Language and Literature: An Exposition -
Papers Presented in Karunya University International Seminar

Editor:
J. Sundarsingh, Ph.D.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   143

Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary

S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.

Difficulties in Retrieving Meaning

Interpretation means trying to decipher the idea which is part of a given word or phrase, sentence or a larger chunk such as a paragraph. Interpretation is enabled primarily by an identification of the written matter, that is, knowledge of the script, and later recognition of words and phrases, leading on to an understanding of simple and complex syntax. Since every language has unpredictable contextual meanings, one finds it difficult to decode or make sense of the given piece of literature, if it happens to be in a language which is not one's native. This not only happens to beginners but even experienced audience of literature stumbles upon the multiplicity of meanings while reading literature.

English Literature as Part of English Curriculum in Indian Schools

Ever since English language teaching was introduced in India after the Minutes of Macaulay during the late 1830s, English literature has been used to teach the English language to Indians. It was believed that appreciation of literature is an integral part of language learning. This was not against the prevailing Indian traditional education as well wherein study of literature was a stepping stone for the mastery of the relevant Indian language. Thus, in India, literature has for a long time been one of the most influential genres in teaching language.

Reasons for Using Literature to Teach Language

There may be different reasons for using literature to teach a language. Younger people are easily attracted by and can benefit from stories, for instance, in the sense that stories are not only interesting but they also induce spontaneous reading or listening on the part of the audience. In the case of the adult or mature readers, they can reflect upon stories or any piece of literature, for instance, and analyze their content within a historical context and/or a psychological framework.

Be it poetry or prose or fiction, literature often makes a lasting impression on its readers due to the vibrant imagery and the closeness of familiarity developed through the characters and events. Thus, literature often has the ability to evoke feelings and emotions, which no other subject can achieve.

English Teaching Scenario in India

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   144

Analyzing the English teaching scenario in India, almost all the schools and colleges have prescribed English texts with texts written by native English authors. It has always been taken for granted that the language-teaching class is to be converted into literature-learing class. As rightly pointed by Mehrotra (1995), "…interestingly, when a work of literature is used to teach language, the language class often turns into literature class and sometimes a general knowledge class, leaving language to take care of itself."

Making Best Use of the Situation

When literature is assumed to be a tool to teach language, teachers of English need to make best use of literature for this purpose. Literature is abundant in its resources - not only to inspire, but also to instruct.

Any ELT class using literature to teach language should take into consideration three important factors that have an effect on comprehension:

-                Developing the students' vocabulary
-                Providing them with a background knowledge of the text, and
-                Creating an interest for learning.

It is important that the students be encouraged to develop strategies, such as questioning, that will help them apply their background knowledge to the reading and understand new vocabulary through context.

Selection and Adoption of Appropriate Genre

The teacher should also make sure that the students are exposed to different genres of literature, namely, poetry, prose, drama, fiction, etc. They need to introduce their students to the exclusive features of a variety of forms, which will definitely spark interest in reading. This should help the language teacher to ensure learners' proficiency in the language being taught.

By proficiency here I mean a good stock of vocabulary, which would help develop and maintain confidence in a student to attempt to express oneself in that foreign language.

The Goal of This Paper

This paper attempts to analyze the possibilities of enabling the students to interpret a piece of literature independently, by means of boosting their vocabulary, resulting in a refined production of language. In this regard, my emphasis is on making use of any piece of literature that comes to the teacher in the form of prescribed text, irrespective of whether it is written by a native or a non-native writer of English.

Miracles Expected

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   145

At the tertiary level, majority of our students comes from rural areas. Teachers are expected to bring about some miraculous change in their linguistic skills that will ensure their proficiency in English, both in the spoken and written forms. But this is not possible all the time because, for these students, an English text is always a 'foreign' one.

What May Help Us Here?

As a matter of fact, students enter into a world (presented by the text) more easily if it is similar to the readers' world, in terms of culture and behavior.

To overcome the complexity that prevails among these students in reading and comprehending a textual matter that is not completely native in flavour, the teacher should clarify the cultural components, if any, that could possibly mislead or alienate the students, thwarting their concentration. The teachers need to give students an idea about how a literary text may be different from a more ordinary text, like a letter or conversation. This clarification ensures student participation. This is essential since the students cannot all be expected to have had any experience of reading literature with literary sensibility in their mother tongue.

Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary has always been learned as a part of the grammar exercises (synonyms, antonyms, filling in the blanks, etc.). But most of the language teachers do not always realize that grammar provides only the patterns, and it is the vocabulary which provides the material to put in the patterns. For instance, the word 'walked' not only refers to an action in past, but also that it is usually preceded by a grammatical subject that refers to something that is alive; in other words, we cannot say 'the chair walked'. The students should be insisted to remember that 'words are related to each other in many ways, and this is how they are remembered and stored' (Cook, 1991). A prior knowledge of this network of word meanings should be inherent in the student if s/he is expected to interpret a text independently.

Complex Relationship Between Words and Their Meanings in Literature Teaching

As a matter of fact, it is the complex relation between words and their meanings that makes interpretation successful or otherwise. In other words, if one is quite aware of the nuances of word applications, one is sure to interpret a text in a reasonably good manner. Increasing a student's vocabulary and enabling them to use it in appropriate contexts is one of the objectives of teaching English as a Second Language.

There is a controversial view that a literary text may not be of much help in this regard, since words used in literature do not have any fixed meaning. Furthermore, it is sometimes argued that a word has symbolic or associative meaning in literature which may be of little relevance to the learner in day-to-day interaction. Nevertheless, if not for any other grammatical purposes, at least for teaching vocabulary, using literature gives the teachers a chance to get students exposed

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   146

to myriad shades of vocabulary, thereby assisting them in understanding a text and even in producing a text of their own.

Usefulness of Independent Interpretation for Language Learning

In making the students interpret a text independently, the teachers should ensure that the students have a good stock of 'passive' vocabulary that will assist them to guess the meaning of the 'ad-hoc' vocabulary present in the text, by fixing them in the context. This can be done by means of providing a text (prepared by the teacher, of course, involving the students' stock of "active" vocabulary) that is quite similar to the text (that has to be taught) in hand. For instance, before starting a poem about seasons, the teacher can brainstorm the class with ideas related to 'seasons' as follows:

- What are the seasons you are familiar with?
- How do you characterize the seasons?
- Which season do you like the most? Why?
- How are the seasons referred to in your mother tongue?
- Do you remember anything or any occasion that reminds you of a particular season? (or vice versa)

All the responses for the above questions should be jotted down either by the teacher (on the board) or by a scribe from the class itself. Having done this, the teacher can ask the students to accumulate all the ideas expressed and to consolidate them (this may take hardly ten minutes). Now, on the premises created by the students themselves, the teacher can proceed further by asking them "how, do you think, are the seasons reflecting the stages of human life?"

The brainstorming session comes to an end with varied responses to this question and that does half the job of teaching the poem. If the students are asked now to read the poem and to try to decipher what the author puts across, the teacher can expect amazing outcome of ideas that accomplishes her job.

Here no question of students' retaining the points arises because, how well people remember something depends on how deeply they process it. In this case, it is the students who process an analysis of the text and they are likely only not to forget it for their lifetime.

Follow-up Activity

The teaching of this text does not stop with this. As a follow-up activity, the teacher may ask the students to prepare a glossary of the new words they have learnt from the new text. With the help of this set of new words, the students should attempt a prose or poem or fiction of their own (and the best ones should be acknowledged without fail). Any text, be it prose or fiction, can be taught the same way.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   147

In the above instance, the teacher takes the students from a concept familiar to them in the native setting to the one that is (or may be) 'non-native'. In terms of vocabulary, the teacher utilizes the 'active' vocabulary of the students to proceed to either the 'passive' or the 'ad-hoc' vocabulary. The advantage is that some of this 'passive' and/or 'ad-hoc' vocabulary becomes a part of the students' 'active' vocabulary.

Frequency of Application

Another thing that has to be ensured by the teacher is the frequency of application of this newly learnt vocabulary. In their attempt to bring a new word into common currency, one will have to keep repeating it quite often on different occasions. It is the language teacher who has to create occasions or to encourage the learners to do so, where they can use the new words they have learnt recently.

Not Simply about Authors and Their Creation

The teachers should realize that by using literary texts, they are supposed not only to teach students about famous writers from the past; they should also enable the students to make use of their creativity and use their English to write and speak. They need practice and they need to be motivated. As we all know, doing lots of tests or studying grammar for years together may not be sufficient to serve the purpose of becoming a 'competent' speaker of the language.

It is not an easy task to incorporate higher level comprehension skills into the classroom, but it is a necessary one. For students to participate in the society in which they live, they must have experiences which prepare them for life. In order to become good communicators, it is essential that students learn to try to interpret things independently, to value their own interpretation, to compare their interpretations with that of others, and to revise or reject parts of that process when it is appropriate.

A classroom environment which is student-centered fosters student participation in the learning process. Learning that is both personal and collaborative encourages independent thinking and expressions. And this leads to a better participation in the society.

Select Bibliography

Cook, V. 1991. *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching* (Second Edition). New York. Edward Arnold Publishers.

Gupta, Pratibha. 2004. *Socio-Linguistic Constraints in Teaching English.* New Delhi: Concept Publishing House.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   148

Halliday, M.A.K., McIntosh,A. and Strevens,P.1964 *The Linguistic Sciences and Language teaching*. London: Longmans.

Krashen, S. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. New York. Pergamon Press.

Littlewood, W.1981. *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Mehrotra, R.R. 1995. 'Literary Bias in Teaching of English as a Second Language' in Agnihotri, R.K., Khanna,A.L., ed., *English Language Teaching in India – Issues and Innovations*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Nagarajan, S. 1978. 'The Teaching of Shakespeare in India' in Mohan, R., ed., *Indian Writing in English*. Bombay: Orient Longman.

Sah, Prajapati P. 1992. 'Designing Text-Based Vocabulary Exercises: Towards a Scale of Difficulty' in Koul, Omkar N. ed. *English in India – Theoretical and Applied Issues.* New Delhi: Creative Publishers.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari. 1995. 'Subjecting English' in Agnihotri,R.K. and A.L.Khanna. *English Language Teaching in India- Issues and Innovations.* New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore 641 046
Tamilnadu, India
enigmadjl@rediffmail.com
jpkoathai@rediffmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
10 : 1 January 2010
S. Jayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Enabling Students to Interpret Literary Texts Independently by Enhancing Their Vocabulary   149