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Teaching English Language through Literary Texts

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Abstract

No one can deny the fact that literature and language are closely related. Using literature as a tool to teach language is gaining acceptance as well as popularity in the present time. Brumfit and Carter already emphasized the role of literature as “an ally of language”. This use is not limited to teach basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking only). It also improves vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Asking the students to translate literary texts into their mother tongue also helps a lot. Translation also helps in enhancing the lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic knowledge of the target language. Literary texts of the target language were read and translated, used as examples of good writing and “illustrations of the grammatical rules”.

Keywords: Lexical, Syntactic, Semantic, Pragmatic, Intention, Communication,

Collie and Slater have four basic questions: Why? What? And how? And they provide four explanations for every question:

- Literature is a valuable authentic material because readers have to deal with language intended for native speakers (different linguistic uses, forms and conventions)
- Cultural enrichment. The imagined world of literature reveals thoughts, feelings, customs, and other features of life of the country where English is spoken.
- Language enrichment. Literary texts offer many features of written language that can broaden learners' skills.

It is not easy to select literature for the purpose of teaching language. The teacher must keep in mind the needs, interests, cultural background, and language level of the students. Collie and Slater are of the opinion that the text used by teachers must be in accordance with the competency of the students. They have given some more valuable suggestions to the teachers:



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- Maintaining interest and involvement by using variety of student-centred activities such as role-plays, improvisation, questionnaires, visuals and others.
- Supplementing the printed page. They call a printed page as “a fairly cold, distancing medium” and they advise teachers to exploit as much as possible from the emotional dimension (that is an integral part of literature).
- Tapping the resources of knowledge and experience with the group. Groups can support and control individuals' reactions and interpretations. Learners involved in a group help each other with difficulties that occur on a page of literary text.
- Helping students explore their own responses to literature by activities shared in groups
- Using target language by means that help to express their response either non-verbally or by limited language skills
- Integrating language and literature.

Teaching literature for the sake of teaching language has many reasons and motivations. First of all literature provides the learner with authentic samples of language as it has been composed by the masters of language like Shakespeare and Milton. The extracts from the works of these masters exposes the students to the most genuine source of language. For a student learning English as a second language or a foreign language it is exceptionally significant to learn a language used in different social conditions. It improves their language skills syntactically accurate and situationally proper.

Another reason to teach literature for the sake of teaching language is procedural. It is based on the fact that that a literary text may have many interpretations. The same text may produce different views among the students. It leads to genuine, inspirational interaction with the text in the classroom. Certainly interaction is at the foundation of learning and it is quite handy in the language learning process through literature. In this way this process puts the learner on the alert and they have to be active in order to be a part of the learning process.

Teaching literature through language not only enhances the language skill of the students but also provides him with the information regarding the culture of the country whose language they are becoming skilled at. The response of the learner to the cultural aspect of the literature is quite significant. For learners, literary works like novels, plays, short stories, etc. make the process of understanding better. The reader comes to know how communication takes place in that part of the world. Though the aura created by a novel, play, or short story is an imaginary one, it portrays complete and multicolored surroundings in which characters from many social / regional backgrounds can be depicted. Moreover the learner's response to this cultural aspect of literature becomes more important when the he is



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touched and moved by theme of the work. It will make him think and feel and also to relate what he has read with the world he lives in. It will motivate him to express his feelings and thoughts based on his own experiences

Language Skills Through Literature

Literature plays a significant role in teaching basic language skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking. "Speaking and listening are said to relate to language expressed through the aural medium and reading and writing are said to relate to language expressed through the visual medium." Speaking and writing are also known as expressive or active skills. Listening and reading, in contrast, are known as receptive or passive skills. All four skills are employed while studying literary works." A story can be the starting point for various activities; for example, reading, writing, drama, handwork, etc." It should be the teacher's aim in the class to teach basic language skills as an integral part of oral and written language use.

This cultural aspect of language learning is extremely relevant in this globalised world where English serves as the lingua franca. The historical developments in the last few centuries like imperialism, colonialism and industrialization have given English the status of the world language. In most of the commonwealth countries it is studied as the second language. These countries have produced the literature of their own. The literature of these countries becomes the medium for the writers to express their feelings and thoughts as well as the cultural aspect of their soil. In this way the readers come to know about culture prevalent in different parts of the globe. John Collie and Stephen Slater hold:

For many language learners, the ideal way to deepen their understanding of life in the country where that language is spoken – a visit or an extended stay – is just not possible. Some may start learning a language knowing that they are unlikely ever to set foot in an area where it is spoken by the majority of inhabitants. For all such learners, more indirect routes to this form of understanding must be adopted so that they gain an understanding of the way of life of the country: radio programmes, films or videos, newspapers, and, last but not least, literary works. It is true of course that the 'world' of a novel, play, or short story is a created one, yet it offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors. This vivid imagined world can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society. Reading the literature of a historical period is, after all, one of the ways we have to help us imagine what life was like in that other foreign territory: our own country's past. Literature is perhaps best seen as a

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complement to other materials used to increase the foreign learner's insight into the country whose language is being learnt.

Normally it is difficult to make learners read the full text of a long literary text. Therefore it becomes the prime duty of the teacher to introduce the chief characters. He should also familiarize the learners with the plot. After that he should help the students in discussing the characters and the plot and the characters in small groups. They should go through the text in groups. Then the teacher should ask them to give their comment on the work. He should also ask short questions from the text. In this way the students start learning to express their opinion on different aspect of the work of art. The students may find it tough to answers all the questions. There may be s also in their points of view but all this contribute to all the aspects of language learning.

The teacher may ask the students to enact a small scene from some play or novel. And then they may start discussing it. Though it takes a lot of time, but this method works on the speaking as well as listening skill of the learner. The teacher may also take the help of audio-visual aids and display the scenes to the students. Gradually they become familiar with the right articulation of words with proper stress and intonation. J. D. O Connor holds in this regard:

If speech depends on hearing, and books don't talk, what are you to do? Fortunately there is a lot of English spoken about the world. On films, on the radio, on tapes, on gramophone records; most people can get the opportunity of listening to English in some way, and this is what you must do. You must hear English. But just hearing it is not enough; you must listen to it, and you must listen to it not for the meaning but for the sound of it. Obviously when you are listening to a radio programme you will be trying to understand it, trying to get the meaning from it; but you must try also for at least a short part of the time to forget about what the words mean and to listen to them simply as sounds.

A language learner has to act and react in different situations. He has to express his thoughts and feelings in diverse conditions. Learning language through literature helps a lot in this regard. Language becomes more expressive when it is used for emotive purposes. Poetry comes from the core of the heart. Its appeal is heart-moving. A good poem can delve the reader deep in the world of emotions. Robert Frost asserts "Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom". Therefore the teacher can make wonderful use of poetry in teaching language. Jonne Collie and Stephan Believe explain it more evidently:

Poems offer a rich, varied repertoire and are a source of much enjoyment for teacher and learner alike. There is the initial advantage of length many poems are well-suited to a single classroom lesson. Then again, they often explore themes of universal concern and



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embody life experiences, observations and the feelings evoked by them. Their brilliant concision and strong imagery combine to powerful overall effect. Moreover, poems are sensitively tuned to what, for language learners, are the vital areas of stress, rhythm and similarities of sound. Reading poetry enables the learner to experience the power of language outside the strait-jacket of more standard written sentence structure and lexis. In the classroom, using poetry can lead naturally on the freer, creative written expression. Indeed, poems are capable of producing strong response from the reader, and this memorable intensity motives further reading of poetry in foreign language. In this way poetry can be used to make the process of learning of language smoother. The students learn the composition process of the poem and also develop a kind of compassion for the written words. It also leads to the student to take deeper interest in the work which develops the analytical ability.

Moreover the use of poetry of to teach language provides the learners different perspective towards language use by going ahead of the established usages and rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. It also familiarizes the students with figures of speech like simile, metaphor, personification, irony, paradox, oxymoron etc.

Literature and Listening

Listening is the first language skill a child acquires. It is a very crucial as well as handy skill for a learner's day to day communication. Literature can be helpful for the purpose of improving the listening skills of his students. Conversations with native speakers in a pleasant sociable environment may help in improving the listening skill of the learner. One of the problems face by the students may be that when they fail to comprehend what they listen. But after some practice it also improves the concentration of the listener. Listening to a story helps a lot in improving the listening skill and also the ability to comprehend the language. "Listening to stories develops the child's listening and concentrating skills via visual clues, their prior knowledge of how language works and their general knowledge." Apart from that audio-visual aids can be employed for the benefit of the students. The teachers' lectures in pure language can also be of great help in this direction

Literature and Speaking

Speaking is the skill to generate words in language practice. Keith and marrow say "Speaking is an activity to produce utterance to oral communication". It signifies that this action requires two or more people. Some of the participants are both hearers and some of them are speakers. It is an important expressive skill. Widdowson holds that it involves not only the production of sounds but also the use of gesture, the movements of the muscles of the face, and indeed the whole body." (Widdowson, 1990). Learning to speak fluently in English is as important as speaking the mother tongue. "Learning to speak in English means



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agreeing to speak in a way which is different from that of the mother tongue, by means of a game imitation, supported from time to time by reflection, but with the same desire to be understood.” Andrew Wright is of the opinion that speaking fluency is based on a positive attitude to “having a go” with the language and not being afraid of making mistakes. Wright thinks that children learn better when they have nothing to fear about and teachers should give more importance to learners’ achievements than to the mistakes.” Stories offer a perfect diet for the buildup of fluency in all four skills.” Language teachers can make use of speeches to make the students listen and comprehend and also learn the proper articulation of the words. They can ask the learners to read literature as it will help in improving speaking as well as listening skills.

Literature and Reading

Teachers teaching English as the second language should employ forceful student-centered methodology. While teaching literature, it should be the sincere endeavour of the teacher to make the students go through the text comprehensively. While going through the texts, the students learn about setting, characters, and plot and the teacher should refer to the text repeatedly. In this way first the students command the text verbatim and then they move to the critical understanding of the given work. They start understanding the themes, characters and setting of the text and thus start forming their own viewpoint.

The main problem with the learner of English as the second language in India is that they lack in self-confidence. Often they create their negative image in their mind and as a result they fail to express themselves. They do not do well in learning because they do not have confidence in their ability to learn. When the teacher makes them read the texts, it gives them confidence. They not only learn new words, but also new structures. Prowse holds that “Successful reading makes successful readers: the more students read the better they get at it. And better they are at it the more they read...”

Literature and Writing

Literature can be an effective and inspiring source for the students learning to write while studying English as a second language. When the learner delves deep down in the text and becomes well aware of the work, it becomes as a model for writing. Students try to imitate the lines read in the text and it enriches their writing. Further when the students start analyzing the works of art, they embark on developing their own thought. When they try to express their thoughts and interpretations in writing, it opens a new panorama for them. There is scope to express immense variety of themes which contributes to enhance and perfect the writing skill of the learner.

The students start learning to write at the early stage of their lives. So the teacher has to be very sensitive as well as active while teaching writing. The teacher can mark the



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progress of the students by going through their writing. The teacher should be careful while giving writing assignments to the students. He should ask them to work on topics that allow them to express what they feel. Stories can be a lot helpful in this direction. Wright holds that stories help children become more aware of the general 'feel' and sound of the foreign language. Stories also introduce children to language items and sentence constructions.

Conclusion

Literature plays a significant role in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. The teacher or instructor has a crucial role to perform. He has to recognise the need of the students. He has to determine what kind of literature should be helpful for them considering their language ability, interests, class, gender, etc. Next he has to provide the learners with right kind of text suited to their requirements. And finally the most important task to perform is to teach the text to the students making use of the selected text. Use of literature in teaching language helps the learners in obtaining sound command over all the aspects of language. It enables them to articulate their thoughts and feelings in lucid English. It teaches them how to use the language for speaking clearly, accurately, and tersely. Moreover they learn to be innovative, critical, and rational readers. In short, literature makes available to the learners an exceptionally rich source of authentic material. It not only helps in learning the four basic language skills but also adds a new aspect of learning i.e. the cultural side of the target language as literature is one of the most effective and powerful transmitters of culture.

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