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Perspectives on Teaching English Literature to English Literature Major Students

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General Goals of Teaching English Literature to English Major Students

The teaching of English for the Literature Major students is considered an exploration into Literature. This is intended to enable students develop English language abilities and skills essential for classroom interaction. The object so far presumably has been to introduce students to some of the classics in English in the belief that exposure to great literature can serve important educational objectives.

Mostly a Content-oriented Methodology

Most literature teaching gives importance to content-oriented targets, which deal with the components of literature, with learners merely acquiring summaries of literary texts. The literature curriculum needs to be attitude-oriented, which refers to the kind of learning experience that is attained through various relationships developed in particular environment that prevails in the classroom. Literature teaching must try to help students achieve an engagement with the readings of literary texts. This engagement cannot really be measured in terms of passing examinations in literature. The success in teaching Literature is achieved when students carry with them beyond the classroom ‘an enjoyment and love for Literature’, which is renewed as they continue to enjoy Literature throughout their lives.

Basic Ability Expected

The basic ability expected of a learner after completing the literature course, is proficiency in language that will enable them to express themselves clearly and effectively and an awareness of literary sensibilities. However, many learners, even after completing a course in English Literature, are diffident in their language use and they face problems in communicating either in public or in private. We, therefore, need to ensure that English Literature students are

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well equipped in terms of competence in language as well as sensitive appreciation of literary texts.

Goals of This Paper

This paper deals with two perspectives of teaching Part – II General English course at the undergraduate level in colleges in Tamilnadu.

The first perspective is the General English course offered to the B.A, and B.Sc., students of all majors including B.A. English Literature students. This course aims at improving communication skills of the learners dealing with function-oriented texts. It demands the performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations) of the learners or the language proficiency of the graduates as end product.

The second perspective is concerned with the design of a separate General English syllabus for English Literature students. It should concentrate on improving the language proficiency and literary competence of learners, where the learners are expected to excel in both competence and performance.

Demands on the Students of English Literature Major

Thus the demand on the part of the literature student is not only to master the content of literary texts, but also to acquire an acceptable level of grammatical accuracy and situational appropriateness in their language use outside the classroom. So, the students of English Literature must be trained to develop their communication skills and sharpen their literary sensibilities as well. The expected objective of an English Literature course is to develop the proficiency level and literary competence of learners.

The present day students of literature need to improve both their language proficiency and literary sensibility during their B.A. English Literature course. This skill differentiates this group of learners from those who do a course in General English as students of other arts and science subjects. We need to be clear about what proficiency is and what literary sensibility is, and how these two concepts form the necessary and essential objectives in an English Literature programme in India.

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Proficiency and Sensibility

The individual's competence, his knowledge of the language use is a significant point of reference in the context of second language proficiency. Proficiency is not just communicating in a language, but how well the individual is able to communicate what he wants to communicate. Proficiency is defined as “performing in a given art, skill or branch of knowledge with expert correctness and facility.” The term further implies “a high degree of competence through training” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 1978). To be more specific, proficiency is used as a term that indicates an individual's general competence in a second language, independent of any particular course of study.

Literary sensibility is in a way analogous to literary competence, because sensibility here refers to “the ability to understand feelings, especially those expressed in literature or art.” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1998). Literary sensibility recognizes the ability to generate valid interpretations of a text. The objective of a literature course must be to lead learners to a higher level of perception, improving their critical sensibilities.

Literary Competence

Literary competence implies the ability to critically appreciate a literary text. This competence also involves the ability to locate a work of art, in the time and space of its creation. So it is necessary to possess the background knowledge of the creation, to respond to the poem aesthetically and also to define exactly its connotative and denotative meanings. In the words of Culler, literary competence is “an implicit understanding of certain conventions of interpretation which skilled readers draw on when reading literature” (Culler 1975).

Gilian Lazar (1993) specifies while reading literature, “Students are expected, as if by osmosis, to acquire a kind of competence in reading literature”. Susan Bassnet and Peter Grundy (1993) acknowledge this fact, “When we read Shakespeare it should not be because he is regarded as a master, but because his skill in using language is a pleasure to be enjoyed”.

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So, the nature of a literature course would depend on drawing up an explicit list of components of literary competence.

The type of sub-skills may include anything from recognizing and appreciating the range of genres (from sonnets to allegories) to simply following the plot of a short story or a novel. Such motives need not always be classic or canonical literary texts.

Literature as a Supporting Tool for Language Activities

The study of literature becomes crucial, when literature is used as a resource for promoting interesting language activities. So for literature pedagogy to be successful, the teaching must be oriented towards the development of literary awareness, which is implicit in learners' ability to use language at all times and sensitize learners to the conventions of the literary tradition.

Proficiency in English – A Prior condition for Developing Literary Sensibilities

Proficiency in English needs to be a prior condition for developing literary sensibility. For without a grasp of language, students may not be able to understand much in expressing their appreciation of literature. The attainment of language proficiency and the development of literary sensibility should be given equal importance in a literature curriculum, moving from the study of common core language to that of the more abstract and emotional aspect of literature. The aim is to develop language proficiency and literary sensibility through the 'learner's literary experience'. By literary experience, Bradford (1968) means an 'emotional and intellectual involvement' of the learner felt while going through literary texts. So this integrated approach of imparting language proficiency and literary sensibility will enable the learner to acquire the confidence to develop, express and value their own responses.

Use of Creative Modes in Selected Jobs

In India, one of the purposes of learning English and communicating in English has been to seek social recognition. However, there is now greater emphasis on seeking a professional status through the mastery and use of English. As in the past, jobs as teachers, journalists, Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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technical editors, etc. are easier to get when the candidates have a good mastery of both spoken and written English. These jobs especially demand skills in the creative mode. So, a graduate who has completed his/her English Literature course is expected to possess a lot of potential and intelligence for professional performance by virtue of his/her skill in the creative use of language.

Needed - An Exclusive and Distinct Syllabus for General English Course for the English Major Students

Given its importance in the national context, and its role in higher education in the state, there is a strong need to raise and maintain the standards of English teaching in the colleges and universities in Tamilnadu. A positive step in this direction is the recognition of the need to improve the English language abilities of students by providing an exclusive General English syllabus for English Literature students. It has been noted that the Study Group reports, reports of the Curriculum Development Centres, UGC summer Institutes in English have only touched the fringes of the problems faced by learners. Academic, attitudinal and administrative constraints have come in the way of designing an appropriate syllabus for English Literature students.

Purpose of This Study

This study has concerned itself with the designing of a separate General English syllabus for English Literature students. It was felt essential to undertake a survey of students' and teachers' views regarding the English language abilities and skills of students, teaching of English in colleges, difficulties of students in understanding subjects, the need for a separate Part – II General English syllabus and the usefulness of the papers suggested. The survey, administered in the form of a questionnaire, led to a statistical analysis of the views of students and teachers regarding the need for an exclusive General English syllabus for English Literature students.

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Questionnaires, Etc.

In the light of this discussion, it is now proposed to give an outline of the priorities in the design of an exclusive General English syllabus for Literature Major students. The questionnaire administered with the B.A English Majoring students show that only a few students joined the course out of interest. The average students who have opted for the study of English major from various backgrounds are poor in their language abilities. They have a low level of learning competence, as is evident from their exposure to General English course. A vast majority of students have indicated that they have difficulty in following subjects in the first four semesters. These students are exposed to challenging texts, which are beyond their understanding and linguistic competence. The major constraint identified in this study is the mismatch existing between Part – II General English and Part – III English Major syllabuses.

What Do the Teachers Believe?

According to the survey undertaken for this study, a large proportion of teachers believe that students joining English literature course lack minimum English language abilities required to follow lectures in English and study the prescribed texts in English. The survey has revealed that teachers regard students' lack of motivation to learn English and students' lack of exposure to English as their main difficulties for the study of English Literature in colleges. They also consider the unsuitability of course book at this level as the next important cause for students' difficulty in learning.

The Textbooks

Most of the texts prescribed for undergraduate programmes are of the literary-humanistic type, and at the linguistic level, the materials they offer are beyond the grasp of learners. The teacher, therefore, resorts to lecturing, text explication, translation, and dictation of notes. Such a situation tends to promote content – based and memory – oriented learning which draws a great deal of support from the examination, which only seeks to test the memory of reproducible content. Actually this tendency for 'reading – reducing – reproducing' reminds us of the earlier habit of 'reading – remembering – reciting' in the traditional system.

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The inevitable result of such procedures is that the student hardly feels any necessity to have a direct encounter with the language and hardly gets any opportunity to use the language. He is a passive listener, not encouraged to react to what he reads, think critically or to do any original writing. So the proposed syllabus tries to activate the creative thinking in learners and prepares him to write observing the principles of grammar and rhetoric of English.

Language is not static but it is a dynamic system; it expands. So learners must be made to understand the need for the vocabulary expansion and to prepare for reading literature. It is therefore claimed in this study that the imparting dictionary and reference skills will help learners in acquiring and using new vocabulary. When students are made to respond to open-ended texts, students are made to think beyond texts and encouraged to use the words newly acquired by them.

The Proposed Syllabus on General English for English Literature Major

The proposed syllabus recommends learners and teachers to play the role of active participants and interact actively in the language learning operation. Based on this changing attitude to English language learning, a separate General English course for the B.A English Major students has been recommended. It aims at providing students with opportunities to undertake a specialized study of English Language and Literature. The course is structured on a framework, which would develop the student's expressive abilities in English and higher level skills of expression. It ensures a conscious understanding of the nature and structure of English equipping them with profession-oriented language skills.

The course is an introductory programme and attempts to develop the literary competence of students by familiarizing them with literary concepts and the discourse structure in literary texts. Its main objective is to help students acquire interpretative abilities and to prepare them for an in-depth study of literature at the post-graduate level. To put it briefly, the course aims at equipping students with language skills and literary awareness, thus enabling them to enhance

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their knowledge of English Literature, skills in using language and develop proper and relevant attitudes to the profession of teachers and journalists.

On Dictionary Skills

In the proposed Part – II General English syllabus, the paper on ‘Dictionary Skills’ enables learners to exploit standard dictionaries for increasing their language awareness and developing reference skills and make them independent learners. The introduction of papers on ‘Grammar and Usage’ and ‘Rhetoric and Advanced Writing Skills’ is recommended to improve the language competence of students giving them a sound background that will be helpful in analyzing and enjoying the reading of literary texts. The paper on ‘Language through Literature’ introduces the students to literary concepts and to a practical approach to the study of English involving an in-depth analysis of major literary texts.

Extreme Mismatches in the Current Syllabus

In the case of the present syllabus followed in the colleges affiliated to the University of Madras, the mismatch of Part – II General English and Part – III English Major are in the extremes. Difficult and challenging literary texts are prescribed for study in the first semester knowing well that the students do not have the minimum English language abilities to understand these texts. So the chances of improving the language proficiency of the learners are slim, as the students are finding it to difficult to follow the prescribed texts especially in Part – III English Major.

ESL and Literature Major

The proposed syllabus holds good in the ESL context. With the studies students undertake in the first four semesters of Part – II General English course, they are able to map out a literary framework that will help them to approach the study of literary texts more purposefully. So, this study has proposed a special General English syllabus for English Literature course, as in the case of B.Com and BCA. The objective of this special General English syllabus is to help learners

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- become independent learners
- take and make notes
- refer to source materials
- have a working knowledge of English
- enhance their critical writing

A Bridge Course

This training forms a bridge course, which would help them face the challenging texts in Part –III English Major papers. So this study establishes a greater match between Part - II General English and Part – III English Major syllabuses. This helps learners improve their language proficiency, which in turn develops the literary competence of learners. Therefore the chances of developing the language proficiency of the Literature Major learners are high with the proposed syllabus.

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S. Mekala, Ph.D.
Department of Humanities
National Institute of Technology
Tiruchirapalli – 620 015
Tamilnadu, India
mekala.mohan@gmail.com

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