

Teaching Language Through Literature: The Meghalaya Context

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the relationship between English language and English literature in the teaching of English in Higher Secondary schools in Meghalaya and to explore the interdependence between the two and how they can enhance competence in language learning. English is taught as a second language in Meghalaya and it has always been taught through literary items. The existence of literature is established by language and language propagates itself through literature. Thus, language and literature are complementary to each other. Besides enhancing language skills and sub-skills, literature also has a wider role to play. It can help to nourish the imaginative faculty of the learners and develop their critical abilities. It also promotes emotional awareness. The multiple levels of meaning that abound in literary texts demands active involvement on the learners' part to interpret hidden meanings and assumptions of the text. This motivates the learners to deal with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text. Consequently, the learners' overall capacity to infer the meaning is developed and this can be applied in real life. Hence, language learning through literature becomes an enriching experience for learners.

Key words: English language, literature, higher secondary schools, Meghalaya

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In the last decade, there has been a growing interest in literature as a valuable source of language teaching. The new trend in the communicative approach according to Nunan (1996), "recognised that simply being able to create grammatically correct structures in language did not necessarily enable the learner to use the language to carry out various real-world tasks"(p.24). It rather views the reading of literature as a way of developing and achieving communicative competence as it provides the learner with authentic and genuine illustrations of language in a real life context. The difficulties faced by students in interpreting the nuances of language in the ELT classroom can be effectively resolved by making use of the various genres of literature like poems, short plays and stories, novels and so on so that language learning becomes an enjoyable experience.

The objectives of language teaching and learning at the higher secondary level of education in Meghalaya is to "lead the students from concrete to abstract thinking as well as integrating other skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking" (Marak, 2007,Foreword). The prescribed text books, according to Marak (2007), contain lessons that aim to lead students from the familiar to the unknown and equip them to face everyday problems and

enrich their life experiences. The tasks included are designed on the communicative language teaching methodology and encourage interaction in the classroom.

WHY USE LITERATURE IN THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE?

According to Boas (1931), literature is the chronicle of the efforts of human beings to give meaning to life, to create beauty and express feelings, ideas and emotions and to be aware of themselves and the life they lead. Literature embraces all aspects of life, the joy and the pain, the yearning and the fulfillment. It evokes a personal response from the learners and inspires them to draw on their own experiences, making them more interested in the process of language learning. Thus literary texts can be included in language teaching because the language used in these texts is suitable in a specific context or for a particular event.

Collie and Slater (1990) assert that literature provides a source of authentic language input. Language in real-life contexts like pamphlets, travel brochures, and advertisements acquaint the learner with genuine language samples of real life and real life-like settings. Reading texts by established authors in the target language exposes the learner to the best manifestation of language use and develops his critical thinking and creative writing skills. It can also help to stimulate the learner's imaginative faculty. Since literary texts are open to interpretation, they promote interaction which is considered a focal point of the communicative approach.

Literature can be seen as an expression of the cultural experience of a people and language is part of this cultural experience. It offers learners access to the culture of the people whose language they are studying. In order to know a language, it is necessary to know the

literature of that language. Literature enables cultural enrichment and increases understanding of the different aspects of communication in the country within which that language is spoken through literary works like short stories, plays, poems and novels which contain real instances of grammatical structures and vocabulary items.

The four basic language skills can be taught in an integrated way through literary texts. Although emphasis has always been more on reading and writing, literature can play a meaningful role in stressing on the importance of both speaking and listening through reading, dramatization, role plays, and group discussions. This will increase their confidence level about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English, promote language development and sharpen listening skills.

Carter and Long (1991) advocate three models to validate the use of literature in language teaching- the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model. How these models fit in with the items in the prescribed texts will be discussed below.

The Cultural Model

The Cultural Model lays stress in literature summarizing the accumulated wisdom of the best that has been thought and felt within a culture. This will bring about an awareness and appreciation of various cultures and ideologies. The learner learns about the society, the history and the politics of the country described in the text. An example of this is Devidas's (2008) short play, *Abraham Lincoln* taught in Class XI where the students are apprised about the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the United States of America.

The Language Model

Literature can be considered as a tool to instruct the learners on structure and vocabulary and enlighten them about the creative uses of language. In poetry, the learner becomes familiar with figures of speech like similes and metaphors. Ramanujan's (2008) *The Striders* is replete with metaphors. We have, for instance, "a landslide of lights"(p.56). Anees Jung's (2008) essay *Lost Spring* is itself a metaphor for the hard life of the underprivileged child. They are rag pickers and "garbage to them is gold"(p.27). The learner will find no difficulty in understanding this beautiful example of a paradox. Derozio's (2008) poem *To the Pupils of Hindu College* is rich in similes "like the petals of young flowers"(p.59) and "like young birds in soft summer hours"(p.59).

The Personal Growth Model

The Personal Growth Model calls for students' active engagement in reading the literary texts more effectively so that they develop as individuals and have meaningful relationships. The teacher therefore selects texts which stimulate students' imagination and to which they can respond. *The Rattrap* by Lagerlof (2008) beautifully teaches students the importance of empathy for our fellow human beings. Palkhivala's (2008) essay *The Ailing Planet: The Green Movement's Role* teaches us to be responsible citizens.

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AT THE HIGHER SECONDARY LEVEL IN MEGHALAYA

In Meghalaya English is taught as a second language from school entry level through nursery rhymes, songs and stories. Young learners are quick to grasp what is taught in the classroom. The teaching of English in schools has always been mainly through literary items.

Present day classroom atmosphere is a competitive one. High test scores have become a priority. Emphasis is on rote learning and completing the syllabus in time. So learners concentrate only on test-related materials. Consequently, not much language learning takes place. It is here that the different genres of literature can be employed in the ELT classroom to make learning more interesting and fulfilling. Literary texts are a prolific source of classroom activities and they expose learners to different registers and diverse types of language use. When selecting a literary text, students' cultural background, social expectations and language proficiency must be taken into consideration. The selected content should cover various fields of activity and be within the world of experience of the learner so that he or she can easily relate to it.

One of the objectives of language teaching and learning in Meghalaya is to integrate skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and critical thinking. With the communicative approach in language teaching, listening and speaking are now acknowledged as relevant in the learning process. Literature can play an equally meaningful role in teaching both speaking and listening. The three genres of poetry, short stories and drama are engaged in language teaching in Meghalaya.

Poetry in Language Teaching

Poetry uses metaphor as one of its primary methods. The poems taught at the higher secondary level are a rich repository of figures of speech. Keats' (2008) *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is rich in imagery and metaphor and Ezekiel's (2008) *Enterprise* abounds in irony. This will motivate the learner to venture beyond the known usages of grammar, vocabulary and syntax and

will increase a learner's storage of lexical items. Grammar can be taught through pattern poems.

A good example of this is Lawrence's (2008) *A Baby Running Barefoot*.

Poetry presents a wide range of learning opportunities through group activities. It can be recited in the classroom where teachers would indicate students' errors in intonation or pronunciation in a positive manner. These group activities help develop reading and speaking skills. Since poetry is open to interpretation, the learner is free to explore the feelings it evokes in his heart and mind.

Use of Drama in Language Teaching

Short plays included in the syllabus comprise extracts from Shakespeare's (2008) *Macbeth*, *The Bishop's Candlesticks*, McKinnell's (2008) dramatic adaptation of an episode from Hugo's *Les Miserables* and *Abraham Lincoln* by Devidas (2008). Drama as a source for language teaching can raise a learner's awareness towards the target language and culture. In dramatizing a play learners may be able to hazard a useful guess as to the meaning of a new word facilitated by their understanding of the relationship between the speakers and the intonation they use to express this. The learner may then be able to internalize vocabulary, grammar patterns or even intonation. *Macbeth* compels the learner to face the dark reality of over ambitiousness. *The Bishop's Candlesticks* examines the nature of good and evil and illustrates the values of kindness and sympathy. Students are exposed to the social problems faced by society and this will have an impact on the learner's imagination thereby promoting creative thinking and developing his critical thinking skills. When a play is enacted in the class,

the learner's listening skill will be heightened and the level of competence with respect to the receptive and productive skills will be improved.

Short Stories in Language Teaching

The use of short stories as a resource for language teaching in an ESL classroom has many advantages. They enable the learner to observe not only language but life. Hismanoglu (2005) asserts that "the characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives and do so in a variety of registers and tones"(p. 61). Anita Desai's (2008) short story, *A Devoted Son* has a universal appeal as it delves into the ironic difference in perception of the father and the son. Daly's (2008) *Enchanting Caves of Meghalaya* is a lesson enjoyed by all learners because of its regional flavour. Students perform relatively well in writing answers to questions from these texts because they relate to these texts as they have contemporary relevance and are well within the world of experience of the learner. It is found that students are most receptive to new learning when they can connect it to what they already know.

Short stories make the learner's reading task easier as it is simple and short when compared to other literary genres. They also promote the learners' appreciation and knowledge of other cultures, enabling them to enhance their critical and analytical skills.

CONCLUSION

Hismanoglu (2005) is of the view that "there are very few pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in a language classroom"(p.65). However, the present texts at the higher secondary level in Meghalaya provide ample opportunities for learners to develop different language skills and is a positive step towards fulfilling the objectives of

language teaching. At the end of each lesson, students are to answer questions based on the text to test their comprehension level. Students are also required to imagine themselves in the place of the characters and write about it or review the text. This also helps them to develop their writing and critical skills. Teachers are encouraged to conduct group discussions after every lesson to hone the students listening and speaking skills. Enacting the prescribed plays, recitation and reading aloud in class helps to enhance pronunciation and right intonation.

Literature has a role to play in motivating students to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings in English. By reading literary texts, the student will be able to understand the finer nuances of English usage. The rich source of authentic materials which covers a comprehensive range of registers will equip the students to effectively internalize the language.

Literary texts are means to initiate a creative process in the learner's mind and emotions. They show how language works in context and how it should be used in certain situations and conditions. Consequently, learners' communicative competence is elevated and language learning will have been a rewarding and enriching experience.

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