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Teaching of ESL through Literature

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The purpose of this paper is to underscore the basic elements of literature that can help promote a reader's understanding and intuitive capability so that s/he naturally becomes auto telic to learn a language, use it skillfully as a means of communication as also for creative writing. The job of teaching language through literature becomes challenging for the modern teachers. Teaching of literature initiates a reader into comprehending the necessary elements of literature. In India, people have different cultures, dialects and tastes that make it difficult for people belonging to different language groups to communicate and understand one another. *Learning English language arts through Literature* is an exciting and different approach to language arts learning. This article deals and examines the role of literature in the teaching and learning English as a second language. In conclusion, teaching language through literature by using the modern technology (ICT) is an indispensable activity which promotes the basic virtues of literature which blossom with 'beauty' and 'pleasure'.

Introduction

Language is the blood of every culture, tradition and society. It plays a vital role in establishing social relations through effective communication and interactions and provides identity in a society. The absence of this can be felt only by the people with speech or hearing disabilities who participate but only partially in social interactions. In India, we have English as a common language that bridges this gap.

The Indian government has framed curricula to include and teach English from primary level onwards but a few states are still reluctant to adopt English at primary level. Other states have introduced the teaching of English at all levels. In order to facilitate easy learning and comprehension, literatures related to people and societies can be used to teach English.

Therefore, the author theoretically examines, in the Indian context, the place of literature in the teaching and understanding of English as a second language. The conceptual issues related to learning ESL, an overview of the problems of learning of English language in India, learning English language through literature and the benefits of using literature to teach English are discussed in the consequent paragraphs.

Conceptual Issues

To be able to learn and understand, we basically have two concepts — the concept of language and literature. In order to have a clear understanding, let us know the few definitions. Language generally is defined as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular country or area. There are different types of languages, which include first language (mother tongue), second language, body language, modern language, etc. But in this article, the point of study is learning English as the second language through literature, which is also defined as a language that one speaks in addition to the language one learns as a child (mother tongue). According to Onukaogu (1999) literature is categorized into four, namely fiction, fact, content area text and newsreel. Fiction consists of poetry, prose and drama. It has

been observed that literature has been seen from different perspectives by literary writers and experts. **Pearse** defines literature as written or oral composition deriving from and mirroring a society and the historical experiences of the society and its people. Corbin (1996) sees it as an experience and imagination. Some other researchers see it as a body of written texts produced by a culture and highly valued within that culture over a period of time as part of its literary heritage (**Sivasubramaniam, 2006**). Hence, in offering English literature as a subject, works of writers such as Shakespeare, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Tagore etc. become the essentials in the understanding of English language as a second language as such literatures clearly represent the traditions, customs and cultural heritage of people.

Problems of learning ESL in India

We had been using English language for the past three to four centuries but still, it is considered as a foreign language and therefore, a crucial decision has been taken to include English language in the curriculum of all levels of education primary, secondary and higher institutions. Despite these efforts, learning of English Language has remained a colossus task, especially in rural areas. There is an increase in English language proficiency among students of urban areas but condition is still the same in rural areas because when it comes to the use of English language in schools and colleges their awareness and competence is far from the expectations.

Language and Literature: Two Sides of a Coin

The reading of literature is an interesting activity and an active process where learner develops his/her vocabulary, knowledge and comprehension skills. This promotes innovative learning as the learners are free to take significant stand towards interpreting meanings which makes them see literature as a personal experience and take responsibility of their learning.

If the purpose of learning a language is communication and literature is communication, then the two are two sides of a coin, which are not separable (Adesuyi, 1991). When people speak, read novels, newspapers, etc., language is being used to express their thoughts and experiences. The language of a people replicates their idiosyncrasy as part of an area, society or a country, which is emulated in their norms, beliefs, customs, traditions, culture, tastes and preferences. These are very well expressed in literary texts, especially fiction. A language therefore, is both a component of culture and a central network through which other components are expressed (Lado, 1964).

Experts are of the firm opinion that the knowledge of literature primarily prepares the foundation for language learning. Literature does not confine its area to entertainment, but enhances students' general use of language since communication takes place all the time in literature.

The learners gain knowledge of universal themes such as love, war, loss, etc. that are not covered in the language learning curriculum but only through literature. The learner accomplishes manifold through literature as: cultural assimilation or acculturation; language development and competence; conflict resolution; a good liberal education and development of desired and desirable attributes.

The experts in various universities have realized its importance and incorporated literature even in the engineering disciplines so that the integration of both language and literature can enable the learners to learn ESL effectively.

However, this system is beset with a number of problems. First and foremost, as no specific number of periods is allocated to Literature in English, the teachers are faced with the problem of balancing the time allocation for the two aspects of the new subject at the engineering level. Secondly, deriving from the first problem, teachers at this level of education, do not normally give enough attention to the literature aspect of the subject in the engineering first year class as many of them do not even know the rationale behind merging the two. The fact that Literature-in-English and English language are twin subjects, which if taught together, enhance the understanding of other subjects (medium is English) and also widen the scope of reasoning of students in their world view is lost on them.

In India, Literature-in-English is treated as a separate subject. That is why English language is prescribed as a general subject for all students at senior secondary level of education and Literature-in-English is restricted to only Art students. To ensure correct understanding of English language, science and engineering students should be offered Literature-in-English.

Probable scenario and challenges in learning ESL through Literature:

On these two concepts, we have reached to a conclusion that language is an instrument of communication, which facilitates two or more persons to set up and sustain a relationship, while literature is a means of communication through which peoples' culture is transmitted from offspring to offspring. The close connection between literature (cultural and societal heritage) and language is obvious from the fact that the former is usually written in a language. However, in today's global business world, language learners see language as a set of transactions, which is different from literature. This belief has barred learners from seeing language as part of literature. The implication of this is that learning of language as an enterprise is now seen as an ascending task because the literature, which is supposed to provide the fundamentals of language, is given secondary role and recognition, which indeed is affecting the proficiency of learners in oral and written aspects of language.

This further strengthens the concept that using literature to teach language will definitely attract some benefits for both the learner and the teacher. The use of literature often encourages motivation in the classroom. The learner's sense of involvement and participation is further developed as the affective area of the learner is strengthened through literature.

The learning ESL through literature exposes the learner to the culture of the native speakers of the language. Such awareness helps learners to see the nucleus of human situations that can occur cross-culturally. Frequent extensive reading widens the prospect of the reader in terms of vocabulary and usage, which invariably promotes thoughts. It is worthy to mention that the benefits of learning ESL using literature in a language class should not be limited to the English class but to all the language classes.

Some problems do creep in from using literature to teach language if certain precautions are not taken. The teacher must choose literary texts of literature that the learners find easy and

interesting. Therefore, selection of literary texts has to be meticulous done to capture the interest of the reader (learner) that eventually lead the students to discover language features. They should be chosen to serve as a facilitator for creative communicative post-reading activities.

The job of teaching language through literature becomes challenging for the modern teachers. The teaching strategies and the manner in which the teacher handles the literature class also play a vital role to motivate the students with the positive attitude towards the subject. Since literature is language in action, the teacher must focus on intensive and extensive reading in the class to ensure that the learners understand the text well. The integration of literature with other language arts activities as well as the interactive nature of the program makes this approach more interesting than most traditional courses.

Conclusion

The article has explained that the ESL can be learnt through literature effectively as the learners consider language as an important human heritage and is precious to the personal and social well-being of the speakers of the language. The status of ESL among learners is not satisfactory therefore the author has made a seminal attempt to examine the place of literature in the teaching of English as a second language, which till last decade constitutes a problematic subject area and how literature can be used in the teaching of language in order to bring out better performance in the students.

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