Teaching Language Functions through Literature: A Case for B.Tech. Students

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Abstract

Teaching English at any level, where it is a second language, is found to be very challenging and such challenge aptly issues from an antithetical relation between the academic needs and the needs of the hour which is synonymous with the need of the students. The academic needs look forward to the coverage of prescribed syllabus in consonance to ensuring the development of their fluency and accuracy in English. However, the present need of students solely rest on employability which requires the proper use of language functions. The present study critically examines a case for B.Tech. students of Odisha to discuss their need of language functions along with fluency and accuracy. The study also suggests using literary texts where real language functions are used effectively to teach language functions. Literature bridges the gap in the syllabus to develop language skills of the students to head on the professional career.

Key words: Language functions, accuracy, fluency

Introduction

Literature creates a student friendly environment by presenting before students life-like situations where different characters communicate their thoughts, feelings and emotions that are similar, or at least relevant to their lives. It encompasses every human dilemma, conflict and yearning unraveling the plot of a short story or decoding the dialogue of a play and is more than a mechanical exercise. Incorporating literature, thus, in language classroom can be lively and motivating and it can provide an interactive climate which can improve the communicative competence of the learners.

Literature that was initially read and enjoyed by enthusiasts and elites has gradually paved its way to become a more dynamic resource in teaching English as a second language. Literature in language classroom can cultivate and enhance the critical thinking abilities of the students. "Literature can open horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect and explore" (Langer 1997, p.607). Literature in language class can make learning vibrant and students enthusiastic.

Need For Teaching Language Functions to B.Tech. Students

B.Tech. students need language proficiency to survive in the highly competitive and professional world for social intercourse, business transaction, making presentation in the professional field and so on. They need proficiency of the language in three areas- accuracy, fluency and language functions. The courses at school and intermediate level help them develop language proficiency in terms of accuracy and fluency. The courses do not provide them much scope to develop students' proficiency in language functions that are essential for them to go ahead in the professional career and for social interaction. Therefore, it is necessary to teach them language functions in the B.Tech. course for both social and professional purposes.

Review of Existing Syllabus

The review of the existing B.Tech. syllabus shows that it aims to develop the higher level language skills --- listening, speaking, reading and writing, grammar and business communication --- of the students and to familiarize them with the phonetic and the phonological aspects of English. It provides adequate listening and speaking practice so that the learners can speak with ease, fluency and clarity in common everyday situations and on formal occasions. Similarly, the aims of Business English course are to prepare the students to handle various written communications like reports, letters etc, to familiarize them with the techniques of managerial communication for information sharing, making presentations, and taking part in meetings, interviews, and negotiations.

Gap in the Course

Though the course promises students' proficiency in language skills and use, it lacks in exposing students to language used in real life. The gap in this course has been stated below:

- Functions are taught but without any explicit focus; this needs to be made explicit
- Students need exposure to function-language correlation, opportunities for practice and production of those functions the opportunities of these are not available in the prescribed textbook

How Literature Helps Bridging the Gap

The gap in the syllabus can be bridged by providing the students an exposure to language functions and that can be best done using literary texts that abound in language functions; those are used in natural communication contexts; interesting to read. Practice materials can be created using similar texts. Production support would be available from literary texts as well.

Since the syllabus does not have much scope to teach language functions and the textbooks do not provide sample activities having language functions that the students can read and follow in real life situations, it is difficult to teach functions to the students. However, this difficulty can be overcome by using literature in B.Tech.. classes to teach language functions.

Literature abounds sample communication in contexts. It will present before them different speech situations close and real to them and thereby will offer genuine and authentic input. Ideas, events and things expressed in literature are either experienced by learners or can be imagined; therefore they will be able to find relevance of literature based texts to their lives. Non-monotonous and wide variety of subjects placed in literature will arrest their interest and help them learn language functions. Hence, it is apt to advocate the use of literature to teach language functions to B.Tech. students.

Background of Students

B.Tech. classes in Odisha are heterogeneous classes where students come from regional and English medium educational backgrounds. The students from regional background learn language skills in the schools with the focus of accuracy and fluency. They do not learn language functions at school level due to lack of exposure to language functions during interaction at family, school and market places and the syllabus giving no attention to teach such functions. At their intermediate level they face the same situation. The students coming from English medium

schools learn language skills better with the focus of accuracy and fluency at their school and intermediate level. In addition, they learn some amount of language functions due to their exposure to the language functions in use in the textbooks. The syllabus designed for them, thus, provides little scope to learn the language functions. As the students from both the backgrounds get admitted to B.Tech. course, they even do not find there enough scope to learn the language functions. The textbooks lack activities having the language functions that would help the teaching and learning of the language functions. Hence, the B.Tech. syllabus does not help the students develop language proficiency in its totality. A new syllabus with some amount of literature focus would serve the purpose by presenting sample teaching materials on language functions.

Material Preparation

In order to teach language functions to B.Tech. students there is a need to prepare literature focused teaching materials. Sample language functions can be selected from existing literature for +2 CHSE textbooks. The principle of selection considers the students' point of view. Basically it takes into account the following aspects:

Students' Interest

- Short plays are to use in language classroom to hold the interest of the students. These are keen to give learners an experience (dry-run) of using the language for genuine communication and real-life purposes; and by generating a need to speak. To make what is learned memorable through direct experience and affect (emotions) for students with different learning styles.
 - Short plays also help students acquire language through play, make-believe and meaningful interaction, and there by arrest students' interest.
 - Make-believe plays encourage students' creativity and develops their imagination, and at the same time gives them the opportunity to use language that is outside their daily needs. These also help learners acquire language by focusing on the message they are conveying, not the form of their utterances. Important messages can be conveyed and explored.
 - Students do get social interactions which seem to them real and interesting. They even tend to identify with those characters.

Length of the Text

The length of the texts has been kept short to hold students' interest for reading and learning. Since students are not competent in English, generally they do not keep interest reading English texts. And if they confront long texts their difficulties will be many folds. Short plays will take less time; may be completed in one sitting. Thereby they will show interest to read and enjoy.

Language of the Text

The language of plays is supposed to be simpler. They embody language of social interaction which generally avoids flowery components. As students read make-believe dialogues they feel motivated. They can easily follow the language. Further the sample texts have been selected from the books they have studied in +2 courses. Therefore it will be an easy deal for them to understand the language and follow different language functions.

The selection includes short plays from three texts, namely:

- 1. Invitation to English-2 (2009)
- 2. Invitation to English-2 (New Edition, 2013)
- 3. Approaches to English-2 (2003)

Sample texts are here modeled on these textbooks. Some modifications are done to them in order to conform to the teaching of Standard English. The table given below presents different language functions, representative language chunks and sample texts:

Language Functions	Representative Language	Sample Texts
	Chunks	
Greeting	Formal-Good morning, good	JOE: Good evening. I've called
	afternoon, good evening	to see Mrs. Parker. What are
	Informal-Hello, Hi,	you two kids doing here?
	How are you?	ALEC: Hello, Joe!
	How do you feel today?	We're also here to see Mrs.
		Parker – and, by the way,
		there's no need for that word
		'kids'. You're not quite ninety-
		nine yourself yet.
		(THE UNEXPECTED)
Asking about	I want a pizza/ a car/ a room	MRS PARKER: Now. What's
something	I need a job/ a glass of water	this exciting piece of news?
	What seems to be the matter? Could	TOM: two convicts escaped
	I use that book?	from the prison this afternoon.
		(THE UNEXPECTED)
Making a request	Please do try again.	MRS PARKER: Please, Tom,
	Please come in.	do not have any fighting. Joe
	Please wake him up.	has been reading too many
	Please reply.	detective stories. I expect that's
	Please allow me to go.	the cause of the trouble.
	Please keep quiet.	TOM: Very well, Mrs Parker. I
		will be going. But mind, I warn
		you, I'm going to get to the
		bottom of this.
		(THE UNEXPECTED)

Offering a suggestion	Why do not we	FIRST LADY: Oh, I hardly
	Why do not you	know! Why not divide the dog
	We could try to	in two and give them half each.
	I'd like to suggest	KING: A splendid idea. Do you
	I think you should/ought to	men agree to that?
		(THE KING WHO LIMPED)
Expressing agreement	I agree with you.	
	Yes	King: a splendid idea. Do you
	Yeah sure.	men agree to that?
	You're right.	FIRST NEIGHBOUR: If your
	Of course, that's a good idea.	majesty thinks fit.
		(THE KING WHO LIMPED)
Expressing	No, I can't agree with you.	KING: (to Second Neighbor)
disagreement	No.	and you my man?
	You're wrong.	SECOND MAN: No, no! I do
	That's not a good idea.	not agree to that! Let him keep
	No, that's not true.	the dog your majesty! It is a
		good little dog. I can't bear to
		see it harmed! Let him have the
		dog. (THE KING WHO LIMPED)
Accepting an	I'II be glad to do so.	REPORTER: Dr. McConnell,
invitation	Thanks for your invitation to	why do not you come with me
	dinner.	to check Houdini?
	Thanks for inviting us to dinner.	DR. MCCONNELL: Yes, let's
	We will try to come in time.	go.
	Thank you for your kind	(THE ONE AND ONLY
	remembrance/invitation.	HOUDINI)

Declining an invitation	I won't be able to come.	
	I won't be able to do as you desire.	JACK: I will drive you to the
	I regret, I can't accept this	station.
	invitation.	AUNT JANE: what! Travel in
	I'm sorry; I can't accept your	a car that has only one tyre and
	invitation to dinner.	two thingummies! No thank
	I'm afraid; I won't be able to come.	you—I will take the bus. (THE
		NEVER NEVER NEST)
Giving a command or	Go slowly/ away/ ahead/ up/ down	KING: Go and fetch your
an order	Go yourself.	brother.
	Wait here.	SECOND NEIGHBOUR: I'm
	Come here	afraid that is impossible, your
		majesty. My brother is dead.
		(THE KING WHO LIMPED)
Reprimanding	skin alive, cast in [someone's]	
someone	teeth,	KING: (to the First Neighbor):
	chew out, curtain lectures, dressing	You said you had never told an
	down, get the stick	untruth in your life. It seems to
		me you have never done much
		else.
		(To HERALDS) take him off to
		the prison!
		(THE KING WHO LIMPED)

Here, in the above table, language chunks and sample text have been presented against each language function. Students while learning language functions will notice how language functions happen in literary texts. They will understand the language functions in different contexts. They are also presented with language chunks that can be used by the students in their communication. After discussing language functions and language chunks with students the teacher will give some practice activities.

Activity Preparation

This study designs two practice activities and one independent activity on language functions to be executed in B.Tech. class. The objective of these activities is to check students' understanding of language functions and their usage. These activities are presented below:

Activity 1

Read the conversations below. There is a language function presented in the underlined utterances. Select one from the options given below that states the language function.

1. Daughter: Papa have you got the teddy I asked for?

Father: Yes dear! Go and search for it in your room.

- a. To make a request
- b. To ask about something
- c. To express agreement
- d. To order

2. Zoya: It's a beautiful evening, isn't it?

Panchu: Yes it is.

- a. To agree
- b. To disagree
- c. To suggest
- d. To reprimand
- 3. Babu: The presentation was indeed very informative.

Reema: I do not think so dear. It was just entertaining but not informative.

- a. To reprimand
- b. To disagree
- c. To agree
- d. To ask about something
- 4. Gudiya: Can we go for shopping this evening?

Mampu: Sure! I will be glad to join you.

- a. To disagree
- b. To offer a suggestion
- c. To agree
- d. To accept invitation

Activity 2

Choose the appropriate expressions from the table below the function of which is given in the bracket and fill the blanks to get a complete conversation.

Did you take it last evening? Do not take it anymore Good morning You must take them regularly in time I will be glad to join

Narayan: Good morning, Doctor.

Dr. Mukherjee:

What happened, you are so early today?

Do you think the shops will open before 6 o' clock in the morning? (Greeting)

Narayan: Forgive me, doctor. I haven't come to market. I have come to you. I had a very poor

sleep last night. There was a severe pain in my chest.

Dr. Mukherjee: Is it still aching?

Narayan: No, not now. It stopped just an hour ago.

Dr. Mukherjee: Narayan! There will be no pain if you stop taking alcohol.

Narayan: Yes a little with Shailesh.

Dr. Mukherjee:

It may kill you one day. (Offering suggestion)

Narayan: Yes I understand doctor... but....

Dr. Mukherjee: Look, I know it's a bit difficult for you, but you must try. At least for the sake of your family. Narayan: Ok doctor.

Dr. Mukherjee: Bye.

Independent Activity

Imagine that you have just come from an interview where you didn't perform well. As you came to your hostel your friends surrounded you and inquired about your performance. Write a conversation between you and your friends using all the language functions given in the bracket.

(Greeting, Asking about something, Reprimanding, Making a request and Offering suggestion).

Teaching Methodology

In order to use these activities the teacher has to adopt teaching methodology. Two lesson plans may be prepared at this end to show the shift from skill to function. The first lesson plan needs to deal with language skill focusing both fluency and accuracy and the second one to emphasize teaching language functions. These lesson plans may be used in the language classes to help the teacher how to carry on the class effectively. The teacher may use these for his own sake, for a systematic and effective teaching. However, the teacher's comfortability, needs of the class, mode of discussion between the teacher and students decide to what extent these are to be followed.

Arguments against the Use of Literature (Sell,2005)

It is sometimes difficult for teachers of literature to justify their professional existence, a difficulty that contributes in part to what literary scholar Elaine Showalter (2002: 1-20) calls "the anxiety of teaching." It is therefore understandable that foreign and second language teachers may sometimes find it even more difficult to justify the inclusion of literature in their lesson plans for some reasons. These are given below:

- As far as teaching English as a second language is concerned, for example, not only are
 professionals occasionally afflicted by guilty feelings that they are lackeys in the pay of
 linguistic imperialism, but if they start introducing their students to Shakespeare, Dickens or
 Ted Hughes they are condemned for cultural imperialism too (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986), not
 to mention a bigoted reverence for mostly dead white males.
- English Language teaching should engage students with "real life" and "real-life" situations; literature—conceived of as some sort of aesthetic artifact—is not "real life", at times not even realistic, and barely relevant to day-to-day living. Similarly, literature is often remote from learners, whether historically, geographically, socially, culturally or linguistically.
- The teaching should favour speaking and listening skills, whereas literature is a matter of reading- writing, or writing to be read.
- The use of literature in B.Tech. classes cause difficulty to students who are not competent literally and linguistically thereby hampers students learning.
- Teaching language functions through literature requires comparatively more time as the teacher has to discuss the context and then leads students to language functions.

Weaknesses in the Above Arguments

- Literature shouldn't be charged for the cultural and linguistic imperialism. Language comes in literature and cultures are implicit in it.
- Literature is not remote for the students. It presents them with real life situations. It is also found that literature presents situations that are more real than real life situations.

- In our context speaking and listening can't be done without doing reading. Reading is a solid ground that leads to listening and speaking.
- There is, in my research, no possibility of literal and linguistic incompetency for the students as the materials are prepared from the texts they have already studied. Here the focus is on language functions not skills.

Literature, it seems, is here to stay, for the time being at least, and particularly in the B.Tech. classroom where the global spread of bilingual and immersion education means that students are expected to be proficient at English communication skills, is difficult to follow. However there is a strong case for using literature to teach language functions to B.Tech. students.

Arguments for Using Literature (Sell,2005)

A welter of reasons for or benefits of teaching literature in the B.Tech. classes have been proffered by a variety of authors. For example, Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000: 9-11) list, with more or less approval, the following ten:

- Cultural enrichment. Reading literature promotes cultural understanding and awareness.
 (Collie and Slater 1987; Schewe 1998; Sell (ed.) 1995; Silberstein 1994).
- Linguistic model. Literature provides examples of "good" writing, linguistic diversity, expressive ranges, and so on.
- Mental training. Better than any other discipline, literature trains the mind and sensibility.
- Extension of linguistic competence. Literature stretches the competences of learners who have mastered the linguistic rudiments.
- Authenticity. Literature is genuine linguistic material, not a linguistically contrived textbook (Duff and Maley 1990).
- Motivating material. Literature is more likely to engage with and motivate a learner than artificial teaching inputs because it is generated by some genuine impulse on the part of the writer and deals with subjects and themes which may be of interest to the learner (Duff and Maley 1990).

 Open to interpretation. Because literature is open to interpretation, it can serve as a basis for "genuine interaction" between learners (Duff and Maley 1990).

The above statements by different authors for the use of literature in language classes establish the benefits in using literature in the B.Tech. classes to teach language functions. Apart from offering a distinct literary world which can widen students' understanding of their own and other cultures, it can create opportunities for personal expression as well as reinforce students' knowledge of lexical and grammatical structure. An integrated approach to the use of literature in the B.Tech. classroom offers students the opportunity to develop not only their linguistic and communicative skills but their knowledge about language in all its discourse types. Literature presents them with language functions used in real life situation and thereby interests students to follow and use. Literary texts are representational rather than referential. Referential language communicates at only one level and tends to be informational. The representational language of literary texts involves the learners and engages their emotions, as well as their cognitive faculties. However, despite of much debate and discussion literature reign supreme for its implication to teach language skills and functions.

Challenges Faced in Using Literature in the B.Tech. Classroom

Using literature in B.Tech. classes to teach language functions no doubt brings positive results. At the same time literary texts can present teachers and students with a number of difficulties including:

- Text selection texts need to be chosen that have relevance and interest to learners.
- Linguistic difficulty texts need to be appropriate to the level of the students' comprehension.
- Length shorter texts may be easier to use within the class time available, but longer texts provide more contextual details, and development of character and plot.
- Cultural difficulty texts should not be so culturally dense that outsiders feel excluded from understanding essential meaning.
- Cultural appropriacy learners should not be offended by textual content.

Solutions to These Challenges

This research has overcome the above challenges by

- Selecting sample language functions texts from short plays prescribed for +2 CHSE students. These texts are relevant and interesting for them. These are used not to teach language skills but language functions.
- Since the students have already studied these texts in their previous class, these are not difficult to understand. They do not face the language problem.
- The length of the texts is kept short by selecting sample materials from short plays to arrest the interest of the students.

Recommendations

The study found that the development of English proficiency of the students is an urgent need. This is because English language is an essential requirement for engineering students in the academic domain and the workplace. English proficiency refers to three aspects of the language-accuracy, fluency and language functions. The present syllabus helps developing students' accuracy and fluency, the least attention is given to language functions. Hence, English language courses taken by B.Tech. students do not enable them to use English effectively. Thus the students do need assistance based on their needs and wants. Similarly, Rayan (2007) stated that the involvement of ESP learners in designing their own courses will enhance their interest and motivation, foster critical thinking skills, make them take part in various language activities enthusiastically, and result in effective learning. He also emphasized that such a step would make the teaching- learning process enjoyable and pave the way for achieving course objectives. These claims point out a necessity to design a new syllabus to meet the students' needs. So the Englineering students.

• A new literature syllabus with some amount of focus of literature should be prepared to teach language functions that should include tasks that reinforce the achievement of generic skills/life skills like leadership skills, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities along with effective communication skills.

- The perceived needs should be translated into pedagogic terms. In other words, when designing the English language course, ESP teachers should take into consideration learners' needs by focusing on all the language skills, with greater emphasis on speaking and listening and thereby producing literature focused materials showing language functions.
- A low-intermediate literature course may be added to the syllabus that would be more appropriate and meet the level of proficiency of the students. As Shuib (2008) said, "students must receive comprehensible input in English; input which they can understand" (p.168). The literature course should meet the interest level of the students.
- The duration of the syllabus should be increased so that English becomes an essential course at the B.Tech.
- The teachers should motivate and encourage students to read literature to get to know how language functions are used in different contexts.

Conclusion

To sum up, the current study explores B.Tech. students' English language needs and how the use of literature helps in meeting their needs. Literature is rooted in a language and language gets life through literature. So, Literature and Language are closely interconnected. According to Lazar (1993), "Literature should be used with students because it is motivating stimulus for language acquisition, students enjoy it, and it is a fun, it is found in many syllabuses and the like." According to Carter and Long (1991), "Literature is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching."

It is hoped that the use of literature will bring positive results in exposing the students to language functions in simulated real life situations in literary contexts. It is also hoped that recommendations of this study would serve as guidelines to what should be done in the review and re-development of the ESP curriculum offered to the B.Tech. students.

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