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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LIFE: CONTENT, CONTEXT AND COMMUNICATION

Abstract:

Literature is the replica of life and also the live example of language in use. Studying the language of literary text as discourse can enable learners to develop the knowledge of linguistic rules, the knowledge of how to use these rules for effective communication and the knowledge of how to motivate and mentor life. The Structural and Functional approaches in ELT during the 1940s to 1960s saw the virtual disappearance of literature. The growth of CLT from the 1970s through the 1990s brought literature back into the curricula and methodologies of language teaching. In the 21st century, ELT has acquired another function, that of imparting soft skills or life skills. This paper attempts to demonstrate that literature is necessary to acquire expression and authenticity of communication since contextual content is enrooted in it. Specific examples from literature are taken up and explored from those purposeful perspectives to analyse how language and life skills can be acquired through literature.

Introduction:

That literature is the replica of life is a fact that is universally acknowledged. Almost every culture has its own vibrant literature which reflects its values, mores and concerns. Ancient India had its own *Panchatantra*, which is a series of inter-woven fables, illustrating the central Hindu principles of *nīti*, which was translated by Arthur W. Ryder as "the wise conduct of life" (1925). It is believed that Pundit Vishnu Sharma wrote these stories for the benefit of three ignorant princes, in order to teach them life skills - our very own example of the use of language and literature to negotiate life skills. In other words, Vishnu Sharma was using a specific content in a specific context in order to help his students to comprehend the complexities of life. In this paper, it is our attempt to demonstrate how literary pieces can be used in the English Language classroom to explore soft/life skills along with language skills.

Literature and ELT – A Brief Survey:

In their extensive survey of the trends of literature in foreign language education over the past century, Kramsch and Kramsch (2000) clearly indicate that learning a foreign language in the early part of the twentieth century entailed a close study of the canonical literature in that language. The processes of mechanization and industrialization that began in the Victorian era gradually pushed language learning methodologies towards new methods of language learning, which in turn, resulted in a movement away from the human element. The period from the 1940s through the 1960s, saw the virtual expulsion of literature from the English classroom as English Language Teaching (ELT) began to practice the Structural Approach and Functional Approach of language learning.

The growth of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) from the 1970s through the 1990s brought literature back into the curricula and methodologies of language teaching. Literary texts are used in language teaching for linguistic, methodological and motivational reasons. They expose learners to language-in-use that can enable them to understand the register, the social context in which it is used, the role-relationships involved in the communicative event, and the form-function relationships. Since literary texts are open to multiple interpretations, they can generate a great deal of interaction in the class room which helps learners to hone their communication skills in the target language. Learners can get connected to literary texts as they

embody human feelings that can stimulate learners to express their opinions and also relate the topics and characters in literary texts to their own life. In the words of Lazar (1999):

By exposing students to the rich language of the text, we can expand their language awareness, their overall knowledge of how word and grammar can be used. By presenting students with the complex themes in the literary text, we can motivate them to reflect imaginatively on their own experience and on that of writers in different societies. By gently encouraging them to make their own interpretations of a text, we can develop their confidence in forming well-reasoned interpretations of the language that they read and hear (14-19).

The Different Approaches to the Teaching of Literature in the ESL Classroom:

There are three important approaches for the use of literature in the English classroom, namely, the Cultural Model, the Language Model, and the Personal Growth Model. The Cultural Model treats literature as content and requires learners to explore and interpret the social, literary and historical context of a specific text. The Language Model views literary texts as examples of language in operation. It sensitizes learners to literary text as a genre in term of its physical appearance, register, form function relationships, sound, and movement in terms of tense, images, unusual collocations, binary oppositions, figurative language, rhyme and style. The Personal Growth Model encourages learners to make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those in the text.

However, the Cultural Model is rejected by most practitioners of ESL as it tends to be teacher-centred with very little opportunity for extended language work (Savvidou 2004). Similarly, the Language Model is seen to be taking a 'reductive' approach to literature (Carter and McRae: 1996), with very little learner-text engagement. Literature is used for purely linguistic practice through a series of language activities. According to Christine Savvidou, the Personal Growth Model attempts to bridge the other two models by "focusing on the particular use of language in a text, as well as placing it in a specific cultural context". She goes on to point out that these three approaches differ in terms of their focus on the text:

firstly, the text is seen as a cultural artefact; secondly, the text is used as a focus for grammatical and structural analysis; and thirdly, the text is the stimulus for personal growth activities. What is needed is an approach to teaching literature in the EFL

classroom which attempts to integrate these elements in a way that makes literature accessible to learners and beneficial for their linguistic development.

The Integrated Model for Literature in the ESL Classroom:

Lazar (1993) suggests the integration of these three models for learners' enjoyable involvement in using literature in the class room. Collie and Slater (1987) and Lazar (1993) offer a series of tasks and activities which can be used to exploit literary texts for imparting life skills too. Savvidou (2004) provides a description of the various stages to be followed: 'Preparation and Anticipation', 'Focusing', 'Preliminary Response', 'Working at it' and 'Interpretation and Personal Response'. In this paper, we argue that the Integrated Model is suitable not just for "linguistic development" (Savvidou) but also for the development of life skills among learners.

Teaching Life Skills through Literature:

For a very long time, the curricula of most institutions of higher education focused on training the youth in 'content skills' or 'hard skills' and neglected an important area, that of 'people skills' or 'soft skills' or 'life skills'. Hard skills which are the technical requirements of a job are simply not enough. This is because employers look for additional skills like interpersonal skills, leadership skills, team management, stress management, time management, and many other soft/life skills in their prospective employees. Soft skills dominate workplace needs. They play an increasingly crucial role in today's highly competitive job market. They are not only necessary in a person's professional life, but also in his/her personal life. These skills may be incorporated into the English curriculum in the undergraduate programme, thereby providing both language skills and life skills within the same framework.

This paper takes up as a case study, the text book *Skills in English: A Coursebook for Language Learning* (2013), which was used, until recently by Osmania University, Hyderabad, in its Undergraduate English Curriculum. The book had been introduced with the stated purpose of developing not just communication (LSRW) skills but also soft skills. The textbook has sixteen units with each unit divided into eight sections – Reading Skills, Writing Skills, Pronunciation, Listening Skills, Soft Skills, Speaking Skills, Grammar and Vocabulary. The curriculum has an interesting variety of literary texts, since there are poems, short stories, memoirs, essays and plays. However, almost all the sections are independent of each other, that is, all the skills are taught in isolation, with nothing to link them to the literary texts provided.

The soft skills components range from topics like anxiety management, stress management, personality development, positive thinking, goal setting, problem solving, positive attitude, time management, multitasking, critical thinking skills, reasoning skills, interpersonal skills, team development, etc., in that order. None of these soft/life skills have any relationship with the specific poem, or story, or one-act play as there is a total lack of coordination among all the various sections. The Content and the Context are not inter-related, leading to the breakdown of Communication.

Application of the Integrated Model:

It is an accepted fact that literary texts provide us with pleasure - pleasure that is aesthetic, intellectual and emotional. However, the larger purpose of literary texts is the fostering of a comprehensive outlook on life. Ultimately, these texts seek to portray universal human values. The values of sympathy, empathy and compassion ought to form the basis of all human interaction and so, what is needed is the Integrated Model of teaching language and life skills through literature. Savvidou (2012) argues that

Communicative competence is more than acquiring mastery of structure and form. It also involves acquiring the ability to interpret discourse in all its social and cultural contexts. For this reason, the use of literature in the EFL classroom can provide a powerful pedagogic tool in learners' linguistic development.

Skills in English has a number of stories, poems, etc., which provide scope for discussion in the classroom. The very first poem, 'Hunger', by Jayanta Mahapatra, is a harsh portrayal of the depths to which humanity can descend due to poverty, when a father forces his young daughter into prostitution. J. P. Das's poem "Kalahandi" depicts the harrowing travails of the people of Kalahandi, a drought-prone district in Odisha. Kewlian Sio's 'Let's Go Home' narrates the heart-breaking story of a young boy who, for a few hours, forgets that his mother is dead, only to be reminded of the tragedy when he has to return home at the end of the day.

Unit 10, Chetan Bhagat's story 'The Cut-off' is a critique of the present system of education and the attitudes of contemporary Indian society, since undue importance is given to attaining marks at the cost of inducing stress and anxiety among young students. Interestingly, the soft skill components on anxiety management and stress management which could have been integrated into this unit, are placed very far-off, in Unit 1 and Unit 2, respectively.

It is only in Unit 15, 'Refund' a one-act play by Fritz Karinthy, that there is a soft skill, which can be taught in conjunction with the text. The play is the humorous tale of Wasserkopf, an unemployed man, who insists on getting a refund of his tuition fee, as he believes that he has not received a 'good education'. The teamwork exhibited by the teachers of the school in outwitting Wasserkopf, can be related to the soft skill component of the unit, team development. In other words, there is a correspondence between the Content and the Context, leading to Communication, as there is active participation on the part of the learners.

In addition to the life/soft skills discussed in the preceding section, the literary texts can be used to discuss yet another important soft skill. That skill is 'Emotional Intelligence' or EI as it is generally known. EI is a term that is being used very frequently in the work force today. Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990) introduced the term and defined it as "the ability to perceive emotions, integrate emotions to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions to promote personal growth". Daniel Goleman, who took this concept and developed it, identifies four domains in EI in his book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995): Self-awareness, Self-management, Social awareness and Relationship management.

Goleman further classifies these four domains into two sets of competencies – personal competencies and social competencies. Self-awareness and self-management are personal competencies, while social awareness and relationship management are social competencies. When applied to the literary texts prescribed in the curriculum, it provides the perfect opportunity to develop the emotional intelligence of the students. It can help them to gain insight into human behavior as they get to identify and discuss skills like self-awareness, self-confidence, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, optimism, achievement-orientation, initiative, empathy, service orientation, team work and collaboration, inspirational leadership.....the list goes on.

Conclusion:

All the above examples show how the Integrated Model can be utilized successfully to teach/learn human values through the English Curriculum. The long-term objectives for prescribing literature to the student of English as a second language include developing an appreciation for literature and forming a civilized character through the modification and enlargement of values. Short-term objectives are to provide vicarious literary experiences and

also to reinforce language learning. Consequently, the text which is seen as a “cultural artefact”, is used as “a focus for grammatical and structural analysis” and becomes “the stimulus for personal growth activities” (Savvidou). It is only then that the relationship between the three terms on the left of the colon in the title, and the three on the right becomes obvious. Language, Literature and Life, can then achieve a one-to-one correspondence with Content, Context and Communication.

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