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English Drama in Indian Classrooms - Some Observations, Implications and Suggestions

Digambar M. Ghodke, M.A. B.Ed.

Abstract

Teaching language through literature has been a widely recognized practice in language classrooms, especially in ELT classrooms, for long. However, the goals of teaching literature have undergone changes from time to time. The present paper attempts to take a brief survey of the goals and objectives of teaching literature to students. It tries to understand the relevance of teaching English literature, especially English Drama, to Indian students. The paper further takes a brief review of the present condition of drama teaching in the classroom. It attempts to briefly explore the challenges involved in teaching drama in Indian classrooms and finally comes up with suggestions to the teachers dealing with English Drama in Indian classrooms.

Introduction

The goals of teaching literature have undergone changes from time to time. Elan Showalter focuses on these goals in her book *Teaching Literature* (2003). In her view, the goal of teaching literature in past was to make people better human beings and better citizens. Literature is “repository of moral and spiritual values”. Of course, there are others who challenge this assumption on the basis of time, space, and specificity of culture in both the production and reception of literature (Sudhakar Marathe & et al, 1993).

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For the proponents of New Criticism teaching literature became teaching irony, tone, paradox, tension and symbolism. During 1960 to 1970 teaching of literature became political act for radical and minority groups in the university.

After 1970 the goal of teaching literature became a branch of philosophical inquiry about signification, representation, aporia (raising doubt and finding truth) and ideology. By 1980 theory occupied a predominant position in teaching literature. The secondary critical and theoretical texts substituted over imaginative literature itself. In 1988 the conflicting views on literary goals gained momentum. The need to teach students to love works of imagination emerged.

What Can We Do?

After reviewing the aforesaid goals, as a teacher of English in Indian classrooms, I started thinking of my goals of teaching English literature to my students. Whereupon, the questions such as “Why do our students want to study literature? Do they really study literature for aesthetic pleasure? Do they opt for it because they are voracious readers of literature? And how many of them are well acquainted with the literature in their regional languages or their own mother tongues?” often came to my mind frequently. This resulted in a strong desire and determination to find some answers to these questions, which would help me as well as other teachers to understand the importance of literature in teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language. This paper is the result of such exploration.

On having the profound and serious contemplation over these questions, I think, none of us would be willing to declare with any certainty that our students really want to study literature for the sake of literature. Then what is it that makes our students to opt for a course in English Literature for their graduation?

Reasons for Learning English and English Literature

Being the graduates and post-graduates in English, we all should know the reasons better than others. We are well-aware of the social, economic and educational factors involved in English Language Teaching (ELT) now.

David Graddol, in his introduction to *English Next India* (2010), says we are fast moving into a world in which not to have English is to be marginalized and excluded. According to him there are three main drivers in India towards the greater use of English: education, employment, and social mobility. Our students want to learn English to come out of the traditional role attributed to their forefather in the caste-oriented society and to empower themselves to meet the emerging expectations in the job market. Hence, their primary interest in English is language-oriented.

Quality of English Teaching and Learning in India

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Unfortunately, Indian universities fall far short of rival countries in the quality of their teaching. English is taught in these universities mainly as a compulsory subject to the undergraduate students in Arts faculty whereas students from commerce and science faculties study it for a one year during the three years period of the course.

My Focus in This Paper

But my focus of attention is on the course in English literature which is offered to B.A. students. It is often named as Special English, Optional English or English Major, etc. in different Indian universities. These courses are usually devised with specific objectives.

Objective of Teaching Literature

While devising the objectives of teaching English literature in Indian classrooms, students' needs are not recognized in any significant manner. No attention is paid to the linguistic skills of the learners. The aims and objectives are devised only to have a definite educational justification for every activity (It must be made clear here that the conditions vary from place to place within India itself and hence it may seem inappropriate to generalize the term Indian classroom). In Showalter's view (Elaine Showalter, 2003), "literature instructors often define their courses by the texts on their syllabi ... not acts that students will be expected to perform." It means we often incline to cover a certain set of topics, and forget to facilitate students to learn and think. But what Roger Kwin (Showalter, 2003) thinks of our responsibility as teachers would certainly make us to introspect. He points out that "we should never forget that in today's undergraduate teaching we are dealing with the vulnerable, the open, the intellectually virginal, the easily bewildered, and the preoccupied, who have little background, little time and little money. We should ask ourselves continually, what our goal is in teaching them the Renaissance. What do we want to accomplish?" (Showalter, 2003).

As the teachers of English literature in Indian classrooms, we know that we are expected to train our students to think, read, analyze and write literary works in English ranging from the classics, the canon, the great traditions of English and American works to postcolonial literature in English from all over the world. Hence, teaching literature for us means teaching fiction, poems, plays or critical essays. But, at a time we should not fail to understand that our objectives of teaching in English classrooms, especially in undergraduate classes, are quite different than that of the teachers who teach literature in Indian languages. Of course, English in India, now, is not a foreign language like French or German; it enjoys the status of one of the official languages of India. Yet, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee (1993), we do not have the confidence of the teacher of Hindi, Bengali or Marathi literature to take granted either the students familiarity with the cultural context or their control of language (Meenakshi Mukherjee in Sudhakar Marathe & et al., 1993).

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Once the fact that our students need English literature for learning language skills becomes apparent, the main aim of teaching literature may tend to be language-oriented. Literature is often considered as a major tool for teaching language, especially a language like English.

Collie and Slater (1987) focused on the positive contributions language learning through literature could make in that literary texts constituted valuable authentic material as it exposes the learner to different registers, types of language use. Literature, in UG classes, gives our students opportunity to acquire a competence in English language. While at postgraduate level, literature teaching becomes a specialized activity. In Sudhakar Marathe's view students of English literature must be acutely aware of the various contexts of literature, but they should equally be aware that the study of a literary text and its language is the primary task (Sudhakar Marathe & et al, 1993).

However, if we glance at the objectives of the University of Pune for teaching poetry, fiction, and drama to the second year students of B.A. in Special English course (www.unipune.ernet.in); we realize that the teaching of language through literature is not focused prominently. This condition is repeated more or less in similar ways for such courses in other Indian universities as well.

The objectives listed are as under:

- 1) To acquaint and familiarize the students with the terminology in Fiction/Poetry/Drama Criticism (i.e. the terms used in Critical Analysis and Appreciation of Fiction/Poetry/Drama)
- 2) To encourage students to make a detailed study of a few sample masterpieces of English Fiction/Poetry/Drama from different parts of the world.
- 3) To enhance student awareness in the aesthetics of Fiction and to empower them to independently venture into reading, appreciation and critical examination and evaluation of Fiction/Poetry/Drama Texts.

The question to be raised here is that if the objectives of teaching all the forms of literature are alike, then why do we need to teach them separately. One of the drawbacks in the use of literary texts such as novels and poems is that many of them contain language forms that the foreign language or even second learners of a language find it difficult to understand.

At this point, I want to emphasize on the uniqueness of drama as a tool for teaching language in our classrooms.

Drama in Classrooms: Implications

We need to learn that there are different types of learners with different needs and attitudes to learning. Some are able to be independent, some are not, or they become independent learners at

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a later stage of learning. Our motivation can give the drive and confidence to independent learning. We can motivate them to use English in different situations.

But can our students learn using English language only by imagining the situations where it is used? Do they get an opportunity to use English in real life situations?

In my opinion as the tool of motivation drama in the classroom is more reliable than either fiction or poetry. There is close relationship between drama and language. According to Evans Tricia spoken language develops through social interaction and is one of the prime media of dramatic expression (Evans Tricia, 1982). According to Maley and Duff, (1978) drama can help the teacher to achieve 'reality' in several ways. It enables him to motivate his students learn a new language with pleasure and interest. It makes the learning of the new language an enjoyable experience.

Usefulness of Drama for Language Use

As said earlier we cannot expect our students to learn a language only by imagining himself/herself in a given situation. So drama might prove helpful by setting realistic targets for the students to aim for. It also helps us to link the language-learning experience with the student's own experience of life. Drama provides our students opportunities to use a variety of registers in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes. It also encourages them to understand the target culture and language and develop a sense of tolerance and respect for other cultures and languages.

Dramatic techniques such as role-playing might prove useful in motivating our learners become personally and fully involved in the learning process, and communicate in a given context in which different characters are placed into. According to Mark Almond (2005), teaching of drama will enable the teachers to accurately target the requirements of a communicative approach to language teaching. While Helen Nicholson (Nicholson, 2000) thinks that drama teaching can enhance our students' ability to combine thought, language and feeling in a range of energetic and creative ways.

Challenges

However, although drama is major tool in teaching language in our classrooms, there are barriers in the effective use of dramatic and theatrical forms in actual teaching.

The first barrier, which is very common to all of us, is that in our university curriculum drama is just like any other subject in which knowledge is regarded as paramount and may be tested by written examination (Evans Tricia, 1982).

Secondly, we rarely think of the cultural differences. Our university curricula do not pay much attention to local, non-canonical dramas. We are still satisfied with the dialogue between Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecil Cardew or the unrealistic dreamy world of Willy Lowman in our

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undergraduate classrooms. Our curricular designers seem to be little concerned with the cultural deprivation, socioeconomic factors, and schooling inequalities of our students. Meenakshi Mukherjee reports in Sudhakar Marathe & et al. that there is growing awareness that English teaching in India cannot be re-examined without correlating the literary text that is taught in the classroom with the social text in which the teacher and taught live (Sudhakar Marathe & et al, 1993).

Sharing the experience

I certainly understand that most of us the teachers have little role to play in designing curriculum. But as teachers of drama in the ELT classroom, we must realize that teaching of drama is a dynamic and energetic activity. It should not be simply explained and taught to prepare the students for examinations. We need to work in a direction to make our drama teaching more student-centered and process-oriented.

Although our teaching is governed by the prescribed syllabi and evaluation methods, we can think of enriching our teaching practice by getting acquainted to the theatrical practices. Of course, I do not suggest joining a course in acting and theatrical performance, but we should try to get some hints in making our drama class process-oriented and participatory. We can think of the possibilities of making our drama classroom dynamic and integrated through the students-centered activities like role-playing, dramatization, and improvisation, etc. Martin Lewis (2005) suggests us that our tasks and instructions should not tend to be prescriptive. They should rather suit the needs and learning style of our students.

At this point, I wish to share my own personal experience of teaching English drama to my students of S.Y.B.A. Special English (all of them are from non-English medium background). These students are supposed to study three plays from three different geographical contexts, viz., British Literature, American Literature and Indian Literature as a part of their Special English Paper-I named "Understanding Drama". They studied Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*.

While studying Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the students, it was observed, found it difficult to understand the witty and humorous conversation among these characters of the play. It was not easy for them to enjoy the complications in the subject matter in the language (vocabulary and syntax) used by the playwright. Although the play is full of wit and humour, my students failed to enjoy it in the way it is expected. For example, the students were unable to enjoy the witty conversation on 'cake and bread and butter' between Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew.

Same is the case of the second play, i.e. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The students were not able to understand the seriousness and melancholic atmosphere in the play due to the weighty language used by the playwright. While reading the bold conversation on women and sex between the two brothers, i.e. between Biff and Happy, the students felt awkward and

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uncomfortable. Such a conversation between two brothers is almost unimaginable in the Indian context.

However, the students found themselves at ease while reading the third play, i.e. Karnad's *Hayavadana*. Of course, I mention Karnad's *Hayavadana* simply as one of the instances of the Indian texts in English. We can rely on other plays such as Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*, *Silence*, *The Court is in Session* etc. They were asked to read and understand the plays on their own but it was not easy for them to do so in case of the first and second plays whereas they found it easy to read the third play. I had shown them the film-version of both Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Unfortunately the film-version of Karnad's *Hayavadana* was not available with me. Yet the students were at ease to enjoy this play. Interestingly, all of them showed keen interest in the enactment of this play and eagerly participated in the role-playing. They found themselves to be at home in the roles of Kapila, Devdatta, and Padmini etc. They could comfortably read the dialogues of this play. They could also understand at least the literal meaning of the story without the help of the teacher. Consequently, the students also participated in the discussion on the plot, theme, characters, and structure of the play etc. actively and enthusiastically.

It must be noted here that the students did not respond to the earlier plays with the same zest. Through the above personal experience I learnt that it's difficult for the students to cope with the culturally alien texts but they not only feel at home but also enjoy while learning the texts and content from their culture in a language which is not their own, i.e., in English.

Conclusion

Thus teaching of English Drama to Indian students should adapt the language-oriented approach at least at the beginners' level so that the learners would be endowed with language skills to understand literary works and develop an active interest in learning literature. It would facilitate the millions of students who have had no great access to English either in their families, communities or in schools. Otherwise passing examinations would become the only target for these students.

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Digambar Maruti Ghodke, M. A., B. Ed.
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English
New Arts, Commerce and Science College
Shevgaon, 414502.
Dist: Ahmednagar
Maharashtra
India
dmghodke@gmail.com

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