

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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Fiction in the Indian Engineering Language Classroom

Anita Manuel, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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Language Through Literature

The phrase ‘language through literature’ is reductive in many ways, for the primary focus of literature is content; language is only studied to see how it is used to serve the content. However, in the engineering context, the primary focus must be given to language and not to content. Secondly, to teach literature requires specialized knowledge of the text, author, genre and period which may be outside the ken of most language teachers. So at the outset it should be clear that the purpose and methodology of teaching literature within the engineering curriculum will be very different from the regular literature class. Having said that, the question then arises why have ‘creative’ texts at all. In the contemporary scenario of the global village where English language is merely a tool for the workplace, the emphasis is on ‘functional’ English.

Is Teaching of Literature Unproductive and Irrelevant?

Teaching of literature is considered unproductive and irrelevant. When the charge was levelled as to what relevance Chaucer and Spenser had to an Indian girl or boy, the teachers of literature were flummoxed. When the charge was leveled that they were teaching Shakespeare to students without the linguistic skills and critical ability to engage with the text, the teachers of literature

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threw up their hands in defeat. When it was pointed out that answer papers of the students showed no originality of thought but merely some mugged up paragraphs from “guides” that flooded the market, the teachers of literature nodded in weary submission. Literature came to be viewed as inadequate and erroneous preparation for any kind of professional course. So the solution proposed and accepted was to throw out literature/creative texts (poetry, fiction and drama) from the curriculum. The framers of our curriculum, as the cliché goes, threw the baby out with the bath water.

The New Buzz Words

The new buzz words, to name two, are Communicative English and Computer Aided Learning. It was decided that students only need to learn the grammatical lexicon and master the basic language required to function at the workplace competently and for this an engineering student needs to be proficient only in the technical register. Clearly, every register has its own structure but technical register cannot be mastered without proficiency in general English.

Equally important is the fact that an engineering student requires more than competency in just the technical register to function successfully in the workplace. He needs to assess, discuss, defend, disagree, ask questions, seek clarifications, negotiate and explain, all of which requires more than ‘technical’ English. The role of language in any person’s life is far deeper than a mere matter of technical communication. Learning language as a communicative tool has edged out learning through individual engagements with texts, learning through activities has replaced learning through interpretation and critical thinking. As Widdowson points out, the goal has become the achievement of limited proficiency in defined domains. But the cost of such a focus is high.

The Status of the Standard of English in India

Every year I have more and more students sitting in my class unable to write a single coherent paragraph. Twelve years of English medium schooling and they cannot write grammatically accurate sentences.

The standard of English in India is going down, not up. The reasons are twofold. First, by making English a commodity which needs to be acquired for successful employment, it has become necessary to ram the language down the throats of more and more youngsters. Secondly, it is often thought an engineering student needs to be proficient only in the technical register. Clearly, every register has its own structure but technical register cannot be mastered without proficiency in general English.

Required Competency in English

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Another equally important fact is that an engineering student requires more than competency in just the technical register to function successfully in the workplace. He needs to assess, discuss, defend, disagree, ask questions, seek clarifications, negotiate and explain, all of which requires more than 'technical' English.

The role of language in any person's life is far deeper than a mere matter of technical communication. Descartes' famous axiom 'I think and therefore I am' takes on an added resonance when we realize that we cannot think without language. Philosophers have often been linguists and vice versa for they held that the structure of language reflected the nature of reality.

This is why the new phenomena of students lacking communication skills in any language, English or vernacular, is so serious, but an investigation on those lines is beyond the scope of this paper. For the present, it is enough to state that an engineer does not exist in a technical vacuum and that the steadily deteriorating linguistic intelligence of the engineering graduates calls for a serious reevaluation of the current curriculum.

Is a Rich Vocabulary Important in Our Context of Education?

But my question is whether all that we want to impart to our students is an ability to communicate at a basic level, to write 'grammatically accurate sentences'? In such a scenario is a rich vocabulary important? Is there a place for originality of thought or style? Should an ability to think critically or creatively be nurtured? If there was a method by which grammar, style and critical thinking could be imparted or imbibed, should not such a methodology be embraced?

For many years now, there has been a shift from the traditional way of teaching grammar. A formal grammar analysis with explicit grammar instruction has been discarded by experts in favour of a more cognitive mode. In this context, exposure to literature can provide an alternative way to the conventional method of explicit focus on discrete structures. Since the use of literature does not fall completely into the structural approach or the situational approach, we may need to call it the 'critical approach'. Engagement with a literary text can also lead to a more intuitive understanding of sentence patterns; the underlying structure of the English language can be internalized.

Teaching Language through Literature

Recently there have been moves to introduce the teaching of language through literature. I have listened to a few interesting papers from stalwarts in the field. But I have serious reservations. For instance, in one paper "Grammar through poetry", V Prakasam says "The best way to discuss a (grammatical) phenomena is to show the difference between its presence and its

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absence and also the difference between its presence and the presence of another category.” To illustrate this he presents the literary uses of the verb “be”:

1. Infinitive – To be or not to be that’s the question (Hamlet)
2. Tense difference – Was is not is madam (As You Like It)
3. Infinitive without ‘to’ – And East and West the wander thirst that will not let me be (Wander-Thirst by Gerald Gould)
4. In progressive forms – The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold
(The Destruction of Sennacheib by Byron)

Is It Necessary to Make Language Instruction More Complex? Literature versus Language in Language Classroom

The above demonstration is fascinating but I see no place in my classroom for such a demonstration of the use of “be” and furthermore I would have to engage with four different complex texts to make the usage clear.

Literature cannot be reduced to language as many proponents have been stating but language is a component and a component that has been wielded by the writer with great exactitude like the scalpel of a surgeon. Every word has been chosen with thought and care. Just like the surgeon dissects the human body with his scalpel, the writer uses language to cut open humanity and lay it before us in all its nakedness, rawness and bloodiness.

Literature defines our humanity; as long as we lay claim to being human, literature cannot become irrelevant. By engaging actively and critically with a creative text, the student’s ability to effectively use a language grows exponentially. My contention is simply that discussing a literary text in the classroom can be a hugely rewarding experience for both the teacher and the student. It encourages a student to think critically and from the industry point of view, improves a student’s communication and analytical skills.

Factors that Shape Linguistic Competency

There are various factors that shape the linguistic competency of an individual. I would like to begin with two case studies.

Case Study One: X knows three languages with varying degrees of competency.

She speaks Malayalam, her mother tongue fluently but only as a social register. She cannot read or write that language, her vocabulary in spite of her fluency is limited which affects her ability to express complex abstract ideas in that language. She has never formally ‘learnt’ that language.

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She learnt Hindi for eight years at school. She knows the script, and hence can read and write Hindi but her vocabulary is limited, verbal fluency nonexistent and the question of expressing complex abstract ideas does not even arise.

On the other hand, her linguistic competency is very high in English; she possesses verbal and written fluency with a vast vocabulary. It is the language in which she thinks.

Case Study Two: Here are two specimens of writing.

“On the contrary of whole, bar graph the year 1994 had been the most sale whereas in the year 2001 had been the least sale gone. In the comparing preceeding year, the year 2002 is similar to the year 1998.”

“The usage of vehicles is increased. There are different types of vehicles is still introducing by their companies.”

As you can see, the writers are ignorant of basic sentence structure. There is confusion regarding tenses, voices and concord. The authors of these lines are two students belong to a first year Engineering batch. They have studied in an English medium school and passed with a first class.. The first student has scored 64% in the Twelfth Board Exams, while the second student scored 82%.

Can We Blame the Indian Language Medium?

Out of a class of fifty-six students, twenty-four write in a similar chaotic manner. Only three of them are Tamil medium students. The remaining twenty have not only learnt the language for twelve years, they have studied subjects ranging from history to biology in English.

An equally serious issue and one which has grave repercussions is that they are inarticulate in Tamil as well. A few of these students were asked to write an essay on freedom. The resulting essay was substandard by any criteria. The students are not able to express complex, abstract ideas with any degree of felicity in Tamil though it is their mother tongue. It is not a coincidence that these students are not conversant with Tamil literature.

Two Hypotheses of This Paper

The first hypothesis of this paper is that there is a direct relation between the two, i.e. familiarity with the literature of a language has a direct and substantial impact on the level of linguistic competency. The second group of students are completely ignorant of the vast body of creative writing in English that has emerged in the Indian subcontinent, whereas the protagonist of the first case study is “immersed” in English language and literature. She reads both popular fiction

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and the more literary creative texts. On the other hand she has no knowledge of vernacular literature whether it is Malayalam, her mother tongue or Hindi, which she learnt in school for eight years. In both case studies, communication in the vernacular language (Malayalm in the first case study, Tamil in the second study) at the level of social register is taking place without a hitch, even though the first protagonist does not know the script and cannot read or write that language. But to rise from the level of basic competency, exposure to literature is significant.

Study of literature exposes the students to great writing by brilliant minds. Literature cannot be reduced to language as many proponents have been stating but language is a component and a component that has been wielded by the writer with great exactitude like the scalpel of a surgeon. Every word has been chosen with thought and care. By engaging actively and critically with a creative text, the student's ability to effectively use a language grows exponentially. Most colleges boast of 100% pass percentage in English, yet at the time of placement, the industry bemoans the lack of communication skills of the applicants. Something is certainly rotten in the State of Denmark!

Survey

The following section of the paper presents data was collected through a pilot survey. A questionnaire with twenty-two questions was given to 100 first year engineering students belonging to Aeronautical and Electronic and Communications Department. The aim of the questions was to ascertain the views of the students regarding language and literature.

Questionnaire

1. Do you think English language paper is important in the Engineering curriculum?
Yes No
2. Do you think English literature should be introduced into the curriculum?
Yes No
3. Which of the LSRW skills is more important to an Engineering student?
Listening Speaking Reading Writing
4. Are you satisfied with the current syllabus of the English language paper?
Yes No
5. Has the knowledge of grammar rules helped you to speak better?

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Yes No

6. Has the knowledge of grammar rules helped you to write better?
Yes No
7. Do you speak English outside the classroom?
Yes No
8. Do you think an English language paper should be included in the second year as well?
Yes No
9. Do you read the newspaper?
Yes No
10. Do you think English literature is difficult, boring, irrelevant, or interesting?
Difficult Boring Irrelevant Interesting
11. Did you enjoy learning English prose and poetry in school?
Yes No
12. Do you read fiction (novels/short stories)?
Yes No
13. Do you think literary texts (poems/flash fiction) should be included in the syllabus?
Yes No
14. When you think of English literature, which three names come to your mind?
15. Have you read any books by Indian authors? (if yes, please specify)
16. Do you think it will be interesting to compare *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat with the movie *Three Idiots* in the classroom?
Yes No Don't Know

(Please read the attached text before answering the remaining questions)

17. What is your opinion about war?

18. If you were the soldier how would you have reacted?

19. Do you think the officer would have helped the soldier to die?

Yes No

20. Do you think the officer should have helped the soldier to die?

Yes No

21. Would you like to discuss more such stories in the classroom?

Yes No

22. Do you think the attached text is difficult, boring, irrelevant or interesting?

Difficult Boring Irrelevant Interesting

Findings

1. The most significant fact that emerged was 62% favoured the introduction of literature into the curriculum based no doubt on their experience of learning general English in school, for an even greater majority of 82% said they enjoyed learning prose and poetry. The main objection then would be why in spite of learning “literature” in school their command of the language is so poor. The main problem with the use of literature in the classroom is that teachers often encourage learning by rote, going by received criticism instead of focusing on independent thinking. The greatness of literature lies in the fact that it gives rise to multiple readings/ interpretations. It is the explanations and discussions of various and possibly opposing students’ responses to the text that enlivens the classroom. The texts must also be chosen with a great deal of care. They must not be completely beyond the comprehensible level of the students. Classics are not the answer.

To make literary texts relevant, it is necessary to focus on contemporary pieces of writing; an emphasis on Indian writing in English will give us creative works that are relevant to the social and cultural milieu of the students. At the same time it is necessary to choose texts written in Standard English for while the local patois often strengthens a creative text, we must not lose sight of the fact that our target audience is made up of engineering students.

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2. The response to whether an English language paper should be included in the second year was almost equally divided with a small majority of 56% favouring the move, while 44% said they did not want it.
3. The unsurprising news is that 60% of the students do not speak English outside the classroom and 84% of the students felt that spoken English is what the Engineering student requires. This belief that only spoken English is important is a myth which is spread by the plethora of “communication skill” trainers that flood the ‘market place’ today. It is up to the language teacher to emphasise that both spoken and written skills are necessary and how interconnected these skills are with listening and reading skills. The impression created is that students already possess the necessary writing skills and only verbal skills need to be imparted.

The two specimens of writing at the beginning of this paper clearly demonstrate the complete lack of writing skills. The sad fact is that a large number of students can neither speak nor write with accuracy or fluency. There are also students who can speak English well but who cannot write cohesively and succinctly and vice versa.

4. To the question whether they read fiction, 52% of the students said they did not but 48% said they did. Though at first sight this was encouraging, every student who answered in the affirmative to the question whether they have read any books by Indian authors, mentioned only Chetan Bhagat.

One lacuna in the questionnaire emerged at this point. Only 18% of the respondents had read books by Indian authors (Chetan Bhagat!) though 48% had said they read fiction. If the questionnaire had asked them to specify the last three books they had read, it would have clarified the ground reality. I had anticipated Chetan Bhagat’s popularity which is why the next question asked if they would be interested in comparing the book with the movie. 64% of the respondents said yes while 12% could not answer the question possibly due to their unfamiliarity with the book or the movie. Popular cinema is in fact another genre that has not been utilized in our classrooms.

5. The ‘creative’ text, the respondents were asked to read, was a flash fiction titled “Choosing Life”. The author’s name was deliberately omitted. The story is about a soldier who loses both his legs in the Indo-Pak war and begs to be allowed to die. His attending doctor cum senior officer tells him that he would do so, if the soldier is of the same mind after two days. The story gained unexpected relevance due to the recent debates on legalizing “euthanasia” and “assisted death”. 72% of the respondents found the story interesting and an even greater majority of 80% wanted to discuss similar stories in the classroom. 6% of the students found the story difficult but answered in the

affirmative to the question whether they would like to discuss it. Another 2% of the 14% who found the story boring, still wanted to discuss similar stories in the classroom.

Classroom Discussion of Literary Texts

Discussing a literary/creative text in the classroom can be a hugely rewarding experience for both the teacher and the student. In my classroom, the text generated group discussion on Indo-Pak relations, war, despair, heroism, ethics, and an animated debate on euthanasia. We discussed words that the students did not know, such as ‘protocol’, ‘modicum’ and ‘gist’. We also discussed the usage of past tense and past perfect tense in the text, question patterns (esp. the use of do, does and did), the various meanings of the verbal phrase ‘come around’, and the idiom ‘to walk in someone else’s shoes’. My students also did not know where Baramulla and Jaisalmer were located.

A Springboard

As can be seen, a piece of literature may be used as a springboard for better understanding of sentence patterns, multiple meanings, phrasal verbs, idioms, and also as a springboard for presentations, group discussions, role play and debates. Literature nurtures the ability to think critically and creatively, abilities essential to succeed in the world outside the classroom. Used correctly, a ‘creative’ text not only encourages a student to think critically but may also be used as a springboard for enhancing vocabulary, developing a better understanding of sentence patterns, phrasal verbs, and idioms, or as a base for presentations, group discussions, role play and debates. The rot is very deep. Serious overhauling of not only the syllabus but also the teaching and assessment methodology is urgently required. This paper is not advocating the replacement of one method with another. One should not do away with the teaching of rules, for it is useful to know a rule when one is in doubt. It is rather a question of using different models of teaching/learning as supplements to each other.

Choose Texts Carefully – Some Practical Suggestions

However the texts need to be chosen with a great deal of care. When students are asked to write the names of those associated with literature, the first name that comes to their mind is Shakespeare. Such is the ascendancy of the bard, though his language makes the text difficult to access; students find his plays boring or they read a dumbed down prose version of the play rather than the original. One of the greatest disservices we have done is to remain focused on the great classics.

To make literary texts relevant, it is necessary to refocus on contemporary pieces of writing whether they are poems, short stories or novels. In fact, the one genre that lends itself easily to

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classroom teaching is flash fiction due to its short length. The more contemporary, the less chance of the availability of a ‘guide’; hence, the student’s response to the text will be given primacy, and not some form of ‘literary’ criticism.

An emphasis on Indian writing in English will give us literary works that are relevant to the social and cultural milieu of the students. Such culturally accessible texts will not only have a positive impact on the knowledge and attitudes of the students but also, as Kachru points out, give them a new sense of ownership of the language. Even regarding pronunciation he states the criteria need no longer be intelligibility to the educated native speaker of English. Such feeling of ownership is essential to remove the psychological barriers which so often are the biggest impediment in the process of language acquisition.

However, fiction from other lands has its own value. The engineering graduate is often than not end up in a multinational company. It is vital that he is able to appreciate and understand other cultures. What better way than fiction from other lands!

Let us not say that a packhorse is sufficient for our students; let us give them a chance to delight in the speed, power and beauty of a wild stallion.

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Appendix I

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Result (the serial number corresponds to the question number)

1. Yes – 86%, No- 14%
2. Yes – 62%, No- 28%
3. S– 84%, W- 14% (One respondent said all four were important)
4. Yes – 58%, No- 42%
5. Yes – 70%, No- 30%
6. Yes – 84%, No- 16%
7. Yes –40%, No- 60%
8. Yes – 56%, No- 44%
9. Yes – 74%, No- 26%
10. D -14%, B-18%, Irr – 14%, Int – 52%
11. Yes – 82%, No- 18%
12. Yes – 48%, No- 52%
13. Yes – 46%, No- 56%
14. The first two names mentioned were invariably Shakespeare and Wordsworth. The only two contemporary authors mentioned were Dan Brown and JK Rowling.
15. Yes – 86%, No- 14%
16. Yes – 64%, No- 24%, Don't know – 12%
17. The questions 17 to 20 were asked only to make the student think. The data was not collated.

21. Yes – 80%, No- 20%
22. D - 6%, B- 14%, Irr – 8%, Int – 72%

Appendix II

CHOOSING LIFE

We were sitting at the gymkhana in Delhi, en route to Baramulla where my father had been posted, when a young, rather good-looking officer stepped up and saluting smartly offered to buy dad a drink. My father looked at him without recognition and without warmth.

“Protocol does not permit a senior officer to accept a drink from a junior. You should know that. Have we met?”

That’s my father, I thought. Talking stuffily of protocol, even at a bar.

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“We met twelve years ago sir, during the war. Do you remember the lieutenant who had both his legs blown off?”

I gaped because the man had walked firmly and easily to the table.

My father looked stunned. “I remember,” he said. “Though not your name,” he added wryly.

“Braj,” he said. He went on to talk about his artificial legs, his promotion, his marriage to a lady doctor and his current posting in Chandigarh.

“I never got a chance to thank you, sir. I am alive today because you took the time to sit with me,” he said.

My father was clearly embarrassed, but equally clearly pleased. Dad rarely talked about the war. When the Bangladeshi war happened I did not know what war meant. I was eight and though I prayed everyday asking God to protect my father and bring him home safe, I was just repeating the words that my mother had told me to. The war threw no shadow over my life.

After he left, I asked dad about the young officer.

“It was at my makeshift hospital in Jaisalmer. I was informed a wounded lieutenant was shouting, refusing to let himself be treated and pulling out the intravenous tube by which he was being given a blood transfusion. I told them to strap him down and I would come around.”

There was a long pause.

“Those were terrible days. Soldiers were being brought in, so many of them, wounded and dying. We were on our feet almost twenty-four hours, snatching sleep whenever we could, wherever we could. That day was no different; it was many hours before I reached his bed. He was screaming, and though tied down was jerking to and fro, to get the intravenous needle out. I was angry. The entire staff was dead on its feet and desperately trying to give some comfort and aid to the soldiers. And this man was cursing and shouting obscenities at them. I told him harshly that we did not expect thanks, just a modicum of cooperation. He told me to go to hell, well that’s not what he said but it was the gist of his reply.”

Dad smiled. “Even when he is in severe pain, a soldier does not curse his senior. The respect owed to an officer is ingrained into his bones. The man’s violation of that code, spoke to me more than the actual words. I knew something was terribly wrong. I sat down. In the middle of that hellhole I found that both his legs had been blown off below the knees. I could find no words of comfort. I just sat there. He quietened down and began to talk, to plead. He was a football player. He was twenty. He could never play again, no girl would marry him; he would be a

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cripple for the rest of his life, an object of pity. He asked if I had been in the shoes in which he would never walk again, would I not prefer death. He wanted me to let him die. I found words. I spoke about artificial legs. I said that to be wounded in battle was an honour, that if he took pride in his sacrifice, others would too. I blabbered on and miraculously he listened.”

Dad grimaced. “I told him to live for two days. At the end of the two days, if he was of the same mind I would help him die.”

“But Dad, that’s against the rules, against ethics,” I protested. “Would you really have done it?”

“When is war ethical? Young men were being killed. I was surrounded by death. At such a time, does life become more precious or less? Did I mean what I said to him? Luckily I was never put to the test. The next day he was evacuated by air to a large base hospital.”

I can never watch war movies because the horror, the terror, the brutality were not imagined, but real. I thought of the soldier with his two legs blown off, screaming in agony, begging to be allowed to die. I knew then, if it takes courage to go into battle, it takes even greater heroism to choose life.

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