

Language Through Literature or Literature Through Language? A Pedagogical Perplexity

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Abstract—There has been an everlasting conflict of selecting between language and literature for effective teaching-learning process of English in India. There have been several experiments to select the best to end the “Lang.-Lit. conflict”, failing to yield any remarkable benefits. From being a language of colonizers introduced in India for their benefits, to the lingua-franka, English remains language of status in Indian society even today. English in India is the first language of handful of people and for many it's either second or third language. So, the question remains, what is important to include in higher education pertaining to the subject, language or literature? This paper doesn't try to justify one's supremacy over the other. It is an attempt to research whether this conflicting viewpoint can be harnessed together to conduct the ground level improvement in the field.

Index Terms—Language, literary competence, cultural studies, lang.-lit. conflict

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is an inevitable element of human life in order to carryout meaningful communication. Similarly, literature has been a mirror for the human society in knowledge acquisition, understanding, insight and wisdom since ancient times. As narrated by Ezra Pound “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” Language and literature are difficult to separate since they are closely entwined with strong bonds. Since the ancient times, narratives like folklores, ballads, religious stories, and folk songs in literature provided an insight into the lives, language and history of the people (Parween, S. 2021: 168). Through such narratives, popular figures and events became memorable and the intensity of local dialects and linguistic variations were retained for a long time among people.

With the spread of colonialism, USA being a superpower and advancement in technology, the narratives remained but the dialects started getting oblivious. English emerged as a world language. The invention of computer and the internet today have further validated the prevalence of English over other languages. It is still expected to be duly taught, learnt, imbibed and perfected if one is to endure and mark the presence on the global world. Similarly, in the earlier times literature studies were considered to be a part of leisure activity highly sought after by individuals seeking pleasure and escape from the drudgery and monotony of real life but it gradually became an inseparable part of human existence as it was made a part of the teaching learning system.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

In modern times, there has been many experiments in determining the approach concerning the study of Foreign Language. Introducing literature in foreign language teaching is one such approach that provides real life material and acts as a beneficial component to such material. While working on the thesis involving syllabus design for B. Com graduates, certain interesting facts surfaced from the students' questionnaire. When the nomenclature was Foundation Course in English, in which ‘Language Through Literature’ and ‘Written and Spoken Communication Skills’ were offered as electives, it was demanded by the students to have a balance of literary and linguistic competence. Ironically, ‘Language Through Literature’ elective's vision was to teach language and syntax by inculcating literature texts in the syllabus but many students did not opt for this elective as it was ‘boring’ or ‘puzzling’ for them. There is no, nor can there be any inherent conflict between language and literature in the

institutionalized English literature programmes. It is not language versus literature, but language in literature, and language and literature that requires the attention of literature students for a proper study. This correct non-conflicting perspective should be reflected in pedagogic practices in the classroom approaches to literary study (Sekar 2012: 03).

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

How, where, when and why literature should be incorporated in EFL/ESL classroom has been the most debatable and discussed question among language educators. Brumfit and Carter (1986: 15) validates the point that a literary text is an authentic text which we can respond to straightforwardly. They define literature as “an ally of language” as there is an undeniable relationship between language and literature. This is a novel approach as understanding and appreciating literature is nearly impossible without understanding the figural aspects of the language and language unlocks literary experience. Many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern (Sage 1987: 1). If one trace back in time to the Grammar Translation Method which is derived from the classical method of teaching Ancient Greek and Latin, literature had an important role to play. Here, the literature of the target language was read, translated, and used as samples of good writing and “illustrations of the grammatical rules” (Duff & Maley 1990: 3). In this approach, literature is merely a classroom material to learn the lexical items and grammar rules of the target language, there was no interest among the foreign language learners to appreciate the text. Once the rules are learnt, the texts were forgotten. In the 1970s and early 1980s, communicative approaches emphasized on the practical functions of the English language. However, over the past two decades, in line with communicative approaches, the interest in literature as a valuable tool in language teaching has made a comeback (Duff & Maley, 1990: 3). It is believed that reading literature in language classroom by foreign language learners will help them to achieve desirable results of communicative competence.

IV. LITERATURE, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Literature helps to create strong base for language teaching through a communicative approach. Lee (1970) is a strong advisor for inculcating literature for better language learning. According to Professor J. Collie, “To truly know a language, you must know something of the literature of a language”. Literature broadens the perspective. It becomes easier for the foreign language learner to relate the culture and the language which ultimately facilitate the language learning process. The four basic skills of language like Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing can be easily promoted through a carefully selected and graded literary texts. Of course, literary texts must be chosen according to the learners' requirements, goals, life experiences, cultural background, and language level it must not exceed student's reading proficiency. Learning language through literary works by great writers such as William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, T. S. Eliot. or W. B. Yeats not only acquaints the learners with the development of language and its changing patterns over time but also the use of perfected language to create maximum impact on the readers or the listeners. Such texts provide broad variety of lexical and syntactic items, they get familiar with types of written formats. They also study about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of probable structures, and the different ways of linking ideas, which expand and improve their own writing skills. Reading of such literary pieces improves creativity of the language learners when they start observing the richness and diversity of the language they are learning. Teaching language through literature gives student motivation for learning. As Basnett and Grundy rightly note, Literature is a high point of language usage, arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian, will read literary texts in that language (Basnett & Grundy 1993:7) Gillian Lazar, further adds to the significance of literature by pointing to literature's fostering of hypothesizing, interpretative and inferential skills among the students (Lazar 1993:19) Scott observes that learners use grammar actively through reading literature. Furthermore,

Mason (2004) observes that literature is more pleasant and interesting than traditional methods of instruction, and learners can obtain other aspects of language from literary works. In order to make language learning relevant and comparatively easier, one can make extensive use of translated first language literature. It is frequently overlooked type of literature. This source has numerous advantages over the types of literature normally employed by language teachers. These sources are translated into target language from the native language of the learners so the learners are able to understand the cultural background of the material used. Plot, theme, Characters, values, attitudes, judgments, and much of the vocabulary are recognizable and hence less psychologically threatening if students know the original (Day and Bamford, 1998). Materials originating from the learner's first language improves their comprehension and retention of the second language.

V. GENRES OF LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

A. Poetry And Language Acquisition

Mostly poems are musical and melodious. It enables the learners to understand language application, personal interpretations and explanations. Since poems are great source of learning expressions, learners become familiar with figures of speech, stress, intonation, pitch and juncture of the foreign language through recitation. For the better understanding, the poem should be recorded in the target language and should be recited first in chorus, then in small groups and later individually.

B. Short Story and Language Acquisition

Short story can be seen as a significant genre for teaching language. Short stories are filled with characters who play the role authentically and symbolically, as individuals do in their daily life. Indeed, short stories mirror and illuminate human lives (Sage, 1987). Considering short story in foreign language classes facilitate the learners' reading task because it is easier to read short descriptions in comparison with other literary genres. Short stories from the children's literature are based on acquisition-based methodology thus it fulfils the major objectives like linguistic, psychological,

cognitive, social and cultural skills for young learners along with foreign language learning. Short stories promote the learners' attitudes and knowledge on different cultures. Since the stories are short as compared to other genres, it makes the learners feel comfortable and confident that they could achieve the task in brief time.

C. Drama and Language Acquisition

Drama is an enrich source for teaching language. Drama helps the learners to learn the application of language. Writers such as Maley, and Duff, (1990) suggest; "Drama can help the teacher to achieve 'reality' in several ways." Drama can raise the learners' awareness towards the target language and culture. The learners can overcome the fear of learning the target language by deploying drama technique in language class. It can be an enjoyable experience where the instructor can set realistic targets for the students to aim for. They can also link the language-learning experience with the student's own experience of life. The use of 'creative tension' (situations requiring urgent solutions) will force the learners to think of a solution in the given situation so they start thinking and relating the situation with their experience and come up with the solution in the target language.

The advantages of teaching drama, as Lenore (1993) observes, are as follows:

- Stimulating the imagination and promoting creative thinking.
- Heightening influential listening skills.
- Providing the instructors with a fresh perspective on teaching.
- Developing creativity, originality, sensitivity, flexibility, cooperation, and communication skills.
- Helping the learners develop their level of competence with respect to their receptive and productive skills.
- Helping the learners develop new opinions and thoughts.

The use of drama can be a very influential way in communication-based language teaching. It helps the learners develop their understanding of the verbal as well as nonverbal features of the target language.

D. Novel and Language Acquisition

Novel can be a very rich source for developing linguistic structures as well as learning the target language. Choosing the appropriate novel can give the learner enough motivation to learn the target language. Novels offer real life as well as imaginary place and time setting. It ignites interest among learners to read the novel and decipher the context used. This ultimately help the learner to think critically and use their imagination. When selecting a novel for teaching language, the instructor should consider that the themes, characters and setting of the novels should be such that the learners can relate with them. Comprehension of the novel helps to developing both oral and written language skills in the target language. Although some learners may think reading a novel is nerve wracking, it can be an influential tool for developing reading comprehension skills and building vocabulary. In fact, reading novel broadens the learners' horizons, and also develops their intercultural communication skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

Literature provides ample opportunities for foreign language classes and can appeal to the students with various learning styles. Literary text, if used as representational tool instead of referential tool in the language classroom, can help the learners to learn target language not only at informational level, but also at contextual level. It involves learners' feelings and perceptions of the real world. Literary texts are reliable sources of linguistic inputs and can help the students practice the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

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