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“Why” And “How” of Literature in Language Classroom

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Poor Communicative Competence in English – Is Literature Teaching Responsible for It?

The main concern of the teachers of English is to help the learners acquire communicative competence. However, students who should have developed reasonable competence in English after more than a decade of learning English and spending their four semesters fail to succeed in English language communicative skills. They have difficulties also in comprehending the nuances, and acquire some creativity and versatility. Teachers, in turn, are shocked by students’ incorrect use of language revealed through their errors in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. In many programmes, literary texts like prose, poetry, and drama are prescribed and taught in language classes. However, the failure of learners to succeed in communicative skills creates a frustration and makes people question the use of English literature in developing communication skills.

A Heavy Dose of Classical Literature!

Some educationalists believe that the reason for the students’ failure to improve their communicative skills is due to the heavy dose of classical literature offered for study in classes. These works are usually in a form of language which is far beyond the language ability of these students. In order to understand such difficult texts students seek the help of sub-standard commercial notes with translations. This in no way helps the students to improve their English knowledge. This raises the question, “Why should we teach literature to language students when in no way it helps them improve their performance in the language?”

Literature Is Useful in Learning Language Skills

Literature provides the students with abundant examples of the subtle and complex uses of grammar and vocabulary of English.

English is used at its idiomatic best and is used most effectively in literature. The teaching of literature would definitely help the students improve their language skills. Good introduction to literature can compensate for the deficiencies of the linguistic approach in the area of grammar, vocabulary and syntax and can augment the students’ competence in English.

Literature Helps Develop Communicative Competence

The teaching of literature can also be justified on the ground that the cultural backgrounds of the literary work would broaden the views of students on other cultures by stirring up reflection, inducing feeling, and stimulating action. The teaching of literature helps learners in gaining not only communicative but also creative competence.

Specific Uses of Literature in Language Class

Literature is lovable and pleasurable. It has universal appeal and it appeals to the hearts of the learners. Because of this strong appealing quality, literature finds an everlasting place in the memory of the learner. So literature is definitely a useful medium for language teaching.

Literature has certain specific uses in the language class. For instance, the skill of guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar vocabulary item from the context can be easily developed with the help of literature. Any literary text, whether prose or poem or a play, provides the learners with rich context and adequate clues to guess the meaning of new words we encounter in a text. Register based teaching of vocabulary can also be done with literature. In a literary text words frequently occur in related groups. These groups of words which are semantically related not only contribute to a better understanding of the text but also facilitate register based teaching of vocabulary item. Literature can play a vital role in the acquisition of syntax. The four basic skills of language, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, can be promoted through a literary text.

What Is Lacking in Our Classes?

However what is lacking in most of our English classes is the integration between language and literature. So, what we need is not the abolition of Literature teaching but the right choice of the texts and a change in the methodology adopted.

The Role of the Text

As far as the choice of text is concerned it is the key to success in using literature in a language classroom.

A text which is extremely difficult in linguistic or cultural levels will reap very few benefits. It is always worthwhile to use simple texts. There is a vast corpus of simple texts available within the body of literature in English. In Indian contexts, texts from the large body of creative writing in English by its non-native user from former British colonies such as countries in the Indian subcontinent, in East and West Africa and in the Caribbean can be used. The works of these non-native writers 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. These literatures also manifest a cultural context that an ESL/EFL learner can identify with. The simplicity in their works is a positive aspect of their literary merit and makes the works apt for the language classroom.

Develop and Use Appropriate Methodology

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The next key to success in using literature in a language classroom is the methodology adopted. Any literary work can be read and discussed on three levels, namely, the denotative, connotative and the evaluative. At the denotative level what is said, or what happens to whom, for what reasons, where and when in a literary text is discussed. At the connotative level, what is meant by what the characters say or do is pondered over. And at the evaluative level, how does the reader regard what is said or done is dealt with.

Problems Faced by Our Teachers

However, the problem with many teachers is that they fail to discuss a prescribed literary text at these three levels. The teachers just read and interpret the literary text. To put it otherwise, only the first level, that is, the denotative level of interpretation is done. This is a wrong method. Instead of reading what is said, or what happens to whom, for what reasons, where and when, literature should be used as a resource for teaching language. Literature should not be taught for literature's sake in a language classroom. Instead it should be used to engage students in activities that will lead, in the first place, to language development.

The Purpose of Teaching Literature

The purpose of teaching literature should never be to make students have a fake aptitude to learn certain diction or critical terms from the examination point of view without a proper understanding of them, or to learn conventional opinions which some literary texts reveal. Literature should be used as a resource for teaching language. While using literary texts in a language class, we should pay more attention to “the use of literature” than to “the study of literature”. The students should be engaged in as many activities as possible to ensure their interaction with the text and with each other in ways, which would hopefully help in promoting language learning.

Literature Can Be a Powerful Tool in the Hand of Teachers

Literature should be a powerful tool in the hands of any teacher of English as a second language. Good literary text not only improves language learning but also inspires motivation, which results in broader understanding. The methodology has to be motivating and promising. More language related analysis could be added to make literature a genuine means for acquiring enjoyable language. Additional language practice would help to fulfill the ultimate aim of integrating language skills. Teachers should have a rationale and a variety of imaginative techniques for integrating literature work with language teaching.

Avoid Dependence on Memorization

Departure from any literature examination based wholly on memory is a must. While incorporating literature into the language classroom there has to be more emphasis on the

development of language skills, enjoyment and creativity. Literature can be evaluated in a lively, interactive way with imaginative recreation.

Encourage Both Individual and Group Work

Students should be encouraged to work individually or in group collaboration to approach the text. For instance the students can be asked to re-write a poem, story, or scene from a different point of view, and/or scripting an episode for radio or television. They can be asked to dramatize a written text, to write the diary of a character in the text, to write a letter from one character to another, or from the student to a character. They can even be asked to interview one of the characters.

Such tasks could offer students the opportunity to respond imaginatively to their reading experience by developing the text in a way that employs communicative and purposeful language. When students are encouraged to use language imaginatively, their interest and motivation for English would increase, and eventually lead to improved use and performance in the language. It would also lead to a deeper understanding of the texts.

Let Us Use Literature to Our Advantage

Literature should be advantageously used for teaching language. If a right approach which best serves the needs of EFL learners and the syllabus is selected for teaching literature in a language class, then both teachers and students would stop asking for the elimination of teaching literature in language learning classes.

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