

RE-DEFINING THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN GENERAL ENGLISH CLASSES



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Abstract

Within the departments of English in India, there has been a war of wits between those who advocate the teaching of literature in English language classes and those oppose it. Such scholastic reflections and disputations turn unpleasant and unprofessional at times sans any theoretical backing and consequently they become a futile academic discussion without any pedagogical practice. With the loss of focus, the scholars/teachers do not see the wood for the trees! Though both the groups entertain two different schools of thought on the use of literature in the language classroom, they fail to recognize the overall objective of the English language education in the fast changing Indian educational and employment scenario. There is a distinction in objectives of learning between English literature and the English language. The traditional humanist agenda of literary studies—inculcation of values—does not hold good any longer for the simple reason that the hollowness of such a subjective character-formative assumption about literature was questioned straight and set aside irrevocably first by the Russian Formalists and later subsequently by both Structuralists and Poststructuralists. Instead, the reader forgoes the need to assign literary texts a function when they are read as literature. Moreover, such an explicit morals/values-laden objective of literary studies not only creates ‘trap’ in which both teachers and students are innocuously caught, but also distracts from the basic learning objectives of a language programme—communicative act. In Indian educational set-up at any level, there are two streams of students, broadly: English-using



*and English-knowing sections with a proportion of 25:75 respectively. In fact, this poses a pedagogic challenge to English language educators in fulfilling their differing requirements. It calls for the inclusion and **NOT** exclusion of English literature (read it as literatures in English) with focus on functions of the English language.*

Key words: General English (GE), Literary English, Adult & Adolescent Fiction, Literary Competence,

Background of the study

With educational globalization in the changing times today, the goals of English language education require to be re-set since the English language needs of students from diverse socio-economic, academic, and professional backgrounds keep changing. ELT practitioners must change their mindset and prioritize learners' needs while preparing them to acquire the 21 century skills of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. English language education in India has seen different facets in its journey since it was institutionalized on the recommendations of the Minutes. The vast majority of today' English language learners need the literal English for bread-and-butter communication in their immediate professional world which is increasingly being corporatized. Does it mean that literary English should wait? 'Yes' seems to be a loud and clear option for many learners. They are asking for their daily bread! "Are the departments of English willing to provide English language learners what they need for their survival?" is the question that is being addressed in the present article. At the same time, all English language learners are **NOT** at the same level in terms of needs and proficiency. There is a sizable body of students at the tertiary level in India who experience a feeling of ennui and emptiness with the basics of English that forms part of English curriculum. They want more challenging activities in English classes than listening to unsolicited explanation on language and literature. It is presumed that they can be taken to green pastures of linguistic subtlety and complexity that characterize literature or specialized functions of English in their areas of study through what is called "ESP."



Aim of the study

The present study aims at exploring the possibilities of the use of literature as a means of learning (**NOT teaching**) the contrast in the different functions of English between literary texts and informational texts.

Hypothesis

English literature can be exploited creatively by the teacher to maximize the learning potentials of English language learners who have not only attained an acceptable level of proficiency in it, but also are learning to use English.

Research questions

The following are pertinent questions addressed in the present study:

Can English literature be exploited for the purpose of English language learning?

If so, what is the role of teachers and learners?

What kind of literary texts are suitable to learning English?

Research design

The study is intended to be an exploratory and qualitative venture on the basis of the researcher's own experience as an English teacher at the tertiary level for more than a quarter century. It is presumed that many English language teachers in India would have had similar experiences though their professional orientation and location of institutions may be diverse in nature since the vast majority of English language learners in India belong to the first generation slot with predominantly backwardness of different kinds in their background: linguistic, locational, social, economic, religious, caste, and gender. Hence, the study is based on the researcher's own reflection as an English teacher and on the basis of the views expressed in the literature on the theme of literature in language classroom.

Review of literature

Brumfit and Carter (1986) have collected key theoretical and practical issues that concern the relationship between literature and language teaching. **Collie & Slater (1987)** lists a number of activities using literature in language classroom in order to further



the learner's mastery in the four basic skills of LSRW.

Discussion

When literature is used in language classes, academics cannot avoid questions “Is there a language of literature?” and “What is literary language?” They are fundamental and therefore important for English language and literature educators to resolve rather than to deliver yet another lecture on Shakespeare's sonnets or Keats' Odes. Resolution of such questions creates greater clarity about the use of literary English for English language educators with academic background only in English literature that characterizes a very peculiar Indian reality. **Brumfit and Carter (1986)** concludes with a ‘yes’ and a ‘no.’ These Applied Linguists affirm that there is no such thing as literary language and therefore literature can be exploited in the foreign language classrooms. Their claim is substantiated on the ground that metaphor that is **the** distinguishing marks of literature is pervasive in the day-today discourse and that the striking phonological pattern that is **the** distinguishing mark of poetic language is found abundantly in advertisements and nursery rhymes. Moreover, they claim that our daily discourse is replete with plenty of military metaphors like ‘marshal an argument,’ ‘have or defend a position,’ ‘buttress an argument/position,’ ‘concede a point,’ ‘conflict of opinion,’ ‘his strategy in the debate was to...,’ ‘he manoeuvred his point skilfully’ and so on. At the same time, it should not be presumed that all language is literary. In other words, there is no such thing as literary language that can be recognised and isolated in the same way as, for example, the language of journalism, or legalese, or science discourses that are characterized by specialist lexis and structure. Literature is therefore not a language variety and writers do not exclude any language form from a literary function.

English language learners should be exposed to all types of discourses though the aim of English language education can still be the acquisition of abilities and competencies for ‘communication through interaction.’ While non-literary texts or informational texts aim to help learners perform an action better in the world, a literary text does not instruct its readers in anything. Rather, it merely represents an alternative world or a created world



in and through language. It is being read because it is worth reading for itself. It assists learners in identifying the operation of language for different communicative functions. It contrasts with what Widdowson calls ‘conventional schemata’ of ‘ordinary discourses.’

Widdowson (1983) recommends the use of literature in language classroom:

If you’re a sensible teacher you use every resource that comes to hand. But the difference between conventional discourse and literature is that in conventional discourse you can anticipate... The amount of information we normally take out of something we read is minimal... with literary discourse which is representative of some new reality, the actual procedures for making sense are much more in evidence. You’ve got to employ interpretative procedures in a way which isn’t required of you in the normal reading process.

There are a number of reasons for the use of literary texts. One, they are interesting and stimulating to the readers if they suit their levels. Novels, short stories, and one-plays with contemporary relevance would be ideal genres. They can also be contrasted with other discourses like history, sports literature, young adult fiction, science fiction, essays and biographies so that learners can easily identify the different communicative functions of language. **Littlewood (1976: 21)** highlights the basic difference between literary and non-literary texts: “the possibly static and unquestionable reality of the informational text is replaced by a fluid, dynamic reality, in which there is no final arbiter between truth and falsehood.” Two, they are original, exciting, and thought-provoking. Three, they are authentic text in the sense that they represent real language in context to which the reader can respond directly. Four, their discussion and exploration of content would inevitably and naturally lead them on to examination of language since what is said is closely bound up with how it is said.

Above all, literary texts in language classes relieve English language learners of monotony and boredom that often characterize the English language classroom. Learners get a real-life-like chance on fundamental human issues that are not only enduring but also transcending both time and culture. Learners are exposed to different linguistic uses,



forms, and conventions of the written mode like irony, exposition, argument, and narration. They can also familiarize with thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions, dreams, aspirations, beliefs, and fear of a particular culture. An understanding of all this is important for intercultural communication later in their social and professional life. Besides, extensive reading of literary texts increases learners' receptive vocabulary with different shades of semantic value. Those who oppose literature in language classes argue that literature does not help language learners with the kind of vocabulary they really need. Though objection is sustainable to some extent, the presentation of lexical and syntactical items through memorable, rich contexts cannot be ignored.

There is a misconception that literary reading entails the character formation and improvement. Students and teachers read literature simply because they enjoy reading it. There need not be any kind of external compulsion or coercion on readers or teachers to labour for meaning or message so that they might get edified personally. They are interested in the general state of affairs. Literary texts therefore do not have any particular pragmatic message for either personal character improvement or social edification. What is actually taught when a literary text is used: morals or medium? Is it the analysis and explanation of the text in terms of character and theme? Is it an attempt to read the authorial intention(s)? Is it an attempt to hunt for morals and values that govern the entire human society? OR is it the imparting of 'literary competence' that is "an interesting combination of linguistic, socio-cultural, historical, and semiotic awareness"? (**Brumfit & Carter, 1986: 18**) Besides, the individual readers need not assign any specific function to literary text with the view to making it different from non-literary texts. Here is an emotional contact between the reader's own life and the text that offers some kind of social interaction in a created world. Incidentally, English language learners fine tune their LSRW skills that are already acquired to a reasonable level.

Not all kinds of canonical texts work in language classroom for the purpose of learning the different functions of language. Teachers should take care on the choice of literary texts. Contemporary fiction and preferably in Indian English can motivate the present first



generation of Indian learners of English since such texts may not present cultural incompatibility and may easily overcome readability issue. Students can easily engage themselves with them. Poems like “If” by Rudyard Kipling or “Good Bye Party for Miss Pushpa TS” & “A Very Indian poem in Indian English” by Nizzim Ezekiel will help learners learn grammatical items like the use of if-clause or the progressive forms of a verb. Modern One act plays and extracts from contemporary plays can be exploited for conversational and interactional and transactional skills.

Instead of exposing students to adult fiction, young adult fiction that deals with the problems of the modern youths can be prescribed. The working definition of the adolescence/young adult novel is that it deals with the societal and psychological experiences of an adolescent and it is preferably written for adolescents/youths. It is the experience of this period of life that is either normally not taken seriously or is taken for granted. Developmental Psychology prescribes adolescence as teen age from thirteen to nineteen years. It portrays an adolescent as the protagonist and it focuses on the challenges of the adolescents. It is marketed to young readers. Novels like *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Great Expectations* (1860), *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), and *Kidnapped* (1886) could not be called adolescence novels in the modern sense of the term because these were written with an adult audience in mind. The criterion for modern classification of the adolescence novel is a truer, darker side of the teens.

There is little merit in the argument that adolescents are just attracted toward romance novels only. According to **Lubar (2003)** and **Wells (2003)** the adolescence novel is characterized by the themes, such as rape, suicide, parental death, and murder, drinking, sexuality, drug & alcohol use, identity, beauty, bullying, popularity, puberty, and even teen pregnancy, remarriage, single parents, problems with parents & grandparents, getting into trouble, and concern over school/college grade in the Anglo-American cultural context. It also explores themes and issues, such as love, sex, familial relationships and ties, friendship, and relationships to authority figures. The whole novel revolves around the



young protagonist and the reader experiences emotions, situations, predicaments, and the like through this central young character.

Indian Fiction in English has evolved a new sub-genre—adolescence novel—with the publication of Manohar Devadoss' *Green Well Years* (1997); Vikas Swarup's *Q & A in 2005* and *Six suspects* (2009); Chetan Bhagat's *Five point someone* (2004), *One Night @ The Call Centre* (2005), *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009), and *Revolution 2020* (2011), *What Young India Wants* (2012) *Half Girlfriend* (2014); Nikita Singh's *Love @ Facebook* (2011); Arvind Adiga's *White Tiger* (2008); Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make it* (2011); Ravinder Singh's *I too had a love story* (2009) & *Can Love Happen Twice?* (2011). Ever since English literature acquired prescriptive and academic value in the early twentieth century in the Anglo-American academic world, it has come under the rigid control and scrutiny of the academics and scholars alike and they canonize some works and authors and marginalize the rest. Academics do not promote all works for the purpose of scholarly scrutiny under the pretext that some don't adhere to mandatory literary and aesthetic norms in the Aristotelian sense. It results in negligence of very many writers and to some extent, a large body of writings of even many celebrated writers who are otherwise 'recognized' for some other works. As **Eagleton (1983: 14)** puts it, "the claim that knowledge should be value free is itself a value judgement."

Learners as readers should inhabit the text. The role of students changes from being a passive and inert audience in class to becoming an active and interactive reader of the text both in class and outside of it. Students should interact not only with the text but also among themselves and with the teacher. They ought to respond to the text both in its culture and context as well as theirs. They may consult print and online sources of support materials on reading and interpreting the text. They can apply and improve all the sub-skills of reading of literature in order to see for themselves how life is created and presented in a special way. They should discuss cultural, social, and political issues and write whole some essays on them. Sometimes they also become amateur critics of



literature. In other words, they should exercise their right to creatively and critically assess the text and examine if there is an inherent link between the world and the word. They must enquire the philosophy of life as implicitly and subtly projected in the text. They should examine if the text is trying to contribute to power politics. They come to understand how their ordinary day-to-day bread-and-butter language is specially distorted to impart aesthetic pleasure. They get a chance to analyze the constituent components of creative language so that they can distinguish it from the language used in their own fields of specialization. They should become readers of other texts that are not prescribed in the syllabus. Finally, they should appreciate the fact that reading has its own rewards in life.

Teachers extend their role as facilitators by ‘backgrounding’ their compulsive, habitual roles as interpreters. The role of teachers ought to change from being disseminators of received knowledge of literary texts to becoming guides to controlled and free and independent reading of, and responding to texts by students. They should facilitate students with skills of reading and strategies of interpreting texts of different genres. They can guide them in this process of reading and responding by raising probing questions into different aspects of the text. They should also ensure the democratic participation of all students through individual reading, group reading, discussion, inference, cross-referencing, improvisation, role play, in-class group writing & individual writing about the text, at-home assignments and so on. Teachers should resist the temptation to explain, summarize, and preach in the class. After all, one of the principles of exploiting literature in language classes is that teachers should not do what students can do themselves. For instance, silent rapid reading and loud reading in the class, consulting support materials like dictionary and encyclopaedia, checking pronunciation details, writing on the board, preparing power point presentation and the like are some of the student-centric activities that one can explore.

It should not be construed that teachers’ role has become passive now. The changed role of being a facilitator of the reading process calls for skills and labour of high order.



Teachers need to prepare a lot beforehand on the text and still pretend as if they are reading it along with students for the first time. In fact, they enact a drama in order to cooperate with students in the class. They need to secure students' active participation by positively appreciating them, encouraging their reading, putting up with faulty reading of some of them, raising plenty of questions that might elicit their response, organizing hassle-free classroom atmosphere and discipline during group reading and discussion and so on. They need to do a lot of home work by thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the text and be ready to raise questions on different aspects of the text in the class. The questions shall be answerable from the textual or learners' point of view.

Recommendations

In most of the Indian universities, English (GE) is offered in the first four semesters. In the case of Engineering Institutions affiliated to the various State-run Technical universities, English (ESP/EST) is offered in at least two semesters. In the first two semesters, GE can be offered with the focus on LSRW and study skills so that learners can prepare themselves to contrast the use of English in the literary texts that can form part of the next two semesters.

Since all English teachers in India are academically trained in English literature, they should find ways and means of exploiting literature for the purpose of English language acquisition. They should be creative in exploitation of all resources available to learners.

Conclusions

English literature can be exploited for the acquisition of the English language with changed roles of the learner as an owner of one's own learning processes & experiences and the teacher as a facilitator & co-learner. The focus is on learning and thereby contrasting the different functions of English and not on teaching values supposed to have been unearthed in literature. It also fulfils the criteria of Content-based Language Learning (CBLL) a modern avatar of CLT. It does not categorize or stream students that involve a lot of negative psychological impact on the young minds.



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