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Teaching ESL Literature: Developing Moral Values

Dr. Aparna Chakraborty
Associate Professor,
West Bengal Education Service.

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Abstract:

Teachers are representatives of an academic subject who must themselves work to understand the knowledge, traditions, and terminology of the subjects they teach and work towards representing this knowledge usefully and in an understandable manner to their students. Teaching is a ‘thoughtful’ and ‘thought provoking’ profession. Teaching Literature to young learners can be done in ways that can help in intellectual and moral development. The author enumerates the role of literature in developing character as discussed by Mathew Arnold and T.S. Elliot. In this paper, the author discusses approaches and activities that can be used in the ESL classroom to foster critical thinking, reflective abilities and ethical values.

Keywords: Thoughtful Teaching, critical thinking, reflective abilities, ethical values.

Introduction

Teaching is a ‘thoughtful’ profession. There are two important aspects of teaching as a job. The first is that, teaching is essentially an intellectual exercise. Teachers are representatives of an academic subject who must themselves work to understand the knowledge, traditions, and terminology of the subjects they teach and work towards representing this knowledge usefully and in an understandable manner to their students. Teaching is a thought-provoking job which demands a lot of problem-solving and decision-making. But, when we usually use the word ‘thoughtful’ as an adjective, we are describing persons who are empathetic, considerate of others’ feelings, kind, reassuring, comforting, encouraging, etc. Such persons can see life from the perspective of another and say and do the right things when we most need that help and support. A person is called ‘thoughtless’ when he is insensitive or hurtful even when his actions can be justified on logical and scientific grounds.

Teaching can never be completely ‘thoughtless’ in the first sense of the term. While teaching, a teacher must be aware of who or how he or she teaches and plan the activities accordingly. Teaching is an inescapably intellectual activity. But teaching as a thoughtful activity - as being genuinely caring about children and teaching them to care is paid less attention. Too often the intellectual mission of schooling is cast in opposition to the social and personal dimensions of life in classrooms: excellence vs equity, rigorous standards vs social promotion, tough-mindedness vs tender-heartedness, competition vs cooperation, rational-scientific vs intuitive, personal ways of knowing. The intellectual and relational aspects of teaching are both vital and when they complement each other, learning becomes more complicated but interesting. This happens when literature is used effectively to teach values.

For centuries, the Bible was considered the ultimate literary text that provided wise solutions to life’s troubles, as were the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. When Flaubert said ‘Read in order to live’ he was suggesting that books and literature can teach us about ethics and the human existence in its intimate and universal aspects, as well as help us understand the follies and appreciate the achievements of our own epoch. With the advent of the Age of the Printed Book, the role of literature in moral instruction came to the fore and was appreciated while the clergy criticized literature as subversive. However, there was always the consensus that literature could be a source of answers to be found regarding the moral way of life.

One cannot doubt that literary characters and the fictionalized accounts of their problems have influenced and shaped the lives of countless generations of readers, whether it is Hamlet’s dilemma or King Lear asking for forgiveness of his daughter, Cordelia, or the tales of Ruskin Bond. They have been inspired to think, judge and react. Many literary critics, from Mathew Arnold to T.S. Eliot speak of the power of moral education through literary study. It was believed that the Author’s voice shaped the readers’ attitude towards a character and influenced his personality and the more one read, the more one began to discriminate and read critically.

In this paper, readers are first introduced to a definition of literature. Then the character-building role of literature as one of the reasons for teaching it is described and finally, some ways in which literature teaching can be used to develop critical thinking on the one hand and personality and character on the other are enumerated.

What is Literature?

The literary world is regarded as an amalgamation of fact and fiction. The factual elements tend to remain subordinate to fictional elements. In all traditional genres of lyric, epic, drama there is a reference to a world of fiction, of imagination. Literature creates a new imaginary world and this distinguishes it from other kinds of writing. Therefore, more specifically and for the purpose of this paper, Literature can be broadly and commonly defined as a body of texts (both written and oral) that are the works of a creative or imaginative mind i.e. works of fiction.

Moral Education and Literature: Mathew Arnold and T.S. Elliot

It seems appropriate that the discussion on moral education through the teaching of literature should begin with Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth century writer and cultural critic, who was also an Inspector of Schools for around thirty years in late nineteenth century. Mathew Arnold turned to great literature as a source of inspiration for the highest ideals as literature usually deals with complex moral dilemmas encountered by characters in their attempt to resolve issues faced by them. It is clear that in Arnold's position there is a departure from the concept of morality as something that is an exclusive domain of the divine. Arnold believed in moral instruction for children studying in public schools. He had investigated the educational systems in France, Germany and other European countries, and often criticized English popular education for doing little 'to touch children's nature for good and to mould them' (Arnold, 1912) and emphasized in his reports on schools that 'men needed to be moralized'. This objective would be best served through a study of literature, particularly poetry, which he believed engaged feeling and imagination.

T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, criticized Arnold's agnostic attitude. In *Religion and Literature* (1932), Eliot criticizes liberal attitudes towards contemporary literature, which he characterized as 'corrupted by secularism'. Eliot gives reasons for his criticism. He believed that the Author's Voice in the text influenced the Reader's moral personality and influenced the Reader to behave in a certain way. However, as we move on to the reading of several texts, we encounter the Voices of several Authors, and this helps us to compare the positions and read texts critically.

To this day, the debate regarding the role of literature in moral education remains a dominant tradition in the western philosophical thinking on moral values. It still affects numerous assessments and decisions for the place of literature in education in national curricula and cultural debate.

Role of Literature in Building Character

The study of literature provides a foundation for developing interpersonal skills and empathetic understanding (Ghosn 2001). Literature helps learners to enter into the minds of others when they ‘see’ through the eyes of the author and the characters he creates. As they ‘uncover’ the meaning, they learn to make judgments based on moral discriminations and develop their own personal philosophies.

One reason that Carter and Long (1991) provide for using literature in the classroom is what they call the Personal Growth Model. Teachers teaching literature with this purpose in mind try to help students achieve an engagement with the reading of literary texts. This helps students to develop a love for reading literature and an enjoyment that helps them to engage with literature throughout their lives. What is imparted here is a lasting pleasure in reading and a deep satisfaction in a continuing growth of understanding. Through this understanding of the world around them, students grow as individuals as well as in their relationships with people and institutions around them.

Recently, there is a lot of interest in Character development. The purpose of Character Development based curricula is to teach children about some essential character traits that help to build a good and noble character. It is a deliberate effort to develop ‘core virtues that are worthy for the individual and society as a whole’. (Almerico 2014) One way in which character education can be done is to make it part of reading and language teaching program by using ‘appropriate’ literature i.e. literary texts that can be used by teachers to facilitate the development of critical thinking and decision making skills.

“Literature is an act of creation born out of delight and exaltation.” (Barnet 1996) It has been argued that the creator of a literary work is in a state of exaltation during the process of creation which provides moral and intellectual elevation and consequently enables them to hand over to the readers a genuine piece of art. In Barnet’s (1996) opinion, “poets, dramatists, and story tellers find or impose a shape on scenes...giving readers things to value.” Consequently,

the readers too experience moral and intellectual transcendence in the process of reading a genuine piece of literature. In literature the world is depicted as a place where there is some imbalance in values where the forces of Good and Evil are in conflict and disharmony which results in humanity suffering at the hands of social, political and moral injustices. The reader's moral questions and sympathies are aroused and this brings about a reformation of moral allegiances. For this very reason, educationists in the past as well as present considered the reading of literature "a way of making people better human beings" (Showalter 2004). Literature helps us to identify what is best in our character and motivates us to contribute positively to the world around us. Literature gives the reader an experience that is pleasurable and elevates and transforms it. It also functions as a continuing criticism of prevailing values and aims at creating a better society than the one in which we live. In other words literature gives knowledge and understanding which is why it is considered an important component of education.

The transactional theory is explained by Rosenblatt (1994) as a process of reading that leads to a 'transactional relationship' between a reader and a poem. The events that take place in a literary text make readers react to them in uniquely different ways, depending on their schemata or background knowledge. Activation of these schemata not only assists in improvement of comprehension but also individual interpretations. Pedagogically, this means that the job of the 'thinking' teacher must be to combine the intellectual and affective aspects of the reader's response in such a manner that the learner-reader critically reflects on the issue and arrives at a moral judgment.

There are a number of approaches used to teach literature. Diana Hwang & Amin Embi (2007) has discussed six: information-based approach, language-based approach, personal response approach, paraphrastic approach, stylistic approach and moral-philosophical approach. The moral-philosophical is an approach which incorporates moral values across curriculum. The focus of this approach is to discover moral values while reading a particular literary text (Diana Hwang & Amin Embi 2007). It seeks to find the worthiness of moral and philosophical considerations behind one's reading (Rosli 1995).

Advocates of literature testify to its usability and value in the reading. Collie and Slater (1987) claim that 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.

To foster ethical reflection in the English literature classroom and intellectually stimulate him to think critically, the teacher must attempt to answer many questions. How can literature be used for character building without reducing the teaching to moralizing which most adolescents today detest? How can readers be taught to respond to a text objectively? How can students learn to map out the moral vector of a literary character?

Here, three strategies that can be used to teach values through literature have been discussed:

a) **Mapping Morally Pivotal Points:**

Bohlin (2005) provides a method of entering a literary text-she provides ‘a set of lenses and questions’ that help a learner reader derive insightful perspectives and be instructed by a fictional character’s moral choices, thus indirectly shaping their own characters. It aims to develop ‘moral attentiveness ethical reflection and refined judgment’ (Bohlin 2005). Morally pivotal points are transformational episodes that result in a fictional character reassessing his life and what he wants to make of it. A student is taught to pinpoint such instances in the narrative, question the reasons why certain decisions are taken and thus identify factors that help or hinder moral growth with the help of tables that they are required to complete.

b) **Developing Decision-Making Abilities through Discussion:**

An instructional strategy that can be used when learners need to share feelings is Discussion. The discussion themes should usually have no right or wrong answers and teachers need to ensure that learners share their points of view in a safe environment so that they can open up and believe that what they say will be heard without criticism, Students thus gain an ‘empathetic consideration of other points of view’. In this way their own moral beliefs are shaped in a positive manner. For example, the ideas/concepts of Duty vs Desire in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost can be discussed using the following steps:

- The teacher will share the themes i.e. Duties vs Responsibilities with the group, giving some examples such as the dilemma faced by Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra.
- Teacher will act as facilitator as discussion among students begins. Students will be asked to give examples- from real life as well as fictional ones.

- All comments, negative or positive, are addressed directly to the question or issue, not to another person's comments. Only one person speaks at a time, while everyone else listens.
- All students are invited to participate and reminded that listening by others should not be judgmental.
- Finally students can be asked to write a paragraph on their response to the theme.

c) **Using Reflective Journals.**

A reflective journal is one that helps to read and think in a reflective and critical manner. A Reading log is a kind of reflective writing that records a reader's reflections as he reads a text. The reader thus 'stands back' and makes a critical judgment. It helps the reader to organize his reactions to the text read. How can a teacher use a reflective journal to foster critical thinking? After reading a chosen chapter of novel students may be asked to note down and reflect on some of the following questions:

- Select one of the characters in the chapter and list 5 adjectives that describe his/her appearance and behavior in that chapter. Support each idea with a quote from the text.
- Which character did you like and why.
- Describe how you would react if you were one of the characters
- Describe something that confused you, made you wonder or surprised you.
- Predict the actions of a particular character.
- State a phrase or sentence that you liked and explain why you liked it.

An indirect approach was suggested by Saye (1998) and Treadway (1995) in which it was suggested that the focus should be on fostering skills and attitudes without committing oneself to a specific conclusion. Teachers can ask questions to stimulate students to think of options to guide them to a deeper understanding and arriving at a 'thoughtful' conclusion. Thus, students not only learn to think critically but also in an autonomous manner learning to arrive at an understanding that is based on respect for a more different opinion.

The use of literary texts in moral education is not new. Several writers and philosophers like Locke, Arnold, and T. S. Eliot have highlighted the correlation between moral education and

literature. Advantages of some kind of Value Education in the school curriculum have always been advocated. Not only does it encourage students to discuss conflicting sides of issues but also allow students to handle aggressive behavior. Values are essential if we are to live in harmony in society.

Stories have traditionally been considered to have an important role in spiritual development. A discussion of differing perspectives in stories can assist development of an enhanced understanding of the characters in their different social roles. Classroom conversations may lead to better understanding of texts. Of course, much depends upon the preparedness and ability of the teacher to handle discussions in the classroom.

Conclusion

Does reading literature make the reader more moral? Definitely no. The Nazis were great lovers of Sophocles and Shakespeare. However, it does teach readers to explore and engage with other people's feelings and intentions – an ability that is important in today's multicultural world where one is often intolerant of others. This can help to 'stimulate people's thinking ability over time in ways which will enable them to use more adequate and complex reasoning patterns to solve moral problems. (Kohlberg 1977) It is through this process of engagement and exploration that readers can shape their own moral perceptions.

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