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ELT through Active Learning with Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda*

Abstract: This paper would look at how the use of Children's Literature acts as an effective way to teach literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and other language areas (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). Linguists and language enthusiasts around the world have researched upon the different reasons on how Literature is the best way to teach language. Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) report (Bonwell & Eison 1991) stresses on the role of Literature in "active learning", a term introduced by R.W. Revans.

Children's literature uses non-complex sentences and language with enthralling stories which will help non-native learners of English experience the language in an interactive way. This paper will explain in detail how a Children's literature text can be used to teach the language skills to non-native speakers of English with the help of selected literary texts, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*(1964) and *Matilda*(1988) by Roald Dahl through the teaching method of 'active learning'. Dahl encouraged his readers to run their imagination free which was what he practiced in his books and therefore Dahl's books would serve their best to not only teach his readers the English language but also to creatively express themselves. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is the best known of Dahl's books, while *Matilda* is an all-time favorite children's book used in schools in U.K and America.

Key words: Children's Literature, Language through literature, English Language Teaching, Second Language Education, Roald Dahl, Matilda, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

Introduction

The use of Literature to teach English language skills has been an ongoing topic of debate for a long time among teachers and theorists. The in and out use of Literature in the language classroom has been going on for the past 100 years as part of academic curriculum for non-native speakers of English. Literature in the ESL classroom has changed patterns as the needs of students have moved on to more professional necessity rather than to create a competency in English as a second language. Often the need for a rationale to use Literature in the ESL classroom is firmly ruled against. Role of literature declined during the period of structural dominance where a language's formal properties took precedence over literature. Though literary texts are the staple examples of good writing, grammatical constructions, and diverse syntax, arguments like lack of time, unable to complete the syllabus, etc are made against the use of Literature in the ESL classroom. And although the use of literature to teach language has been researched upon and affirmed by a fair portion of acclaimed language experts like Collie and Slater, H.G Widdowson, N.S Prabhu, et.al, the refusal to accept this style of teaching continues. Some of the major arguments are firstly, the time constraint- as teachers run on a tight schedule to complete the portions of the curriculum, teaching literature would only slow them down. Secondly, the premier goal of language classes has been shifted to teaching grammar and literature cannot contribute directly to this cause. Thirdly, literature expects a certain amount of cultural knowledge to understand the content students are exposed to. These arguments need to be addressed before we can discuss further into the topic.

(Literature) is able to stimulate personal involvement, arousing learners' interest and provoking strong positive reactions from them; it is meaningful and enjoyable, and reading it has a lasting and beneficial effect upon learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge. (Collie,et.al, 1987, p.6)

In the modern Indian education system, we find that the syllabus strains the students than to train them. The English language classes focuses on bundle of assignments and worksheets for the student, and often have grammatical rules that are to be memorized. The language classes conform to accuracy than fluency. It would be more beneficial if the student can communicate freely in the target language than to be weighed down by the rules of grammar. A change in the syllabus is long overdue for the welfare of the student community. The need of the hour in the

language classroom is a mix of both grammatical and literary competence. The strained rules of English language in the form of grammar and vocabulary exercise should be followed by some undemanding reading of literature.

As acclaimed language teaching expert H.G Widdowson said:

As far as language teaching is concerned, this should alert us to the possibility that certain kinds of activity that are to be found in textbooks, particularly those perhaps associated with task based learning, might presuppose ways of thinking that are alien to certain individuals, or groups of learners, who might then have to cope not only with the foreignness of the language but the foreignness of the way of thinking that the activity requires. We come here to the very general issue of individual and cultural differences among learners and how far these can be, or should be, accommodated in teaching. Again, having identified a possible problem, its solution can only be a matter of local decision. (Widdowson, 1978, p.80)

The cultural alienation that a student might face with the English textbooks is a matter of concern for language teachers and parents. Indian classrooms have diverse class of students who come from different backgrounds and social structure. The diversity of the classrooms in India can vary from religion to caste to financial background. Literature can help the students reach a common area of interest and help them learn about the unknown or revisit known cultures and traditions. It gives them access into other worlds. The cultural perspective can further be explored by the assistance of the teacher. Literature from multiple societies/ communities will augment and enhance the tolerance for distinctive customs and perspectives.

Judith Langer in her article ‘Literacy issues in focus: Literacy acquisition through Literature’ talks about helping Dominican Republic students acquire literacy through literature. She recounts the extent of how literature helped her class,

...we saw that Literature can be a particularly inviting way for students to reflect on their lives, their learning, and their language- to engage in literate activity. When students read literature, ‘horizons of possibility’ come to mind, moving them to reflect on and interpret ideas at hand; students raise questions, recognize problems, seek causes and solutions,

and make connections. They explore multiple perspectives and imagine scenarios. (Langer, 1997,p.606)

Reading Literature improves the reading capability of the student and helps her communicative competence, focusing on her communication skills rather than linguistic or grammatical competence. They enable the reader with the distinct ability to produce excellent sentence structures, discourses, and learn new words, thereby additionally enabling the reader with grammar and vocabulary as well. Reading demands the understanding of the language / sentence structure plus the decoding of language and the comprehension of the meaning.

Stephen Krashen on Sustained Silent Reading in ‘Free Reading’

Research has also shown that SSR is at least as effective as conventional teaching methods in helping children acquire those aspects of reading that are measured by standardized tests, and pleasure reading provides a great deal that these tests don't measure. Study after study has confirmed that those who read more know more about a wide variety of topics. Plus, according to both students and teachers, SSR is a much more pleasant approach than regular skill-building instruction. (Krashen, 2006)

Children's Literature

Children's Literature is defined as ‘material written and produced for the information and entertainment of children and young adults.’ by the Library of Congress. Children's literature have come a long way from being a guide to moral virtue like *On Civility in Children* (1530) and *A Token for Children* (1671) which narrated the deaths of pious children. From the books of children's literature's father John Newbery in the 18th century to 20th century writers Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Enid Blyton, J.K Rowling,

Children's literature themes have moved on to kids as protagonists in multifarious lands taking on momentous matters without the help of adults. John Locke in his cardinal work *Thoughts concerning Education* (1695) writes “He that has found a way to keep a child's spirit easy, active and, free, and yet at the same time to restrain him from many things he has a mind to, and to draw him to things that are uneasy to him; he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming contradictions, has, in my opinion, got the true secret of education.” (Locke, 1695) In a

country like India, where the ability to speak English fluently for academic and occupational excellence is important, using children's literature in primary classrooms can help students immensely. Children's literature is rarely taken as a serious form of literature by scholars and experts. Understanding children's literature is essential because it is what relates closely for the young readers. And often literature is judged from the point of view of the teacher and not the learner.

Irma K. Ghosn lists four reasons to use "authentic children's literature" in the primary classroom; first, she says that since children are naturally drawn to stories, authentic literature will be motivating and meaningful for them. Second, literature can help build vocabulary for the child and natural language. Third, in an English medium academic circle, literature can help with the academic literacy and critical thinking. Fourth, literature can help with the personal growth of the child to understand various cultures and opinions. The text books often contain simple sentences, exquisite imagery, great source of vocabulary, and themes that interest the reader. The imaginative style of writing can help the reader with their creativity. In Indian schools, we frequently find disinterested pupils in the English classrooms. The result of this inattentiveness results in them finding difficulty in communicating in English after their formal education which further pushes them towards English speaking tutoring service centers. Other times, the practical significance of the language is lost since there is no demand for English in their surroundings. However, English is the lingua franca of our country and also of the professional world. Thereby, it becomes important to make the learning environment interesting for the sake of the students to ensure the active learning takes place. In her book 'Story as a Vehicle: Teaching English to young children' (1990), Edie Garvie enunciates the importance of narrating stories in the language classrooms in non-English- speaking country, "The English language syllabus is not made to serve the medium as it should. In an ideal world where it was, one can see how story yet again could help. It will be remembered that it can be conceived in a great many ways. The story of history or environmental science or mathematics could be told by the teacher of English as much as the teachers dealing with those subjects, and the teacher of history etc should recognize her important role as a teacher of English. This it seems to me is crucial in every ESL situation." (Garvie, 1990, p.28)

The educational worth of stories have always been known to us throughout centuries. Children's Literature's use of repetition and cumulative content, rhyme, onomatopoeia, humour, and suspense and makes use of well-developed characters, an engaging theme, illustrations, and an easy plot all with the help of simple sentences. The study of children's literature reveals the integrity of this art, the humanizing possibilities inherent in the literary experience, and the importance of literature to the education of the imagination.

Active Learning

Active learning is a learner centered approach. Than to just passively listen in classes, students are helped to actively use their resources. Students are made to think, listen, write, discuss and read in active learning. Active learning was first defined by R.W Revans. According to Douglas R Barnes 1989 book on Active Learning ,

“The key principles of active learning are:

1. The task has purpose and relevance to the students.
2. The students are able to reflect on the meaning of what they have learnt.
3. The students can negotiate goals and methods of learning with the teacher.
4. The students can critically evaluate different ways and means of learning the content.
5. The complexity of the learning tasks is comparable to professional contexts and real life.
6. The tasks are situation-driven: that is, the need of the situation is taken into consideration in order to establish the learning tasks.” (Barnes, 1989)

Selection of Literature for classroom

Children's literature in the language classrooms for young children will be focusing sometimes on acquisition-based methodology. While using literature in the classroom, it is important to address the question whether literature is used solely to teach language or to help the student enjoy the text. As Rosenblatt explains, there are two types of reading: efferent and aesthetic reading. In the former, the reader's main concern would be on what she would take away from the text and in the latter, the reader would be concerned only of the text and the experience of reading the text. According to Irma K. Ghosn, some of the important points to keep in mind while choosing a text of literature to use in the classroom are listed below. Along with them are points on how Roald Dahl books are apt for teaching English language.

About the author

Roald Dahl (September 13, 1916- November 23, 1990) was one of the most famous and beloved children's literature writer in English. Dahl has penned 19 children's books and has received numerous awards for the same. Dahl works were well known for the right amount of humour and sadness. Maria Nikolajeva, a children's literature professor at the University of Cambridge, says "He is one of the most colourful and light-hearted children's writers". Dahl never minced the world of a child with just happiness. He made sure to include horror, revenge, fear, and tragedy in his books, everything that a child faces in his real life. As another famous children's literature writer and illustrator Maurice Sendak observed "...a child is a complicated creature who can drive you crazy. There's a cruelty to childhood, there's an anger." Narratives focused on a child's wildest imagination coming true are a common line of theme in Dahl's books and his protagonists are well mannered children who are rewarded for their good behavior.

Theme: Basic emotions like fear, loathing, hope and other universal themes is what Ghosn roots for in her article. Universal themes, though in different cultures, can help students understand and relate to the story. Roald Dahl books deal with themes that are easy for students to relate to and possible to comprehend. Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate factory* deal with the theme of poverty, good manners, chocolates and *Matilda* discusses about school, family, and loneliness.

Storyline: "Clear, uncomplicated storyline with a satisfying, un-melodramatic conclusion. No flash backs or complex, multifaceted characters for beginner learners." (Ghosn, 174). Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* have simple and non-complicated storylines. Dahl focuses on the present tense throughout thereby not confusing the reader. This connection will further help them in overcoming their own struggle with troubles in their life. Child's attention can vary and then the lesson will not be learned. The narrative plot should be something the child can relate to.

Language: "Repeated grammatical structures and formulaic expressions that are made clear in the story context. Use of vocabulary that provides synonyms and alternative expressions." (Ghosn, 174) Simple sentence structures / syntax with rhythmic tone to the style of writing in Dahl's both novels make it apt for the reading lessons of secondary to higher secondary class of students in India.

Illustrations: “Aesthetically pleasing illustrations that help clarify the text.” (Ghosn, 174)

Illustrations help students understand the text better and play a huge part in making the text seem lighter and also to hold the attention of the young reader. One of the most important aspects of children’s literature, illustrations and the story go hand in hand. Roald Dahl is famous for the illustrations his narrative is backed up with. Often and more, Dahl closely worked in collaboration with Quentin Blake, an English cartoonist; whose illustrations will be used in this paper specifically.

The importance of culturally diverse/ appropriate texts for the students of English as their second language may find the Roald Dahl books of a certain cultural perspective that is different from their own. Northrop Frye talks about how reading literature helps students with ‘tolerance’. And also aids them in understanding other cultures different from their own, thereby also increases their creativity.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Matilda

Charlie and the Chocolate factory is a children’s novel written by Roald Dahl and was released in the year 1964. It is the story of 11-year-old Charlie Bucket who lives in a small hut with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bucket and his four grandparents; Grandpa Joe, Grandma Josephine, Grandpa George and Grandma Georgina. Willy Wonka is a legendary inventor who owns a huge chocolate factory and has hidden five golden tickets inside his chocolate bars. Whoever is lucky to find these golden tickets has the opportunity to visit Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory and gets to take home truck loads of “delicious eatables” to last for a lifetime. Charlie is the fifth and last person to find the golden ticket. He along with four other winners visits the factory with their guardians. Here Charlie meets the Oompa-Loompas, a race of small people who were rescued by Willy Wonka. The other four kids are spoilt, greedy and boisterous; and therefore get thrown out of the factory in comical ways. Charlie emerges as the winner and becomes the successor to Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.

Matilda was written and published in 1988. Matilda is a five and half year old girl who lives with her parents and brother. Her parents mistreat Matilda and do not care about her. Matilda is a voracious reader and has read variety of books by the age of four. She goes to the local school and her headmistress is Miss Trunchbull, who harasses and terrorizes her students.

Matilda realizes to her surprise that she has the power of telekinesis, which she uses to avenge herself, her friends and Miss Honey, against her parents and the headmistress. Matilda and Miss Honey find their happy ending when Matilda is allowed to stay back with Miss Honey while her family leaves for Spain, fleeing from the police.

English language teaching through *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Rosenblatt distinguished between Aesthetic and Efferent reading in *The Reader, the Text and the Poem* (1978). She defines efferent/unaesthetic reading as the type of reading where the reader is focused on what to take away from the text, more like an action to be carried out. Whereas, aesthetic reading is when the reader is reading the text to understand it and is focused on the act of reading. “In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.”(Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25) Often in classrooms we only focus on efferent reading, where worksheets and exercises are provided to the student in an attempt to be sure if they reader has comprehended the text. Since in second language classrooms the need of the hour pertains to improving language proficiency, efferent reading provides the needful for paraphrasing and restatements only. Aesthetic reading is overlooked in language classrooms, often due to the lack of time and demand to complete the syllabus within a time period. Encouraging aesthetic reading in the classroom helps to improve the appreciation of using literature in the classroom. In second language classrooms, it is pertinent to use both styles of reading to ensure linguistic proficiency and to also enable students to have an aesthetic experience with literature of the target language. Widdowson states in 1978 ‘Teaching language as communication’ that “to present someone with a set of extracts and to require him to read them not in order to learn something interesting and relevant about the world but in order to learn something about the way the language being used is to misrepresent language use to some degree” (Widdowson, 1978, p.80)

Literacy skills/ LSRW skills

Following is a passage from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which describes Charlie and Grandpa Joe opening a bar of chocolate in secret, which they bought with the only saving his grandfather had. Charlie and Grandpa Joe open the chocolate in anticipation of finding the Golden Ticket in it.

“The next day, when Charlie came home from school and went in to see his grandparents, he found that only Grandpa Joe was awake. The other three were all snoring, loudly.

‘Sshh!’ whispered Grandpa Joe, and he beckoned Charlie to come closer. Charlie tiptoed over and stood beside the bed. The old man gave Charlie a sly grin, and he started rummaging under his pillow with one hand; and when the hand came out again, there was an ancient leather purse clutched in the fingers. Undercover of bed-clothes, the old man opened the purse and tipped it upside down. Out fell a single silver six-pence. ‘It’s my secret hoard’, he whispered. ‘The others don’t know I’ve got it. And now, you and I are going to have one more fling at finding that last ticket. How about it, eh? But you’ll have to help me.’

‘Are you sure you want to spend your money on that, Grandpa?’ Charlie whispered.

‘Of course I’m sure.’ Spluttered the old man excitedly. ‘Don’t stand there arguing! I’m as keen as you are to find that ticket! Here- take the money and run down the street to the nearest shop and buy the first Wonka bar you see and bring it straight to me, and we’ll open it together’

Charlie took the little silver coin, and slipped quickly out of the room. In five minutes, he was back.

‘Have you got it?’ whispered Grandpa Joe, his eyes shining with excitement.

Charlie nodded and held out the bar of chocolate. WONKA’S NUTTY CRUNCH SURPRISE, it said on the wrapper.

‘Good!’ the old man whispered, sitting up in the bed and rubbing his hands. ‘Now- come over here and sit close to me and we will open it together. Are you ready?’

‘Yes,’ Charlie said. ‘I’m ready.’

‘All right. You tear of the first bit.’

‘No,’ Charlie said, ‘you paid for it. You do it all.’

The old man’s fingers were trembling most terribly as they fumbled with the wrapper. ‘We don’t have a hope, really,’ he whispered, giggling a bit. ‘You do know we don’t have a hope, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Charlie said. ‘I know that.’

They looked at each other, and both started giggling nervously.

‘Mind you,’ said Grandpa Joe, ‘there is just that *tiny* chance that it *might* be the one, don’t you agree?’

‘Yes,’ Charlie said. ‘Of course. Why don’t you open it, Grandpa?’

‘All in good time, my boy, all in good time. Which end do you think I ought to open first?’

‘That corner. The one furthest from you. Just tear off a tiny bit, but not quite enough for us to see anything.’

‘Like that?’ said the old man.

‘Yes. Now a little bit more.’

‘You finish it,’ said Grandpa Joe. ‘I’m too nervous.’

‘No, Grandpa. You must do it yourself.’

‘Very well, then. Here goes.’ He tore off the wrapper.

They both stared at what lay underneath.”(Dahl, 2016,p.40-44)



Fig 1: Grandpa Joe tells Charlie the story of Willy Wonka and his Chocolate factory (*Charlie and the chocolate factory*, 2016, p.19)

The students can be asked questions at this point in text on whether they think Charlie and Grandpa Joe will find the golden ticket. The teacher can direct students to complete the rest of the passage on their own. This would help them form opinions; help their creative process and their writing skills. The students can also be asked about their relationship with their grandparents and to write about their favorite grandparent or relative. This could help them feel closer to Charlie and understand the book more deeply. “In Aesthetic reading, a reader often relates his world of experience to the text.” (Mckay, 1982, 535). Further, students can be asked questions on meanings on words like ‘hoard’, ‘snoring’, ‘nervous’, ‘fling’, ‘sly grin’, etc from the context of the passage; thereby helping students improve their vocabulary. Direct comprehension type questions would help the teacher understand whether the students have basic language skills, but it would not help the students in improving them.

Matilda is a text that can be recommended for higher secondary students. In the following passage from *Matilda* (1988), Miss Trunchbull is furious to find a newt in the jug of water. She accuses Matilda for the prank, of which she is innocent. Matilda is enraged at this blatant accusation. Her anger turns into a power with which, she discovers, she can move things with her mind – telekinesis.

“The Trunchbull was sitting behind the teacher’s table staring with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Matilda’s eyes were also riveted at the glass. And now, quite slowly, there began to creep over Matilda a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity seemed to be gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in those eyes of hers, a feeling of great strength was settling itself deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which was something else altogether, and which she could not understand. It was like flashes like lightening. Little waves of lightening seemed to be flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot, as though vast energy was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass, and now the power was concentrating itself one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at.

‘Tip it!’ Matilda whispered. ‘Tip it over!’

She saw the glass wobble. It actually tilted backwards a fraction of an inch, then it righted itself again. She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes, feeling the power that was flashing straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs.

‘Tip it!’ she whispered again. ‘Tip it over!’

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushes harder still, willing her eyes to shoot out more power. And then, very very slowly, so slowly she could hardly see it happening, the glass began to lean backwards, farther and farther and farther backwards until it was balancing on just one edge of its base. And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle on to the desk-top. The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss Trunchbull’s enormous bosom.” (Dahl, 2016, p.150-160)

Matilda has a super power and children are fans of super heroes. The above passage can be used for students to discuss in the classroom on the superpowers they would like to have and also what would they do if they had them. The deliberate slow narration of Dahl is an excellent example for students to make an example of to write about their own super powers and the way they discovered it. The enjoyment of the story should be the aim of the lesson and writing skills should not be pushed at the students at the expense of the lesson. As far as how the above passage is to be dealt with for encouraging students to learn language skills – the normal methods used in classrooms would be comprehension methods, vocabulary, and other finding synonyms. But as Sandra McKay efficiently explains with her examples it is rather better to ask students for what they have understood from the passage and how different is it from their cultural backgrounds. Further the students could be asked on narrating their similar experiences.

The need of a planned program for literature is the need of the hour, to enhance reading skills of students. We can shift between international, national and regional literature to be used in the English as a second language classroom. Enabling students towards active learning can help them emerge out of their passive inactive lifestyle that the modern day has succumbed us to. Literature and stories do not have to be a thing of past. They can be the source of strength for the future, if utilized in the best manner.

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Figure 1- Dahl, R (2016) *Charlie and the Chocolate factory*. <https://www.google.co.in/url>