

Teaching Reading Using a Literary Text in the English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to present a sample module on teaching reading skills using an excerpt from a novel by the Indian English writer, Manju Kapur. The paper examines the theoretical perspectives on using literature in the language classroom and then goes on to discuss the sub-skills approach to teaching the reading skill. Based on these theoretical perspectives, the literary text is chosen and the module is designed, taking into consideration the target learners and the skills to be focused on.

Keywords: Language Through Literature, Literature in the Language Classroom, Teaching Reading Through Literature.

Using Literature in the Language Classroom

The English classroom has often been a site for experimentation, with different schools of language teaching experts proposing various materials and methods to make language teaching effective. One of the most contentious issues in the English classroom has been the issue of using literature in the language classroom. As Fitch O'Connell, BritLit Manager, ironically points out: "Literature. Quite a divisive word, that. Throw it through an open window into a room full of language teachers and most will dive behind furniture, fingers in their ears and looks of horror on their faces." (O'Connell NA)

Arguments Against the Use of Literature

Many arguments may be used to make a strong case against the use of literature in the language classroom. There are a number of

methodological reasons advanced against the inclusion of literature in the language classroom.

The primary argument against the inclusion of literature in the language classroom is that literature is irrelevant to the learners. It is too far removed from the experiences of the average language learner who cannot relate to the experiences described in the literary piece that he/she is asked to read. Closely linked to this argument is the point that the language of the literary text is far too complex and intimidating for the average language learner to make sense of. The next argument that may be advanced against the use of literature is that while the English language classroom should encourage the practice of all the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, literature prioritises reading and writing over the other skills. Also, the use of literature disturbs the teacher-student equation in the classroom. While CLT and

other allied methodologies are in favour of a student-centric classroom, the use of literature would make the classroom teacher-centred, as the teacher would evidently know more about the literary text than the student.

Sandra McKay, in her article *Literature in the ESL Classroom* published in TESOL Quarterly, summed up the arguments against the use of literature in the language classroom in the following words:

First, since one of our main goals as ESL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. Second, the study of literature will contribute nothing to helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. Finally, literature often reflects a particular cultural perspective; thus, on a conceptual level, it may be quite difficult for students. (Mackay 1982)

Arguments in Favour of Using Literature in the Language Classroom

However, many ELT theoreticians and practitioners have made a case in favour of the use of literature in the English classroom. Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater, in their book *Literature in the Language Classroom*, list the following four reasons for the inclusion of literature in language teaching curriculum – valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement (Collie and Slater 1987). Alan Maley, in his article *Down from the Pedestal: Literature as Resource*, includes the following as reasons for the inclusion of literature as resource material in

the language classroom: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power. and ambiguity (Maley 1989).

Criteria for the Choice of Literary Material

However, all these theoreticians have emphasised that the English language teacher or instructor should be very careful in the choice of literary pieces to be used in the classroom. The material should be chosen after careful consideration of the language skill that is going to be taught, the relevance of the text to the target learners, and the exploitability of the text itself for teaching the particular skill that is focused on.

Reading Skill

As the focus of the paper is on teaching reading, it is important to understand the various theoretical perspectives about this particular skill. Almost all ELT theoreticians and practitioners agree that reading is a very important skill. Jo McDonough and Christopher Shaw sum up the importance of reading in their book *Materials and Methods in ELT*: “As a skill, reading is clearly one of the most important.” (McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara 2013)

Sub-Skills of Reading

Though there is little difference of opinion among theoreticians about the importance of reading, there is much else about the skill that is debated upon. The reading skill itself can be broken down into a set of sub skills. Urquhart and Weir, in their book *Reading in a Second Language*, state “if reading itself is a skill, it must be possible to break this

down into different level of component skill categories.” (Urquhart and Weir 1998). There is no agreement among theoreticians about these component skills, which have been variously called sub skills, or micro skills. F.B. Davis (1968) states that there are eight sub skills, while Munby (1978), in his book on *Communicative Syllabus Design*, identified 19 sub skills which were required to develop the reading skill. Heaton (1988) lists 14, while Hughes (1989) categorises them under four groups of skills.

There are other theoreticians (Oller 1979, Lunzer, Waite and Dolan 1979, Rost 1993) who challenge the entire sub skill view and state that reading is a single or unitary skill which cannot be sub divided into component skills.

Contentious though the issue is, most ELT practitioners fall in line with the sub skill view, perhaps because teaching sub skills is more manageable in the English classroom. Although, as stated earlier, lists vary, it is generally agreed that prediction, global comprehension or reading for gist, scanning, intensive reading, reading to make inferences and extensive reading are some of the component skills of reading.

Sample Module to Teach Reading Using an Excerpt from Literature

With the criteria mentioned earlier in mind, a sample module using a literary excerpt has been designed and presented in this paper. The skill that has been chosen is reading.

The following sample activities have been designed using a literary excerpt to teach reading. The text chosen is an excerpt from

the novel, *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur (2008), a contemporary novelist. (The excerpt chosen is provided in the appendix).

This excerpt is chosen as its narrative is well within the ambit of the Indian students’ experience and they can relate very well with it. They have also gone through schooling in India and have experienced the angst of making choices regarding their future course of study. Many of them have had similar experiences as the character in the excerpt, of not scoring enough to take up the courses of their dreams and forced to settle for their second or third options. Many of them can also easily relate to the idea of parents and relatives playing a big role in making the decisions on what to study on their behalf. The excerpt also fulfils other criteria such as readability, as it does not have complex language structures which would be challenging for low proficient learners in a heterogeneous classroom and can be exploited to practise various language skills.

The target learners for whom this module has been designed are from the first year engineering stream (though it could be used with students of any professional discipline, preferably those in the first year, who would be able to relate the narrative to their own recent experiences. The text may also be used with students of later semesters with a different set of activities.).

The skills that are focused on are reading, along with incidental teaching of vocabulary and writing as an extended activity. The sub skills approach is adopted here with separate focus on scanning, intensive reading and reading to make inferences.

Pre-Reading

Before distributing the excerpt for reading, a warm up activity for ten minutes is planned. The students are asked to imagine themselves back in school during their 10th standard: What did they look like? What was their uniform like? Who were their friends? Who were their teachers? What was their daily routine like?

What were some of the words of advice their parents gave them often? After giving them a couple of minutes to recollect these details, they are asked to jot down these facts.

Then the students are asked to write down the following bits of information about themselves. This table may be provided to them as an aid.

Courses available to them in 11th class	Courses chosen by them	Reasons for their choice	Courses they would choose if given a second chance	Reasons for revised choice

The students are asked to discuss in small groups of three or four their choices and the reasons for their choices. They are then asked to make a list of common reasons for choices made by students in general in their context. Finally, there is a general class discussion on what are the factors that influence career options of students in India.

This warm up activity helps the learners to become comfortable with the literary text chosen as it calls attention to the fact that it narrates an experience that is familiar to them. It also helps them to reasonably predict that the excerpt that they are about to read is connected to the educational system in India.

While Reading

After this warm up activity, the excerpt from the novel is distributed for reading. Reading may be done at three levels. The first level would be comprehension of the text at the literal level. The students would then move to the next level which would involve making inferences from the text. After the students have read and understood the text at both these levels they would be ready to evaluate the text. This should stimulate them to think beyond the text both imaginatively and critically.

In order to facilitate the comprehension of the text at the literal level, the following worksheet may be used. This should take about ten minutes.

Worksheet 1

- Find words in the passage which mean the following. The number of the paragraph in which the word may be found is given in brackets:
 - commendable (3)
 - misfortunes (5)
 - having assets / ready money (6)
 - travelled (8)
 - inculcate / teach while bringing up (9)
 - satisfaction of one's desires (10)
 - independence (11)
 - meagre (12)

- i. put up with (12)
- j. ultimate (12)
- k. weak and defenseless (14)
- l. compassion and understanding (14)
- m. asset given as security at bank to obtain a loan (15)

2. From the information given in the excerpt, fill in the following biodata sheet of Ananda.

Name:	Place of birth:
Father's name:	State:
Father's occupation:	Educational qualification:
Mother's name:	College of study:
Mother's occupation:	Internship:
Number of siblings:	Career:

3. Read the given excerpt and decide which of the adjectives given in the box would fit Ananda and which would fit his parents. Some may fit both and some may not fit either. (Use a dictionary if necessary.)

ambitious, diligent, obedient, concerned, imposing, conforming, rebellious, contented, respectable, dutiful, devoted, money minded, insecure, unreasonable, responsible, narrow minded, broad minded, single minded, pliable, reasonable	
Ananda	Ananda's parents

This worksheet is graded from simple to complex and helps the learners practise the different sub skills. The vocabulary exercise helps the learners understand the meanings of the given words in context which in turn contributes to an overall understanding of the text. The datasheet focuses on the scanning skill, looking for specific details about the persona in the reading excerpt. The third exercise involves the more complex skill of

intensive reading to comprehend the personality traits of the various characters in the excerpt.

After students understand the text at the literal level, they move on to make inferences from the text. The following worksheet may be used at this level. This would require 15 minutes with each statement being discussed for its implications.

Worksheet 2

What are the inferences that may be drawn from the following statements in the text?

1. Her lack of academic brilliance was compensated by the genius she exhibited in choosing her partner.

2. It was the first disappointment he had known in anything that had to do with reproducing large amounts of memorised material.

3. His hand was deft, but with patients,

strangers after all, his conversation was hesitant, his demeanour bashful.

This exercise would require the learners to discuss the underlying implications of the statements in the text and draw inferences regarding the social, educational and employment contexts prevalent in the country. These inferences can also whet the learners interest in thinking about socially relevant topics and sharing their ideas.

Post-Reading

After the students are able to make inferences from the text, they may be led to think beyond the text. At this stage, students may be led to do a critical writing activity (which would seamlessly move on to the writing skill) or a debate (which would integrate the speaking skill) on various topics such as the need for reform in the educational system in India and the social prejudices for and against certain domains of study. The text may also be used to stimulate creative writing (suggested topics: Imagine what circumstances might have led Ananda to go abroad? / Write a dialogue between Dr Chandra and Ananda, with the former giving Ananda tips on how to become better at his profession.)

Scope / Limitations of the Module

The test of the pudding is in the eating. The success or lack thereof of a lesson or module depends entirely on the implementation in the actual classroom. Although this module has been designed with a specific group of target learners in mind, it is yet to be tested for its effectiveness in the actual classroom. As the module is part of an ongoing study on the

use of literature in the language classroom, it needs to undergo trial in the classroom before any claims can be made about its effectiveness. The trial, it is also hoped, would give further pointers to the design of similar modules using literary texts.

Conclusion

This sample is an attempt to show that a literary text may be exploited profitably in the language classroom to teach specific skills. The literary text is a rich resource and may be used in different ways to suit different types and levels of learners. Literature provides material like any other resource. The effectiveness of the material lies in the tasks and activities that can be planned using this material and the execution of this plan in the actual classroom.

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APPENDIX

Excerpt from *The Immigrant* by Manju Kapur

1. *Far away, on the eastern seaboard of Canada, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a young man stood at the window of his clinic and gazed at the trees lining the sidewalk. It was summer; the air was mild, the sun shining for a change. His longtime friend and partner had just walked home to his wife, child and lunch.*
2. *Eight years earlier, Ananda had been a practising dentist in small town Dehradun. Unlike many of his friends he had never dreamt of leaving India. His ambitions were simple. He wanted to make enough money to look after his parents and repay them for the time, love and hope they had invested in him.*
3. *But these exemplary aspirations were not destined to be realised.*
4. *His parents had been middle class professionals, on the lower scale of things. His mother taught at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, his father was a minor functionary at the Forest Institute. They had two children. The daughter studied at her mother’s school, and for her BA went to Miranda House, Delhi University. Her lack of academic brilliance was compensated by the genius she exhibited in choosing her partner. The boy had actually been to Doon School with Sanjay Gandhi! Now he was in the IAS, UP cadre. Success was*

- bound to crown your career when you could claim some connection with The Family.*
5. *The umbrella of this marriage would cast its shade over the young brother as well. At all times the parents were keenly aware of the potential calamities that could befall their children and a son-in-law added to their sense of security.*
 6. *Ananda was going to be a doctor. The father spent hours going over the child's lessons with him, making sure there was no question he could not answer, and the son justified this attention by winning scholarships every year. He had to be something responsible, respectable, solvent and being a doctor fit the bill. In class XII he had school in the morning, coaching classes for medical entrance exams in the afternoon and homework at night. But though he was a position holder in the science stream in the boards, he didn't score high enough in those other exams to make it to medical college. It was the first disappointment he had known in anything that had to do with reproducing large amounts of memorised material.*
 7. *Dentistry was the alternate option. The medical exam entrance forms had demanded he fill in a second choice and now he was forced to see the bright side of things. He would not have to do night shifts. He would get the same – almost the same – respect as doctors did, the same – almost the same – money, but without the insane hours. With more economy and a bank loan, he could set up private practice in*
 - Dehradun. The career of a dentist uncle in Canada was painted in glowing colours. Who knew, his future might convey him across the globe. But for the moment, a stretchable moment, he belonged to his parents.*
 8. *Dental courses ran on quotas. Ananda was from UP, so for him the obvious choice was the dental wing of King George's Hospital in Lucknow. He passed the interview, and for the five years it would take to qualify he shuttled between Dehradun and Lucknow.*
 9. *From the moment of his birth Ananda had been surrounded by ... rituals. Before he left home, his parents did their best to reinforce the practices of a lifetime. ... Boys in the college hostel might try and tempt him towards ... cigarettes and alcohol. Should he deviate from the pure habits they had instilled in him, his mother's heart would break. She assured him of this with her disturbed, devoted gaze.*
 10. *Ananda was put in a room with three boys who ... all smoked. The air was blue with the haze of constant indulgence. He breathed deeply and smelled liberation.*
 11. *From cigarettes he graduated to alcohol. As he moved from first to second to third year at King George's he found parents allowed their sons a certain autonomy if they were doing well. So, freedom went hand in hand with success. He absorbed this lesson.*
 12. *Most of his classmates aimed to go abroad. Were they to labour like donkeys for the measly sums Indian doctors*

commanded? No, never, not while they had wits to fill in applications and patience to endure the year it took to get admission. They would have to qualify again once they were abroad, borrow money for tuition and living expenses and put in even more years if they wished to specialise, but the eventual reward dwarfed these sacrifices.

13. *If the love of his parents meant that Ananda's ultimate destination lay no further than the small town he had lived in all his life, he was son enough to accept this. His parents found him an internship with a reputed dentist in Anstey Hall in Raipur Road. His future was such a well understood thing between them that discussion was not considered necessary before this was settled.*

14. *Ananda worked with Dr Chandra for two years. His hand was deft, but with patients, strangers after all, his*

conversation was hesitant, his demeanour bashful. Dr Chandra thought he would gain confidence with time, you can't be awkward around people's mouths. Dentists have to be skilled at putting patients at ease, especially since they feel vulnerable as they recline, mouths open, saliva gurgling in tubes stretching across their chins. Each file had to have notes about the client's profession, background, interests and family, so that small talk could be generated, empathy exhibited.

15. *Two years later Ananda felt he had learnt enough to be on his own. His parents broke their fixed deposits to help him set up a dentistry practice further down on Raipur Road. They applied for a one lakh loan from the State Bank of India with their house as collateral to help finance office equipment.*

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