

A Language for learning: Learning for life

A Pedagogical Overview of Teaching English in India

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Abstract:

The paper proposes that we need to break the illusion with the levels of experience and the matrix of language. Education is about life. Life is a fabric of relationships—the child should grasp this through experience. A rational and objective consideration of this issue would go a long way to establish the place of literature in our language teaching programmes at the secondary and the tertiary levels. To ignore literature altogether and concentrate mainly on morphology and syntax alone seems to me as unwise a policy as the traditional one for language does not exist in a vacuum. It may well be that the teacher in the ‘changing classroom’ should look in the fact all pupils, including those of limited attainments, need the civilizing experience of contract with great literature, and respond to its universality although they will depend heavily on the skill of the teacher as an interpreter. There are numerous Indian issues pertaining to English language. The paper further explores can ELT material avail the optimal mileage to hone the pupil’s language skills and also outlining the problems with recommendations regarding ELT in India.

Research Paper:

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In senior secondary schools and degree colleges, the traditional approach to the teaching of English has been a dependence on literature. The study of literature, it was assumed, developed a taste for reading and widened the horizon of human nature. Whether the objective is realized or not, such a study has exposed the students, extensively or intensively to some of the finest expressions in the language through literature. The paper essentially discusses the major belief that in the zeal for ‘creativity’ by English teachers today, there is not rigorous critical marking of spellings, punctuation and grammatical errors which there used to be, while the traditional systematic ‘doing of corrections’ is fast disappearing. Proficiency and learning are now inculcated through action, from doing and from experience.

Some of our finest writers in English were well-versed in English literature. There is some ground for the teachers of English to believe that the mastery of the language depends to a considerable extent upon the study of literature. Our older teachers of English brought up in this tradition look upon the present shift of emphasis in the teaching of English from literature to language with a certain amount of skepticism and even suspicion. Bruce Pattison of the Institute of Education, London University, on the contrary happened to remark that ‘the demand for English to impose literature was an unwise policy.’ This trend- almost global in character now - of ignoring literature and concentrating on ELT vocabulary, grammar, sentence patterns, represents the other extreme. A rational and objective consideration of this issue would go a long way to establish the place of literature in our language teaching programmes at the secondary and the tertiary levels. To ignore literature altogether and concentrate mainly on morphology and syntax alone seems to me as unwise a policy as the traditional one for language does not exist in a vacuum. When we talk about literature in the context of teaching, we usually think of some essays, poems, novels and plays. Generally two or three plays of Shakespeare, one or two novels of Thomas Hardy, a few poems by Victorian and Romantic poets, a few essays by nineteenth century prose writers constitutes a staple diet of undergraduates in India. These deal with some aspects of human experience which they convey to the readers vividly and powerfully. We are deeply moved by great classics of literature. We enjoy reading them and like to read them over and over again. We share the experience which the writer has described so well and so artistically in them. The medium which literature uses to convey this experience is language, for after all language is the staple raw material of any literature. We can, therefore, state with full justification that literature is language. Language is both the instrument of cognition and communication. But the language that is used in literature is in many ways different from the language we use in common parlance. This is inevitable because literature has a special function to perform- transposing experience through the medium of language- and so it has to sift, pick and choose and bring together the syntactic strings in a manner which best serves the purpose. A study of literature involves the study of this special language it brings into existence. It also involves the study of the ways in which this language differs from the language we use in day-to-day life.

In teaching literature, then, the teacher has to discover ways in which he can successfully focus the attention of learners to the special effect produced by such use of language. This study constitutes what teachers often refer to as the beauty of language in a work of literature.

A second consideration in the teaching of literature is the realization of the experience which inspired the writer to produce that work. The writer perceives experience in a way different from most of us and in translating his

vision into language, has to think of the most appropriate collections of words. The complexity and sophistication of his experience determines to a great extent the complexity and sophistication of the language he uses. This involves allusions, and references and other devices to present the concepts and situations which a particular text introduces. Teaching literature is a mode of jugglery, competence and skill.

A third consideration in teaching of literature is the choice of the appropriate literary text. A work of literature has two dimensions: the linguistic and the experiential. The way the writers grasps experience and presents it is largely determined by his background/ cultural milieu. It comprises a host of factors: the ecological environment of a country, its history, the values of life as crystallized over the centuries, its legends and myths, socio-economic-political forces and what not. It may also usher in those things which shaped his attitudes and values- *Samskar* (संस्कार). This makes American literature different from Canadian or African or Indian literature. But it is the portrayal of the universal constants of human nature that makes it so appealing irrespective of time or place.

In the recent past literary texts were used which had a cultural frame and social context totally alien to Indian learners. Very often it produced an aversion rather than a linking for literature. If there is anything which commends literature for language teaching, surely it is the interesting text which motivates the learners. A poor teacher can create hatred for the discipline he happens to teach. If the element of interest is lost by a bad text or a poor teacher, there is no point in recommending the study of literature. Moreover, the text chosen for study should not make excessive demands on the part of the learners to comprehend it. There is no point in teaching Langland's *Piers, the Plowman* and Chaucer's *Prologue to Canterbury Tales* to the undergraduates of Rajasthan.

In planning literature courses, then, we have to keep in mind both the content and the language. A good work of literature must create sustaining interest and enrich the learner's experience. Even a simple story told artistically, can yield far better results than the laboriously constructed 'Structural Reader.' A common complaint against

such Readers/Primers is that they are dull, boring and monotonous. It is also very essential to acquaint the students with modern English usages, we should not plunder into the jungle of archaisms, clichés and artificial diction. Difficult, complex and archaic expressions (clichés) create unnecessary difficulties in both comprehending and teaching the text. What I mean is that it is not wise to prescribe Shakespeare's play and T.S. Eliot's poem for a high school learner. It is a pity that W.B.Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium* was prescribed in the seventh standard in Assam. Is a school boy supposed to learn English from the Elizabethan idiom used by Shakespeare? It is more profitable for him to study the modern English renderings of Shakespeare's plays into stories. Another thing we may consider in choosing literary texts is that we need not confine ourselves to the literature produced in English or the United States of America. We can pick and choose from fascinating works by African, Asian, South-Eastern, Chinese, German, Russian writers in English translations. Students would love to cross cultural boundaries provided the study is worthwhile and rewarding.

Shall I add that regional dialects should also be studied? No language or dialect is low or high: They are all vehicles of human experience and expression. India is cradle of several rich and prosperous dialects and languages. No language or dialect should be marginalized under the dazzle and glamour of learning English. We have Marathi, Bengali, Gujrati, Punjabi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, etc. as developed as Hindi, English, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit. I conclude on the note that mono lingualism is a myth in India, since India is a fertile paradise of languages and dialects. Let us be optimistic and assume that our English teacher of our immediate future will have knowledge of the nature of the language skills he wishes to encourage in the pupils and how their development might best be ensured. Such knowledge in itself is no guarantee that he will be able to motivate children to make real efforts in appropriate areas. Pupils learn best, to state a commonplace, from those who have a genuine enthusiasm for what they are teaching. It may well be that the teacher in the 'changing classroom' of our title will have much in common with colleagues trained differently and more formally. They would be likely to share a commitment to introducing children to the satisfactions of technically competent writing and to reading worthwhile literature. In these respects the purposes of English teaching have not changed significantly and are unlikely to. When every school has its language policy across the curriculum

and all teachers understand the need the need for a balance of challenge and encouragement, English will continue to make a unique contribution in its preoccupation with the creative potentiality of language. Methods of presentation and presentation and principals of organization may perhaps after dramatically, but the ends pursued by future English specialists will be familiar ones. They will encourage children to learn about themselves and others through talk, reading and writing; disciplines not merely useful or enjoyable, but increasingly valuable sources of discovery and understanding.

References

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