

Teaching Literature in ESL Classrooms: Implications from Rosenblatt's Theory

Ekta Goel

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of Education,
University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Email: precious.ektagoel@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

English literature is a cornerstone of cultural history, including vital works that constitute the pinnacle of human artistic achievement. However, people think it is difficult to convey their richness and complexity to children. Many pieces of English literature are simply beyond children's ability to absorb, while others leave them bored and restless. The purpose of teaching English literature to kids is to instil in them a love of the stories and to prepare them for more thorough study as they grow older. The reader-centred approach, based on reader-response criticism, emphasizes the individual as a reader-responder. It argues that reading a literary text is part of a complex process that includes collaboration between the writer, the text, and the reader. A text is re-created every time someone reads it, and it becomes, in the process, increasingly richer. The text is a stimulus that elicits responses from us based on our past experiences, our previous reading, our thoughts, and our feelings. The present paper tries to explore how teaching literature to children at elementary school level can be made interesting. Based on theory and research it can be said that children should be taught literature not just as texts following exercises but something meant for enjoyment. In this process children automatically learn the language.

KEYWORDS

Teaching Literature; ESL Classrooms; Rosenblatt; Transactional Theory.

Introduction

Poem, novel, drama, biography, and essay- no matter what the form, literature makes alive and comprehensible to us the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers (*Literature as Exploration* 6). By teaching literature, teachers help their students understand what they read, to help them develop some critical understanding, to acquaint them with the history of literature, and to give them some insights into the literary forms. Literature is meant for enjoyment and learning

language is a hidden agenda. From vicarious experiences, children develop social sensitivity, learn about different cultures and hence learn the language. In the contemporary English classrooms, use of literature is becoming obsolete and is sometimes limited to teaching chapters in the textbooks. The term 'lesson' is commonly used in place of chapters which reflect the morality aspect imbued in these chapters. The present paper tries to make an attempt to explore the area of children's literature and talk about some of the ways in which literature teaching can be made interesting in ESL classrooms. The paper is

based on theoretical underpinnings mostly of Louis M. Rosenblatt, who did pioneer work in this field. The paper is divided mainly, in four sections: the contemporary situation of ESL classrooms vis a vis literature teaching, why literature should be taught, theoretical aspects of literature teaching, and implications for ESL classrooms.

Literature Teaching In ESL Classrooms

From my varied experiences, I have observed that literature teaching is limited to textbooks. It follows a very monotonous process. The teacher reads aloud the chapter or the poem and translates it into the first language. Then, the students are asked to answer the questions given at the back of every chapter. The questions are usually information based. In this whole process, children start losing interest in literature and the language itself. The sole purpose of enjoyment is lost somewhere in the hustle and bustle of completing the prescribed number of chapters. The chapters mostly revolve around moralization. Thus, literature has been made merely a handmaiden of the social studies, or a body of documents illustrating moral points or sociological generalizations. It is seldom seen that children pick up a book of their own choice and start reading it just for the enjoyment sake. Their reading is limited to their syllabi books. It is a brute reality that in today's world of competition, students thus, remain deprived of the many benefits that literature can bring in their personality, social adjustments and language development.

Contributions of Louis M. Rosenblatt

Although a lot of researchers in the west have done work in this area, Rosenblatt's seminal work is the one which gave a new direction to literature teaching. Rosenblatt's focus on the uniqueness of a particular, momentary transaction has become known as the "transactional

theory" (1969) which proposes that the meaning of a text derives from a transaction between the text and the reader within a specific context. According to her, Literature provides a living through, not simply knowledge about, not information that lovers have died young and fair, but a living-through of *Romeo and Juliet*; not just facts about Rome, but a living-through of the tensions of *Julius Caesar* or the paradoxes of *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Her seminal work is the cornerstone of Reader Response theories.

Basically, Reader Response theories reject the New Criticism of the late 1930s through the 1950s which assumed that the texts themselves were central and that teachers were to teach the skills of close, concise, attentive analysis while discouraging the expression of and attention to differences in students' own individual responses. Thus, in the 1960's and the early 70's, there occurred a paradigm shift in the teaching of literature away from viewing the text as authority to a view that focuses on the reader's relationship with text. As Louise Rosenblatt has argued, the reading of literature is distinctive not merely because of the nature of the text, but because of the reader's approach to it. She distinguishes efferent (non-literary) reading from aesthetic (literary) reading in this way: In non-aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as a residue after the reading the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out. In aesthetic (literary) reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading event. In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.[2] This distinction is not, as Rosenblatt points out, a hard-and-fast separation, but a continuum, with most of our reading a mixture of the efferent and the aesthetic.

Why should Literature be taught?

Carefully chosen children's literature allows children to develop their receptive language in an entertaining, meaningful context and naturally invites them to repeat many of the predictable words and phrases, which they gradually take ownership of and add to their receptive and productive language. Literature can be an important means of bringing about the connection between intellectual perception and emotional drive that we have agreed to be essential to any vital learning process. Moreover, prolonged contact with literature may result in increased social sensitivity. In today's world, the sharp competition of the daily struggle for existence, nobody gets time to think too much about the feelings and needs of others. However, it cannot be denied that literature undoubtedly contributes to the diffusion of more humane sentiments. The unique ability to enter vicariously into the experience of others can be fostered by a great many different forms of literary works.

The present worlds tend to make people heartless to the needs of others. We as teachers should exploit the capacity of literature to nourish the imaginative flexibility. Literature can play an important part in the process through which the individual becomes assimilated into the cultural pattern. Manners of speech, gestures, social etiquette, as well as an image of more complex behaviour or the broader social and ethical values, can be assimilated from books. Literature not only makes possible the experience of diverse patterns of the past and present it also offers the opportunity to envisage new and more desirable patterns.

Implications for ESL Classrooms

Needless to say that literature should be meant for the enjoyment of the students. They should be exposed to wide forms of literature and various flavours of

genres. In any teaching situation, the student's preoccupations and emotional needs should be constantly brought to bear upon the problem of ensuring that the student has responded to what is actually present in the literary work. The teacher's aim is to help the students receive the full sensuous, Intellectual and emotional impact of the work. The classroom environment should be conducive so that the children can bring forth their own interpretations of a given work based on their understanding, the teacher should avoid putting the given implication in the minds of young readers. The aesthetic sense of the readers should be developed. The teacher should encourage students to read independently. While providing students with the reading material, their level of understanding should be kept in mind.

Conclusion

To summarize, it is very important to teach literature to students and provide them opportunities to explore various facets of literature. The beauty fascination aestheticism involved in literature should not be lost between the student teacher transactions.

The main aim of education is to prepare the students directly for a living; he must be able to live a happy life by developing emotional and intellectual capabilities. As language teachers, this is our prime responsibility and objective for which literature can be used as a useful tool.

Literature teaching should find new unexplored areas and practices. The new paradigm of Reader Response which is quite old in the West is still very new to our country. An attempt should be made by all language teachers to make literature teaching interesting and exploratory by using the implications of this new paradigm which is based on constructivism. In words of Rosenblatt, through literature, the reader seeks to

enter into another's experience, to glimpse the beauty and intensity that the world offers to fathom the resources of the human spirit to gain an understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible to find moulds into which to pour his own seemingly chaotic experience.

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