

A Proposal for Teaching English through Language

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Abstract:

It has become increasingly necessary today for teachers and teacher trainers not only teach language, but also to develop the learners' abilities to make them capable of using the language for a variety of communicative purposes. English teaching today has evolved around the primary prominence on its feasibility as a communication skill to assist acquire jobs, promote business interests or provide diverse forms of entertainment. Nevertheless, our students encounter a lot of inconvenience in comprehending English as a language. This is so because the students appear to have the linguistic proficiency and expertise to deal with the text, but are unable to do so because they are approaching it in an inappropriate manner. Language teaching is a process and teaching English through literature has become the fashionable phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is to investigate these problems and analyse the importance of literary discourse in teaching English language.

Suitable literary texts should be selected so as to make the students familiar with the use of literature as literature is a popular technique for teaching language skills i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking vocabulary and grammar. Literature provides interesting language practice materials in the form of drama, poetry and prose.

Poetry, Prose and Drama written in regional or non standard English not only offer valuable source material for this type of applied language study but also raise attendant issues to do with cultural, social and ethnic identities among speakers of English. (Simpson, 1997:180)

Keeping in mind literature as the "Supremely civilising pursuit", this paper will focus on some strategies for the learners to be aware of the creative potential of language and facilitate them to communicate ideas and states of mind in an effective and practical manner.

Key words: Communication skills, linguistic proficiency, language teaching, literature.

Introduction:

Since we live in a global village today, a lot of emphasis is laid on learning English. English language is considered a window to the world. It is a vehicle of upward mobility. It also has the most pronounced and lasting impact on the collective networks of the world mind as it is considered a global language. In his book "English as a Global Language", Crystal asserts: "A

language achieves a global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country". (1997: p-2)

English is a language of business technology, science, the internet, popular entertainment and even sports. Hence, in every institution, teaching of English language is emphasized and given a lot of importance. But it is not an easy task to master the language. There is a difference between learning a language and communicating in the language. Students encounter many challenges and difficulties. As stated by Paul Simpson:

"Perhaps the greatest challenge in the study of English language is how to understand and explain its most basic structures and it's most prosaic day to day functions. It is hard to develop a conscious awareness of what we routinely take for granted about language." (Afterword, 2003: p-180)

These challenges can be overcome effortlessly if literature is used as a tool to impart language. By learning through literature, students will become more creative and adventurous, as they get an opportunity to appreciate the richness and variety of the language they are trying to master, as substantiated in the words of Gillian Lazar:

"Literature may provide a particularly appropriate way to stimulating this acquisition, as it provides meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language." (1993: p-17)

This paper aims at investigating the interaction between language and literature. Why should literature be included in the curriculum? How English language can be taught through the medium of literature? And last but not the least, what are the major sources of literature to be used in language class? The focus is consistently on literary discourses, with emphasis laid on prose, poetry and drama.

If such a curriculum rich in literature is adopted it will not only raise the intellectual ability but also develop competence in students as well as in teachers. Hence, literature provides an appropriate approach in the acquisition of English language.

What Inappropriate Approach do Students Adopt?

English is a language which has about forty sounds, twenty four consonants and twenty vowels. To learn the language, constant practice is required. English grammar is again too vast to memorize and use logically. It has thousands of rules which undoubtedly, make it a daunting task for students to apply the correct ones. Students wanting to master the language are concerned about correctness. In order to be perfect they make a lot of errors. They focus too much on grammar not realizing that it is not necessary that in order to communicate effectively, they have to speak the language perfectly. According to Michael Swan:

"If someone makes too many mistakes in a foreign language, he or she can be difficult to understand, so a reasonable level of correctness is important. However, it is quite unnecessary to speak or write a language perfectly in order to communicate effectively. (A very few adults in fact achieve a perfect command of another language.) Learners should aim to avoid serious mistakes but they

should not become obsessed with correctness, or worry every time they make a mistake. Grammar is not the most important thing in the world.” (2005: p-ix)

English is a foreign language for the students of Asian countries namely India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China etc. Consequently, the interference of the mother tongue hinders in their grasping the language with ease. As substantiated by Tim Collins:

“Many errors commonly made by speakers and learners of a second language are caused by transferring patterns and features of the native language to the new language. This happens in all aspects of language from pronunciation to word formation to sentence structure.” (2009: p-v).

At times when the students converse in English, they tend forced speech which ends in their speaking without confidence and without fluency. In order to be perfect, the students generally adopt another inappropriate approach which hinders their acquiring the language effectively and successfully. Instead of understanding the rules in grammar, they believe and follow “Rote Memorization” which hampers their creative skills. As rightly said “Practice makes a man perfect”, nevertheless, many students do not follow this. They learn only from the books and do not have any practical knowledge, so they do not have the chance to practice the speaking language. They lack in confidence when it comes to conversing in English. They generally apply the regular –ed past tense ending to regular verbs- like ‘comed’, ‘goed’, ‘eated’ etc. In addition, they use the word more with the adjective which requires –er ending. For example Instead of “faster” they say ‘more fast’ or instead of “heavier” they say ‘more heavy’.

Apart from an inappropriate approach by the students, they face difficulties in learning the language efficiently because of their pronunciation and use of verb and tense. English can be really complicating when it comes to pronunciation or the use of verb and tense. Some words contain silent letters which mean they are not spoken, whereas some letters may be pronounced differently. Then there are hard and soft consonants. Therefore, odd combinations and changing rules in the pronunciation of words make English much difficult to learn. Nonetheless, pronunciation is not the only thing that complicates English. The present and the past verb tense add on to the complexities.

Improving this Approach:

The use of incorrect rules in grammar or using the incorrect pronunciation along with the incorrect use of verb and tense can be easily improved. This approach of teaching can be improved by adopting a way of learning the language in a more effective way. And this is only possible with the integration of language and literature.

We already know what language is. Before we talk about the integration of language and literature, we should also know what actually literature is?

Literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and introducing cultural assumptions. Povey argues that, “Literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge”. (1972: p-18)

It is a fact that literature exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language. Undoubtedly, there will be deviations in the literary language from the ordinary language. It is moral responsibility to show the students right path and make them realize how authentic literature is. As Gillian Lazar proposes:

“The study of literature makes literature itself the content or subject of a language course, while the use of literature as a resource draws on literature as one source among many different kinds of texts for promoting interesting language activities.”(1993: p-14).

Reasons for using Literature:

When students read literature in a language class they become broadly aware of the social, political, historical as well as the cultural events which form a background to a particular drama, story or poetry. The reasons why literature is so significant are:

1. Literature indeed is authentic and dependable:

Literature is one of the best tools to master the language. It provides us with authentic and dependable material that has high educational value. It is the unsurpassed and easiest way to stimulate language acquisition. It gives excellent opportunities for classroom discussions and enhancing the students' confidence level to participate in such discussions. When a student is a part of such brainstorming, his motivation level also rises. Hence, it improves his overall knowledge of English. A student is sensitized to the wide range of styles in English and the various purposes for which they can be used. When any kind of prose and poetry is taught in the class, it helps the students to not only enjoy the content matter but also learn to articulate their ideas and thoughts. They learn the figurative language which helps them to enhance their speaking skills. They become more creative and see the world from a wider horizon. As Brumfit and Carter put across:

“Reading literary texts will help our students to understand and appreciate multiple levels of meanings, metaphors and phonological patterning in many other types of texts.” (1986: p-8).

2. Literature Fosters Enhancement of Culture:

It is claimed that studying literature enables the students to comprehend and appreciate the foreign culture without difficulty. When literary works such as novels, plays, short stories or even poetry, are used in the classroom, it facilitates understanding that how communication takes place in the other countries. This kind of culture study can improve and develop a students' cross cultural communication and raise their moral and ethical concerns in the classroom. They can relate themselves with this global world. They do not feel alienated when interacting with people of other cultures. They learn the manners and etiquettes followed in other countries. They can easily adapt themselves in a situation where they have to interact with diverse cultures. As stated by Stephen Slater and Joanne Collie:

“Literature is perhaps seen as a complement to other materials used to increase the foreign learner’s insight into the country whose language is being learnt.” (1987: p-4).

It can indeed deepen and expand the students’ understanding of life in that country, where the language is spoken.

3. Literature Enhances discourse

When students read literature, they learn from discourse and function of sentences like the variety of possible structures, and different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their language skills i.e. reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary and grammar. Listening to a story or a piece of poetry will definitely help the students to develop new ideas and enhance their sentence construction. Stephen Slater and Joanne Collie say that reading literature will help the students to be familiar with the written language. Hence when the students enrich their written skills, it will automatically enhance their speaking skills.

“Literature provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Reading a substantial and contextualized body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language – the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas – which broaden and enriches their own writing skills. The extensive reading required in tackling a novel or long play develops the students’ ability to make inference from linguistic clues, and to deduce meaning from context, both useful tools in reading other sorts of material as well.” (1987: p-5).

Therefore, literature is very accommodating in the learning of the language.

4. Literature Facilitates Personal Participation:

Literature fosters wonderful sources of materials for eliciting strong emotional responses from our students. When students learn literature in a language class, they learn to express and articulate their personal opinions, reactions and feelings. They feel close to certain characters in a story or a drama and tend to learn something from them. They allocate and share their emotional and poignant responses which definitely have clear and effective expressions upon the whole language learning process.

How are Stories, Poetry and Drama helpful?

1. Stories:

When we talk about stories, poetry or drama, we see that all of them enrich the students’ learning experience. They provide an effective and collaborative means of language learning. When language is taught through stories, it is very motivating and involves a lot of fun in the learning process. Listening to stories enhances the listening and concentrating skills of the students. Stories generally link the fantasy and imaginative world with the real world, thus exercises the imagination of the students and raise the curiosity about the target language. As stories are

memorable because of the repetition of the language, they assist the students in enhancing their vocabulary, sentence formation, pronunciation and even grammar. It develops their learning potential and boosts up their confidence and creates a desire in the students to continue learning. This even encourages the student to participate in the class activities and predict what is coming next in the story. This assists in building up their character and discerns them about their choices in life. As William Kilpatrick and Gregory and Susanne say:

“Stories present us not only with memorable pictures but with dramas. Through the power of imagination we become vicarious participants in the story, sharing the hero’s or the heroine’s choices and challenges. We literally “identify” ourselves with our favourite characters, and thus their actions become our actions. In a story, we meet characters who have something to learn; otherwise we would not be interested in them. When we first meet the hero, he has not achieved moral perfection or ultimate wisdom. If the story grips us, though we root for the hero, suffering with him and cheering him on. The imaginative process of participation and identification gives us hope, because we want to believe that in the stories of our lives we too can make the right choices.” (1994: p-21).

Nevertheless, for teaching language through stories an appropriate selection of stories should be made, which not only improves students’ learning skills but also provide a shared social experience to them.

2. Poetry

In addition to stories, poetry promotes language learning ability as well. Poems encourage students to interact and experiment with the target language. It gives way to their creativity and experimentation with English language. Simple forms in a poem can give students a framework of expressing ideas that are meaningful to them. The figurative language used in poetry yokes higher levels of experience in the students, opening up new dimensions of perception in them. Poetry is indeed the most effective forms of literary and linguistic expression, in which words are chosen carefully and arranged in a rhythm. According to Maley and Moulding:

If carefully selected, poems can open up themes which are common to us whatever our cultural background, and can thus act as a powerful stimulus to the students’ own reflective thinking, which will lead to more mature and fruitful group discussion. (1985: p-135).

Therefore, we see that if used appropriately, poetry can offer valuable source material for acquiring the language in an authentic manner as students learn the use of literary devices and become more creative in using the language. They learn to play with words in order to rhyme their sentences. They learn to express themselves effectively in terse sentences.

3. Drama

Let us focus on the significance of teaching English through Drama. Drama is another effectual tool that makes the class more learners centred, fascinating and motivating. It bridges the gap

between the course book dialogue and its natural usage. It also bridges the gap between classroom and real life situations by providing insights to how to handle delicate and complicated situations. It improves the level of competence in students with respect to their receptive and productive skills. It integrates language skills and fosters the comprehension of verbal and non-verbal aspects. Students are inclined to get implicated in the language learning process more interactively and experience a kind of a connection between thoughts and actions. It encourages an open, advanced and analytical style of learning and develops the creativity and imagination of the students. When students play, move, act and learn at the same time with drama, it provides them with an atmosphere full of fun and entertainment. As substantiated by Mark Almond:

“Drama is a whole person approach to language teaching which requires us to look at communication holistically. Creating a character and acting in a play can be a visceral, intellectual and emotional experience which makes the learning process more meaningful and memorable and more transferable to the real world.” (2005: p-10).

Using different kinds of drama like mime, role plays or simple dramatization, facilitate students with an opportunity to use language to express their emotions, take decisions, solve problems and know each other better. Talking about mime, which is a non-verbal representation of an idea or story through gestures, expressions and bodily movements, it reinforces memory in the students by means of visual association. Whereas role plays are methods for exploring the issues involved in complex social situations. From the point of view of language learning, role plays play a significant role of enabling a flow of language with ease and confidence. Discussing about dramatization, we see that it requires classroom performance of scripted materials. Students can use their ideas and creativity to make their own scripts using figurative language, good vocabulary or even phrases. And then enact them for a better impact and memorization. Hence, proving what Mark Almond said about drama:

“It is a whole person approach in that it doesn’t deal exclusively with spoken language but rather requires our learners to read and respond with their intellect, emotions and natural instincts.” (2005: p-11).

Undoubtedly, drama creates a suitable context for enhancing language skills.

Conclusion:

This paper has proposed the integration of language and literature as an essential aid for the effective learning of English language. Literature is surely not an end in itself but the means of beginning a creative process in the minds and emotions of the students and assist them in grasping the language with ease and effortlessly. Furthermore, it can improve students’ overall knowledge of English proving the saying by Ezra Pound to be true-

“Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the almost possible degree.”

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