

## **Literature as Content for Teaching English as a Second Language in Higher Education**

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**ABSTRACT:** Literature as content for teaching English as a second language works on the premise that language and literature are inseparable; they are inseparable from the lives of language speakers as well; as such, interpreting a piece of literature in a language class exploits the interpretive skill of both teacher and students. There are four main reasons for a language teacher to use literature in the class room: literature remains a valuable material for cultural and language enrichment, besides motivating learners' involvement, a literary text is authentic too. Apart from its ability to motivate student readers to be critical and analytical it offers a wide variety of lexical and syntactic items for the language teacher to exemplify the use of language. Furthermore, the narration of the story in a novel or a short story, the manipulation of words and imagery in poetry, the flow of thought and conversation, the connecting ideas and coherence in the scenes of a drama offer rich scope for teaching communicative language. This paper wishes to deliberate on exploiting a literature class for developing ESL learners' proficiency in English.

**Keywords:** Language, literature, content, interpret, communicate, language enrichment cross-cultural encounters

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Date of Submission: 25-02-2019

Date of acceptance: 11-03-2019

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Teaching English in the university context is bleak with the mass of students admitted to run the universities. The entrant students have no such quality education as has been assured by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) of India which defines, 'Quality education' is 'fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society'. Despite the crores of rupees spent on our tertiary education system, it has not been successful in terms of providing the need based education and training that our students need. On reflecting, we teachers realise the context is that we can do nothing about the students' past but still we can do something to turn them proficient in English to be global citizens. This paper wishes to focus on the viability of teaching English competence through literature to University undergraduates and the role of English language teachers in bringing out a change in the language attitude of students.

### **II. THE BROKEN MYTH**

English as a Second Language (ESL) classes across India have been functioning with a notion such classes are authenticated only to teach language with materials like essays of great authors who had scribbled their thoughts whenever they felt they had to express their reactions to certain incidents, events or what so ever. But of late, literature has caught the attention of ESL teachers that literature can be used in a classroom to teach language and linguistic skills to the motivated learners without much difficulty. This revival of literature as input is welcome on two counts. First, it is totally different from the traditional approaches which focused functional grammar and its use in language. Second, the enlightened teachers believe in the implicit ways to facilitate language learning among the students, especially when it comes to teaching university undergraduates.

### **III. LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Keshavarzi (2012) says "Choosing appropriate texts is the first step to teaching English in the ESL/EFL classroom". The right material selection should visualize learners as active participants in the learning process and what they learn and internalize should not only improve their self and personality but equip them with such noble ideas and rich ideological vision that they become active contributors to the society of which they are members. A good amount of such materials come from literature. However, there are scholars like Claudia Feradas (2009), who categorically reject the claim saying that literature has little practical application because

culture and cognition are intertwined in any writer's mind and that what he writes is his thoughts expressed in words.

Literary texts can be introduced in their original forms or in simplified or abridged versions. English Classics like Shakespearean plays, novels like *Pride and Prejudice* may pose problem for students to understand and enjoy. There are also other kinds of literature like popular fiction, fables, comics and song lyrics. An increasing number of stories in English are written specifically for Indian learners and there are quite a number of translated literature from regional literatures of India. To talk about a few, Aurobindo's translations of religious writings from Tamil and Bakim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anand Math* and Tagore's *Gitanjali*, which were originally written in Bengali. The different types of literary texts that can be suggested for reading and studying inside and outside ESL classroom are short stories, plays, song lyrics and novels from any language, if they are in English and appropriate to the proficiency level of students.

The literary texts expressed in multiple ways offer scope for the learners to know the importance of form in achieving specific communicative goals. They also provide an ideal basis for integrating the four language skills. Thirdly, in a global context, they raise awareness about the cross-cultural encounters. Further, literature as content exploits the fact that language is used to convey a message by relaying information. As such what is said in literature contributes to the reader's ability to interpret and deciding on what is said and how, the speaker can communicate in his own way. The verbal play in a text often gives a rich content for discussion and learning in an ESL class. At most of the times, a teacher is helpless when the syllabus prescribed has dull and morose pieces of literature. But, it is for the teacher to make an interesting study and instructional conversations in a class to initiate an informative discussion about the author and his work. With this attitude any literature is good as long as it can engender peer-discussion.

The chosen piece of literature's theme or the subject matter must have the power to motivate even the low proficient who "attach little importance to all the reasons for learning that we as teachers and their better motivated classmates could see: reasons such as gaining knowledge for qualifications and career, experiencing the fascination for discovery and making one's parents and teachers happy" (Lindstromberg, 2004: p.6). To bring them to listening and reading, the subject matter or the content of the text is of real significance. Once the story or the theme is narrated in simple language, the learners need to read and explore the possibility of narrating the story line with appropriate lexis and structure. When the language of the text is, just one step ahead of his current proficiency level (Krashen, 1983) the learner will get motivated with the thematic content of the story to go deeper into the text that he would understand the meanings of lexis in the context, or at times may make use of his mobile dictionary. At the end, he is more concerned with the climax and what is unfolded through it. The possibility is that he may share the emotional responses that the characters share. This kind of personal involvement will make him unconsciously imbibe the expressions and associated verbal and syntactic structure to strengthen his language learning and communication skills. Learners' age, need, expectation, interest and above all their proficiency level in English should decide the selection of literary texts for effective use in an ESL class.

#### **IV. LITERATURE AS CONTENT**

Literature as content engenders an opportunity for the learners to learn the content through the language which is 'content obligatory and content compatible' (Snow, et al., 1989). The literary text of any sort, when decided to be used in the language class, the first step is to check whether every learner holds a copy of the text without which the purpose of teaching is lost. Even the reading sessions need preparations. The teacher needs to make heavy preparations to make the learners understand the new words in the text. The new words are made understandable in meaningful sentences that the learners become familiar with the words. Brain storming sessions are the introductory sessions that inform the readers the vocabulary and back ground knowledge required to comprehend the essay or short story or even a poem. Par se, the students also realize the language gap they face in comprehending the material; as they read again and again, the proximity with the vocabulary and structure develop that they are able to comprehend the text to become productive either to narrate or write. However, the wand is still with the teacher to make the learners communicative. The learners need to be engaged in instructional conversations before and after the reading sessions; otherwise the reading will not have impact on their ability to relate what is read and what is learnt already. Further, the context offers them a forum to check their own ability to be productive. In the higher education learning context, learners' self-check is very important to develop as autonomous learners.

A reading comprehension not evaluated is of no significance in an academic context. The students can give an oral review about the theme, story, characters and the treatment of certain concept or the writer's perceptions as revealed through his delineations of the characters, dialogues and the critical views he expresses on societal happenings. As for writing exercises, information gap exercises like filling the blanks, completing the sentences will make sense. The students may be grouped to do the exercises in groups, which according to Willis and Willis (2007) gives learners plenty of opportunities to talk. The teacher may use the teacher led

approach to familiarize the learners with the process of doing a task for example reading and interpreting a poem.

Teacher led approach is not an easy option. It requires careful preparation. When teaching young adult learners of universities, the teacher needs to think with great care, anticipating the difficulties the learners are likely to have and working out strategies for handling those difficulties. The class is divided into five member groups consisting of a proficient, two moderately proficient and two low proficient students. Each member is responsible for each other's learning. The group leader needs to monitor the group members' learning. It must also be made absolutely clear to the learners what is expected of them before they are led into groups. Further it is also important to monitor groups carefully to make sure that they are on track. Brain storming for recalling and relating vocabulary and accentuating the background knowledge will help the learners to feel the joy or pangs of sorrow as expressed by the poet.

## **V. POETRY AS CONTENT**

Poetry selection for classroom teaching may be short and simple with rhyme and fun to arouse the interest of the students (Christison, 1982). However, the university teachers are left with little option that they need to complete the syllabus with different kinds of poems. If the poem is from the older centuries when the words are archaic, the tasks that the teacher gives should guide the students through such linguistic complexities; it will increase the awareness of different language registers and the contexts in which they are appropriate. It will give a deeper understanding of the different contexts in which the word may be used (Gillian Lazar, 1996). For the matured undergraduate students, 'On Killing a Tree', the poem written by Gieve Patel which is so relevant to the ecological issues prevalent in our country may be introduced. The deforestation in the name of laying and expanding roads, developing industrial estates and housing sites for down-trodden can make students voice their perceptions on environmental issues. The cutting techniques and the tree's invincible strength to grow will make the students speak about similar destructions that happened in their area.

When the spark is introduced, the matured learners will indulge in speaking. On speaking they would realize, only speaking helps them to speak. The meanings of words not understood in the context may be found through teacher, peer enquiry and mobile phones. Vocabulary is easily acquired with mobile apps (Gokale, 2011). The poet's personal picture as developed by the teacher and researched in google will definitely motivate the learners to analyse the poem as written by a doctor. Writing the gist or paraphrase of the poem will scaffold the comprehension of the poem. Writing is to activate the meta-cognitive skills to organize the understood content with coherence. Once organized neatly and read repeatedly, oral presentation is considered easy by the learners. When the criteria for assessing is not rigid (permitted to refer to the written paraphrase) the learners are motivated to present orally. Thus poetry class can motivate the students to be productive learners.

## **VI. CULTURE AND LANGUAGE**

The most important advantage of literature as content is by reading a drama or a short story or a novel, the students become familiar with the target language culture. Culture and language are so intertwined that it is difficult just to show this part of the drama or the story portrays the culture of the people whom the characters represent. The dialogues and the settings reflect the target culture. However, Peterson (2004) suggests the concept of little C culture and big C culture; the big C culture consists of great literature, grand themes, architecture, historical figures that are readily visible; big C culture's invisible items include core values, attitudes, beliefs and assumptions; the little C culture is often described as subjective culture involving people's everyday life, behaviour, traditions and practices, clothing styles, food, hobbies which are visible.

'Othello' the classic piece of literature is a classic example for little C culture that is so vivid and visible. The Shakespearean play does not introduce us to the catastrophe all of a sudden instead it has a format of its own. The introduction of the characters in the first few scenes of the first act is simply for the purpose of exposing the strengths and weaknesses of the main characters along with their acquaintances and the situations. This situation is not one of conflict but it apprehends conflict. The characters and situations excite us with their speeches, actions and they develop into conflicts and crisis to end up in catastrophe. Catastrophe does not pop up as a surprise, it inevitably emerges from the characters themselves. The reason for the socio-pragmatic failure is assigned to the cross-cultural mismatch that arises among the characters from different ethnic and cultural groups (Othello- Moor, Desdemona, Cassio – Romans, Roderigo – Venetian, Iago - Florentine). The characters indulge in literal interpretation when they need to infer from what is said and underuse the context information (Chandrasena, 2016). Another classic, which can throw light on the English culture of 18<sup>th</sup> century is Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*. The Hollywood adaptation of the novel 'Pride and Prejudice' finds good response when screened in the English lab or smart classrooms. The CDs available featuring Shakespearean drama and Novels not only enlighten students on the culture of the community depicted but also the way they speak and communicate. As they are authentic models they are reliable simulations in a language class to stimulate the student audience to give a review or critically analyse the characters and situations

## VII. CONCLUSION

Many of the themes, whether traditional or modern – involving the day to day life of digital generation, the cyber-crimes, social evils, travel and so on are found in English literature. In the higher learning context students bring certain amount of maturity to utilise the class hours for meaningful learning. In an ESL classroom the teacher is present not to teach but to facilitate learning. The ESL teachers need to motivate the students to read literature. The teacher can look for such activities like role plays and simulations prepared from the prescribed non-detailed and detailed drama, short stories and novels, quizzes and poetry reading exercises to motivate student participation in literature learning. Such student- centred activities, encourage students to research and accentuate background knowledge to understand the author's view point and explore their own responses to literature (Collie and Slatter, 1987).The present day culture of watching TV and indulging in useless talks and dancing leave the students little time to enhance their reading skills. The students must be made to realise, in the absence of native speakers of English around, only English literary books can inform them of the language use implicitly and such knowledge will surely enrich their language and style of expression.As a word of caution, it may be in the interest of the teacher and students, any literature or excerpts that can arouse conflict and disrespect be avoided in a language classroom. Because “Teachers are responsible for creating an atmosphere of respect for each other's opinions, beliefs and ethnic/ cultural diversity” (Brown, 2007: p. 515).

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Dr.M. ChandrasenaRajeswaran. “Literature as Content for Teaching English as a Second Language in Higher Education.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 24 no. 03, 2019, pp 36-39.