

A Literary Approach to Teaching English Language in a Multicultural Classroom

Sanju Choudhary*

Department of English, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India

Abstract: Literature is not generally considered as a coherent branch of the curriculum in relation to language development in either native or foreign language teaching. As teachers of English in multicultural Indian classrooms, we come across students with varying degrees of competence in English language learning. Although language learning is a natural process for natives, students of other languages put in colossal efforts to learn it. Despite their sincere efforts, they face challenges regarding pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary. Indian classrooms are a microcosm of the larger society, so teaching English language in a manner that equips the students to face the cutthroat competition has become a necessity and a challenge for English language teachers. English today has become the key determinant for being successful in their careers. The hackneyed and stereotypical methods of teaching are not acceptable now. Teachers are no longer arbitrary dispensers of knowledge, but they are playing the role of a guide and facilitator for the students. Teachers of English are using innovative ideas to make English language teaching and learning interesting and simple. Teachers have started using literary texts and their analyses to explore and ignite the imagination and creative skills of the students. One needs to think and rethink the contribution of literature to intelligent thinking as well as its role in the process of teaching/learning. This article is, therefore, an attempt at exploring the nature of the literary experience in the present-day classrooms and the broader role of literature in life.

Keywords: literary approach, literary analysis, English language skills, English language teaching, multicultural classroom

Introduction

The study of literature is not regularly discussed as a coherent branch of curriculum in relation to language teaching and learning. However, teachers and scholars feel that language and literature are closely related and can be integrated together. An integrated approach offers learners an opportunity to develop their linguistic and communicative skills. Literature exposes students to meaningful contexts that are replete with universal themes. Literature appeals to the learners with different styles and encourages thoughtful and purposeful learning. Structuring language lessons around the reading of literature introduces a profound range of vocabulary, dialogue, and prose. In addition to developing students' English language skills, teaching literature also exposes them to the practical use of language. It enhances the cultural awareness and encourages critical thinking about characters, plots, themes, and so on. Barnett (1989) expressed, "authentic texts are vital; they motivate students, offer a real context, transmit the target language culture, and prepare the students for world outside the class-rooms" (p. 145). Students are exposed to critical thinking needed for the practical world. Most importantly,

Suggested citation: Choudhary, S. (2016). A literary approach to teaching English language in a multicultural classroom. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 6(4).

* Author correspondence: anju.choudhary07@gmail.com

the activities that can apply with literature lessons easily confirm student-centered and interactive tenets of communication language teaching (CLT).

In fact, there are a variety of resources for teachers of the English language to enhance the quality of their language classes with the study of literature. Carter and Long (1991) said that “both literature and language teaching involves the development of a feeling for language of responses to ‘texts’ in the broadest sense of the word—in both written and spoken discourses” (pp. 2–3). Therefore, evocative response is a key feature of both literature and language teaching and learning. Lord Byron viewed words as things that provoke thought. Most people think of words as *things* almost literally and vocabulary development as an acquisition of more and more *things* or *words*.

Teachers of English are acquainted with the criticism and interpretation of a literary work. These literary texts can be effectively used for language teaching, as “literary texts are representational rather than referential” (McRae, 1994). The referential language connects and communicates only at the peripheral and basic level and tends to be informational, but the representational language involves the use of imagination and enhances their empathy for others and makes the learners more creative. Thus, we need to expose them to a wide variety of “representational material” that invites them to respond. The multiple layers of meanings provide opportunities for developing their “interpretational and inferential skills.” The famous linguist Ur (1991) rightly opined that, “Beyond the mere comprehension of information, but they also give the students the satisfaction of knowing that they are reading literary texts in their original form” (p. 155).

Teachers of English are well acquainted with the criticism and interpretation of literary works. As Lazer (1993) put it, “Literary texts enrich the language input in classroom and stimulate acquisition by providing meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language” (p. 17). These texts can be used effectively for language teaching. Teachers use literature in English teaching practices so that they can broaden students’ horizons by imparting knowledge of the classical texts as well as improving students’ general cultural awareness. These texts stimulate their creative and literary imagination and develop their understanding of literature. They should be given “meaningful content to provoke their imagination give them something important to talk” (Widdowson, 1986, p. 33).

Earlier, literary experts were unwilling to draw on English language teaching (ELT), and ELT trainers usually considered literature as a secondary tool for language pedagogy. As Carter and Long (1991) also wrote,

The gulf had become wider: literature for the humanist, language for the scientist—the two cultures—which to say the least, was an unfortunate split when they could have been helping one another. Both literature and language teaching involves the development of a feeling for language, of responses to “texts”—in the broadest sense of the word—in both written and spoken discourses. (pp. 41–42)

Morgan, King, Weisz, and Schopler, in their *Introduction to Psychology* (1986), wrote that “language is a device to express thoughts and when we speak a language we invariably and unconsciously use our underlying knowledge of the rules that govern language. This linguistic competence helps to generate and comprehend language” (p. 126). Words have denotative as well as evaluative/emotional meanings; literary texts facilitate to give commutative association to words and meaning.

Literature plays a vital role in teaching the four basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, when using literature in the language classroom, skills should be taught not in an isolated but rather in an integrated way. Teachers should try to teach basic language skills as an integral part of oral and written language. Literature can be used as a means for creating both referential and interactional meaning, not merely as an aspect of the oral and written production of words and phrases and sentences. Literature is a rich source of linguistic input.

Carter and Long (1991) proposed three models to justify the use of literature: (a) the cultural model, which shows how literature helps in understanding and appreciating different cultures and ideologies together with the developing of one's perception of feelings and artistic forms; (b) the language model, which emphasizes the view that language is the literary medium and that literature could be seen as an instrument to teach various aspects of language; and (c) the personal growth model, which emphasizes that a student understands his/her own society and culture by reading the literary texts.

Review of the Two Approaches to Literary Analysis for Language Teaching

The field of literary analysis has a long history; many theories exist on how to use it to evaluate and teach literature and language. Two frequently discussed approaches to literary analysis for teaching language include the reader-response approach and the language-based approach.

Approach 1: Reader-Response

The major principles of the reader-response approach include attention on the role of the reader and a process-oriented approach to reading literature. This encourages students to draw on their personal experiences, opinions, and feelings in their interpretation of literature. Dias and Hayhoe (1984) pointed out that "it is precisely the role of the reader in the act of reading that has not been sufficiently and properly addressed" (p. 15).

The reader-response approach addresses this problem by making the learners active participant in the learning process. The crucial connection between the reader and the text is explained by Rosenblatt's theory of literary reading, which describes the *transactional relationship* between a reader and a literary work. The events that take place in a literary work occur at a particular time and place, and different readers react to these events in different ways, depending on their unique interests and experiences. Each reader attaches his or her own personal interpretation to a literary work.

The reader-response approach, as a matter of fact, makes an important contribution to language learning by demystifying literature and connecting it to individual experience. Researchers and teachers in the field of language learning support making literature more accessible by activating students' background knowledge so they may better predict and decode the language and themes of literary texts. Emotional reactions from reading a story, poem, or play can be harnessed for classroom instruction (Bleich, 1975). Activating students' schemata in reading literature is important and personalizing the learning experience increases student participation and motivation. These are the core principles of CLT that are known to encourage learning through student-centered and process-oriented activities.

Approach 2: Language-Based Approach

The language-based approach emphasizes awareness of the language of literature, and it is the basic stage for language learners. This approach facilitates students' responses and experience with literature and is considered quite accessible for language learners. In addition, the language-based approach calls for a variety of language instruction activities, including brainstorming to activate background knowledge and make predictions, rewriting the ends of stories or summarizing plots, using closed procedures to build vocabulary and comprehension, and incorporating jigsaw reading to allow student to collaborate with others, form opinions, and engage in spirited debates. Thus, literature is an excellent vehicle for CLT methods that results in developing language skills through interaction, collaboration, discussion, and collective learning. The teacher's role is not to impose interpretation but to introduce and clarify difficult and technical terms, to prepare and offer appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene whenever necessary to provide prompts or stimuli.

The language-based approach responds to language students' needs in studying literature: They receive the skill and technique to facilitate access to texts and develop sensitivity to different genres so that they may enjoy a piece of literature that relates to their lives. Moreover, this approach meets students' needs in learning a language better; they communicate in English to improve their language competence, develop the necessary skills of working in groups, and become active learners. Most educators agree that the language-based approach is motivating, as it helps students handle a text, enhances their enjoyment and interest in literature, develops their autonomy, and improves their learning of English.

Recommendations for Using Literature in a Language Classroom

We have so far discussed at the theoretical bases of two different approaches for the analysis and teaching of language through literature, both of which are well suited for teaching learners of English. When evaluating the relevance of such approaches to teaching language using literature to students, it is useful to consider a few principles of CLT.

The Purpose of Learning

The use of literature facilitates language learning because, when it is properly introduced, students enjoy a literary style. In addition, they will inevitably forge strong connections with the plots, themes, and the ideological assumptions of literature, thereby becoming active learners who embrace critical thinking in English.

Activities in the Classrooms

The study of literature is amiable to student-centered activities that offer opportunities for collaborative group activities such as drama enactment, roleplaying, poetry reading, and watching movies based on the texts prescribed in the syllabus. Visual stimuli can be effectively used in various ways as initiators for interactions. Short scenes and anecdotes can be shown and used to express and frame opinions. Important messages can be imparted through this medium. Students' vocabulary can be immensely enhanced through these innovative methods.

Role of the Student

Literature has the power to create opinions and individual meanings for students; hence, they can initiate and sustain activities based on literary themes. This will also help students

become active classroom participants and will, in turn, lead to autonomous learning. Their vocabulary also grows and they easily grasp the usage of the newly learned words.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers are no longer arbitrary dispensers of knowledge; gone are the days when students used to listen and the teachers used to speak. Teachers have become facilitators and guides when it comes to offering a choice of texts and ways to interpret them. Far from being a passive observer, the teacher must plan and prepare to involve students in lessons and encourage them to express the viewpoints. Using the literary text becomes useful only when the student is able to comprehend, understand, and interpret the text and gives his or her personal response to it. Thus, while we teach the stylistic aspects of a text like vocabulary, figures of speech, plot, and so forth, we must also integrate teaching methods and activities that train the students to speak so that they can easily express whatever they have understood.

Challenges in Using the Literary Approach

Using literature for language teaching is not a simple task. Teachers of English face a lot of challenges in Indian multicultural classrooms. Teachers must be very cautious in choosing texts that are acceptable for language learning. Steve Buckledee (2002) wrote in his article "Language and Literature in Tertiary Education: The Case for Stylistics" that, in many countries, students of English study literary texts that are selected because of their status as a major work rather than their accessibility to the students. There are several points to ponder. First is the difficulty of the vocabulary and syntax. So, teachers should look for works that match the level and competence of the learners. The other factors that make literature difficult are the historical, social, and political references that add to the complexity for the non-English speakers. The students' cultural unfamiliarity with texts causes problems and makes them dependent on the teacher's use of language items as well as his or her interpretation. As a result, students often have to study language via literature by listening to the teacher's translation and analysis. Thus, the teacher—who speaks mostly in the students' native language—monopolizes a large part of the class time, which is an entirely unproductive way to teach and learn English. Moreover, combination of difficult language and cultural material creates passive students and also negatively affects their motivation due to lack of interest or enjoyment in the experience.

Conclusion

Students' motivation in the learning process is often determined by their interest in and enthusiasm for the material used in class: The more enthusiastic and self-motivated the learners are, the more they learn. This type of involvement cannot be imposed; it must come from the materials and lessons that are implemented and used in the classroom. The project BritLit (i.e., British literature), which was launched in Spain for the students and teachers of English, has earned a reputation. Denham and Figuras (2009) wrote that "BritLit has teachers around the world to exploit English Literature in ELT Classroom as language tool" (p. 9), and Obediat (1997) also stated that "literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English". Thus, literature can be used by teachers of English in making their language teaching more effective and dynamic.

References

- Barnett, A. M. (1989). *More than meets the eye: Foreign language reading*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bleich, D. (1975). *Readings and feelings: An introduction to subjective criticism*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Buckledee, S. (2002). Language and literature in tertiary education: The case of stylistics. *English Teaching Forum, 40*, 8–13. Retrieved from <https://americanenglish.state.gov>
- Carter, R. (1997). *Investigating English discourse*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Carter, R., & Long, M. (1991). *Teaching literature*. Harlow, United Kingdom: Longman.
- Denham, L., & Figuras, N. (2009). Introduction to original APAC monograph. In F. O'Connell (Ed.), *BritLit: Using literature in EFL classrooms* (p. 9). London, United Kingdom: British Council.
- Dias, P., & Hayhoe, M. (1984). *Developing response to poetry*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Lazer, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, C. T., King, R. A., Weisz, J. R., & Schopler, J. (1986). *Introduction to psychology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Obediat, M. (1997). Language vs. literature in English departments in the Arab world. *English Teaching Forum, 35*, 30–37.
- Ur, P. A. (1991). *Course in language teaching*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1986). *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
-