

Literature in the Language Classroom

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Traditional Approaches

The teaching of literature has recently been resurrected as a vital component of English language teaching. Over the past few decades, there has been much discussion on the value of attempting to teach any kind of literature, whether it be the classics or any imaginative work written in English, as part of an English language syllabus. For instance, in the sixties and seventies, there was a distinct reaction against the use of any literary English before the pendulum swung again in support of literature teaching. The opposition towards literature may well have been due to the impact of the approaches that were practised in the decades prior to the sixties and seventies and prevailing ideas in language teaching and methodology.

The study of literature acquired eminence during the Romantic period when the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge asserted that the "imaginative truths" expressed by literature were superior to those discovered by scientists, historians and other scholars:

... the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all Knowledge; Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge - it is as immortal as the heart of man.

(Wordsworth: 1805)

Literature was seen as a body of knowledge which ought to be learnt for its own sake. The process of creativity and the entire body of literature were given an honoured and elevated status

that sustained the elitist nature which the study of literature had already acquired.

In examining traditional approaches to literature, what is apparent is the prevailing views amongst the elite were continually emulated by educationists, possibly preventing a clearly-defined role for literature teaching in education. Most of these views remained as propaganda and failed to motivate a reasoned set of proposals as to how a literature course could be designed. The ultimate purpose of literary criticism can be defined as interpretation and evaluation of literary writings as works of art and the major concern of the critic is to explicate the individual message of the writer in terms which make it clear to others. However, this is a difficult process to implement without a sufficiently explicit and pedagogically-oriented definition of the nature of literature study as a subject. A consistent assertion that literature illuminates the mind with no specific aims in terms of objectives only served to make literature an unpopular subject. Moreover, changes began to happen in the sixties and seventies.

The approaches in language teaching in the sixties and seventies stressed the structural methods to language learning, with emphasis on discrete-point teaching, "correctness" in grammatical form, repetition of graded structures and restricted lexis. These approaches represented a methodology unsuited to literature teaching, and were unable to accommodate literary texts. Thus, in many situations, while English language teaching adopted a structural approach, literature was taught as a separate subject, sometimes comprising of purposeless poetry recitation.

Nevertheless, current approaches have endeavoured to re-examine the value of literature and have begun to uphold its worth again. These approaches assert the value of literature teaching from several aspects, primarily, literature as an agent for language development and improvement, cultural enhancement and also for the eminence that many poets have previously ascribed to it.

Literature is beginning to be viewed as an appropriate vehicle for language learning and development since the focus is now on authentic language and authentic situations.

The Relationship Between Language And Literature

It is difficult to supply a watertight definition of the term "literature"

but what can be asserted is that literature is not the name of a simple, straight-forward phenomenon, but an umbrella term which covers a wide range of activities. However, when it becomes a subject of study, it may be seen as an activity involving and using language. The claim "the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation" (Widdowson: 1971) is based on the realisation that literature is an example of language in use, and is a context for language use. Thus, studying the language of literary texts as language in operation is seen as enhancing the learner's appreciation of aspects of the different systems of language organisation.

Linguistic difficulty has been one of the main arguments against literature. There has been a general pre-supposition that to study literature, one required knowledge of the intricacies of language and an inherent interpretative ability to derive the writer's message.

Traditionally, literature has been used to teach language use but rarely has it been used to develop language use.

The advantage of using literature for the latter purpose is that literature presents language in discourse in which the parameters of setting and role-relationships are defined. R. Carter(1986) insists that a natural resolution would be to take an approach in which language and literature teaching are more closely integrated and harmonized than is commonly the case at the present time so that literature would not be isolated, possibly rejected, on account of the "literariness" of its language:

It is my contention that some of the language activities and work with models on the literariness of texts can aid such development, and that responses can best develop with increased response to and confidence in working with a language using a variety of integrated activities, with language-based hypotheses and in classes where investigative, student-centred learning is the norm.

(R. Carter: 1986)

Another argument against literature also relates to literariness. With the shift to communicative approaches to ELT in the eighties, literary language is seen as not providing the conventional and appropriate kinds of language required to convey, practical, everyday messages. Poems, plays and novels make use of the same basic language system but have differing functions from

non-literary discourses in the communicative function. The result is that poets, novelists and playwrights produce linguistic messages, which by their very nature, stand out prominently against the reader's background awareness of what is both communicatively conventional and linguistically appropriate to the social purpose that the message is to fulfil, though grammatically intelligible in terms of syntax and vocabulary.

Yet, what emerges from such work is the recognition that the precise contextual values of every word, phrase, clause and sentence can be inferred from its interaction with all the others in the text.

Selecting Literature

It is all very well to point out the advantages of teaching literature but the key to success in using literature in the ESL classroom depends primarily on the works selected. A text which is extremely difficult in linguistic or cultural levels will reap few benefits. Several solutions have been suggested in regard to the problems of linguistic or other difficulties: simplification, extracts or simple texts. Simplification is not generally favoured because of its reduction process. The original book is shortened in characters, situations and events, the vocabulary is restricted and the structures are controlled. Extracts are advantageous because they remove the burden of intensive lengthy reading. However, they are artificially isolated for teaching purposes and do not necessarily cultivate interest in reading in the ESL/EFL learner.

A new solution is to use simple texts. There is a vast corpus of simple texts available within the body of literature in English. The emergence of a large body of creative writing in English by its non-native users demands that we develop critical perspectives for understanding, evaluating and appreciating such literature. This body comes mainly from former British colonies such as countries in the Indian subcontinent, in East and West Africa and in the Caribbean. The works of these non-native writers (Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Das) reveal the intermediary degrees between the indigenous and metropolitan cultures – both from black and white sectors, and the variety of ways in which the author translates social conflicts into literary expression. What makes them unique is the way in which the English language has been extended, modified and

elaborated to serve the purposes of revealing local, national individual sensibilities. These literatures also manifest a cultural context that an ESL/EFL learner can identify with. The organization of the family unit, traditional practices and daily life touch upon aspects of real life seen through the eyes of the individual writer. The simplicity in R.K.Narayan's works is considered as a positive aspect of their literary merit. Some of his works (for example, *Swami and Friends: 1935*) employ simple language for a lively story that is apt for the ESL classroom.

Assessment

The notion of literature as a difficult and highly academic subject is also reflected in the techniques of assessment. Assessment is still based on critical essays, which impel teachers to focus on understanding the text and inevitably leads to testing for recollection and literal comprehension. However, incorporating literature into the language classroom calls for more emphasis on the development of language skills, enjoyment and creativity. If these elements are the main focus, then it is possible to depart from any literature examination based wholly on memory.

It is possible to assess in a lively, interactive way (where imaginative recreation can take place) in which students are encouraged individually or in group collaboration (suitable for continuous assessment) to approach the text in an integrated manner. This could include:

- re-writing a poem/story/scene from a different point of view.
- scripting an episode for radio or television.
- writing or dramatising what happens after the events in the poem/story/play.
- writing an incident as a newspaper report.
- writing the diary of a character in the text.
- writing a letter from one character to another, or from the student to a character.
- improvising a scene for live performance.
- interviewing one of the characters.

These suggested tasks could offer students the opportunity to respond imaginatively to their reading experience by developing the text in a way that employs communicative and purposeful language.

Admittedly, these types of assessment strategies would require a more complicated and perhaps even a more sympathetic method of scoring where language accuracy should not be the deciding factor. However, if students were encouraged to use language imaginatively, their interest and motivation for English would increase, and eventually lead to improved use and performance in the language.

If literature begins to be taught and examined at lower secondary levels in these ways, it will foster enjoyment of the text alongside a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the language. Students will then be ready to explore some of the literary features of the poems and stories, having become fully involved with the writers and characters in the process of language consolidation and imaginative recreation. Still, to assess or to examine literature in a communicative or interactive way demands teaching strategies that also integrate language and literature, allowing activities which require language, which involve students in experiencing language, playing with language, analysing language, responding to language and enjoying language. These elements can only be achieved if the student is allowed to engage a process of discovery:

However intrinsically interesting the ideas presented by the teacher, they will only appear interesting to the students if they are allowed to discover them for themselves. This is especially true when what is taught is reading, which is always a process of discovery, a creation of meaning by the reader in collaboration with the author. If this creative dimension is removed, if we are told the meaning of what we read before we read it, then we are left with the hollow formality of scanning the words on the page, with no incentive to piece them together, to treat them as communication.

(Jennings: 1989)

Therefore, it is essential that when literature is brought into the language classroom, it needs a clearly-defined aim, which is an axiom in language teaching for ESL/EFL learners. Only then can literature be successfully integrated into the language teaching.

Conclusion

"Using literature in the language classroom" is a concept that has

its focal point in language development. Thus, any syllabus based on this concept should also maintain language as the central concern. For this, it is imperative that curriculum developers depart from the traditional view attached to literature. It is also equally important that the syllabus has suggestions for teaching strategies and forms of assessment. The objectives may outline the importance of literature towards language development, but they become redundant if the teaching and assessment techniques do not apply those objectives practically.

Literature generates creativity in language and imagination and should feature in any education system that regards discovery and enjoyment as essential components of the learning process.

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