

Teaching English Language through Indigenous English Literature

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Abstract

The teaching of English as second language in India can be a challenging task, particularly in rural areas. The teachers have to cater to the difficulties and barriers of the learner in learning this foreign tongue. They have to basically address his linguistic hurdles and cultural barriers of understanding. As regards the linguistic difficulties, the four skills of language, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing must be wrought into the teaching-learning process through a holistic approach. The cultural barriers can also be overcome by incorporating indigenous literary pieces of English in the curriculum. The present paper explores the efficacy of teaching English to the second language learners of India through native literature. *The Homecoming*, a short story by Rabindranath Tagore, the well-known Indian writer in English, is taken for the present study. The paper focuses on how the socio-cultural background, common to the learner and the text, contributes effectively to the teaching-learning process.

Keywords: second language learner, linguistic hurdles, cultural barrier, indigenous literature, familiar content

The teaching of English as second language in India can pose to be, by and large, a challenging task to the teachers of English. This problem is more acutely faced by teachers in suburban and rural areas which account for three quarters of the entire population. First and foremost, the teachers have to cater to the difficulties and barriers that the learner encounters in learning this second language which is a foreign tongue. To tackle this inherent complexity, they have to basically address his linguistic hurdles and cultural barriers of understanding in dealing with the texts.

As regards the linguistic difficulties, the four skills of language, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing have to be addressed elaborately and managed effectively. Each skill needs to be honed separately and in tandem with other skills by planning the curriculum to suit this approach. Thus the four skills must be wrought into the teaching-learning process through a holistic approach.

As regards the cultural barriers, it is suggested through this research paper that they can be certainly overcome by incorporating indigenous literary pieces of English in the curriculum. The use of such native literature would prove to be an effective tool of teaching by addressing the cultural gap so that the battle would be half won by the second language

learner. It would greatly facilitate his comprehension and strengthen his response. The framing of the syllabus should employ a selective process to include different forms of literature like the poem, essay, short story, etc. which present the local life and culture. Such course content would enable the learner to understand the text easily. It would also enhance his skills of language by enabling him to employ them with ease and confidence.

The major thrust in the pedagogy of employing the native literary pieces in English is to serve the useful purpose of driving away the fears and complexes of the second language learners. As the familiar contents and contexts of the text would provide a realistic framework of learning, the learner would relate them to his immediate life very easily and quickly. He would be increasingly receptive and responsive and readily overcome his difficulties of comprehension. His curiosity, interest and willingness to learn would motivate his participation and accelerate his acquirement of the second language.

There are some arguments that incorporating literary forms in the curriculum may hinder rather than help the second language learner due to their structural complexity. But this problem can definitely be overcome by planning the course content carefully and vigilantly by anticipating and considering all possible difficulties and difficulty levels.

Ronald A. Carter and Michael N. Long (1991:2) have advocated the inclusion of literature in teaching English as a second language. They have presented three main models of teaching English through literature namely, the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model, each with its own set of learning objectives. The first model emphasizes the understanding and appreciation of cultural differences like customs, tradition, beliefs, etc. that emerge through the literary texts; the second one stresses language learning through vocabulary, syntax, etc. while the third one refers to acquiring the skills of language through the study of these texts.

Elaborating on the use of literary texts in teaching second language, Howard Sage (1987:40) expounds the merits of using fiction: "Fiction, as a rendering of people's dreams, actions, and words, may indeed have points of contact with conversational language." According to him, fiction is simultaneously a source of pleasure as well as knowledge to the learners. He argues that it is a more effective resource than using parts or extracts of texts that are cited in brief and consequently limit the scope of understanding the contexts. He mentions three important advantages of using short fiction in teaching: firstly the brevity; secondly the universality and thirdly the boosting of the cognitive and analytical abilities of learners. Sage opines that this pedagogy would be a successful strategy in teaching the second language learners as it is a fallback on the old tradition of storytelling with its inherent language skills of listening and responding.

In view of these methods and discussions, it may be proposed here that incorporating indigenous English literary works in the curriculum would effectively contribute to the learning process of students by facilitating their overall understanding and comprehension. The present paper is an effort to explore the pedagogy of teaching English to the second language learners of India through the use of indigenous English literature as an effective means. As an example, *The Homecoming*, a short story by Rabindranath Tagore, the well known Indian writer in English, is taken for the present study. The paper focuses on how the common socio-cultural background of the learner and that of the text contributes to the teaching-learning process by making it an effective mode of instruction.

According to Sage, while employing this pedagogy, the communication essentials of the target text must first be planned and worked out. If the text is a short story, its major elements like plot or structure, storyline or theme, character, language, etc. could be selected

as areas of focus for the study. The communication essentials or elements should map some well defined learning objectives for the students. These objectives have to be achieved by learners through language activities/ exercises based on the contents of the narrative. The activities must be designed in such a way that they should hone on their language skills as well as increase their knowledge of grammar. The activities should also evaluate the performance and progress of the second language learners.

Plot

Plot is an important communication essential or element. According to Sage, the plot of the short story selected for study should be appealing to the learner. He says that quality is more important than quantity in the pedagogy of teaching English through literary works. Therefore, the selected story should have a simple plot construction or a structure without too many complications.

The short story taken for the study, *The Homecoming*, is set in two places, a village on the banks of a river and Calcutta, which are typical of any village or any city in India, providing a familiar context to the learner. The narrative deals mainly with the theme of grief and sorrows of childhood due to the gaps of understanding between children and grown-ups as presented through the characters of Phatik Chakravorti, the protagonist who is a mischievous country lad, his widowed mother, his kind uncle Bishamber and the unkind aunt. The narrative that revolves around the fortunes and misfortunes of the fourteen year old Phatik, shifts from the village to the city with his shifting to Calcutta, to live with his uncle for his high school education. The narration of his life in the city focuses on the problems of displacement and the problematic relationships that hinder his adaption and education. Phatik's yearning to return, the lack of permission and the climax of his running away are consequential to his sufferings. Though he is traced and brought back, he is sick and dying, deliriously waiting for "homecoming" when the story ends.

This short story with its simple plot would easily capture the imagination of the learners by motivating them to take interest and pay attention. For example, the scenes like the boys playing on the banks of the river, Phatik bossing over his gang, his playing mischief with younger brother Makhan – are commonly visible in the length and breadth of rural India and with which the learner can easily connect. When the scene shifts to Calcutta, it is again a familiar sight of an overcrowded city of "houses and walls" which suffocates Phatik. The learner can understand and connect with Phatik's yearning to ". . . go out into the open country and fill his lungs and breathe freely" (13). The learner will also easily comprehend meanings of words and phrases like ringleader, cramped atmosphere, glorious meadow, and images like "the lowing of a calf in the twilight." The school in Calcutta is again a place where teachers believe in the axiom, "Spare the rod and spoil the child" literally and figuratively. The scene of the strict teacher being severe to the slow learners and wielding the cane is something that the learners can quickly understand and even instinctively loathe it.

Thus, the single plot of the story with known locales, familiar characters and local settings makes it realistic and effective. It becomes easy for the learner to follow the study material as it pertains to his socio-cultural milieu. The learner visits the real time village and city virtually and is very much an active onlooker rather than a passive spectator of alien settings of foreign lands. So, the familiarity of plot and settings certainly facilitates the comprehension of the second language learner by contributing to his learning process and enhancing his efforts of acquiring the language skills.

Storyline/ theme

The storyline/ theme of the short story is an important element for the second language learner as it holds his attention and inspires him to read more and more. The learner may be asked to pre-read the story two or three times as this would assist him in improving his level of comprehension in classroom activities.

The storyline of *The Homecoming* is based in the cultural contexts familiar to the second language learner. It is woven around the life of the middle class boy Phatik who lives in the village with his younger brother Makhan and his widowed mother. He is a leader of a band of boys and notorious as a mischief monger. His “lazy, disobedient and wild” nature is a source of concern for his mother who lives in a perpetual fear that he would drown Makhan or break his head in a fight or endanger his life in some way. When her long lost brother Bishamber comes to meet her and takes the responsibility of Phatik off her hands, she is greatly relieved and happy. But according to Bishamber’s wife, Phatik is an unwelcome addition to the family as she is already overburdened with her own three boys. Phatik too is unhappy as he is oppressed by the “cramped atmosphere of neglect” at his uncle’s house in Calcutta and depressed by his inability to cope up with his school education. He is jeered at by schoolmates and his own cousins, and caned by his teacher every day. The merciless treatment by his teacher, his aunt and his cousins augment his misery. Though he yearns to return to his village and his friends, he is told to wait for the holidays. The losing of his lesson book precipitates matters and he runs away. When he is found by the police and returned to the custodians, he is very sick and longs to return home to his mother. Though his mother reaches Calcutta, he is already critical and too delirious to recognize her. The story concludes with Phatik muttering, “Mother, the holidays have come.” The open-end, an artistic closure, is only suggestive of the ensuing tragedy.

Thus, it is beneficial to use a storyline that deals with local life and culture as the language skills of the learner are honed naturally. The use of local study material would not only retain the interest of the learner but motivate him to learn more and more. This short story which represents the fate of a country lad when he is transposed to city life, the miseries that he suffers as an aftermath of his displacement, the conflicts in his mind and his intense desire to go back to his roots – are all real life experiences that the learner can easily understand and identify with, and in cases, even empathize. He is able to understand the politics of leadership in boyhood, the magnanimity of Phatik who “. . . bequeathed to Makhan, in perpetuity, his fishing-rod, his big kite and his marbles” (12), his abject misery when the tables are turned and he is the object of tyranny in Calcutta, his heart aching with loneliness and his longing to play with boys, etc. Thus the familiarity of the content due to its local theme and the common socio-cultural background makes the story a useful study material to the second language learner. He is enabled to connect the incidents of the story with the events happening around him that contribute to increasing his comprehension levels of language structure and vocabulary. As the storyline refers to the lived experience of identifiable socio-cultural situations, it interests and motivates the learner. However, if it is a story written by a foreign author about alien characters living in unknown lands, the learner would be greatly disadvantaged due to the socio-cultural gaps in understanding or responding.

The classroom activities for the second language learner may involve language exercises based on the contents of the prescribed short story with its familiar material. Language tasks like loud reading, narrating a part of the story in his own words, identifying

key words related to the theme of the story, summary writing, expanding the story, etc. may be given to the learner which would significantly facilitate his learning and retention.

Character

The characters of a story provide as another important element for the second language learner. The characters of an indigenous short story are recognizable men and women with reference to internal factors like ideology, beliefs, attitudes, etc. and external factors like society, class, culture, etc. They belong to the same ethnic, social and political background as the learner. Therefore the learner would readily and easily connect with the characters and even empathize with them. This process of relating to the experiences of characters would definitely stimulate the learner's abilities of language learning.

Phatik represents a typical country lad who is wild, bold, adventurous, mischievous, not much interested in studies and a constant source of trouble for his mother who, as a single parent finds it difficult to control him. To Phatik, however, she appears to be prejudiced in favouring her younger son Makhan. He is hurt by the injustice of her protectionism as he cannot understand her fears that he might inadvertently harm his younger brother. Despite his grouses and his opinion of her as a "tyrant mother", he longs to return to her during his unhappy stay at Calcutta. Despite sibling rivalry, the gesture of gifting all his "treasures" to Makhan before leaving for Calcutta, betrays his love and affection for him. His victimization at the Calcutta school is a universal experience that would appeal anyone who has gone through schooling. Phatik's kind and generous uncle Bishamber, his cruel and mean minded wife, the wicked cousins, the proverbial school teacher with a stick are all stereo-typical indigenous characters whom the second language learner can easily recognize and place in the perspective of real life situations.

These characters and contexts that emerge from the learner's own background support his perception and understanding of the text as well as facilitate his learning abilities. The common cultural background of the characters and the learner makes it easy for him to relate them to someone or the other from his circle of acquaintances. He would easily understand their responses to situations. This works to his advantage as opposed to the study of foreign characters in foreign texts, placed in unfamiliar cultural milieu.

The designing of language learning exercises may include depicting character sketches, defining the character type, enacting roles, writing/ delivering dialogues of characters, etc. that would contribute to skill enhancement of the learner.

Language

Language is an important element and an essential tool for the second language learner. The language used in the indigenous short story would usually be the Indian dialect with the possibility of containing some non-English words. The study of language in the short story would include the style of narration/ point of view, sentence construction, vocabulary and terminology, idioms and phrases, collocations, etc. As most of these essential components of language are embedded in the narrative, it facilitates the second language learner to grasp them more easily in contextual learning.

The third person omniscient style of narration in *The Homecoming* enables the second language learner to have an objective view of each character and the happenings in the story. He is facilitated with the outsider perspective of all the characters. The elements of grammar like sentence structure, speech, voice, etc. would be learnt in a natural manner as they are couched or cloaked in the narrative. It is the same for vocabulary, idioms, phrases,

collocations, etc. which would be easily comprehended and grasped in their contextual use in the narrative. A paragraph on the predicament of Phatik who is turning into an adolescent would serve as an example to highlight this point:

In the world of human affairs there is no worse nuisance than a boy at the age of fourteen. He is neither ornamental, nor useful. It is impossible to shower affection on him as on a little boy; and he is always getting in the way. If he talks with a childish lisp he is called a baby, and if he answers in a grown-up way he is called impertinent. In fact, any talk at all from him is resented. (Chaskar et al: 12)

Words like ‘nuisance,’ ‘ornamental,’ ‘impertinent’ and phrases like ‘shower affection’ ‘childish lisp’ and ‘grown-up way’ can be understood by the second language learner from the context in which they appear in relation to specific parts of the story.

Symbolism, imagery, figures of speech, parallels and contrasts, etc. that emerge through the text also facilitate the learner to understand, appreciate and gain knowledge of the aesthetics of language. For instance, figurative language like, “And, sure enough, Makhan rose from Mother Earth blind as Fate and screaming like the Furies” serves to highlight Makhan’s anger upon being injured and his revengeful attitude of turning a blind eye to ethics. Comparisons like “as good as gold,” “as quiet as a lamb,” “like a stray dog that has lost his master,” “like an overlaid ass” and “like a whirlwind” serve to reinforce the linguistic aspects into the learner’s memory in connection with specific parts of the narrative.

Based on the short story, language exercises like reproducing the story from another point of view, vocabulary building, writing collocations, playing word games, holding debate, initiating discussion, etc. besides solving exercises of grammar would make it possible for the learner to acquire the language skills easily and effectively.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that teaching English to Indians as second language learners would be more fruitful and effective if it is done by using texts of indigenous English literature. Introducing native literary pieces in the curriculum would greatly facilitate the process of learning as the learner would be provided with contents and contexts with which he is familiar. The storyline or theme pertaining to the learner’s ethnic background would enhance his grasping power and retention, while the setting, characters and dialect would lend him the ease of familiarity. In effect, the objectives of learning would be substantially fulfilled by making use of English literature produced by the locals.

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