

The Teaching of ESL/EFL Literature at the Undergraduate Level: Quo Vadis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of past practices and current status with regard to the teaching of English literature at the undergraduate level, especially to Literature major students. It is argued that there has been very little change in the ways in which English literature has been presented to ESL/EFL students and their learning assessed. Teachers have been largely using the transmission mode to provide a biographical account of the writer and explicate the texts, even dictating notes to students. As such, students have not been involved in the process of grappling with the texts on their own. The paper establishes the urgent need for re-examining the situation and suggests future directions for the whole exercise to become relevant and meaningful to students as well as teachers.

KEYWORDS

Literature Curriculum; Literary Competence; ESL/EFL Classroom.

With regard to language teaching, “there have been too many drastic shifts of paradigm in the past” (Widdowson 1983: 34). The ‘developments’ in the field of teaching English literature over the past fifty years or so, however, have been few and sporadic. On the one hand, the place of literature in a language curriculum has been debated over and over again, and literature is now accorded a place, albeit grudgingly, in an ESL/EFL classroom. It is now recognized that literature can be used as one of the authentic resources in the language classroom along with non-literary resources like newspapers, magazines, brochures, and so on. Another

positive development has been a large number of publications that provide useful classroom techniques for using literature in the ESL/EFL classroom.

Despite these sporadic efforts, however, the teaching of English literature at the undergraduate level as the Literature Major has remained essentially the same throughout this long period – teacher-centred and teacher-directed, the literary texts being presented to students through lectures, summaries and paraphrases, with little or no involvement of students in understanding and appreciating those texts on their own.

The aim of this paper is to examine the current practices relating to the teaching of English literature at the undergraduate level and suggest the directions the field should take in future if it were to be meaningful and relevant to students and not continue to be a wasted effort, as it has been till now.

Past Practices and Current Status

The teaching of English literature to students majoring in English had seen very little change over the past several decades. In many classrooms, the teaching of literature has remained unchanged with emphasis on teacher-centred and text-directed approaches and methods (e.g., lectures; period and genre surveys; biographical summaries; teacher's explication and 'critical analyses' of canonical texts; stereotyped exam questions requiring stereotyped answers). Literary texts continue to be taught as finished products, to be unilaterally decoded, analyzed, and explained (Kramsch p. 356; cited in Harper 1988).

Such an approach tends to minimize learner involvement, engagement and participation, and undermines the value of learners' responses to literature as readers in their own right, resulting in frustration and a lack of interest and motivation on the part of learners. Most of our undergraduate students also have limited linguistic and critical-analytical skills for responding to literary texts as works of art and for articulating their experiences of reading such texts when asked to do so. For them, the course in English literature may become a "painful lesson in deciphering" (Santoni p. 434; cited in Harper 1988).

While reading literature, "students are expected, as if by osmosis, to acquire a kind of competence in reading literature" (Lazar, 1993). It may, therefore, be safely asserted that "we unfairly blame our students for difficulties that essentially stem from our own methodological

weaknesses and unrealistic expectations" (Scher p. 56; cited in Harper 1988).

The situation has also been complicated by confusion over the objective of literature teaching, whether it is increasing the language proficiency of the learners, or transmitting the cultural and social values embodied in them, or developing in the learners an adequate capacity for responding personally to literary texts, and interpreting and appreciating them appropriately.

Teachers and educational policymakers have not made sincere attempts to clarify to themselves what exactly they are seeking to develop in learners except by making vague statements, such as 'sensitizing students to great literature and developing their literary competence'. This is the central problem with literature teaching at the undergraduate level; that is, to specify the particular function of literature in the educational system in terms of specific objectives and, consequently, to spell out in no vague terms what is meant by the notion of 'literary competence' (Ramani 1986). Besides, students' attitudes and goals in terms of linguistic and literary competence are not given importance in curriculum design (Akyel and Yalcin 1990).

The literature syllabus has been hitherto spelt out only in terms of texts and historical periods; the methodology has been confined almost to lectures; and the evaluation of literary learning has only been emphasizing rote memory and reproduction of borrowed critical opinions. In other words, there has been very little reading and study of literature with clearly spelt out objectives and methodology.

The teachers of English at the undergraduate level and above have maintained that applied linguistics cannot make inroads upon literature teaching as such studies are essentially subversive and felt to be a threat to the aesthetic and

humanistic dimension of literature. These teachers would maintain that application of linguistic principles or language teaching insights would only amount to 'murdering to dissect' aesthetic artefacts and hence the whole exercise would be demotivating to students. This is not a valid assumption, as it only tends to mystify literature and thus make it inaccessible to a majority of students.

A review of published work on teaching literature brings into focus the following major issues identified by researchers, for example, Paran (2000):

1. The role of literature within the mainstream of EFL is still not firmly established despite a fairly steady stream of theoretical publications and teaching materials; For a majority of ESL/EFL teachers, literature is still not considered to be an essential element of ESL/EFL students' overall learning experience.
2. ESL/EFL teaching and the part which literature has to play within it have not been seen as part of the whole educational endeavour, but apart from it. For many years, there has been a tension between an instrumental view of literature (i.e., beneficial to language learning) and a humanistic view of the role of literature in the target language within the larger educational system.
3. The methodology to be used and its role have not been outlined clearly. Ways of exploiting a few selected poems, short stories, or novels have been suggested, but principled ways of matching appropriate methodologies to types of text have still not been proposed.

The current situation regarding the English Literature Major programme has

been summarized by Mekala (2009). Learners' needs and interests are neither documented nor considered at the time of preparation of English literature syllabuses. The students, a vast majority of whom have low proficiency in English, are exposed to challenging and often unsuitable texts, which are beyond their understanding and linguistic competence. The teacher, therefore, resorts to lecturing, explicating and translating the texts, and dictating notes.

The current practices tend to promote the content-based and memory-oriented study of literature. Classroom teaching usually consists of a long monologue by the teacher on a piece of literature, this monologue taking the form of the teacher primarily attempting to explain the meaning of the text preceded by a 'brief' introduction to the author and his works. The teacher may be much admired for his erudition or scholarship, but his lectures are little understood. As a result, students rely almost exclusively on guidebooks and resort to rote learning. The inevitable result of all of these is that the students hardly feel the necessity to have a direct encounter with the texts – they are passive listeners, and are not encouraged to react to what they read, or think critically, or do any original writing on the texts.

Moreover, the teaching and study of literature are largely exam oriented. Examinations also seek to test students' memory of reproducible content. The focus seems to be solely on passing examinations and acquiring a paper qualification. This has a negative washback effect on teaching.

It is interesting to note that, for nearly 25 years, the situation does not seem to have changed – stating clear objectives, principled selection of texts, appropriate methods and strategies of using those texts, and valid methods and tools for assessing students' literary competence (Ramani 1986).

Future Directions

From the discussion above, it is clear that there has been very little change in how English literature has been taught at the undergraduate level as a major or specialist subject of study over half a century. If the status quo were to remain, the relevance and popularity of the English literature curriculum would decline further considerably and it might continue to exist in universities and colleges, but only in a vegetative state devoid of any life. Several steps have, therefore, to be taken immediately to make literature teaching more meaningful, relevant and purposeful to the learners as well as more satisfying to the teachers.

The 'literature major' curriculum should aim at developing in the learners an adequate capacity for responding personally to literary texts, and interpreting and appreciating them appropriately. This "fundamental ability of a good reader of literature" is "the ability to generalize from the given text to either aspect of the literary tradition or personal or social significances outside literature" (Brumfit, 1985: 108). The process of reading is a process of meaning-creation by integrating one's own needs, understanding and expectations with a written text (ibid: 119).

One of the first steps is, therefore, to evolve a theoretical model of what is involved in responding to literary texts, i.e. literary competence. Literary competence is taken to refer to a complex network of procedural capacities with which a reader interacts with a literary text on the basis of shared conventions. It is the procedural capacity on the part of the reader to bring into convergence the textual patterning signalled by the writer through cues such as foregrounding and the schematic pattern in his own consciousness and thus establish coherence and meanings (Ramani 1986). In effect, this model of literary

competence should incorporate a dynamic view of discourse processing and should be relevant and useful to the reading and interpretation of literary texts.

This literary competence should be spelt out in terms of its constituent or component skills and sub-skills, similar to the attempts to spell out the dimensions of communicative competence in terms of language skills and sub-skills (Yalden 1983; CEFR 2001). Taxonomy of measurable competencies, proficiency levels and indicators should be evolved. It is worth remembering that:

in the area of literary education, the focus on competences and their assessment has to be put in the context of a broader conception of the purposes of education (Pieper 2006:6).

Another future direction should be to develop clear statements and guidelines on teaching methodology. It has been pointed out that the main orientation in literature study has been content-based and that too much energy is expended on rote learning and reproduction of isolated facts, thus rendering learning and study unnecessarily laborious. There has to be a shift of emphasis away such from episodic knowledge to conceptual relational knowledge, i.e. from the memorization of facts towards the development of a powerful and flexible set of strategies for acquiring, organizing and applying knowledge irrespective of the specific content in a text.

There is a need to examine what is really involved in the interpretation of literary discourse and consequently to explore appropriate strategies for developing the procedural competence to interpret literature. Literary texts by their very nature allow for divergent responses and hence offer enormous scope for interactive strategies to be developed in the classroom provided suitable tasks are formulated to create the required

communicative pressure. Teachers must adopt a variety of teaching methods instead of following the same route and “the students should be encouraged to play a dynamic and creative role in the literary study” (Jia and Miao 2009:18).

There should be a corresponding effort towards specifying principles of selection and grading of literary texts on the syllabus, such as proceeding from the familiar to the less familiar. If literary texts are to be used successfully, they must be carefully selected and approached in a manner which promotes an aesthetic interaction between the reader and the text. Obviously, the teacher has to make choices about what is to be read by students, what sort of assistance the students need *before* and *while* they are reading, and what type of *follow-up* exercises to give.

If we are talking about helping students to read, we need to look at what we are talking about in the classroom from the teacher’s, not the academic’s point of view (Gower 1986).

It is important to know students’ needs and attitudes towards studying literature in an ESL/EFL setting. Students have many fears and anxieties about studying literature, especially poetry. Student attitudes, taken along with teacher goals and suitable texts well chosen, will make the course satisfying to students and teachers alike (Hirvela and Boyle 1988; Ramani and Al-Mekhlafi 2009). The literature syllabus should be an accurate reflection of student needs and classroom activities should be primarily student-centred. The essential

factor is to create conditions in which students can develop a genuine response to literary texts.

The use of literary works written in non-native varieties of English will make it easier for the teacher to enhance the students’ awareness of their own society, their sense of self-identity, their communicative competence within their community, and their command of the standard language itself (Talib 1992). The incorporation of multicultural literary texts in the curriculum will “introduce students to an exciting and challenging range of world literature, particularly, postcolonial literatures in English”, “help students develop a critical understanding of literary variations”, and “give students a substantial introduction to non-canonical texts and the relationship of culture, politics and history to the study of literature.” (Mohammadzadeh 2009:27).

Finally, the existing examination format should be thoroughly examined for its effectiveness in achieving the redefined objectives and modified to help assess learners’ literary competence. Within the classroom, the teacher needs to devise activities that will assist in the process of developing the skill that might be measured finally in the literary essay. Literature examinations should return students to the text and its uses of language as the originating centre of their experiences (Carter and Long 1990).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said the suggestions made here are tentative, but they should be attested through specific proposals and empirical work in varying contexts so that their validity and feasibility are established.

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