

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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V. Sakthivel, M.A., M.Phil. and N. Kavidha, Ph.D.

Is Literature a Viable Medium for ESL Acquisition?

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Life, Literature and Mastering Language Skills

Interestingly, there is an interrelation between life and literature, literature and language and language and life. In any society, all these three components are important and inseparable. Among them, life provides the base, then language evolves and using the language literary works are created. To create a literary work, the writer should have a command over the language and have an eagle eye on the day-to-day events in life. This actually makes the use of literature more relevant to learn a language, so long as such literature is in current idiom.

One of the Best Tools

Literature is one of the best tools to master a language. People have an inherent ability to understand the basic story-telling conventions irrespective of age, religion, caste and creed. This helps us enjoy literature and appreciate the meaning it conveys. It is this implicit competence that we try to take advantage of in using literature to teach language.

Active Participation Takes Place

When a reader reads a piece of literature, he actively participates in the story and he questions, wonders, gets angry, cries during the process of reading, All these feelings exemplify the readers' participation.

Literary critics and experts have classified it as reader-response criticism.

Scientists nowadays are doing the same thing using technologies and have named it virtual reality, where the viewers immerse in the artificial atmosphere and anticipate the happenings with real involvement. The same can be experienced by reading a novel, for example, where we curse the villain and praise the deeds of a hero or heroine or both. We also sympathize with the people who suffer unnecessarily.

The same may be correlated to Coleridge's theory of willing suspension of disbelief and to Aristotle's theory of Catharsis. They depend on how far a reader allows himself to be consciously captivated by his believing of what he reads.

Recognizing and Storing Usage Rules

While reading, a conscious reader should allow his heart to go for details and his mind to collect the usage of a language.

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Easy Interaction

Literature provides real-life situations where one character meets other characters and they interact and express their emotions. The language used by these characters should be noted by the reader.

It's the duty of the language teachers to show the right direction to the learners and motivate them to take note of the language used by the characters.

Focus Also On Aspects of Language Use

Even though many experts reiterate that one should read a lot of novels to build one's vocabulary, the teachers should be able to distinguish right English from the slang, dialects etc. The main drawback found in courses like English literature is that the attention of the learners is totally focused on the geographical information, theme and character analysis, besides the background of the writer. As a result, the existing system of teaching and learning literature never allows the learner to concentrate on the nuances of a language.

Literature is for All, Not Just for the Students of Literature!

Similarly, literature is not read by the students of literature alone. People from all walks of life also read literature to focus on the language, besides the entertainment it offers.

Take Note of Grammatical Aspects

While teaching literature, grammatical aspects of a text should be explained by the teachers apart from concentrating on the story. Currently in most schools and colleges, the learning activities of students are always textual. Language acquisition is made theoretical and not application-oriented.

What Is Our Goal, as Teachers of English?

Language teachers should realize the fact that their goal is not teaching English literature but teaching a language. By reading a piece of literature learners can understand the diverse use of words, phrases, phrasal verbs, multiple meanings, idioms, etc. They learn use familiar words in new contexts with new meanings. Students get absorbed in the story, and the language (sentences, sentence and phrasal patterns, and words) is understood and mastered without much effort in the process.

Story-telling Conventions

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Whether literate or illiterate, sophisticated or not, all of us have an inherent ability to understand the basic story-telling conventions. At the lower level, stories are part of the textbook. The stories may be “taught” following the usual steps, with focus on vocabulary and sentence structure. Students may be given tasks to paraphrase the story in their own words and manner.

Study versus Use of Literature

However, we need to distinguish between the study of literature per se and the use of literature as a resource for language teaching. The goal in this case is not teaching literature. The goal is to teach and language. We intend to use literature to teach language. So, more care can be invested in vocabulary, word combinations and sentence formations.

Select Materials That Match Student Interests

While reading texts of the present day novels, one can divest a lot of information regarding language usage and word power. The students in Third World countries have only a limited access to spoken English. Face to face communication with the native speakers is a rarity. So, we need to select materials which match the interests of our students and which will at the same time bring more exposure to the English of Americans or any other Western country.

Use Contemporary Materials

Use of contemporary materials will augment learning methodologies, as the learner would have a higher thirst for greater acquisition. They can identify the conversational strategies that the characters in the story employ, and try to use the same in conversations with their fellow students in the class. They can enact the story as a team / role play- initially ask them to write the conversations then ask them to present them or enact them in the class room. Short story collections and short novels are better suited than full length fiction or poetry.

Practice English Appropriately!

In an earlier paragraph above we mentioned that the students are always textual in their learning and language acquisition is more theoretical and not application-oriented in our schools and colleges. We would like to elaborate on this point further here.

For instance, when a teacher teaches tenses in a classroom, the students are active enough to offer examples on their own such as,

The sun rises in the East. (Present tense)

The train had already left the station, before we reached there. (Past perfect tense)

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However, in real life situations, the learners fail to use the same tense aptly. They are familiar with the names of tenses and the usual examples taught to them by their teachers since their childhood. But applying them in the required context is what is deficient.

This discrepancy can be overcome by reading contemporary fiction or plays. While teaching literature, grammatical aspects of a text should be explained by the teachers apart from concentrating on the story.

The use of the past tense can be explained through biographies and autobiographies or through some narrative pieces where past tense is used. Conversation practiced by the characters of a play will be very useful to face the same situations in day-to-day life. In this sense, modern plays provide platform for the students to learn spoken English. Similarly, we get a chance to express our ideas or react suitably in a given situation.

Fluency and Oral Proficiency

Oral proficiency of a student, that is, the capacity of the student to speak errorless English with fluency is what is expected in a student to be employed in any job, may be teaching, or in any software or IT related jobs of today. Thousands of disadvantaged Engineering graduates and science graduates are longing to have English fluency and are left disappointed with ordinary spoken English institutes. Hence it is necessary that a teacher should know to coordinate language and literature to bring a learning atmosphere for the learners.

Select Bibliography

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