a habit of critical enquiry.

Finally there is the vexed question of language. No one can be creative unless he has the language to be creative in. Clearly, verbal inadequacy entails an inability to conceptualize properly or think at an advanced level of abstraction. Attempts by students to make genuine responses to literary works would be defeated by an inability to articulate thoughts which cannot be formed properly because they lack necessary verbal and conceptualizing tools. This would off course pose a serious problem and there are no easy solutions. However we will at least have gone some way towards improving the situation if the seriousness of the problem is acknowledge and kept in mind when designing an integrated course literature and language course.

## 7. Conclusion

Clearly change needs to take place in the teaching of English as a second language at both secondary and tertiary levels of education. While the above by no means account for all the various angles from which this problem can be scrutinized, it attempts to contribute to the discussion on the quality of English studies ESL students. The need to bring about interventions that will translate into practice remains a pressing one in Nigeria. The more voices are raised concerning the integration of literature in English language learning, hopefully, the quicker necessary actions will be carried out to halt the downward slide of English studies. In order to bring about meaningful changes in the learning experience of ESL students, there is need to implement the integration of the two components of English during the crucial stages of education. To borrow the words of Shakespeare-

There is a tide in the affairs of men

Which, taken at the flood leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyages of their life

Is bound in shadows and miseries.

Thus linking creative literature to language learning at secondary school and first year of university level studies would be taking useful advantage of that tide which "taken at the flood" could lead to learners' linguistic fortunes.

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