

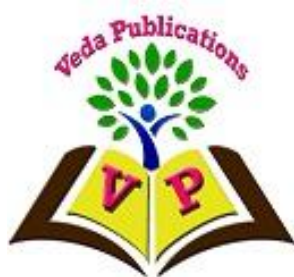


THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT



It is necessary to understand the importance of teaching English language through literature in order to make language learning an enriching experience for students. English language Teaching (ELT) gained prominence in the last three decades. The mushrooming of technical institutes all over the country has led to the popularity of technical English in our country. The paper tries to analyse how literature can be used effectively for teaching technical English in colleges. The paper also tries to find out whether learning English Language is feasible through the use of Literature.

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Literature supplies many linguistic opportunities to the language learner and allows the teacher to design activities that are “based on material capable of stimulating greater interest and involvement” than many other non-literary, informative texts (Carter and Long 1991: 3). The aim of these activities should be to focus on the form and content of the text at stake, and to provide the stimulus for interaction to take place between the learners among them, and with the teacher. Literature is the mirror of society. Literature from time immemorial has appealed to students of all ages. Literature gives permanent happiness to anyone who reads with diligence and passion. John McRae (1994) makes an earnest attempt to

differentiate between classical literature and pulp fiction by using ‘L’ and ‘l’ respectively.

Colonization almost came to an end in the late 1940s and 1950s. Once colonization came to an end, Literature of different countries gained prominence. Apart from traditional literature of the U.K. and the U.S.A, literature from other parts of the world captured the imagination of readers. In the earlier times, people were really skeptical to think beyond Shakespeare and Milton. Twenty first century reflects the changing mindset of people all over the world.

The rise of ELT led to the gradual sidelining of Literature, as focus shifted to functional use of language. The revival of literature is inevitable as



students find it hard to decipher the nuances of language in the ELT classroom. Various genres of literature like short stories, poems, novels, plays etc can be used effectively in the ELT classroom to make learning a joyful experience for students.

Nowadays, one finds the classroom atmosphere really out of sync with the ground reality. Students are crammed inside their classroom from early morning till dusk with emphasis solely on rote learning. Due to immense pressure from higher authorities and peer groups there is a mad rush to complete the syllabus in time, which enables the students to revise and perform well in the examinations. Though this method is highly productive in giving good results, the problem is students are not able to retain anything substantial once the exams get over.

Literature can be taught to students through audio-texts, music CDs, film clips etc which will help the students to understand the beauty of language without much difficulty. ELT experts lay emphasis on four skills- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Through Literature, students can be taught all the four skills by paying attention to sentence structures and new vocabulary.

Literature starts in delight but ends in wisdom. In other words, literature not only instructs but also delights. Literature helps students appreciate diverse cultures apart from their own cultures. Certain emotions like anger, greed, love, jealousy etc are universal. Once the students have absolute control over their emotions, it will help them in their professional lives also. In short, one can say that literature serves a dual purpose. It informs and delights at the same time.

Literature and language are closely related and this is a fact none can deny. Literature is constituted by language and it represents one of the most recurrent uses of language. Language and linguistic analysis can also be employed to access literature from the learner's point of view. Brumfit and Carter (1986: 1) already emphasized the role of literature as "an ally of language". This technique is by no means novel, since literature has been a widely used teaching tool in different language teaching methods. However, here the perspective changes

giving more relevance to the literary text as a work of art. First of all, let us go over the changing role of literature in the tradition of second language teaching to end with an account of its current situation within the communicative approach.

In the grammar translation method, literature was the central component. Literary texts of the target language were read and translated, used as examples of good writing and "illustrations of the grammatical rules" (Duff and Maley 1990:3). The focus of this teaching method was on form, on learning the rules of grammar and the lexical items as they appeared in the text. There was no literary interest, nor interest on content. After this method fell in disuse, literary texts also went forgotten for teachers of second languages.

For the structural approaches to language teaching, literature was discredited as a tool, because it represented the old tradition. The functional-notional method ignored literature, because in this method the importance lies on communication and they present authentic language samples. Literature was not considered either to have a communicative function or to be authentic example of language use. Nonetheless, in the last decade or so the interest in literature as one of the most valuable language teaching resources available has revived remarkably (Duff and Maley 1990: 3). This is in consonance with the new currents within the communicative approach that see in reading literature the perfect realization of their principles, namely developing communicative competence, that is teaching learners to communicate in the second language and accounting for real, authentic communicative situations (Sanz and Fernández 1997).

Literature reading is, no doubt, a communicative activity and literary texts are, who could nowadays deny such thing, authentic examples of language use. Many authors, among them Brumfit and Carter (1986) and Lazar (1993), reject the idea of the existence of a specific literary language and claim that the language used in literary texts is common language with a high concentration of linguistic features like metaphors, similes, poetic lexis, unusual syntactic patterns, etc. (see Lazar 1993: 7 for a more detailed account of the



characteristics of the literary use of language). These are not literature specific since these features also appear in ordinary language use and also in nursery rhymes, proverbs or publicity slogans, just to cite a few examples, however, in literature these show a higher incidence. We talk therefore, of a literary use of language.

Examining the reasons for using literature in the language classroom we could argue that there are three main criteria that justify the use of literature as a second language teaching tool (Duff and Maley 1990: 6). In the first place, the linguistic criterion defends that literature should be used in language teaching, because it provides the learner with genuine, authentic samples of language, and also with real samples of a wide range of styles, text types and registers. It is extremely important for foreign language learners to be trained in a variety of registers, styles and genres and to be able to discern the function of each of them. These different manifestations of language are not only distinctive linguistically, but also socially, they all have a social communicative function (Sanz and Fernández 1997). This has to do with the notion of adequacy. It refers to the fact that a message needs to be linguistically correct and situationally appropriate, as regards not only its content, but also its form (see Llobera 1995, Sanz and Fernández 1997, Cassany 1999 for a more detailed account on the notion of adequacy and its relationship to communicative competence). The second criterion is methodological and refers to the fact that a literary text has multiple interpretations, these generate different opinions among the learners and this leads to real, motivated interaction with the text, with the fellow students and with the teacher (Widdowson 1983). Interaction is one of the bases of the communicative approach which defends that it is by interacting, by communicating, that the language is learned (Sanz and Fernández 1997). From the methodological point of view, further aspects that favour the use of literature in the language classroom are the active role of the learner and the literary text as the central focus of attention.

Learners become active, autonomous, and central to the learning process. One aspect of special importance within the communicative approach, and

that is magnificently reflected in the poem at stake, is the idea of literature supplying the learner with cultural information about the country whose language they are learning (Lazar 1993: 16). Poetry is fictional and, therefore, we must be very careful when treating this point in the classroom, for sometimes its relation to the real world is rather lax. Our response to the cultural aspect as reflected in literature should be critical (Lazar 1993: 17). Finally, the motivational criterion is of great relevance because the literary text shows the real feelings of the writer and this generates a powerful motivation in the learner. With the literary text the student accesses this personal experience, if she is touched by the theme and provoked, she will be able to relate what she is reading to her world, to what she knows and feels. Designing stimulating activities that motivate the learners is the greatest challenge for language teachers, and literature has a strong motivating power due to its calling on to personal experience.

McRae (1994) is of the opinion that literary texts are representational rather than referential. Referential language is very informational and as a result, less appealing. On the other hand, representational language appeals to one's emotions and as a result extremely interesting. Referential language appeals to the imagination of students and makes them empathetic towards the society as a whole. Rote learning can be replaced by participative learning. Students can be encouraged to participate in skits, one act plays, presentations, etc once they have a good command over the prescribed literary texts.

Literary texts may be selected based on interest and relevance to students. The level of students should be checked thoroughly before prescribing any literary texts. It is suggested that the texts be slightly shorter so that the students make optimum use of them before the stipulated time. Meticulous planning is necessary to ensure that the learners get literary texts that are culturally appropriate.

Duff and Maley (2007) raise a wide variety of questions to analyze the congruity of suggesting certain literary texts for students. Some of the questions are:-



1. Is the material really interesting for the learners?
2. Is the literary style comprehensible/
3. Is it possible to complete the text within the schedule?

Duff and Maley (2007) also propose easy tasks to stimulate the interest of students. One should proceed gradually from easy tasks to difficult tasks. Teachers can completely exploit the material by conducting brainstorming sessions, pre-reading tasks etc for the benefit of students.

Pulverness (2003) offers valuable advice for teachers to make learning English language a joyful journey. In order to draw the attention of students, teachers are expected to pay a lot of attention to pre-reading tasks, icebreakers etc. Students can be encouraged to modify the texts, change the ending etc using their creativity, ingenuity etc.

Over the years, teaching language to students has undergone a sea change. Nowadays language is taught to students without the help of literature. English Language Teaching (ELT) gained prominence in India in the last two decades after the rapid mushrooming of Engineering Institutes all over India.

Language teaching is incomplete without literature. The earlier generations had solid foundation in language, because they learnt classics written by literary writers like Shakespeare, Wordsworth etc. Unfortunately, the modern generation does not have any exposure to classics. This severely hampers not only their intellectual growth but also emotional growth.

Technical education is not complete, if one does not pay any attention to values, character building, soft skills etc. All the above mentioned things can be easily and effectively inculcated in students through literature. Professionalism without human touch is quite ominous. Just a few years back a new course titled "Human Values and Professional Ethics" (HVPE) was introduced as per the strict instructions of the former Vice- Chancellor of UPTU, Prof. Prem Vrat.

Now the question comes in everyone's mind about the outcomes of introducing a new course HVPE. Whether the new course can succeed in

fulfilling its objectives is the million dollar question. In this context, literature can first play a supporting role to subjects like Professional Communication, Human Values etc. before taking a full-fledged role to create versatile engineers. For beginners, classics from Indian Writing in English can be introduced so that they get a peek into the glorious culture and tradition of our motherland. Great writers like R.K.Narayan,. Mulkraj Anand, Rabindra Nath Tagore etc. have permanent sway over the readers.

Once the students get a fair idea about the great Indian Writers, it will become easy for them to appreciate the works of literary masters like Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. Further, the students should be exposed to literature from commonwealth countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand etc. This will help them to appreciate the cultures of different countries. Shaping the personality of the student is the need of the hour. Literature will play a pivotal role in this direction if it is inculcated in students right from the beginning.

Berardo (2006) and Wallace (1972) highlight the importance of authenticity to make language learning a beautiful experience.. In other words, students find it really fulfilling to read authentic texts instead of the artificial language used in certain sources. Certain factors should be taken into consideration while selecting authentic material in the ELT Classrooms. The factors are as follows:-

1. They should have a positive impact on students.
2. They should expose students to real language. (language in day to day conversation).
3. They should cater to the different needs of the students.

Literary texts will expose students to use the appropriate language according to the situation and condition. Cruz(2010) and Kramersch (1998) speak about the importance of fifth skill that is learning culture apart from the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Students will really enjoy learning culture which they firmly believe in and also accepted by society. Care should be taken in selecting appropriate texts which instil the right cultural values in students.



Once the students get good command over the language doing well in campus interviews, group discussions etc. will become a cakewalk. In addition, one can say that time can be saved for students if any extra lecture in the form of career development classes and personality development classes are reduced considerably. There is no doubt that literature will help the learners to get good command over the language. In other words, language is something that has to be caught and not taught. If literature is made part of the curriculum in technical education,, language learning will become a really enriching experience for the students.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that teaching English language through literature is viable in technical institutes. The important point to be noted is that the literature prescribed should be interesting and understandable for young engineers. If syllabus designing is taken proper care of half the battle is won. The ambience in the classroom changes dramatically with the introduction of literature. It is no surprise that the budding engineers enjoy learning English language through literature. Literature is for all ages and never ceases to inspire the students irrespective of their age and gender.

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