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**Teaching of English Literature and  
Empowerment of Indian Students**

**M. Poonkodi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.**

# Teaching of English Literature and Empowerment of Indian Students

M. Poonkodi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I would like to identify and propose a different focus in teaching English literature to semi-and non-urban Indian students, who study in government-run schools and colleges.

English is taught as a second language in most of the government-run schools and colleges in rural and semi-urban areas, with less than desirable enthusiasm among the students to learn and appreciate English literature. The desire to learn and master English for a better career in these days of globalization is manifest in urban schools and colleges. But students' attitude towards learning of English in rural and semi-urban areas has not changed much. They experience a fear psychosis and feel being alienated in their English classes.

## Confusing Declarations: Dichotomy between the Pronouncements of Politicians and the Demands in the Job Market

There is a dichotomy between the pronouncements of politicians who preach in favor of Indian languages and almost decry the learning and use of English on the one hand, and the growing value added to the mastery of English in the job market. This dichotomy has existed for generations in modern India. It will not go away easily. Meanwhile, first generation learners as well as students from rural and semi-urban areas need more motivation to study and acquire some mastery of English.

## Drawback Is Inherent In the System

Here one of the serious drawbacks is not with the students but with the system that lacks a suitable methodology for the teaching of literature. I assume that judicious use of literature helps learn a language better, in a balanced manner.

Currently, the English teacher utilizes her teaching session to stage her mono act enthusiastically while students remain passive observers scarcely participating in it and carelessly attempting to take notes in between the cramped space of the prescribed text. The literature class should pave the way for significant interaction between the teacher and the students. However, currently the literature class is transformed into a discipline in itself, with emphasis more on content and on the analysis of the literary pieces encountered in the class.

How do we change this situation and exploit literature as an entertaining and empowering tool to master the language? I propose that empowering students in ways detailed below will help remedy this condition.

### **Prose and Poetry: Classrooms Should Become Places for Interactive Learning**

Almost always, teaching of English literature continues in Indian class rooms through the genre of prose and poetry.

Literature is an important window letting one to have a view of the world and realizing the expression of culture by means of sharing individual or collective life experiences. Since literature is formed through the language, it is also the agent for interaction during teaching sessions demanding student's active participation.

Unfortunately, most of the literary classes in semi- and rural India become oppressive for the students because of the inadequate methods of teaching followed by the English teachers. For example, if a teacher teaches a poem in English and takes the students line by line through it in a theoretical manner, without letting the students to exercise their imagination and interpret the metaphors, themes or imagery in their own ways, literature turns out to be an agent that assimilates them to teacher's mindset. The teacher stands before them as an autocratic personality with no interest to let the students participate in learning. Class room, then, is no more a place of interaction but a place wherein monologue is authoritatively delivered.

### **Role of Indigenous Sentiments**

When teachers teach the students ignoring their indigenous sentiments, another great damage is done to them. Students feel isolated and far removed from their culture. Terry Dean observes, "the further a child's culture is from the culture of the school, the less chance for success. Class room environments that do not value the home culture of the students lead to decreased motivation and poor academic performance". Even while teaching English literature, Indian students should be taught and must be allowed to learn from their own cultural perspectives and worldviews for their empowerment.

### **Students' Empowerment**

*Empowerment* as a term has been used in educational institutions for quite some time now. Empowerment comes in so many different ways in an instructional situation. Applied to our context in this article, I'd like to view adequacy of participation in understanding and interpreting a literary form, its content and implications and actually enjoying the piece and relating it to one's own world of experience as empowerment.

Boomer called for the empowerment of students and investigated ways in which power and responsibility could be shared. Boomer's conception of empowerment is about teachers sharing power so students who then are able to exercise their own power and responsibilities.

## **Power-with, Power-over and Power-to Relations**

Empowerment during literature class is about students satisfying their need for power so that they gain a sense of power-with peers or the teacher to interpret and express in a way that eradicates a sense of alienation in the class room and develop a sense of belonging. Students who are involved in ‘power-with’ relations are more likely to feel a sense of belonging than if they are involved in ‘power-over’ relations. Furthermore, if students satisfy their need for belonging in the classroom and there is a sense of community then it seems reasonable to expect that they are more likely to achieve a sense of power-with. Additionally, they gain a sense of ‘power-to,’ that completely ensures their attainment of power to be on their own in thinking and creating and more appreciating of western or any other alien culture-bound literature.

There is certainly a clash of cultures between the classrooms of semi and rural regions and the classrooms of urban institutions. In addition, the educational system in India is rather tilted in favor of westernized ways of thinking, acting and reacting. It is this tilt that comes to determine who is successful and who is not. While absorption of the best in the westernized modes of education is a must, we also should recognize the need to see usefulness and efficacy in the native modes of communicating education to the semi and rural students. This struggle needs to be noticed and positively directed through appropriate strategies.

## **Literary Empowerment in the Classrooms**

In Indian semi and rural classrooms, literature written by western authors, about western culture or lifestyle, is often taught. Teachers of English have also been trained in this sort of literature. They enjoy reciting an American poem, enacting an Irish drama, narrating a Russian story and reading a British fiction all to them, restricting the students to exercise their power and responsibility to act, react and interact. So, what is offered to them is something not directly experienced by the Indian students since they have to cross over to a different physical and possibly in several ways new mental world with a different social milieu.

They enter this world as strangers and function as outsiders, living in a different society. When they compare their lives against that of the American or European characters studied in the literature classes they begin to feel separated from the class room environment and as though they are outsiders looking at a world to which they do not belong.

## **Possibility of Negative Impact**

I propose that these feelings of isolation and difference are likely to have a negative effect upon students.

If the westernized story and the westernized characters are supposed to be the norm and the native student feels different from that norm, there is going to be a decrease in that student’s self-esteem. It incites inferior feeling and detaches the students from any further interest in the work being studied because it places them as an “other” in contrast to the dominant, society that

is being portrayed in the literary pieces they encounter in the classroom. For example, in a poem or a fiction, if there is a descriptive picture of European winter season with snow covered landscapes, hurling of hailstones, frozen ice hanging on trees and branches and men in exclusive costumes and peculiar winter behaviour, it might create a strange feeling for a student living in Tamilnadu because he has been mostly exposed to brilliant sun and hot weather. The theme, characterizations and symbols that highlight social privileges in such descriptions perplex him. He finds difficult to accommodate himself during the class hours.

When divorce is shown as a frequent phenomenon, or dating as the most preferred form of spousal choice, or individualism is portrayed as the best goal in life, indulgence rather than self-control as the ordinary way of life, and so on, a student needs to learn what these really mean to him or her in the Indian context, especially in semi and rural areas. To what purpose they are exposed to such happenings? Students begin to wonder.

### **A Possible Solution – Allow the Students the Power to Translate**

The sense of being “other” can be eliminated in a less fussy and less complicated manner by bestowing upon them the literary empowerment. Educators, in all the pedagogy training programmes, advise the teachers to empower the students by giving academic freedom-freedom of imagination and expression which, in turn, shall remove the clash of cultures from the classroom, enhance their creative talents and self-esteem and also instill self-confidence.

In other words, allow and encourage students to translate the literature into their own worldviews.

For instance, let the students endeavour to translate asking questions and tracing similarities:

- Is there a character in the novel that could be viewed as a figure in the Indian context?
- Is there within the novel any mythology, folklore, beliefs etc. in line with Indians’?
- How well could they be translated and interpreted in concordance with the students’ cultural milieu?
- Is the thematic portrayal of characters and their inter relationships within a novel appropriate and do they have interconnections with students’ familial, societal and historical background?

We need to encourage the students’ earnest attempts to find out answers for these questions.

- Encourage them to escape from the western world into which they are coerced in and set them into their own world.
- Set them into a context in which they better understand the theme and characters while simultaneously have a revision and a retrospective understanding of their cultural chronology and indigenous experiences.
- This exercise allows the students to eradicate the barrier they may encounter when they are reading as a trespasser or as an outsider.

The outcome is, hopefully, they attain literary empowerment or in other words a stronger sense of self-confidence and a better understanding of their native identity. Teachers, on the other hand, get an opportunity to play their pedagogical roles as an educator and an enabler diffusing students' literary knowledge and developing their critical awareness, the most indispensable outcome of any curriculum.

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