

Teaching English Language through English Literature

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Abstract-- In recent years, the role of literature as a basic component and source of authentic texts of the language curriculum has been gaining importance. Among language educators and ELT experts, there has been a hot debate and discussion on how and when literature should be incorporated in ESL / EFL curriculum. There are discussions of how literature and ESL / EFL instruction can work together and interact for the benefit of the students and how language can be taught through literature. This discussion leads to the development of interesting ideas, methods and techniques of ELT through literature. Many language educators consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and useful concern.

This paper aims to discuss the use of literature as a popular technique for teaching both basic language skills and language areas. The basic language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing; language areas like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation can be taught by using literature as an important teaching material. This paper also discusses the benefits and problems encountered by the language teachers in this attempt of teaching language through literature.

Index Terms—Foreign Language Teaching, Literary Competence, Literature, Teaching Literature, Teaching of Language Skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the present global context Learning of English has become inexorable when English plays an important role as world's link language or lingua franca. Hence English became an important part of the Indian curriculum in schools and colleges and is taught as second language. In this context the English teachers and the students of Indian schools and colleges face many problems in teaching and learning.

It has become a Herculean task for the teachers to improve essential skills in students to express themselves in English in academic as well as real life contexts. As a part of giving thrust to language teaching, literature has been relegated to secondary place. Nevertheless, the role of literature in the ELT classroom has been recognized and even the linguists view literary texts as an important teaching material.

Literature, with its rich linguistic input serves as effective stimuli for students to express themselves. Needless to say it serves as a potential source of motivation to the learners.

Among language educators and ELT experts, there has been a hot debate and discussion about how and when literature should be incorporated into ELT curriculum. There are discussions on how literature and language teaching can work together for the benefit of students. This discussion or debate leads to the development of innovative ideas, methods and techniques of ELT through literature.

2. DIFFERENT TYPES OF LITERARY TEXTS

Literary texts that can be studied in the ELT include the genres like poems, plays, novels, short stories, prose pieces and one act plays. Literary texts can be studied in their original forms or abridged versions and they can be divided into classical texts and popular texts. The classical texts include the works of great writers like William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, John Milton, Francis Bacon, Charles Dickens etc. Popular texts include the literary works produced by the writers of contemporary period and native writers. Language can be effectively taught by using texts from English literature and literatures in English.

These literary texts are available in different forms like printed books, e-books, audio files, videos and films. The language teachers can take the students to the English language lab and give them access to these e-resources.

3. USES OF LITERARY TEXTS

- Literary texts provide opportunities for multi-sensorial classroom experiences.
- They enhance the literary and language horizons of the students.

- Literary texts are representational rather than referential (McRae, 1994). Hence, the literary texts appeal to the emotions and feelings.
- Literature helps the students to understand varied cultures, compare and develop the ideas of tolerance and understanding.
- The literary texts deal with universal themes such as love, compassion, humility, humanity, humor, anguish, pain and loss. Hence they appeal to everyone.
- These texts help in moulding a man into a universal citizen.
- Literary texts offer a rich source of linguistic input and help learners to improve the four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- They also develop the grammatical structures and add new vocabulary.
- Literary texts motivate the students to be creative and imaginative in their thinking, speaking and writing.

4. CHALLENGES

In spite of their uses, the literary texts may pose a number of challenges such as such as text selection, length, cultural difficulty and cultural appropriacy.

4.1. Text selection - Texts need to be chosen that have relevance and interest to learners. For instance the short story 'The Loaded Dog' prescribed for UG students has universality in its theme and the narration is all absorbing. Hence the students evince interest in reading and enjoying the story by themselves. On the contrary, the short story 'My Beloved Charioteer' presents two conflicting characters, one bound for culture and acceptance of traditions and the other, westernized, perverted, gloomy, who shuns the society. This story is not interesting for the students. Difficulty level of the topics needs to be considered while prescribing texts.

4.2. Length - Shorter texts may be easier to use within the class time available, but longer texts provide more contextual details, and development of character and plot. In UG syllabus the Court scene from Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' is prescribed under the area one act play. Instead of choosing a part or an excerpt from a five act play, a one act play may be prescribed.

4.3. Cultural difficulty - The students can easily follow the texts, which represent their native culture. If texts, which deal with western culture and traditions, are prescribed, sufficient inputs may be provided for comprehending the texts.

4.4. Cultural appropriacy - Learners should not be offended by textual content. For example, teaching a story like 'Interpreter of Maladies' in the Indian class room for UG students is difficult, because it offends their sentiments. It is also difficult to teach the content which does not fit into the Indian cultural context as the theme of the story is alien to Indian culture.

5. MEASURES TO MEET THE CHALLENGES

5.1. Text selection:

While designing and framing the syllabus, the subject experts may take into consideration the age, understanding level and cultural background of the students. Duff and Maley (2007) stress that teachers can cope with many of the challenges that literary texts present, if they ask a series of questions to assess the suitability of texts for any particular group of learners:

- Is the subject matter likely to interest the learners?
- Is the language level appropriate?
- Is it the right length for the time available?
- Does it require much cultural or literary background knowledge?
- Is it culturally offensive in any way?
- Can it be easily exploited for language learning purposes?

5.2. Difficulty level:

Based on the level of difficulty, Duff and Maley (2007) have categorized the literary texts into four levels.

- Level 1 - Simple text + low level task
- Level 2 - Simple text + more demanding task
- Level 3 - Difficult text + low level task
- Level 4 - Difficult text + more demanding task

Age and understanding level of the students must be taken into account while prescribing difficult level of the texts.

5.3. Creative Activities of Teaching:

It is a challenge for any English teacher to select the suitable literary text as teaching tool to meet the ELT objectives. By using suitable techniques/ methods, this difficulty can be overcome. Teachers can teach a literary text through pre-reading activities, while reading activities and post-reading activities.

5.3.1. Pre-Reading Activities:

Pulverness (2003) provides some useful advice on the measures to be taken while taking up the pre-reading activities.

- Teach essential vocabulary keeping in view the proposed tasks.
- Maximize pre-reading support.
- Minimize teacher's intervention.
- Provide frameworks for creative response.
- Invite learners to step into the shoes of the writer or invite them to modify, extend or add to a text.

Introducing the Topic:

Teachers introduce the theme of the topic to arouse interest in the students by recalling their previous knowledge.

Presenting Geographical aspects of the literary text:

Before beginning to teach a literary text the teacher can give the geographical information that helps for better understanding of the text and the writer's view.

Presenting Historical aspects of the literary text:

It is advisable to train the students to prepare small projects/ presentations on the historical background of the country related to the study. It helps them to know and understand the historical details that influence the literary text and the writer.

Presenting Political aspects of the literary text:

Every writer is a product of his age and society. Hence the writer cannot be read or understood without the knowledge of the society in which he lived in. Hence a teacher should discuss the political aspects relating to the given text.

Introducing the Author:

Students can be motivated to present a brief biographical sketch of the author in the class. This

helps the students to get awareness about the literary background of author.

5.3.2. While reading Activities:

Role plays: It is easy to arrange the enactment of the drama in the form of role play. It helps the students improve their communication skills.

Silent reading: The teacher can encourage the students to read the text silently and understand it by using the information and vocabulary provided earlier.

Loud Reading: It is very useful to encourage the students to read the text in meaningful units/chunks. Through this activity teachers can diagnose the correct or incorrect pronunciation and accuracy in reading the text.

Exercises for reading between the lines: The students may be trained to understand the text by inferring the meaning of the words contextually. It increases their imaginative powers and interpretative skills.

Additional sources of input: Audio and video files from internet, YouTube lessons are useful to make the learning process more interesting.

5.3.3. Post-Reading Activities:

Guessing the climax: Teachers can make the students guess different conclusions to the drama, story or novel through brainstorming and come out with different suggestions.

Giving tasks/ exercises/assignments: At the end of teaching a literary text, language exercises/tasks/ assignments may be given to develop creative writing skills.

Attention towards use of language: Draw attention to stylistic peculiarity, which help students appreciate the writer's use of language.

6. CONCLUSION

If the teachers teach a literary text without using creative activities/ methods the teaching can become elongated monologues. Hence, it is essential to teach literature with the help of these innovative activities

to involve all the students in the learning activities. It makes the ELT, more students centric and a fruitful activity.

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