

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM POWER OVER PERFECTION?

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“It is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression.” - Alfred North Whitehead

Abstract: As far as I can remember my childhood dating back to a few decades ago, the entertainment options in learning a language were pretty limited just except the pleasure of reading books. I can easily understand and realise why I spent so many hours of my childhood absorbed in books. But then, these days, when I ask students in particular, what they like to read, they look at me as if I'm a bit mad. “Do you mean books?” they often ask, with a note of incredulity in their voices!

Introduction: Literature is often viewed by students in general as a dreary subject due to its structural complexity and distinctive use of language. Thus, it is not likely to attract students in developing their interest towards it. The purpose of the contribution of this paper is to provide creative suggestions on embedding the teaching of literature to motivate and facilitate students in learning English language.

Teaching, especially ‘language’ is an art in which the relationship among human beings, the teacher and the taught, is crucial to real success. This is one way of distinguishing teaching from training, for the latter can be successful simply via a series of instructions; but the former necessarily involves basic moral and psychological issues, engages the all the persons of both the teachers and learners. Learning to teach is not to pick up formulae but to act on internalized principles, to borrow the terminology from the dutiful instruction, and not concerned with the outward and visible signs; but an act with the inward and spiritual graces. Each teacher recreates the principles of teaching in relation to each new class and each new student. Some teachers usually do *it* better than those of the others, of course, but all teachers are believed to attest to gradually getting a ‘feel’ for the teaching as they become experienced on. One can analyse this feeling, but the analysis is not sure to lead to experience. It must follow the event, and the event can only occur in the process of genuine teaching. Analysis concerns itself with facts; teaching the ‘feel’ is concerned with certain values. The inculcation of values is the most important seed of teaching, but in the public domain we only have facts available for security, since we cannot live values in print, we can only refer to them, and offer careful references turn rapidly to analysis.

Students’ lack of interest in literature is perhaps due to the inappropriate teaching methods. Literature is also often said to be ostracized by a large majority of students because the teachers are not exposed to or use various methods of teaching literature in a fun way while dealing with the language education in the classroom. One of the major setbacks in learning literature is caused by the text itself that carries

language and content that can be deemed to be beyond students’ perceptibility. It is suggested by a linguist Agee that “language activities constructed from the literary text should be the type that promotes intellectual development, independent thinking and interest towards learning literature” (33).

This includes an idea to point out the use of hardly any literature in language education in present day classrooms across the world. In fact, literature has an amazing role in the language learning. It offers an easy approach to language learning indeed. A place for literature in a language classroom facilitates abundant fund of words, sentences, feelings, emotions, functions, culture and stretches a repository of moral values. To say, the knowledge of literature makes the learner to express subtle nuance of feeling which greatly facilitates one’s communication skills. English Language teaching can no longer be a conventional the teacher-centered class, but almost like a blissful and pleasant interaction with the young minds and thus teachers in this kind of ambience can accomplish their dual tasks i.e. imparting communication skills and imbuing human values. To say, communication has its purpose. It doesn’t happen rightly and reasonably in the chaotic climate in society. Communication should give way to turn this world to a better place for humans and all beings that habitat it.

As we are discussing the role of literature in a language classroom, we need to know what exactly we mean by the *literature* of a language. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary defines *literature* as “writings that are valued as works of art especially fiction, drama and poetry in contrast with technical books and newspapers, magazines” (687). There are many good reasons for using literature in the classroom. Among them are:

- ✓ Literature is a very rich source of genuine subject matter. It is good to expose the students to this authentic original language usage in the class

because the language proficiency and skills they acquire can be used outside the class.

- ✓ Literature encourages communication. Literary texts are often used for critical discussion as they are rich in meaning.
- ✓ Literature also expands language awareness. Making students examine sophisticated or non-standard examples of language will also make them more aware of the rules of language use.
- ✓ Literature is appealing to many cultures and it is seen to be highly regarded in many communities. Students may feel proud of their achievements in understanding their readings and applying critical thinking skills.
- ✓ Povey states that “literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, a complex and exact syntax” (40).
- ✓ Literature also develops “a sharper awareness of the communicative resources of the language being learned” (80).
- ✓ Literature promotes learner-centred activities which are useful in their own right.

Regrettably, the role of literature has hardly any place in the ESL/EFL classrooms in the cross-section in the teaching of the English language in a majority of nations and the English classrooms therein. It is reported to that curriculum supervisors and teachers say that only spoken language is needed to carry out together with those of the oral and the written functions of the language to prepare students meet the order of the day in this world of cut-throat competition. In other words, the scenario available with the present day system of language teaching/learning sets more emphasis on the language functions. But then, it is important to make a note of the fact that in secondary-level classrooms across most English speaking nations, learners begin reading literature accordingly for a wide variety of reasons in that language after completion of the +2 level of learning. Also because ‘literature’ is a valuable instrument for developing mastery of the language, extending the learner’s grasp of the vocabulary, syntax, lexicon and idioms.

Students who study only English Language, with its emphasis on the reading and the writing skills, every-so-often fail to see the point of studying English literature. Literature exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language. A good novel or short story can take the students’ minds to foreign lands and fantastic worlds. A play or a poem can bring up certain dilemmas and powerful emotional responses. All this can be transposed to their real lives accordingly.

One of the debates centred on literature teaching in the language classroom is whether literature language

is somehow different from other forms of discourse in that it breaks the more usual rules of syntax, collocation and even cohesion. Using literature with students can help them become more sensitive to some of the overall features of English. Linguists like Gower and Pearson are of the opinion that “Reading literature helps students concentrate on helping them actually read what are sometimes difficult texts, while at the same time helps them with literary history, biography, differences in genre, technical literary terminology and literary criticism”(1). For instance,

*“We are such stuff As dreams are made on; and our
little life Is rounded with a sleep.” (The Tempest,
William Shakespeare)*

In support of the role of literature in language teaching, critics like Maley and Moulding say, “If carefully selected, poems can open up themes which are common to us whatever our cultural background, and can thus act as a powerful stimulus to the students’ own reflective thinking, which will lead to more mature and fruitful group discussion”(135).

Distinguished linguists like Carter and Long say at this juncture, “a book like *The Web of Words* helps learners to understand and appreciate English literary texts. It does so by using a wide variety of learning techniques and exercises which often involve active group and pair work in class.” (1). *The Web of Words* focuses particularly on language where this is relevant to appreciate the style, effects and techniques of writing. The main purpose is to help students to use response to language as a basis for reading and appreciating literary sources.

Literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/learner is actively involved in *teasing out* the unstated implications and assumptions of the text. Thus, by encouraging our students to grapple with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text, we can help develop their overall capacity to infer the meaning, and this can be applied in real life too.

Apart from all the linguistic benefits, we should also consider the greater and effective educational function of literature. It helps to stimulate the imagination of our students to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness. If we ask the students to respond personally to the texts we give them, they will become increasingly confident about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English successfully.

It is learnt that the *language based approach* while studying the language of the literary text helps to integrate the language and literature syllabic more closely. A detailed analysis of the language of the

literary text in turn helps students to make meaningful interpretations or informed evaluations of it. At the same time, students can improve their general awareness and understanding of English. They are encouraged to draw on their knowledge of familiar grammatical, lexical or discoursal categories

to make aesthetic judgements of the text they are exposed to. The information provided in the table given below helps us understand the aforesaid outcome of integrating literature in language education.

S.No	Feature	Function
1.	Lexis	Choice of words in the text and their meaning potential
2.	Syntax	Word order – the way words are organized
3.	Cohesion	System of links throughout the text: temporal, verbal, pronominal
4.	Phonology	Sounds of and within the text
5.	Graphology	The form, the shape and the script in the text
6.	Semantics	The study of the meaning and how the meaning is achieved through negotiation of textual and contextual elements
7.	Dialect	Variation in language
8.	Register	Degree of formality associated to who is speaking to whom
9.	Period	When the text was written, for whom, tone, style used

As far as a striking feature known as *literature and content* is considered, it is known that literature itself is the content of the course, which concentrates on areas such as the history and characteristics of literary movements; the social, political and historical background to a text; literary genres and rhetorical devices and so forth. Students acquire English by focussing on the course content, particularly through reading set texts and literary criticism relevant accordingly. The judicious use of the use of the mother tongue of the students may be used to discuss the texts, or students may be asked to translate texts from one language into the other as required.

According to Nina and Violeta (2012), other benefits as given below can be achieved in teaching literature while the language education takes places in the classroom:

- results in aesthetic taste and bliss
- instills good reading practice
- develops awareness and skills to analyse
- offers better results in a competitive setting
- provides original communication ideas
- balances receptive and also productive skills
- provides language exposure
- improves the vocabulary, syntax and structure of the English language

- gives ability to appreciate values

If we consider *literature for personal enrichment*, it is a useful tool for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions. It helps students to become more actively involved both intellectually and emotionally in learning English, and hence aids acquisition and an excellent stimulus for group work towards language development on the part of the students.

Stylistics too has its own importance in the context of finding a place for literature in a language class room because 'stylistics' has two main objectives: firstly, to enable student's to make meaningful interpretations of the text itself; secondly, to expand students' knowledge and awareness of the language in general.

An important idiosyncrasy in language teaching is humanistic aspect. One important trait of humanistic language teaching is derived from a curative tradition. This tradition is influential on the part of students to turn out to be model citizens in their lives in a number of ways to promote coexistence on this habitat in all possible promoting better mode of living. In fact, this is what is wanted as an outcome ultimately in the system of education, with special reference to the language education in the class room. As such, humanistic approach in the pedagogy

of the language teaching in matters of English language teaching is essential to help promote the purpose and function of the language learning. Humanistic element of aspect in the teaching of a language, of course, is only possible when the role of literature plays its effective role in a language classroom as an important tool for both the teachers and the learners in the teaching-learning process.

So to say, humanistic language teachers do believe in a preferred world of autonomous, creative and emotionally secured people to create humanistic world. There is not even particular method or a book, which can substitute humanistic teaching. So an ideal and effective methodology needs to be a part of a language classroom organization sufficiently free to enable students to make their own initiatives on their own terms in any matters related to their deeper feelings with an aesthetic language use and also with the utilitarian philosophy. And this is particularly important in a language work with special reference to the English language. For instance, see this excerpt from the literary work entitled *An Answer from Limbo*, by Brian Moore.

*Who died, Daddy?" "Nothing, Lisa," Jane told the child.
"It's just big people's talk. Now eat your egg up,
sweetie."*

A teacher is not supposed to find fault with students in regard to the aspect of change. Certain perseverant and dedicated efforts of the faculty, the progressive teaching content and the empathetic but a balanced teaching approach will certainly assist the students to refine their personalities, in course of time. We can also teach them how to view and comprehend the complex phenomena of Nature and human society, and how to put an end to the antagonistic contradictions among humans and thus we can contribute to the production of better citizens in society. Consequently the dire necessity for integrating literature in the process of language teaching turns out to be the essential phenomenon in the context of this discourse. The one and only remedy to achieve the purpose and function of the language teaching is achieved by means of inviting the genuine role of literature to creep into the text and treatment of language education.

For instance, while criticizing moral degeneration, we may make use of a few lines from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a master-piece in English literature.

"London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (Spiritual values are always decaying and disintegrating, particularly in large cities like London) To consider, why should it be the duty of only language teachers and language classrooms to pave way for a (*linguistically, in the least concerns*)

civilized society? A justifiable answer to this question is that it is the structure of curriculum and methodological aspects of language teaching with a justifiable place to literature naturally facilitate a language teacher to inculcate such values just in the pretext of teaching a text by presenting worthy allusions and examples from the classics and the progressive works in the literature of any community and in any language yet. It could be done timely and tactfully. Relevant quotations, maxims, interesting passages from the first rating literary and non literary texts should be presented, while dealing with lessons or language lab activities. It is also because there is a direct conflict between the public mode of the classroom and the private individuality of the deep feelings which is being referred to so persuasively.

After out and out search and research, one can arrive to the conclusion that literature alone best reflects life. It is clear that the teachers of English are concerned with improving the quality of English by maximizing learners' exposure to the language of literature owing to the fact that language teaching is more than skills training and functions. Literature can thus be used judiciously at any level even as an ice-breaker, a booster and an end-game. The focus is centred on the content and seriously on the form. To say, the knowledge of functions makes learners "how to say" but a bearing of literature makes them "how to say better". Hence I am for literature in all possible approaches towards the language education taking place in a classroom in today's scenario, which, of course, is actually the need of the hour to make this good earth and its bounty a demanding domicile of human existence to live in peace and harmony.

In conclusion, literature goes synonymous with a clarion call that expresses values and beliefs, and show people live as individual or as group with this perspective; literature becomes the ideal tool to show the learners the English speaking world and to lead them to discover English culture. It opens up innumerable avenues for the learners to increase their world knowledge as they will have access to a variety of contexts, which is inevitably related to the target culture. By developing a literary knowledge of the English language, learners are sure to understand and interact effectively with the English people so very natively. They acquire effective linguistic and cultural competences because the study of the target language is bound to its literature and fine arts concerned. The decline of literature indicates the decline of a nation.

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