Necessity of Literature in Language Classes

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ABSTRACT

Literature and language are mutually complementary. A meaningful interaction created between the two disciplines would give the learners, a taste of English literature and would also enhance their communication skills.

Each novel, short story or play can spark off a wealth of different activities. Tasks and exercises based on a literary text can provide valuable practice in listening, speaking or writing as well as improving reading skills. The advantage of the literary text is that it provides a context for exercises in language work that can be quite open-ended. Hence, in addition to language improvement, they incorporate student response, thereby developing their creativity.

The present situation of English in India with reference to language-literature harmony, is not really encouraging. Literature is losing its ground as the course material of English language focusses only on communication skills. The students tend to feel that in English, there is nothing beyond communication skills and they lose interest in reading literature. Thereby, they miss out on the pleasures, the literature has to offer. Hence, there is a need to bring awareness on the importance of literature among the students. The teacher as a facilitator should emphasize on the various narrative techniques and the unique styles employed by the writers and help the students get the ‘feel’ of literature. Once the students taste the charm of literature, they will gain confidence and may well be motivated to read further outside the classroom.

The main thrust of my paper suggests the significant role of literature in language learning and emphasizes on its value.

Use of literature to teach language has been an accepted practice in the academics of ancient India and other nations as well. For instance, Sanskrit learning for a freshman would begin with Kalidasa’s Raghuvamsa in ancient days. The strength of such a methodology was in the harmonious blending of language and literature in the teaching methodology. The content was taught through an analysis of language used and the language processes. Thorough understanding of language facilitated understanding and enjoyment of literature.

Recent courses materials have quite rightly incorporated many authentic samples of language – for example, travelogues, advertisements, newspapers or magazine articles. Literature is a valuable complement to such materials. But in reading literary texts, students have to cope up with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration and so on. And although it may not be confined to a specific social network in the same way that a newspaper article

INTRODUCTION

Literature and language are mutually complementary. A meaningful interaction created between the two disciplines would generate a ‘feel’ for English literature in the learners besides enhancing their language and communication skills.
might be, literature can none the less incorporate a great
deal of cultural information as its scope is wider.

Literature provides an important means of learning the
language. It is not just a good model of language that the
learner may be exposed to in the world. Rather, it
provides the learner a field, a world in which the learner is
engrossed and with the language of which, he actively
negotiates. In other words, literature makes its reader
engage in the use of language such that the language itself
becomes a ‘living tongue’. Hence, a living speech and not
merely the code of grammar is one that needs to be
stressed.

Literary language is thus, not always that of everyday
communication but it is special in its way. It “is
heightened: sometimes elaborate, sometimes marvelously
simple yet, somehow, absolutely ‘right’. The compressed
quality of much literary language produces unexpected
density of meaning” (Rao 9).

A literary text provides the learners training in listening to,
and reading the texts of life more sharply and more
sensitively. For, the literary text like most other creative
works helps the reader to see what may not be so
conspicuous in daily life. This does not imply that a
literary work imposes an unnatural order or a deviant style
upon what is an experience. Rather, it heightens and
celebrates the hidden or not so hidden order of experience
itself. Similar to the French painter, Cezanne’s painting
which reflects on greater sensitivity to experience,
literature also holds up for examination of those aspects of
experience and of language which we tend to take for
granted in everyday life. Thereby, the student would
grapple the feel of life. In this context it would be
significant to recall that all critical schools have shared the
view that literature develops and refines the quality of the
mind such that it sharpens one’s response to the world.

When the learner is given a literary text to interpret, he/she
would be ‘exposed’ to language within the world of the
work and would, in interpreting the work, use language.
The learner’s attention, however, would be on the text and
its interpretation rather than on language itself. Such a
language learning environment, would provide the learner
the maximum possibility to explore language. He would
not see language either as a product or as a means of
communication alone. He would rather become aware of
a balance between its subjective and objective dimensions.
Within such a framework what would be of relevance
would be neither the language nor the communicative
functions it performs but in the process the learner would
develop a ‘feel’ for literary style. In other words,
literature brings to the learner a heightened use of
language and may, therefore, be particularly suited to the
‘fluency activity’ necessary for language learning.

A literary text also serves as an excellent activity field for
language learning. Each novel, short story, play or poem
can spark off a wealth of different activities. Tasks and
exercises based on a literary text can provide valuable
practice in listening, speaking or writing as well as
improving reading skills. The advantage of the literary
text is that it provides a context for exercises in language
work that can be quite open-ended. Hence, in addition to
language improvement, they incorporate student response.
For instance, Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, Slaughterhouse Five
narrates the life of Billy Pilgrim including his experiences
in the Second World War. The material encourages
extensive as well as intensive reading that can be followed
by language exercises and literary exercises. This method
involves an increasing quantity of reading that needs to be
done and this in itself should be considered a most
valuable exercise. By working on literary texts in such a
manner, “the learner’s knowledge of vocabulary will be
augmented and he will develop a feel for literary style”(Walker 6).

The language exercises from the novel may include:
exercises on sentence structure, prepositions, adjectives,
tenses, vocabulary, rephrasing a sentence, phrasal verbs,
active and passive voice, direct and indirect speech,
syllable, stress, intonation and punctuation. Literary
exercises may include exercises on:
a) Plot: Purpose is to concentrate on the major
events of a text and help students to take notes and
summarize. Students may have to skim and scan the
extract to comprehend the content. This is often a good
exercise for improving reading and writing skills.
b) Character: Purpose is to teach character
description, analysis and interpretation. The students may
enhance their speaking skills, their creative outlook and
rationale. E.g., ‘Valencia is a stronger, pushier and more
extrovert character.’ Give evidence from the extract to
support this view. What other qualities emerge?
c) Style and technique: Purpose is to develop in the
student a ‘feel’ for stylistic variation. E.g., The novel (or
the extract) cuts quickly from one scene to the next and
back again. Give examples from the extract. What are the
(dis)advantages of this technique?
d) Open-ended exercises: This is to relate the text
and students’ reading of it to a wider context. These
exercises may develop creativity, team spirit besides
improving their speaking, listening and writing skills. E.g.,
Continue this extract concentrating on Billy’s experiences
on Tralfamadore? Or Describe a science fiction film you
have seen or book you have read.

Questionnaires are usually very helpful in sparking
discussion. A simple kind lists statements with answer
boxes to be ticked, such as: agree/disagree/not sure. These
can be prepared to be filled in classroom. Students can
then be asked to discuss their choices with fellow students
either in pairs or in groups. It is entirely in order to use the
text of a novel to practise specific areas of language, though in our experience this should be done briefly so as to maintain the ‘magic’ of the narrative and the reader’s immersion in its fantasy.

Student practice can be linked to student response. They can consolidate their control of grammatical forms by completing sentences, while at the same time making explicit their response to characters and situations in the novel. Continuous practice sessions in the classroom will help the students to develop confidence in their listening, writing, speaking and reading skills. While it may seem “obvious at first glance that practice has an effect of language competence, it should also be obvious that different kinds of practice have different effects on developing competence” (Allwright 235).

It is a different kettle of fish when it comes to teaching poetry. What makes a poet special in his usage of the English words, however, is that he uses words with greater awareness, greater sensitivity and greater artistry. The poem “as a whole is not made up, as inferior writing often is, of more comments or directions to the reader about what he should feel and how he should react but of concrete detail” (Hooper 96). Before a poem is taught, the students must be allowed to read the poem twice. Then the teacher should encourage ideas, comments from the students and he/she should not criticize them for the mistakes. On the contrary, he/she should lead the students to a realization of their mistakes. This can be done through questioning. The class will get excited and interested as the teacher leads them to an understanding of the meaning and the rhythm of the poem. Remember that poetry written in English follows the usages of English grammar. Here are a few points to observe:

a) Pronouns: Are they subjective or objective? What noun do they refer to? Ask the same thing of relative pronouns and demonstrative pronouns. Notice the pronoun ‘him’ again in those lines by Milton: …Him the Almighty Power

Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky…

The students could mistakenly think that ‘Him’ referred to ‘Almighty Power’. ‘Him’ however is objective and is the object of the verb ‘hurled’. So the grammar is: subject+verb+object, viz., ‘the Almighty Power hurled him’.

b) Different functions of words: In English one word can often have two or more functions. For example, the word ‘head’ can function as: a noun, e.g., He hurt his head, an adjective, e.g., He is the headwaiter, a verb, e.g., the centre forward tried to head the ball.

c) The vocabulary of the poem: How well has the poet chosen his words? Are there any outstanding examples of appropriate or inappropriate choices of words? Is the vocabulary simple or difficult? Has he used any words in individual or unusual ways?

d) The grammatical structure of the poem: Is the structure simple or difficult? Has the poet taken any liberties with the structures of the language? Has he used any individual, or archaic structures? How has he used grammar to get his meaning across more effectively? E.g., inversions, dialogue, questions, exclamation, imagery etc..

In all these ways, a student working with literature is helped not only with the basic skills of language learning and communication skills but also gets a ‘feel’ of literature. Further, literature helps extend the undergraduate learners’ awareness of the range of language itself. Thus, by making a controlled and meaningful use of literature, language learning can become effective and interesting. This would not only give the student a taste of English literature but also develop a positive approach towards literature too.

WORKS CITED