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1. NEW VISTAS IN ELT: EMPOWERING ENGINEERS FOR EMPLOYMENT

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Teaching Language through Literature in Engineering Colleges

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Abstract

Acquiring English language is an innovative process and it is the role of the teacher to make learning the language interesting and motivate the students to learn the language without any inhibition. The engineering students are exposed only to Technical English and the

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expectations of the objective are not dealt with. Every year engineers are produced without proficiency in English and there is a gap between industry demand and academic achievement. To fill the gap there should be a change in the syllabus and the teaching methodology. To capture the attention of the students, literature can be used as a tool to teach language. Literature would help realize the objective and it aid students in learning the language with fun and entertainment. Among the different genres, short stories and poems are the most effective means of teaching literature. Literature makes the teaching-learning process effective, meaningful and applicable. So, when you make learning language a fun project, the students in a college class room would begin to enjoy it and not be worried about making mistakes while learning and so on. This paper attempts to present how the teaching of literature can be an effective tool in learning the English language at college level for engineering students.

Keywords: Engineering Students, Technical English, Teaching Literature, Teaching-learning Process, Short Stories

Teaching Language through Literature

Every year Technical English is taught to engineering students and the outcome is not at all what one would expect. These students are not able to write a single paragraph without mistakes and they are not able to speak even a few sentences without errors. Even the students who have studied in English medium schools for twelve years are not able to speak and write English grammatically correct. The standard of English is going down especially in engineering colleges. Many trainers of Communication skills emphasize only the speaking skills. But both speaking and writing skills are important and have to be integrated with reading and listening. The introduction of literature in language classes will certainly enhance the creativity of the students. It will give rise to multiple interpretations and enliven the classroom.

Literature helps students to shift from a mechanical learning of English language to an emotional, creative, imaginative means of inferring ideas from English passages and poems. This shall help establish a bond between the subject and the student, the student and the teacher. The students will be so much involved with the plot of the story or meaning of the poem, that they would forget the difficulty in vocabulary. The desire to understand and become a part of the

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story will help students to overcome the obstacles to the learning of the language. It is necessary to choose the text according to the interest of the students, because both the teacher and the students are to be active participants in the classroom. Literature not only offers language enrichment, but it also offers cultural enrichment. Through its pictorial, descriptive language, literature gives them a glimpse of the culture of different people, especially for all those who are reluctant to go to new places and have their prejudices and inhibitions dealt with.

Language and literature are inseparable as they are like the two sides of a coin and are a part and parcel of everyday activity. Language is used to express the thoughts and experiences of the particular people. The language of a people reflects how unique they are in their customs, culture, beliefs, traditions, norms and expectations. These are expressed in fiction and short stories, plays and poems. The interpretation of language is part of the culture of the people and the means by which the members of the society communicate. The general belief is that the knowledge of literature prepares the foundation for language learning. Apart from entertainment, literature enhances students' general use of language, since communication takes place all the time in literature. Literature helps learners understand the differences in culture and enables them to tolerate and understand the cultures of other people. Through literature, universal themes such as love, war, loss, etc. are all covered, which are not always covered in the language course books that are used in class. Through literature, the learners achieve language development and competence for conflict resolution. A learner/student is exposed to all the vices and virtues of mankind and shall be fully aware of how human life could be lived out in the best manner possible and vice versa; the student could get integrated into his/her culture as well as be able to understand other people's cultures. He/she would also become more fluent in the English language, having a very wide range of vocabulary at his disposal. Literature has become an important window through which we can strive to reach the stage of fluency in English language and of course any language.

In engineering colleges the English language should be taught through short stories and poems that can help enhance moral values, and heroic attributes. Literature provides an authentic model of language use, due to its rich potential compared to all other genres. The language is varied, rich, and full of high idealistic thinking. By reading literary works, students learn to see a

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world through another person's perception, observing human values and a different kind of living. They would understand and become broadly aware of the social, political, historical, cultural events happening or that had happened in a certain society, maybe thousands of miles away, across the oceans. Through literature, learners can deepen their cultural understanding. Since literature enables students to understand and appreciate other cultures, societies and ideologies different from their own, it encourages growth of character and personality development, and brings about intellectual development. Short stories require less time, less number of characters in them and only one plot; so it is easy for students to understand. The students would be enabled to come out with many language activities, through the reading of an interesting small piece of text. It is the role of the teachers to facilitate the students to learn at the micro level and relate it to the macro level and vice versa.

Teaching Language through Short Stories

Let us see the story **The Fortune Teller** by Karel Capek, a famous Czech novelist, playwright and short story writer. In this story a smart detective inspector, MacLeary employs his wife to trap a fraudulent fortune-teller called Mrs. Myers who predicts that her client will marry a rich man and sail to a distant place. Soon the Justice of the Peace, Mr. Kelly rebukes Mrs. Myers and orders her deportation. A year later Mr. MacLeary confesses to the Justice that his wife has run away with a rich businessman to Australia, unfortunately making the forecast true in the life of the inspector.

From this short story a debate can be organized on "Astrology - A Superstition or Science?" Since the short story is comprised of dialogues between the characters, exercises on reported speech could be given. Synonyms, antonyms, tenses, words related to astrology and law could be dealt with. The students could be asked to enact a play based on the theme. Words related to personality could be identified by asking them to read the zodiac signs in the newspaper. Activities based on short stories kindle the imagination and boost creativity. Literary pieces offer the greatest level of enjoyment and develop a holistic development in the students. The tasks will make the students highly interactive and will develop their communicative

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abilities. Values, human relationships, humour, compassion, pathos, and such find a place in the literary arena. Exercises based on communication skills which are required by the employment world would satisfy the expected communication needs.

The use of short-story in English teaching should be aimed at encouraging the students to use what they have previously learnt. By doing this, the learning process will be student-centered. However, the teacher plays a great role. She/he must choose a suitable text to use in class, and should help her/his students understand the story with various activities. In using short stories to teach English, story selection is indeed one of the most important roles of the teacher. Since the lengths of short-stories vary, they should choose a story short enough to handle within course hours.

All the four skills can be developed through short stories. With respect to the reading skills, the student should be asked to read the text to understand the gist without referring to the dictionary. He should underline the words that he does not know. He should then read the text the second and the third time to guess the meaning of the words. He should be asked to refer to the dictionary after understanding the general essence of the story. He will be able to realize that he was able to guess the meaning of the words. The student can enrich his/her vocabulary through synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and usage of the same. The students can then be asked to read the text to learn and understand grammar. He can understand articles, prepositions, the usage of tenses and why the use of tenses varies. The texts should lead the students to discover language features. They should be chosen to serve as a springboard for creative communicative post-reading activities.

For example, going through stories filled with images of love, adventure, war, and so on, creates an outlet for emotion. This therefore, leads to sharper and deeper real life experiences. These imaginary situations enable the reader to identify with others and their experiences. It also enlarges the students' knowledge of the world. The opportunity so created by the use of literature makes the learner to understand that human nature is multi-dimensional. Literature is of immense help in language learning through the practice of extensive reading. Reading is the easiest way of

bringing the foreign learner into sustained contact with a substantial body of a language. If the piece read is interesting, the language remains in the mind of the reader. The patterns of collocations and idioms are established.

Extensive reading widens the horizon of the reader in terms of vocabulary and usage, which invariably promotes thought and thinking. There is no doubt that poor development of vocabulary and language skills has seriously inhibited development of excellence in literary studies. It is necessary to point out here that the benefits that could be derived from using literature in a language class should not be limited to the English class. The teacher, in using literature in his language class, should relate the class activities to real life situations. The class should be made to become lively, interesting and attractive. The teacher should ensure that the students' background and culture are taken into consideration, when choosing literary texts. Since literature is language in action, there should be actual reading in the class. Though, extensive reading should be encouraged, which could be mainly reading out of interest, intensive reading is required of the students in order to ensure that they understand the text. The text can be used to learn punctuations and quotations also.

In the writing activity, students can make an outline of the story. They can separate what they have read into main points and subordinate points. The students can paraphrase the story or they can retell it in their own words. The students can first get into writing without much emphasis on the quality of writing. This helps to kindle the thought process and enhances the creativity of the students. Pre-writing activities like brain storming, flow chart, mapping, and cluster formation will help the students in organizing their thoughts. The students need to be motivated to continue writing, and rewarding should outweigh any major frustration.

The summaries, at the beginning, can amount to five paragraphs and then, progressively, be reduced to one paragraph as the students improve their skills in extracting the main points. To guide the students to do what is expected, the teacher can provide a prompt, such as questions about the story, for building the paragraph. They can write about what interests them the most, they can change the end of the story, they can create a new character to change the parts of the story they do not like, and so forth. This sequence of writings, about the same or different short

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stories, should be collected and corrected by the instructor. Suggestions for improvement should be given. It is relevant to mention that not every mistake needs to be corrected. The students themselves, as they begin to master the language, will perceive and correct their own mistakes. The instructor can also move from correcting mistakes to only marking them and giving general comments on mistakes in the class. By doing so, he activates the students' critical thinking proficiency. This positive insight makes the students evaluate their mistakes more carefully and helps them avoid making the same mistake more than once. The teacher can also compile the most common mistakes among the group, talk about them, and produce a handout with suggestions for overcoming such problems.

Listening and speaking can be done in groups where the students can be asked to speak extempore on an argumentative topic with respect to the short stories they have read. Grammatical errors in the flow of language could be ignored the first time. Once the students overcome the fear of speaking in English, the grammatical errors could be pointed out and corrections could be made. This sort of collaborative work lowers the students' anxiety levels and lets them express themselves more freely, for the frightening presence of the professor is out of the scene. It also pushes the students into talking, breaking the myth that they never have the opportunity to speak in class or that they are going to finish the course without learning how to speak. The teachers' task is to visit the groups and make corrections and suggestions as he/she sees it.

Teaching Language through Poems

Poems are mostly neglected as a tool for teaching language. But numerous activities can be done with poems. Any activity with reference to a poem can be done within a short span. It can be completed in one hour. Assignments on any cultural, social and historical information can help students make sense of the poem, closed test could be conducted, ordering jumbled stanzas, predicting what's coming next after reading only one verse at a time, improving on a given paraphrase (replacing, adding, or omitting words, images, etc.), rewriting one part of a poem in one's own words and ideas to offer different messages, discussing vocabularies, syntactic features, rhetorical devices, writing a group-poem or an individual poem and

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exchanging it for a comment, discussing the theme of a poem and writing out personal experiences related to the theme, doing a creative role-play based on the theme, story, and subject of the poem. For example, the poem “**O What is that Sound**” by **W. H. Auden** follows the question and answer pattern. It contrasts the brutal male world of the warriors to the human cry of a female lover.

Let us look into the last four stanzas of the poem:

O is it the parson they want, with white hair,

Is it the parson, is it, is it?

No, they are passing his gateway, dear,

Without a visit.

O it must be the farmer who lives so near

It must be the farmer so cunning, so cunning?

They have passed the farmyard already, dear,

And now they are running.

O where are you going? Stay with me here!

Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving?

No, I promised to love you, dear,

But I must be leaving.

O it's broken the lock and splintered the door ,

O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;

Their boots are heavy on the floor

And their eyes are burning.

From this simple poem their thoughts on the cause and effect of war can be kindled. The students could be asked to discuss about the Human Rights Commission. Rhyming words, rhythm, phonetics and so on, could be discussed. After the lyrics are fully understood, the student can be asked to write a poem, four verses, or a paragraph revealing their perception of the original lyrics. It is guaranteed that interpretations of all sorts will be evoked. To make this activity more effective, the students need to be instructed to freely write down whatever crosses their minds concerning the lyrics. It is their opportunity to correct grammar. At this stage, inspiration is engaged in eliciting English grammar patterns. To improve the reading and writing activities, the students can exchange poems or paragraphs and read them out loud to the rest of the class.

Teaching/learning English through English poetry can be an excellent addition to this shifting. The relevance of English poetry as a component of the humanistic and language teaching process has to be incorporated. English poetry can act as a powerful stimulus to the student's own reflective thinking and emotions, which will elicit more expressions of opinions, reactions, and feelings for more mature and fruitful group discussions. English poems touch upon non-trivial areas of human experience and heighten the students' awareness of even the apparently trivial. Hence, they elicit a strong subjective investment in poem-centered activities, which, combined with group interactions, is a powerful motivational factor in language learning.

When we read a poem, we bring personal associations to it, bringing our own interpretations to it. Doing a paraphrase of a poem would help us understand how different/similar we are in our perceptions of the meaning of the poem. Although the paraphrase can't tell all that the poem contains, it will help us understand how language choices are made in relation to meaning and how a particular style has a particular effect on the meaning in a particular context of the poem. The poems chosen should be simple, easy and should have familiar words, should be short; common themes should be used, and poems that are emotional and intellectual; they should enrich the meaning of life, as well as appeal to the senses. Poetry has numerous uses and benefits in the English language-learning classroom. Besides adding to the range and variety of uses of English, poetry provides cultural insights and forms a basis of

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discussion. Poems are often thought-provoking and help teachers to break away from routine exercises; they are often humorous and add a motivational buzz to classroom activity. Poetry also provides good practice in developing correct pronunciation and intonation. Rhythms and rhyming patterns not only develop technical language skills; they add fun and vigour to the process. The teacher of modern English usage has to be selective, otherwise there is the danger that students will focus on archaic or literary forms that are not relevant for typical modern English in general or business contexts.

Conclusion

Since the objective of English teaching is to help students to communicate fluently in the target language, teachers should provide an authentic model of language use. Since short stories focus on linguistics, cultural and literary elements, they are highly beneficial to students when used in English teaching programs. However, the selection of short stories should be done in reference to the course objective, the learners' profile, and the story content in order to make the best of it. Since every teaching situation is unique, the use of one single piece of literature varies from classroom to classroom and from teacher to teacher. This paper shows, short stories can be used to provide different activities for reading, listening, writing and speaking classes. Short story creates a meaningful context to teach different language focuses and to improve the students' interpretative strategies. Last but not least, the same story may also serve for some other language focuses or skills such as vocabulary development.

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