

Problems faced by Teachers in the Teaching-learning situation of English literature with special reference to the use of Stylistics at the Degree Level

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Abstract:

Teaching-learning situation of English in the non-native context gives rise to many practical difficulties. As the level of understanding differs in a heterogeneous classroom particularly in rural and sub-urban context where majority of the students belong to vernacular background, teaching of English in the degree level is a daunting task.

Keywords: heterogeneous, non-native, literature-centric, vernacular.

Introduction:

Ideally the study of literature supports and complements the language and communication skills of the learner. But an indiscriminate literary course for one and all, whatever the level at which English is taught, is hardly calculated to serve the needs of India. There should be a healthy balance between literature –heavy learning and extreme language only orientation in our colleges because in the changing global context English language must be taught as a means of communication rather than as a mere study of literature. The general poor response as well as performance of students in literature classes in English points clearly to the facts that a good deal needs to be done to make classes interesting, interactive and productive.

Teaching literature in a non-native context is a complex enterprise and its objectives should specify the following skills-a) an ability to respond appropriately to all literatures in English b) an ability to analyze responses to English literature c) an ability to place English literature in the wider social, cultural and historical context and d) an ability to derive pleasure from the study of English literature.

OBJECTIVE

This paper attempts to address different problems related to teaching-learning situation of English literature at the degree level in the Indian context.

PROBLEMS OF TEACHING-LEARNING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE:

Teaching English literature to speakers of other languages who are not the native speakers of English can give rise to several problems. Some of them are – what to teach- fiction, drama, poetry or all of them, which portion or portions to teach-e.g. If one were to teach poetry would it include Langland, Chaucer, Milton, all the way to Yeats, Auden and Philip Larkin; then how to teach it- use the Richardsian method and all that it involves- treating a literary text as an autonomous entity, giving importance to close reading and examination of the four constitutive factors of sense, feeling, tone and purpose or the traditional way- annotating, explaining and evaluating the given poem not in any particular sequence but all together or the more recent stylistic way, bringing to bear on the given poem some of the insights which modern linguistics has made available. The attempt is made to bring out somehow the peculiar effect a literary piece, especially a poem has on the reader through interplay of such factors on the reader as diction, figures of speech, imagery and sound pattern.

In this regard we are not helped by the syllabuses either. Most existing syllabuses in literature, like those for general compulsory English, describe the number of papers to be taken at the end of the course and list the texts prescribed for detailed and non-detailed study. However in the case of major/honours courses (Eng.), there is an arrangement in the choice of books. This arrangement is normally done according to either literary form, for periods or major authors in literature. So the lists of books are in chronological series and cover at the most important forms or include the most easily identified “Classics” of English. What this points to is that all these texts are chosen by some arbitrary decisions about their difficulty level and the students’ preparedness for them. Further, no explicit statement is provided of what the student, say, at the B.A level, is expected to do with the knowledge he acquires of the works and related commentary. In this regard Randolph Quirk refers to the experience of a young American teacher, John B. Shaw, who taught English in one of the universities in South India, and who rightly asks:

“Why must these men and women of Tamil Nadu read turgid late 19th century essays, packed with trivial allusions to London streets, Victorian dress, and English birds, and written in a prose style as difficult to read as it is useless emulate?” (A Report on English Teaching in India, University College, London).

Literary texts from culturally different locations, namely British, American or other regions, offer special challenges while preparing the students with language sense and literary appreciation skills. The learner's background at all stages of education offers special challenges because of large class conditions and heterogeneous groups of learners. Green (1993) also draws attention to the fact that the teacher must recognize that in “large teacher centered classes; students have little opportunity to deliver enough output to be judged fairly or receive constructive feedback to enhance feelings of security and success.” Indian classrooms being especially ‘large teacher centered’ ones the need is to help / support the emotional state of the learners that is so vital to the language learning situations.

With the introduction of CBCS (choice based credit system) the syllabus for most Universities are more or less same. The syllabus of compulsory English courses at UG level (Arts) for General students sans Honours is heavily literature-centric which makes learning of English as a language principally meant for use in real life situations difficult. As for e.g. we can here refer to the degree First and second semester syllabus for General English (G.U) which includes drama like *All My Sons*, or a lesson as difficult as D.H.Lawrence's *The Women Who Rode Away* or poems like Nissim Ezekiel's *Shilong* or David Constantine's *House* or a Poem as lengthy and difficult as *Christabel* by Coleridge. Similarly for Alternative English students the syllabus is heavily literary in content which includes for instance Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or a Novel like *Emma* or a poem like *Marina* by T.S.Eliot. No doubt the literary values of these pieces are very high but content is difficult for average students to comprehend. Again motivation level of the students is very low in a general English classroom.

STYLISTIC APPROACH AND TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Stylistics offers us precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions to proceed from them to interpretations. And these descriptions are verifiable and rigorous like the descriptions of science where subjectivism and impressionism is not allowed. Only after description we move to interpretation, which means not the paraphrase meaning but the effect of the text. Stylisticians usually analyze literary texts using the tools of linguistics. In principle stylistic analysis can be performed on non-literary texts but it is a fact that most stylisticians work on literature.

Thus at one and the same time stylistics is applied linguistics (it applies the tools and methodology of linguistic description). In general stylisticians say that literature is written in language and so linguistics should be able to help us understand literary texts and how we manage to understand them in the ways that we do. The aim of stylistics is to arrive at an objective account of form and meaning.

Now if we want to use stylistic approach in the teaching of literature in India, the teacher should first of all possess certain qualities which are as follows-

- 1) The teacher should be aware of stylistics to begin with.
- 2) Should see teaching-learning as a collaborative activity. There has to be co-operation between teacher and students and amongst students themselves. Teacher should be ready to consider the suggestion of the students.
- 3) Should insist students to have a copy of the text required. Much importance is attached to the actual reading of the text.
- 4) Should welcome individual responses. Even a wrong response should be welcomed because it shows student's involvement and effort in the text.

Similarly students are also expected to possess certain qualifications-they should be more active by reading text, thinking about their own responses, should be attentive to the responses by other students.

In the stylistic approach a lot of importance is attached to the language of the text. Most of the Indian students have linguistic difficulties. We are not as sensitive to the use of language, as the native speakers. Tendency to literal interpretation or surface meaning of the word is dominant in the Indian students. As we know, there are two levels of meaning-one is denotative concerned with literal, word by word meaning, and the other is the connotative or suggested or implied meaning. Indian students are likely to be guided by surface or broad meaning.

Study of the text is given the utmost importance in stylistic approach. Paraphrase can never be a substitute for a text. There is some kind of inner compulsion in an author, which makes him write in a particular way. So paraphrase cannot present before us that individuality of the author. But in reality what we find is that students come to major classes, without having any text with them. And those few who come with texts to the class actually brings Ramjilal's, Tilak's or Mundra's version of the original text with paraphrase. Stylistics favours individual responses as

opposed to stock responses. But without actually reading the text, possibility of individual response is limited and the response which is based on "told" meaning is likely to be stock. In the present examination oriented system most students are caged prisoners, they live in a limited world, depending on the meaning "told" by the teacher.

Again majority of the Indian student's problem is related with the recognition of different styles. So there arises the problem with interpreting or evaluating a text because of this. Majority of the Students are insensitive to the subtle nuances and shades of meaning of language. This is a genuine kind of difficulty because in an average Indian classroom we teach only formal style.

What goes on in most Indian classrooms (especially colleges with rural background and where majority of the students come from regional medium background) in the name of teaching English literature is extremely counter-productive, even harmful because if literature has to be a source of real joy, and a means of refining one's sensibilities it must be so taught as to make students experience and enjoy it on their own. This could be possible only if they had the necessary skills of analyzing and interpreting it. But analysis and interpretation presupposes a certain level of understanding based on requisite degree of linguistics competence. It is here that the so-called English literature class in an average Indian college becomes either a pathetic exercise in make-belief or an exercise in sheer farcicality. The purpose of teaching is to make students understand as well as to make them independent. But the purpose of the

system is defeated. It wrongly makes student think that they know or learned literature.

Granting these difficulties, stylistics still has some usefulness. We cannot ignore it totally, whatever may be the situation. We can ask students to make frequent use of dictionary to understand the deeper level meaning of a particular word. Moreover stylistics can take students back to the text, making students aware of the importance of close and frequent reading of the text. The teacher can use this approach to certain extent using his/her own discretion even with weak students.

CONCLUSION

We can sum up by saying that the courses for literature should be offered under properly planned divisions of the syllabus into units and sub-units to ensure conscious learning of language structures and an insight into how the same could be used for producing connected compositions in oral and written discourses.

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