

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

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Abstract

It is necessary to understand the importance of teaching English language through literature in order to make language learning an enriching experience for students. English language Teaching (ELT) gained prominence in the last three decades. The mushrooming of technical institutes all over the country has led to the popularity of technical English in our country. The paper tries to analyse how literature can be used effectively for teaching technical English in engineering colleges. The paper also tries to find out whether learning English Language is feasible through the use of Literature.

Introduction

Literature is the mirror of society. Literature from time immemorial has appealed to students of all ages. Literature gives permanent happiness to anyone who reads with diligence and passion. John McRae (1994) makes an earnest attempt to differentiate between classical literature and pulp fiction by using 'L' and 'l' respectively.

Colonization almost came to an end in the late 1940s and 1950s. Once colonization came to an end, Literature of different countries gained prominence. Apart from traditional literature of the U.K. and the U.S.A, literature from other parts of the world captured the imagination of readers. In the earlier times, people were really skeptical to think beyond Shakespeare and Milton. Twenty first century reflects the changing mindset of people all over the world.

The rise of ELT led to the gradual sidelining of Literature, as focus shifted to functional use of language. The revival of literature is inevitable as students find it hard to decipher the nuances of

language in the ELT classroom. Various genres of literature like short stories, poems, novels, plays etc can be used effectively in the ELT classroom to make learning a joyful experience for students.

Nowadays, one finds the classroom atmosphere really out of sync with the ground reality. Students are crammed inside their classroom from early morning till dusk with emphasis solely on rote learning. Due to immense pressure from higher authorities and peer groups there is a mad rush to complete the syllabus in time, which enables the students to revise and perform well in the examinations. Though this method is highly productive in giving good results, the problem is students are not able to retain anything substantial once the exams get over.

Literature can be taught to students through audio-texts, music CDs, film clips etc which will help the students to understand the beauty of language without much difficulty. ELT experts lay emphasis on four skills- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Through Literature, students can be taught all the four skills by paying attention to sentence structures and new vocabulary.

Literature starts in delight but ends in wisdom. In other words, literature not only instructs but also delights. Literature helps students appreciate diverse cultures apart from their own cultures. Certain emotions like anger, greed, love, jealousy etc are universal. Once the students have absolute control over their emotions, it will help them in their professional lives also. In short, one can say that literature serves a dual purpose. It informs and delights at the same time.

McRae (1994) is of the opinion that literary texts are representational rather than referential. Referential language is very informational and as a result, less appealing. On the other hand, representational language appeals to one's emotions and as a result extremely interesting. Referential language appeals to the imagination of students and makes them empathetic towards the society as a whole.

Rote learning can be replaced by participative learning. Students can be encouraged to participate in skits, one act plays, presentations, etc once they have a good command over the prescribed literary texts.

Literary texts may be selected based on interest and relevance to students. The level of students should be checked thoroughly before prescribing any literary texts. It is suggested that the texts be slightly shorter so that the students make optimum use of them before the stipulated time. Meticulous planning is necessary to ensure that the learners get literary texts that are culturally appropriate.

Duff and Maley (2007) raise a wide variety of questions to analyze the congruity of suggesting certain literary texts for students. Some of the questions are:-

1. Is the material really interesting for the learners?
2. Is the literary style comprehensible/
3. Is it possible to complete the text within the schedule?

Duff and Maley (2007) also propose easy tasks to stimulate the interest of students. One should proceed gradually from easy tasks to difficult tasks. Teachers can completely exploit the material by conducting brainstorming sessions, pre-reading tasks etc for the benefit of students.

Pulverness (2003) offers valuable advice for teachers to make learning English language a joyful journey. In order to draw the attention of students, teachers are expected to pay a lot of attention to pre-reading tasks, icebreakers etc. Students can be encouraged to modify the texts, change the ending etc using their creativity, ingenuity etc.

Over the years, teaching language to students has undergone a sea change. Nowadays language is taught to students without the help of literature. English Language Teaching (ELT) gained prominence in India in the last two decades after the rapid mushrooming of Engineering Institutes all over India.

Language teaching is incomplete without literature. The earlier generations had solid foundation in language, because they learnt classics written by literary writers like Shakespeare, Wordsworth etc. Unfortunately, the modern generation does not have any exposure to classics. This severely hampers not only their intellectual growth but also emotional growth.

Technical education is not complete, if one does not pay any attention to values, character building, soft skills etc. All the above mentioned things can be easily and effectively inculcated in students through literature.

Professionalism without human touch is quite ominous. Just a few years back a new course titled “Human Values and Professional Ethics” (HVPE) was introduced as per the strict instructions of the former Vice- Chancellor of UPTU, Prof. Prem Vrat.

Now the question comes in everyone’s mind about the outcomes of introducing a new course HVPE. Whether the new course can succeed in fulfilling its objectives is the million dollar question. In this context, literature can first play a supporting role to subjects like Professional Communication, Human Values etc. before taking a full-fledged role to create versatile engineers

For beginners, classics from Indian Writing in English can be introduced so that they get a peek into the glorious culture and tradition of our motherland. Great writers like R.K.Narayan,. Mulkraj Anand, Rabindra Nath Tagore etc. have permanent sway over the readers.

Once the students get a fair idea about the great Indian Writers, it will become easy for them to appreciate the works of literary masters like Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus.

Further, the students should be exposed to literature from commonwealth countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand etc. This will help them to appreciate the cultures of different countries.

Shaping the personality of the student is the need of the hour. Literature will play a pivotal role in this direction if it is inculcated in students right from the beginning.

Berardo (2006) and Wallace (1972) highlight the importance of authenticity to make language learning a beautiful experience.. In other words, students find it really fulfilling to read authentic texts instead of the artificial language used in certain sources. Certain factors should be taken into consideration while selecting authentic material in the ELT Classrooms. The factors are as follows:-

1. They should have a positive impact on students.
2. They should expose students to real language. (language in day to day conversation).
3. They should cater to the different needs of the students.

Literary texts will expose students to use the appropriate language according to the situation and condition. Cruz(2010) and Kramersch (1998) speak about the importance of fifth skill that is learning culture apart from the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Students will really enjoy learning culture which they firmly believe in and also accepted by society. Care should be taken in selecting appropriate texts which instill the right cultural values in students.

Once the students get good command over the language doing well in campus interviews, group discussions etc. will become a cakewalk. In addition, one can say that time can be saved for students if any extra lecture in the form of career development classes and personality development classes are reduced considerably. There is no doubt that literature will help the learners to get good command over the language. In other words, language is something that has to be caught and not taught. If literature is made part of the curriculum in technical education,, language learning will become a really enriching experience for the students.

I. Conclusion

It is clear that teaching English language through literature is viable in technical institutes. The important point to be noted is that the literature prescribed should be interesting and understandable for young engineers. If syllabus designing is taken proper care of half the battle is won. The ambience in the classroom changes dramatically with the introduction of literature. It is no surprise that the budding engineers enjoy learning English language through literature. Literature is for all ages and never ceases to inspire the students irrespective of their age and gender.

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