

LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE: USING SHORT STORIES TO TEACH ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT:

That literature and language are inseparable in the acquisition of the first language, is accepted in the area of language education. This is because it provides authentic materials as well as enjoyment. However, in the context of second language acquisition, especially English as Second Language (ESL), there is an ongoing debate on the need for using literary texts in the teaching-learning process. The present article takes a brief look at the findings of several research studies on the use of literature in English Language Teaching and applies them in the context of an undergraduate General English Classroom in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

Keywords: *Literature; language classroom; English as Second Language (ESL).*

INTRODUCTION:

One of the most important questions that is being raised nowadays in the field of English as Second Language is whether or not literature has any place in it. While the emphasis is on functional English in most language learning scenarios, there is a dire need to bring back literature into the English Language classroom. Research studies have shown that literature can be used as a means and not an end in the acquisition of English as Second Language. Therefore, as teachers, we need to consider why and how literature is beneficial in the language learning process. There is also a need, as Collie & Slater (1987) point out, “to rethink the way we present and use literature in order to develop a broader range of activities which are more involving for our students” (6).

A quick glance at the current textbooks of the General English Curriculum of under-graduate courses in Andhra Pradesh shows that quite a number of lessons in it are pieces of literature - poems, one-act plays, short stories, etc. The questions that have bothered me for a long time are - what are we, the English teachers, supposed to do in the class-room? Do we teach language or do we teach the students how to appreciate literature? How does the English teacher approach these texts? Should there be an emphasis only on the language skills? If yes, then, does the text become merely a pretext to teach language skills and nothing more? Or can the literary text be exploited

to explore a whole new range of activities? These were some of the questions that I had to ask myself when I first began to use the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method in my classroom. For example, I would use a piece of literature – a stanza from a poem or a few paragraphs from a short story - for a reading or a listening comprehension exercise. I found that the students were able to comprehend the passage and answer the questions that followed. However, the element of pleasure was lost in this comprehension exercise. The students were too intent on reading or listening to the literary text in order to answer the questions and this made them bypass the most important aspect of literature - pleasure. This brought me back to the basic question ‘how should the literary text be taught in an English language class’?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Acquisition-Learning Distinction put forth by Krashen (1981) states that ‘acquisition’ refers to the way in which children learn to communicate and interact meaningfully in their first language. They communicate by concentrating on the communicative act and not on the utterance itself. ‘Learning,’ on the other hand, refers to the conscious process of formal instruction, like the learning of grammar rules, etc. (10). However, Krashen points out that real language acquisition does not require either extensive use of conscious grammar rules or tedious drill, and that it occurs slowly. According to him, “the best methods are therefore those that supply ‘comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear” (6).

Ur (1991) favours the inclusion of literature in courses, not only because “it is a rich source of language, but also because of its intrinsic educational and aesthetic value and its contribution to motivation and enjoyment”. According to her, the literary text lends itself beautifully to the teaching of language skills because of its ability to provide ‘motivation and enjoyment’ (201-202). However, when it is used as a mere exercise in comprehension, the students lose the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the text and thereby lose any pleasure out of their encounter with it.

Collie and Slater (1987) state that it is necessary to include literature in the language classroom because it provides valuable authentic material as well as cultural and language enrichment. They also add that “literature can be helpful in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters in readers” (7).

Lazar (2007) recommends the use of literature in the language classroom because literary texts provide the following:

1. Motivating material

2. Encouraging language acquisition
3. Expanding students' language awareness
4. Developing students' interpretative abilities
5. Educating the whole person

Against this backdrop, it is evident that literary texts are most suited for use in language classrooms as 'comprehensible input,' as they provide an opportunity to learn the target language in low anxiety situations and also cater to the requirement of motivation and enjoyment.

METHOD:

It is in this context that I place my discussion of the use of literary texts in the English classroom. Using the insights gained from the above, I chose a literary text - the short story 'After Twenty Years' by O' Henry in my General English class for the second year undergraduate class as an additional exercise to improve language skills and also to provide the necessary aesthetic and cultural value. The story was selected as it is one of the author's best-loved stories, and also because it uses easy and simple language.

The story is about the reunion of two old friends who, as boys, had agreed to meet at "Big Joe" Brady's restaurant at ten o'clock exactly twenty years later. In the intervening years, while one has turned into a criminal, the other has become a policeman. When they do meet, Jimmy Wells, the policeman, realizes that his old friend, Bob, is none other than the notorious criminal known as 'Silky Bob.' After a brief conversation, Jimmy leaves the place without having revealed his identity. He sends a colleague in plainclothes to pretend to be Jimmy Wells and arrest Bob since he cannot bring himself to do it. Bob is arrested by the officer and then is handed a note in which the real Jimmy Wells explains that he was in fact the officer who was with Bob at the designated place and time. However, when Bob had struck a match to light his cigar, Jimmy had recognized Bob's face as that of the criminal who was wanted in Chicago. Since Jimmy could not arrest his old friend, he had left before he could be recognized and found a plainclothes officer to arrest him.

The story was of great interest to the students because it threw up many ethical issues for discussion. Behind the rendezvous lurks a powerful dramatic situation with a fascinating moral dilemma. This provided the necessary motivation for the students to read/ listen to the story, think about it and react to it. In fact, the students automatically began to interact with each other in the target language, without too many inhibitions.

While proceeding to actually use the short story in the classroom, I was guided by Ur (1991) who proposes that the teaching and learning of a piece of literature may be treated as a process with the following three stages:

1. Encounter and impact
2. Understanding and familiarization
3. Analysis and interpretation

I introduced a few pre-teaching activities taking care to allow the students to make their own meaning. The students were asked to predict what the story would be about by looking at the title. Later, they were asked to compare their guesses with the actual story. Since the story is reasonably long, (it has 1270 odd words), I divided the story into three parts which roughly corresponded to the beginning, middle and end of the traditional story. By dividing the story into smaller chunks, the students were given the opportunity to approach it in stages. This gave me enough time to generate discussions between each part on how the story would progress. It also kept the suspense until the end.

RESULTS:

The discussions were very useful, even though the language that was produced was not 'correct', since the objective was fluency and not accuracy. Significantly, the students were given the opportunity to negotiate the text on their own terms and to come out with their own understanding of it. Since the class was learner-centred, with the teacher playing the role of a facilitator, there was no pressure on the students. This was a situation in which the students were provided with a non-threatening atmosphere in which they could be more confident of their own abilities and thereby allowed them to participate in the classroom discussions.

Since the literary text, in this context, the short story, was open to multiple interpretations, it generated a great deal of discussion. The students were exposed to language in use, thereby enabling them to understand the social context. They were able to connect to the literary text as it presented human feelings that provided the necessary stimulus to express their opinions and also helped them to relate the topics and the characters to their own lives. As Lazar (1999) states:

By exposing students to the rich language of the text, we can expand their language awareness and their overall knowledge of how words and grammar can be used. By presenting students with the complex themes in the literary text we can motivate them to reflect imaginatively on their own experience and on that of writers in different societies. By gently encouraging them to make their

interpretations of a text, we can develop their confidence in forming well-reasoned interpretations of the language that they read and hear (14-19).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that the use of literature for Second Language learning is very beneficial. The selected literary texts stimulate student interest and motivate them to engage with them. Not only does it provide enjoyment, but it also gives the students the opportunity to learn from various authentic language sources, as well as contributes to their personal and professional development. Therefore, the use of literature as a means and not the end of Second Language acquisition is a step in the right direction.

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