

Bridging Literature and Language Learning: A Pedagogical Approach Using Jojo Moyes' "*Me Before You*"

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of literature and language learning through a pedagogical approach using Jojo Moyes' novel *Me Before You*. The novel offers a rich resource for developing English language skills while engaging with complex themes and character development. Educators can enhance students' linguistic competence and critical thinking abilities by analyzing and incorporating the novel's content into a structured language learning curriculum. This study employs a qualitative methodology, using close textual analysis to examine the educational benefits of this approach and its impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. The analysis reveals that using *Me Before You* in the classroom provides contextualized vocabulary learning, improves reading comprehension, and stimulates critical thinking. The novel's relatable characters and contemporary setting foster high levels of student engagement, making the learning experience both meaningful and memorable. The thematic depth of the novel, including its exploration of disability, personal growth, and ethical dilemmas, provides ample material for classroom discussions and debates, further enhancing students' language skills and ethical reasoning. This study underscores the importance of integrating literature into language education to create a holistic and engaging learning environment beyond linguistic proficiency to include cultural awareness and empathy. The findings suggest that such an approach can significantly enrich the language learning experience and better prepare students for the complexities of real-world communication.

Keywords: literature, language learning, pedagogical approach, critical thinking, "*Me Before You*."

1. Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as a valuable tool in language education, offering authentic language contexts, cultural insights, and opportunities for critical thinking (Paran, 2008). Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You* is an ideal text for this purpose, presenting themes of love, disability, and personal growth that resonate with learners. The novel provides an engaging narrative and reflects complex societal issues that students can explore through language learning. This article aims to illustrate how the novel can bridge literature and language learning, fostering both linguistic proficiency and literary appreciation among students. The integration of literature into language learning enhances cultural awareness and empathy, critical components in today's interconnected world (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Traditional language teaching methods often fail to engage students deeply or develop their critical thinking skills (Hanauer, 2001). This challenge is particularly evident in environments where language learning is perceived as a mechanical process devoid of emotional and cultural context. Integrating literature into the curriculum offers a promising alternative, providing exposure to varied linguistic structures, vocabulary, and stylistic devices that enhance language competence. Moreover, literature fosters a deeper cultural understanding, which is essential in a globalized world (Kramsch, 2013). Contemporary research supports these findings, highlighting the effectiveness of novels in enhancing reading comprehension and critical thinking (Brookhart, 2010).

The urgency of this study stems from the need to find innovative and effective methods to enhance language learning amidst increasing global interconnectedness. Language educators continually seek ways to make teaching more engaging and relevant to students' lives. Literature's ability to connect language learning to real-world issues and personal experiences offers a dynamic way to address these challenges. Teachers can help students develop their linguistic skills and a broader understanding of the human condition by incorporating literary texts like *Me Before You* into language education.

Me Before You is a contemporary novel that explores profound themes through relatable characters and accessible language. Studies have shown that contemporary novels with relatable themes can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. The narrative of *Me Before You* revolves around the complex relationship between Louisa Clark, a young woman struggling to find her place in the world, and Will Traynor, a wealthy man left quadriplegic after an accident. The novel's accessible yet sophisticated language makes it suitable for diverse language proficiency levels, while its themes provide opportunities for deep engagement and critical reflection. Students can practice language skills through character analysis and thematic exploration in a relevant and engaging context.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How can “Me Before You” be effectively integrated into an English language learning curriculum?
2. What specific language skills can be developed through the analysis of the novel?
3. How does the use of literature in language learning impact student engagement and comprehension?

1.2 Literature in Language Learning

The use of literature in language education has been widely advocated for its multi-faceted benefits. Literature provides exposure to varied linguistic structures, vocabulary, and stylistic devices, enhancing learners’ language competence (Lazar, 2015). Furthermore, literary texts offer a context for cultural exploration and empathy development, which is critical for holistic language education (Kramsch, 2013). Recent studies have emphasized the importance of literary texts in developing advanced language skills and promoting cultural awareness.

Novels, in particular, offer extensive narratives that engage readers and provide sustained language input. They present opportunities for deep analysis of character development, plot structure, and thematic exploration. According to Collie and Slater (1987), novels can motivate students, develop their interpretive skills, and provide a rich context for language practice. Contemporary research supports these findings, highlighting the effectiveness of novels in enhancing reading comprehension and critical thinking (Ghosn, 2002; Hall, 2005).

Studies have shown that the emotional and cognitive engagement elicited by literature can significantly enhance language retention and comprehension. For instance, narrative texts like *Me Before You* enable students to immerse themselves in authentic language use, enhancing their ability to understand complex sentences, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references. Integrating literature into language education also aligns with modern pedagogical approaches that emphasize student-centered learning and critical engagement with texts (Hanauer, 2001).

1.3 Literature as a Tool for Cultural Awareness and Empathy

Literature enhances language skills and serves as a vehicle for cultural understanding and empathy development. Engaging with characters from diverse backgrounds exposes students to different cultures, societal norms, and ethical dilemmas, broadening their worldview and fostering intercultural sensitivity (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Recent research underscores the importance of cultural awareness in language learning, emphasizing that understanding cultural nuances is crucial for effective communication in a global context (Metcalf et al., 2009). Using literature like *Me Before You* allows students to explore themes such as disability, socio-economic disparity, and personal agency, encouraging them to think critically about the societal constructs that influence characters’ decisions and actions (Barnes, 2019; Shakespeare, 2014). This exposure helps students develop a deeper appreciation for diversity and equips them with the skills to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics both in and outside the classroom.

1.4 Pedagogical Framework

This study adopts a literature-based pedagogical framework grounded in communicative and task-based learning principles. Drawing from schema theory, affective engagement, and constructivist approaches, literature is a medium where students co-construct meaning, negotiate interpretations, and build language skills (Hanauer, 2001; Harmer, 2015). Recent studies affirm that literature-based pedagogy enhances learners’ engagement and linguistic performance by embedding instruction in emotionally resonant narratives (Khatib et al., 2011; Lazar, 2015). According to Collie and Slater (1987), literary texts stimulate cognitive-affective engagement, leading to deeper processing and retention. Furthermore, research by Savvidou (2004) supports that literature fosters critical consciousness and intercultural competence, enabling learners to connect language with lived experiences. Key strategies include:

a) Pre-reading schema activation

Before encountering the text, students engage in discussions, brainstorming, and prediction tasks that activate their prior knowledge and establish a thematic framework, which helps learners anticipate content, enhances engagement, and improves comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

b) Guided literary analysis

Teachers scaffold close readings by highlighting stylistic devices, figurative language, and character motivations. This encourages deeper lexical and syntactic processing and provides opportunities to discuss textual meaning collaboratively (Lazar, 2015).

c) Thematic discussions

Facilitated dialogues around the novel’s central themes, such as dignity, autonomy, and care, enable learners to develop language fluency through expressing opinions, supporting arguments, and negotiating meaning (Savvidou, 2020).

d) Role-plays and debates

Students take on the personas of characters or stakeholders to explore ethical dilemmas and interpersonal conflict in the narrative. These activities stimulate authentic language use and promote critical and creative thinking (Khatib et al., 2011).

e) Reflective and creative writing

Learners write diary entries, alternate endings, or personal responses to the text, helping them process their interpretations while practicing genre-specific language features. These tasks foster emotional engagement and self-expression, supporting linguistic and affective goals (Hanauer, 2001).

These methods align with Vygotsky's social constructivism, emphasizing interaction and scaffolded support for deeper learning (Vygotsky, 1962). The novel's emotional narrative and ethical complexity enable students to engage language meaningfully, fostering pedagogical empathy, a dynamic approach that connects language use with emotional intelligence and moral development (Zhang, 2022).

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology, using close textual analysis of *Me Before You* to identify pedagogical strategies for language learning. The analysis focused on key passages, character interactions, and thematic elements relevant to language education. Data were collected through classroom observations, student feedback, and student work analysis to evaluate the approach's effectiveness (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The qualitative approach allows for a detailed examination of how literature can be integrated into language learning, adapting teaching strategies based on students' needs and feedback (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants included 26 undergraduate EFL students at Universitas Musamus, aged 18–22, with early-intermediate English proficiency. They enrolled in a thematic reading course to integrate literary texts into structured language learning. The class met once a week for 90-minute sessions over a 14-week semester.

Me Before You was chosen for its contemporary relevance and accessible yet rich narrative, which supports a variety of linguistic and critical engagement tasks. The novel was incorporated into weekly lesson plans featuring pre-reading, guided reading, discussion, and output tasks. Key language skills targeted were vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, reading comprehension, and spoken fluency. Thematic discussions also encouraged cultural awareness and ethical reasoning.

A multi-method data collection design was used to assess the impact of this pedagogical integration. This included classroom field notes, semi-structured interviews, student journals, and reflective essays. The data were analyzed using thematic coding, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the qualitative dataset. This method allowed for the interpretation of student responses in a structured yet flexible way, providing rich insights into the pedagogical impact of literary integration. Coding was conducted in iterative phases: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and refinement to ensure analytical depth and coherence across data sources. This comprehensive approach allowed for triangulation and deeper insights into student responses and pedagogical efficacy.

3. Results

3.1 Vocabulary and Grammar

"*Me Before You*" offers rich vocabulary that can be contextualized within the story, aiding retention and understanding. For instance, terms related to medical conditions and caregiving were explicitly taught and reinforced through reading and discussion. Grammar exercises were derived from the text, focusing on verb tenses, sentence structure, and dialogue analysis. Recent research indicates contextualized vocabulary learning significantly enhances retention (Nation & Waring, 2019; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). The example of implementing the novel in vocabulary and grammar teaching is as follows: after the reading session, students were asked to discuss and identify some sentences related to the objective of the grammar lesson.

An example from the novel: "*I tried to lift his spirits, but he remained stubbornly low*" (Moyes, 1969). This sentence was used to teach phrasal verbs ("*lift his spirits*"), adjectives ("*stubbornly*"), and verb tenses (simple past tense). Students can better understand their meanings and applications by discussing the context in which these words are used. Further exercises included creating sentences using the new vocabulary or identifying similar phrasal verbs in different contexts. Such activities help reinforce learning and ensure that students can use the vocabulary accurately and confidently in their writing and speaking. Additionally, students engaged in peer-teaching activities, where they explained newly learned vocabulary to their classmates, further solidifying their understanding and boosting their communication skills. This collaborative learning approach aligns with the principles of cooperative learning, which have been shown to improve language acquisition and retention through peer interaction (W. Johnson & T. Johnson, 2019).

3.2 Reading Comprehension

The novel's narrative structure, with its shifts in perspective and time, challenges students to track plot developments and character motivations. Comprehension questions and summaries were used to ensure understanding and encourage analytical thinking. The novel's emotional depth also helps develop students' inferencing skills, as they are prompted to read between the lines and interpret the characters' emotions and intentions. Studies have shown that engaging with complex narratives can improve reading comprehension and inferencing abilities, allowing students to practice higher-order thinking skills (Kintsch, 2013).

One activity involved students reading an excerpt: "*I couldn't stop thinking about Will's decision. It seemed both brave and tragic at the same time*" (Moyes, 1969). This sentence was utilized to trigger students to discuss themes, character motivations, and personal reactions, enhancing their comprehension and critical thinking skills. To deepen their understanding, students were asked to write reflective essays on the characters' decisions or create alternative endings for the story. These activities promote critical thinking and allow students to engage with the text on a deeper level, considering the broader implications of the characters' actions.

3.3 Student Engagement

Feedback from students indicated high levels of engagement with the novel. The relatable characters and contemporary setting made the text accessible and enjoyable. Students reported that discussing the novel helped them understand complex issues and improved their confidence in using English for expressive purposes. The novel's emotional and relational depth, particularly Lou's growth and her relationship with Will, resonated with students, making the learning experience both meaningful and memorable. Research supports the finding that relatable and emotionally engaging texts can significantly enhance student motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Students also appreciated the opportunity to discuss real-life issues through the novel's lens. This approach improved their language skills and deepened their understanding of important social topics. Group discussions and presentations further enhanced their ability to articulate their thoughts and engage in meaningful dialogue. Moreover, incorporating multimedia resources, in this case, the film adaptations, can further enrich the learning experience and provide additional perspectives on the novel. This multimedia approach caters to different learning styles and keeps students engaged by providing varied forms of content.

4. Discussion

4.1 Critical Thinking Through Literature

The incorporation of *Me Before You* in the classroom promoted not just language development but also critical engagement with ethical and emotional dilemmas. Instead of merely recognizing themes, students were guided to critique, negotiate, and interpret them through structured learning activities. Debates surrounding assisted suicide, for example, were framed within evidence-based argumentation, where learners had to articulate their perspectives, counter opposing views, and support arguments with textual references. These activities enhanced their critical discourse competence, fostering skills in persuasion, interpretation, and moral reasoning (Dwyer et al., 2014; Nussbaum, 1997).

Additionally, role-playing further facilitated a shift from textual understanding to emotional immersion. By embodying Louisa or Will, students stepped into complex moral terrain, negotiating internal conflict and external pressures. These simulations functioned as both linguistic practice and ethical inquiry, supporting Brookfield's (2012) assertion that perspective-taking enhances reflective learning. As students engaged with character dilemmas, they also refined their argument structures, modality use, and emotional vocabulary.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

4.2.1 Disability and Personal Growth

"*Me Before You*" provides an insightful exploration of disability and personal growth. Will Traynor's character, who is rendered quadriplegic after a motorcycle accident, serves as a focal point for discussions on physical limitations and mental resilience. Through Will's interactions with Louisa Clark, students can examine how physical disability impacts personal identity and relationships. The novel illustrates how Lou's initial perceptions of Will change as she begins to understand his condition and its effects on his psyche. This transformation is critical for fostering empathy and more profound understanding among students.

In analyzing these themes, students were asked to track Will's emotional journey and identify key moments that signify his growth and acceptance of his condition. Discussions can explore how Will's character challenges societal stereotypes about disability and what this means for broader cultural perceptions. This critical examination deepens students' understanding of the novel and encourages them to reflect on their own attitudes towards disability (Barnes, 2019; Shakespeare, 2014). Additionally, students can engage in projects that involve researching real-life stories of individuals with disabilities and comparing their experiences to Will's. This research can culminate in presentations or reports highlighting the challenges and triumphs of people with disabilities, fostering a greater appreciation for their resilience and strength.

4.2.2 Ethical Dilemmas

The novel also presents complex ethical dilemmas, particularly surrounding the issue of assisted suicide. Will's desire to end his life through assisted suicide and Lou's attempts to dissuade him provide a basis for debates on morality, autonomy, and the value of life. Students can explore different cultural and personal perspectives on these issues, enhancing their critical thinking skills and ethical reasoning. This theme is particularly engaging for students, as it encourages them to consider and articulate their own views on controversial topics, thus improving their argumentative and persuasive language skills (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019; Rifkin, 1996).

Teachers can facilitate debates by dividing the class into groups representing different viewpoints. Each group can research and present their arguments, followed by a class-wide discussion where students can question and respond to each other's points. This activity develops critical thinking and promotes respectful discourse and the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives (Brookfield et al., 2019). Role-playing exercises can also be practical, where students take on the roles of various characters and argue from their perspectives. This method allows students to immerse themselves in the characters' ethical dilemmas, fostering a deeper understanding of the issues and enhancing their empathy.

4.3 Pedagogical Implications and Classroom Integration

4.3.1 Lesson Planning and Activities

Effective lesson planning involves aligning language learning objectives with the content and themes of the novel. Activities such as

role-plays, debates, and creative writing assignments can be designed around key scenes and themes from the novel. For instance, role-playing the conversation between Lou and Will about his decision to pursue assisted suicide allows students to practice negotiation and persuasive language. Creative writing tasks, such as rewriting a scene from a different character's perspective or composing diary entries for Lou or Will, enhance students' narrative skills and empathy (Harmer, 2015).

Teachers can also design projects where students create multimedia presentations on themes such as disability rights or ethical dilemmas in healthcare. These projects integrate research, writing, and presentation skills, providing a comprehensive learning experience (Brown, 2001). Incorporating digital tools like video editing software for presentations can also engage students who are more visually inclined and provide them with practical skills applicable beyond the classroom.

4.3.2 Assessing Language Skills

Assessments were reframed as reflective dialogues. Instead of relying solely on quizzes and essays, students engaged in peer assessments, oral feedback loops, and self-evaluation journals. Quizzes can test comprehension and vocabulary, while essays can evaluate critical thinking and writing skills. Oral presentations on themes or character analysis from the novel provide opportunities for students to practice public speaking and articulate their thoughts coherently. Assessment rubrics can provide clear grading criteria, focusing on clarity, coherence, use of evidence, and language accuracy. Peer assessments and self-reflections are also incorporated to encourage students to evaluate their and each other's work, fostering a more reflective learning environment (Brown, 2001).

4.3.3 Enhancing Cultural Awareness

"*Me Before You*" also serves to enhance cultural awareness. The novel's British setting and social contexts provide a backdrop for discussing cultural differences and similarities. Students can compare their cultural norms with those depicted in the novel, fostering a broader understanding of global perspectives. Teachers can incorporate cultural research projects where students explore different aspects of British culture as portrayed in the novel, such as healthcare policies, legal issues surrounding assisted suicide, and social attitudes toward disability. Final projects focused on cross-cultural comparisons, encouraging learners to draw parallels between the novel and their sociocultural realities (Goh & Burns, 2012).

4.4 Limitations and Further Research

The exclusive use of *Me Before You* as the core literary material in this study is a deliberate and pedagogically grounded decision. Rooted in a qualitative framework, this choice enables an in-depth exploration of how a single, emotionally resonant text can be meaningfully integrated into language instruction. By focusing on one novel, the study can closely analyze learner engagement, thematic comprehension, and linguistic outcomes in a detailed and context-specific manner. This approach reflects the principles of depth over breadth, allowing for a richer interpretation of student interactions, discussions, and written output tied to the narrative.

However, this single-text design also presents certain limitations. The findings, while insightful, may not be readily generalizable across other texts or instructional settings. Learners' responses to literature are often shaped by personal, cultural, and contextual factors, and different literary works may evoke varying levels of engagement or present distinct linguistic challenges. Acknowledging this, the current study serves as a foundational case study demonstrating the pedagogical value of literature in EFL settings.

Future research may build on these insights by adopting a comparative lens, analyzing the integration of multiple literary texts from diverse genres or cultural origins. Longitudinal studies could also explore the sustained impact of literary engagement on learners' language development, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness.

5. Conclusion

Integrating literature such as *Me Before You* into language learning provides a holistic educational experience that enhances linguistic competence, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. The novel's rich thematic content and relatable characters make it an effective tool for engaging students and developing their English language skills. Teachers can create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that fosters both language proficiency and a love for literature by aligning lesson plans with the novel's content and themes.

The findings of this study highlight the significant benefits of using contemporary novels in language education. The contextualized vocabulary learning, improved reading comprehension, and enhanced critical thinking skills observed in students demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach. Furthermore, the novel's exploration of profound themes such as disability, personal growth, and ethical dilemmas provides a platform for meaningful discussions and debates, fostering students' moral reasoning and empathy. This pedagogical approach prepares students for academic success and equips them with the skills needed to navigate complex social and ethical issues in their personal and professional lives. By engaging with literature, students develop a deeper understanding of human experiences, which enhances their ability to communicate effectively and empathetically in diverse contexts.

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of integrating literature into language learning and its applicability to other literary works, including those from different cultural backgrounds. Expanding the use of literature in language education can give students a deeper understanding of language and the human experience, preparing them for a more empathetic and informed engagement with the world. This study underscores the need for innovative teaching methods that develop linguistic skills and nurture critical thinking and cultural awareness, which are essential for navigating the complexities of today's globalized world.

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Authors' contributions

Dr. Martha Betaubun conceptualized and designed the study, oversaw the research implementation, and contributed to manuscript revision. Desy Eva Laila Rokhmah, S.Pd., M.Hum. was responsible for data collection, textual analysis, and the initial manuscript drafting. Both authors contributed to the analysis, reviewed the final version, and approved the manuscript for submission.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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