

## **A Janus Faced Approach to Language Teaching and Literature**

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*Janus is two faced, with each face poised in opposite directions. The phrase “Janus faced” as it comes down to us means “two-faced” or deceitful; but the original significance of the two-headed god meant vigilance and new beginnings, as in the word “January”. ([www.janushead.org](http://www.janushead.org))*

A debate often raises its head amongst teachers of English, teaching literature and language. There are some teachers, who claim the superiority of teaching English literature, leaving the monotonous and lesser important work of teaching the language to newly recruited teachers or lesser experienced ones. The task of teaching English language at the primary school level is often relegated to teachers of other subjects having an English medium background. It seems there is a general consensus as to which is more important and which is secondary. What we fail to understand and notice is the complementary nature of both: without a proper expertise over the language one cannot fully comprehend or appreciate literature and without the help of literature there would be a dearth of matter to teach the language. In fact English language teaching and teaching of English literature are two sides of the same coin: Janus faced, but not contradictory. It is our own ignorance that we take a negative approach to its dual identity.

The image of Janus as two-headed reminds us that, as human beings, we are

always radically de-centered and unknown to ourselves . . . Janus’ signification of vigilance calls us to continually remain open to what has been marginalized, split off, and left out of dialogue, for it may appear in the face of that which aims to destroy us. ([www.janushead.org](http://www.janushead.org))

Our role as English language teachers in a SL/FL scenario is an arduous and difficult one, laid down by various obstacles and pitfalls on the way. It is our responsibility and duty to be vigilant and alert to these shortcomings and be open to the various approaches and methods that can be adopted and implemented to enhance and improve our classroom conditions and the learning process..

English language teaching in India; falls a prey to this raging debate of supremacy between language and literature more often than not due to the lack of a proper training facility for English language teachers in the country. Except for a few universities that offer courses in language studies, most of the postgraduates who become teachers have a degree in English literature not language. Here it wouldn’t be wrong to suggest that the main imbalance in our approach to the issue results from our ignorance and expertise over the subject that we teach.

Every language teacher would agree that literature forms an integral part of the language teaching process at the various levels of education; progressing from children’s rhymes to fairy tales, short stories, dramas and novels. Literature

exemplifies the use of language in the best possible manner and helps the learners to use and construct their own language skills and create literature. As an English teacher at the university level would agree, basic language competency is required for the students of English literature to move on to the next level of literary appreciation and analysis.

*Recent approaches to language teaching . . . have ignored literature teaching. However, increasing recognition of the difficulties of communicative syllabuses . . . have led to a more cautious approach. (As quoted by Subbulakshmi, 2011: 3)*

The present paper aims to discuss this complementary role of language and literature and the ways literature can help in the teaching-learning process of the language. Even when our approach to language teaching is communicative, the role of literature cannot be undermined as it helps in learning the nuances and emotive content of language usage. Besides the four language skills (LSRW) necessary can also be learnt and practiced through the incorporation of literature. In simpler terms the benefits of using literature in a language classroom in brief are:

- **Interest:** Literature creates an interest in the subject that is generated by curiosity and the pleasure experienced.
- **Motivation:** Interest in turn keeps the learner motivated to attend and concentrate in the classroom.
- **Confidence:** Use of literature and related activities help the learner to break free of hesitation and use the language effectively thereby gaining confidence in the language as well as in self.
- **Imagination:** Learners are motivated to use imagination and create their own literature that helps in the practice of language skills and further builds their confidence.

- **Anticipates Life:** The educational process prepares the learner for their life in the real world. Through literature the child can learn to anticipate real life situations and employ the necessary language skills in a given situation.
- **Saves from Monotony:** Use of literature innovatively and in an interactive manner during the teaching process can help overcome classroom environment from becoming monotonous or boring.
- **Widens the scope:** The space and the scope of the language classroom is widened to include a variety of activities, teaching aids, audio-visual media to effectively teach not only language through literature but also social-cultural nuances, soft skills and values. And so the teacher stays not just a teacher but becomes a facilitator, creator, innovator and so on.

There are many teachers and experts who have their doubts about the use of literature in a language classroom. Even when used it is often relegated as just a resource for the teaching of communicative language skills. Literature merely for the purpose of communication or only for the study of literature and the literary canon, both fail to acknowledge the special status it has in language teaching. An important benefit of teaching language through literature is the generation of interest in the course content. A dry informative piece would certainly lack the interest, curiosity and involvement created by introducing a relevant literary piece. Poetry for instance has a better receptive value: its rhythms, rhymes attracts and motivates the students. Poetry is a reflection of life, in a manner more refined and delicate. Other genres of literature also have their own characteristic charm and contribution to the process of language teaching. Still no matter what the genre of literature incorporated into language

teaching, it can never be effective unless it is taught the right way.

It is not only the meaning or subject matter of the poem which gives delight to the reader, but the delight reader gets when reading poetry often comes from its musical qualities or from the striking way the poet uses words. (Vijay 34)

The first and foremost requirement for the use of literature is the choice of relevant literature as per the level of students. Young children will benefit more with poems that have simpler syntax and rhythmic structure that can help them build vocabulary, combine words and are pictorially represented. Repetition of words and sounds are especially beneficial for retention in memory. For a higher level student a little more advanced poem can be used that employs symbolic imagery or personification. At their level they can begin to understand, comprehend and value the innate ideas being conveyed by the poet, thus developing their skill in literary appreciation. At the university level these basic skills learnt will help them in their task of analyzing literature and interpreting them critically. In a way how we learn to read, understand and appreciate literature in our language class often contributes considerably to how we critically analyze them later as students of literature. Even when our chosen field might be different, a sound basis of literariness can substantially improve and refine our language skills for our professional and personal life.

There are ways in which poetry can be used in the classroom. Fore mostly it has to be taught in the correct manner.

Read in an improper and negligent manner the best of poems will not yield their meaning to you. The teacher should know the worth of poetry recitation as it is the first step to its comprehension. Intonation, voice modulation: pauses, stresses and emotions play a big role in conveying the meaning of the verse. The teacher should demonstrate how the poem should be read

before asking the student to read it out aloud. Background to the poem should be discussed and post reading should be followed by discussion. The students should also be encouraged to render their own impressions and motivated to create their own poetry as a task for writing. The most crucial thing in the whole process is the enjoyment that can only be generated by the teacher's own approach to teaching the poem in the classroom.

Stories appeal as a highly naturalistic means of teaching." (Porselvi 8). Situations presented in a life like setting within the story and the reactions and responses of the characters enable the students to anticipate actual conditions they might encounter in life. An interesting story taught in the correct manner can help the learner more than a simple dry presentation of information. Sentence construction, grammar, vocabulary, etc can be taught with the help of the story. The four skills of LSRW can be incorporated along with the text as the story is listened to, discussed about, read and finally writing tasks given to the students based on the text. Creatively the text can be used as the jumping board to other related story ideas being developed by the learners, possible alternative endings or their own version of the story. Group projects can be centered on such activities. The text can also be used for the teaching of grammar as tenses, voice, prepositions, articles, etc.

Similar to short stories, novels also form a very interesting and integral part of language teaching. The fictional world presented by the novels opens up a whole new world of experience for the students, giving them a glimpse of another time, world and culture. Often introduced at the secondary and higher levels, the novels entertain as well as teach and enhance the learner's language skills considerably.

Incorporation of stories in a language classroom should begin with a proper and relevant choice of material, reading sessions by the teacher and by

students individually or in groups, discussions and questions on the text, and so on. Images, sounds and movements relevant to the story can be employed during the telling of the story to help create curiosity and interest amongst the learners. Enactment of the story, dialogue writing, and character interview are some of the ways through which the classroom teaching can be made more learners centred, interactive and interesting.

Role play and enactment of fictional characters have a significant role in the language classroom. Most often a major deterrent in learning a language, especially ESL/EFL is the lack of confidence and hesitation among the students. Drama in this case provides with an interesting opportunity to the student to break free of the shy and hesitant self and perform as someone else; as the character. Role play thus helps to overcome the obstacle hindering the progress of a learner. Students can enact out scenes, play the roles of the characters, create their own version or endings of the play or create their own original plays. In the recreation or creation of scenes or entire plays, the students participate in imaginary circumstances that anticipate actual and real life situations. Dialogue writing is an important task set for students in examinations; inclusion of drama in the language classroom provides the learners with perfect examples of language used in different situations by different people. Play reading helps the learner understand and use proper intonation and voice modulation to create the required effect and emotion in the delivery of dialogues. Nuances of language use are thus effectively taught and practiced with the help of drama.

Prose is often the most ignored and neglected part in language teaching but the most used aspect of course content. Labeled as boring and monotonous, prose pieces are looked upon by the teacher and students alike with disdain and disinterest

especially at the undergraduate level in our colleges. What we have failed to notice is the choice in this matter. Too many lessons and too less relevance: that is how we can describe the content of the present language course being used. Interest of the students or relevance to their life and situation has been completely ignored resulting in a total lack of interest for the subject. A prose piece like "A Little of What You Fancy" by Dennis Morris (Contemplations – II) is an example of how much a correct choice can change the entire scenario. Here we have failed to recognize the Janus effect of language and literature by failing to be vigilant about the effect of the course we have been teaching for ages and the need for change. Prose can also be interesting, relevant and full of possible avenues for learning the language.

Language, culture, etiquettes, mannerisms and soft skills; all the aspects required to character formation are inherent in a language classroom, and what better way to learn them than through literature. Conversations, day-to-day communication, cultural nuances and practices can be effectively learnt through literature. Literature in fact provides a window to the world wherein we can move better learn the local and move forth to know the global. It contributes to our understanding of life and values.

Language not a mere combination of linguistic signs but has more to its soul. But even when we talk of language as a structure or combination of signs, literature does provide the opportunity to learn the structural, stylistic and rhetorical features of the language along with the emotive, attitudinal and experiential examples of its usage.

Whatever the literary genre being used for the teaching of language, some points that need to be considered includes:

- **Level:** The text to be included should be chosen as per the level of the children to whom it will be taught. Children's literature should

be used for young learners as the vocabulary and sentence construction will be simpler and suited to their level of comprehension. Higher classes can be introduced to novels for instance.

- **Relevance:** Learners should be able to relate to the literature being used. Subjects chosen should be chosen according to the taste of the intended learners. Fairy tales and fables will interest young learners but for the more advanced age group sports, entertainment, fashion, etc will have more relevance.
- **Cultural Relevance:** Cultural relevance is an important factor for the ability to relate to the text. If a text from another culture is being used, related introduction of the culture should form part of the teaching process in order to develop a better understanding of not only the text at hand but also of other cultures and people.
- **Activities, Tasks and Projects:** Every literary text should be supplemented with associated activities, tasks and projects targeted to the teaching of language skills and their usage by the learners that are interactive and learner centered.
- **Evaluation:** The process of effective teaching is incomplete

without a proper evaluation process and feedback. Assessment and evaluation of the learning process should include tests, projects, oral presentations, etc. Proper evaluation of learning should be followed by periodical evaluation of the course content to confirm its effectiveness or bring in necessary changes.

Duality is not always a negative feature. In reality it is more authentic to life for it encompasses the plurality of existence. Man, identity, expressions, voices; in fact everything in life is multifaceted and so is our approach to language teaching and the significance of literature in the language classroom. In other words it would not be an exaggeration to say that one is incomplete without the other: language cannot be learnt without literature and literature cannot be created or appreciated without language. It is a topic that requires many deliberations. The present paper has attempted to shed light only on one aspect of its interlinked and intertwined with the other at every step and angle, as for the importance of language in literature it can hardly be undermined as the number of researches and theories that have evolved over the issue since centuries prove, and for which one session or paper is not enough to provide light to.

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