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Teaching Language through Literary Texts in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction – Push against Teaching Literature in the ESL Classroom

The primary objective of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in India should be communicative competence, that is, mastering the use of English in a variety of situations, social contexts and professional areas. Unfortunately, the communicative competence of the learners is limited to their ability to produce formal, curriculum-confined literary discourse, that too having its basis in their cramming powers. They never get to know how to exploit and particularly use in their day to day life situations what they have learnt through their knowledge of formal grammar and exposure to literature.

That is why teaching literature in the ESL classroom has been discouraged by many. There is no denying the fact that improvement of communicative skills in English should be part and parcel of any teaching of English as a second language. But for that one cannot do away with literary texts in an ESL classroom.

Rich Linguistic Input through Literary Texts

The literary texts, as many linguists have come to accept, provide rich linguistic input, effective stimuli for students to express themselves in other language and are a potential source of learner motivation.

If the student remains communicatively incompetent after completing a course in English language/literature the literary texts in any ESL classroom are seen as something redundant rather than useful.

This observation tends to discourage and disregard the use of literary discourse in the ESL classroom. Such tendency also gives strength to the historically strong dichotomy between language and literature.

But any attempt to separate language teaching from literature teaching, either in human mind or in the practice is fraught with danger. Widowson's claim that 'study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation' is based on the realization that literature is an example of language in use and is a context for language use. Thus studying the language of literary texts as language in operation is seen as enhancing the learners' appreciation of aspects of different systems of language organization.

Complementary Nature of Literature and Language

Language and literature are inseparable and their teachings should be complementary to each other. Michael Short's comment in this regard is worth mentioning: "Literature and language teaching should be linked and made mutually reinforcing" (Short and Candlin 1986). Literature studied for aesthetic enjoyment only and language studied without literary texts both are insufficient and far from yielding satisfying results.

The Challenges and Difficulties Faced by Teachers/Learners

Some language learners find literature study difficult as literature has an emotive and figurative use of language. The literary discourse, no doubt, is a poetic one, different from expressive (letter, diaries, essays etc.) and transactional (advertising, business letters, editorials, instructions etc.) one.

Another barrier is the uninhibited treading into the world of imagination on the part of the literary writers which makes it difficult to invest the literary content with a uniformly accepted meaning. Yet another difficulty is bridging the cultural gap and comprehending a discourse totally alien to the learner's socio-cultural background.

But it is up to the teacher how to excite the imagination of learners and how to make his or her teaching most effective, rewarding and refreshing. However, literary texts remain an unavoidable tool in the hands of language teacher. It is in the teacher's domain as what to teach and how to teach and how to use poetry, drama, prose, short stories or novel for language teaching.

Use of Non-canonical Literature from Non-native Writers in English

In recent years, the role of literature as a basic component and source of authentic texts of the language curriculum rather than an ultimate aim of English teaching has been reassessed and gaining momentum.

The literature used in ESL classroom today is no longer restricted to canonical texts from certain countries, e.g., the UK, the USA but includes the works of writers from a diverse range of countries and cultures using different discourses of English. The works of non-native writers in English are unique in the way in which the English language has been extended, modified and elaborated to serve the purposes of revealing local, national individual sensibilities.

The Focus of This Paper

This paper proposes to explore why a language teacher should use literature in the ESL classroom, what sort of literary texts language teacher should use with language learners and how different genres of literature benefit language teaching.

An attempt has also been made to look at the problems faced by the teacher which sometimes makes teaching language through literature a futile exercise and to suggest some humble solutions regarding the methodology and designing course contents for literary items.

Why Teach Literature

There are many reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom.

- a) The use of literary texts aims to improve language skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking.
- b) It also improves language areas such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation etc. They learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas.
- c) Literature provides authentic material. Many authentic samples of language in real life contexts (i.e. travel timetables, brochures, city plans, diet charts, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, leaflets, advertisements, magazine articles) are included within recently developed course materials. The learners are exposed to actual language samples from real life and literature acts as a beneficial complement to such materials.
- d) The use of literature in teaching English also acts as a means of cultural enrichment. Any literary piece is sufficient to acquaint the learner with understanding how communication takes place in that particular country. The learners get to know the socio-political backgrounds of foreign lands against which the narrative is set. This widens their horizon of understanding the human nature and world in general. When the learners confront the difference in the other culture and their own they tend to develop tolerance and understanding. Simultaneously the literary texts can deal with universal themes such as love, war and loss which makes the learner feel him a part of the whole humanity.
- e) Being representational rather than referential literature supplements language teaching process. This feature fosters the personal involvement of the readers. The learners/readers tend to inhabit the text mentally and are drawn to it personally. They become enthusiastic to find out what happens next and feel close to certain characters and situations. That makes language learning more interesting and exciting.
- f) The sociolinguistic richness of literature also facilitates language learning. A person speaks differently in different social contexts like school, hospital, police station, court, theatre etc. (i.e. formal, informal, causal, frozen, intimate). The language used changes from one profession to another. The literature provides students with a wide range of language varieties used in different situations. The

- most important contribution of literature to the ELT is to display the variety, the subtlety and imaginative force of the language and to encourage the scrupulous use of words.
- g) Literary texts provide opportunity for multi-sensorial classroom experiences and can appeal to learners with different literary styles. Texts can be supplemented by audio-texts, music CDs, film clips, documentaries, all of which tend to enhance richness of students' sensory inputs.

Selecting Literary Texts

The needs, motivation, interest, socio-cultural background, economic status, mother-tongue and enjoyment of the learners are to be taken into account before selecting a literary text in an ESL classroom.

The last one is the most important as the enjoyment or pleasure of encountering one's own thoughts or situations exemplified clearly in a literary work and an equal pleasure of noticing those same thoughts and situations presented by a completely new perspective makes the language teaching session much more captivating and absorbing.

Duff and Maley (2007) stress that teachers can cope with many of the challenges/difficulties of teaching language through literature if they ask a series of questions to assess the suitability of texts for any given group of learners:

- a) is the subject matter interesting to the group,
- b) is the language level appropriate,
- c) is the text right lengthwise for the time available,
- d) does the understanding of the text require exhaustive cultural or literary background,
- e) is it religiously or culturally offensive in any way,
- f) can it be easily exploited for language learning program?

Once the teacher finds satisfactory answers to these questions he/she can proceed with the task of using text for teaching language. Appropriate selection of literary texts would undoubtedly lead to fruitful results. Last but not the least is that the texts should be stylistically uncomplicated and the ones with which the students can identify easily.

Literature and Language Skills

- a) **Literature and Reading:** The language teacher should adopt a dynamic, student-centered approach towards comprehension of a literary text. Besides literal understanding of the passage there should be reading at an inferential level. Both the individual as well as collaborative work should be encouraged during the teaching sessions. The personal reaction of the students to characters, theme, plot and author's point of view should be explored.

- b) Literature and Writing:** Literature can be a powerful and motivating source for writing in ESL, both as a model and as subject matter. The students' writings reflect their original thinking like interpretation or analysis and comparative study. Literature acts as a model when students are asked to write similar to original work or clearly imitate its content, theme, organization and style. Based on literature as a model the writing can be controlled (for beginners), guided (at intermediate level) and reproductive (at advanced level). Based on literature as subject matter it can be "on or about" the literary text and out of literary text. The latter one uses literature as a springboard for original composition, which, in turn, enhances language learning. The learners can be asked to report the contents of the text or reproduce what one character thinks of another or write about their own reaction to the similar situation.
- c) Literature, Speaking and Listening**
The teaching of speaking and listening can be made interesting with an equally meaningful role of literature. Whereas oral reading and role-playing enhance confidence and improve pronunciation; dramatization and re-enactment lead to better understanding of the text and the resultant enjoyment out of it. The discussions and group activities help in improving communication skills. Listening to literary re-enactments makes one substantially alert not only to pronunciation, sentence formation and tone of the speakers but also to the possible errors in their speech and dialogues.

Why Teach Different Genres of Literature to Language Learners

Now the question arises what are the advantages of using different genres of literature as resource material for language teaching and how can they be best exploited for that purpose. Let us take them up one by one:

Poetry: Poetry, along with drama, novel and short story paves the way for the learning and teaching of basic language skills. It provides readers with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the known usages and rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. It triggers unmotivated readers into multiple interpretations and also evokes feelings and thoughts. The students also get to know various figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification etc.

The important issue, however, is how the teacher could use a poem towards language teaching program. The poem can be used as a stimulus for making the reader/learner create his/her own experience of the similar situation.

For example, while teaching Wordsworth's "Nutting" the learners can be asked to recall their own childhood experiences of picking stealthily some other nut or fruit from the orchards and ravishing unintentionally the natural beauty in the whole exercise. The learner can be involved in the learning exercise by fantasizing as to what he/she would do

in a similar situation. This would promote a personal and aesthetic interaction between the learner and the text of the poem.

Short Story: Short Story is a supreme resource for observing not only language but life itself. In it characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives. One cannot disagree with what Sage says that “the world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives.” (Sage 1987). It makes the learners reading task easier due to being simple and short when compared to other literary genres. It is universal in nature as students all over the world have experienced stories told to them since their childhood and can relate to them.

Drama: Using drama in a language classroom is a good source for language teaching. It is through the use of drama that learners become familiar with grammatical structures in contexts and also learn about how to use the language to express and inform. The use of drama promotes language development as well as heightens effective listening skills.

Novel: In novel, characters reflect what people really perform in daily lives. There is portrayal of the whole social set up in a novel. Class discussions of each novel event should comprise the main idea and supporting details, including who, what, when, where, and how. Details of various social issues like sexual harassment, female foeticide, terrorism, adultery etc. which are often the integral part of the plot, can provoke interesting debates and, hence, initiate exercises leading to communicative proficiency and, resultantly, language learning.

Problems Faced by Teachers Teaching Language through Literature

No doubt, literature plays a pivotal role in the language instructions of many non-native countries. But still there are some problems faced by the language teacher using literature as course component:

- a) lack of pedagogically designed appropriate literary material,
- b) lack of sufficient preparation in the area of literature teaching in the ESL programs,
- c) absence of clear cut objectives defining the role of literature,
- d) lack of adopting an integrated approach to ELT,
- e) lack of prior planning of the lesson on the part of the teacher, and
- f) lack of proper training programs for the teachers in this field.

Solutions and Suggestions—Developing and Adopting Appropriate Strategy

The role of the teacher in this field is to teach according to the needs and expectations of the students. Appropriate language teaching method suited to his learners should be selected, very judiciously and flexibly.

The texts also should be chosen wisely, taking into consideration the students' interest, background, culture, needs, age, sex, etc. At elementary level simplified and specially written stories can be taken up and at advanced level literary texts with figurative use of language should be preferred. Containing within them a number of different varieties of language they are extremely useful in sensitizing more advanced learners of English to linguistic variations and the values associated with different varieties.

The best way to exploit literature for language teaching is to provide for a variety of open-ended tasks demanding attention, effort and explanation on the part of all pupils. Presentation and explanation of the 'content' by the teacher should only act as a springboard to facilitate his willful plunge into various explorations, interpretations and myriad responses.

Literature should not be taught for the sake of literature only in an ESL classroom but it should be used to engage the learners in activities that will lead, in the first place, to language development.

Thus, most of literary texts can be read and discussed on three levels, namely the denotative (the literal, surface meaning), the connotative (the deeper nuances of the text) and the evaluative (reader's response). The last one ensures the learners' response and participation in the learning activity to the maximum.

One should avoid putting literature teaching and language teaching into water-tight compartments as they are not contrary but complementary to each other. Literary texts, as Nash Walter says, are "emblems of general and continuing experience" and "have the inherent power to illuminate a universe of parallels, analogies and variants." (Walter 1986). One cannot but agree with Prof. Verma that "the language draws its life giving nourishment from literature and literature uses language as its vehicle" (Verma 1993).

Conclusion

The need of the hour in any teaching program of English language is restructuring and redesigning the course contents according to the changed global scenario of academics. The literary texts by Indian writers should be given preference over British, American or Australian writers as the learners are saved the extra labour of understanding a foreign culture all the time.

The past tradition of the selection of textbooks from a limited domain of classic British texts should be given up in favor of an open field which also includes the writings of non-native speakers of English, especially those from the Indian subcontinent. The heavy dose of classical literature impedes language learning as it causes disengagement and boredom to the learners. One has to agree with Prof. Verma's observation that we "should have courage to change, modify, expand, and even replace the model or models on the basis of

our needs, our problems, and limitations and the socio-cultural settings in which we are learning and teaching English” (Verma1993).

Moreover, the teachers should aim not at transferring their superior understanding and appreciation of the literary texts to pupils but aim at helping them experience or ‘feel’ the text themselves. An integrated approach to language and literature teaching makes it a lively and rewarding exercise as one should not forget that literature is language and language can indeed be literary.

This integrated approach to the use of literary texts in the ESL classroom offers the learners an opportunity to develop not only their linguistic and communicative skills but their knowledge about language in all its discourse types. The use of literary texts, which are selected judiciously and wisely, can be a potentially powerful pedagogic tool. For that the teachers, too, must have a rationale and a variety of imaginative techniques for integrating literature work with language teaching. There should be refresher training programs more regularly to sensitize the teachers to the need of the hour—to use literary discourse as an effective tool for language teaching rather than to teach it as merely a part of the curriculum.

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