

Learner-centric Study of Literary Criticism

Dhanappa M Metri

Department of English, Sangameshwar College, Solapur 413001-MS

E-mail: metri_dmm@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Teaching Literary Criticism to the Indian Learners whose reading of English literature rarely goes beyond the prescribed texts is a challenge. The traditional way of lecture method by the overenthusiastic teachers providing the passive learners free fish of the summary and notes to prepare them for the written memory tests serves little purpose. The learners heavily depend upon the readymade material available in the market. As a result the objectives of the study are hardly met. It is time for the empowered learners, learning the critical theories under the support of the facilitator who is committed to do it innovatively. This paper is such a successful experiment of applying student-centered learning technique for the effective learning of literary criticism by the undergraduate learners.

KEYWORDS

Effective Learning; Literary Criticism; Traditional Way.

Introduction:

The study of English language in India has its social, political and historical background and English literature is one of the most sought after disciplines under humanities today. However, the craze for study of English literature is mainly with the objective of strengthening the communicative and writing skills of English language to get lucrative job, rather than its aesthetics is an irony. The Indian curriculum designers frame the curriculum keeping in mind the study of English literature and language. As a result the learners, while studying the beautiful literature, they study English linguistically. In addition to these there is a discipline of Literary Criticism to strengthen the art of appreciation of literature, understanding the process of its creation and different literary theories. This discipline is introduced to the learners of English literature at the advanced stage of

Undergraduate course of BA English. If teaching English Literature to the Indian learners having little aptitude and exposure to literature is a challenge then teaching Criticism is a big challenge to the faculty struggling for the outcome beyond performance in the memory testing examinations.

Study of Literary criticism in India:

With the objective of inculcating the skills of judging literature, a special paper called Literary Criticism with western concepts of literary theories is the indispensable component of the curriculum. Compared to study of creative literature, Criticism is both creative and scientific study of that creativity. It is more theoretical so the learners find it dull and difficult to pursue. The faculties practicing the lecture method explain the topics starting from the concept of art, its types, its imitative nature by Plato and creative

qualities by Aristotle, to literature as fine art and sublimity its special feature poetic creation by Wordsworth to the controversy of significance of text or the creator of the text.

The major tools used in its study are the texts of various literary theories from the Greek to the contemporary critics. The learners mainly depend on the lectures and the notes dictated by their teachers or the ready material available in the market in the form of bazaar notes and the guides. They mainly mug up the ready answers and reproduce them in the test of written examination. The examiners credit them with good grades still knowing that the answers are thrice removed from reality. This is the study technique in majority of the institutes and the researcher is the part this system. Totally the learners of critical theories have rare pleasure of applying their skills and judging a piece of literature.

Need for the student-centric Pedagogy:

The undergraduate students of Arts faculty having rare aptitude for any art and very rarely exposed to literature, even to their mother tongue and teaching them literary criticism is of course a challenge. Introducing Plato, Aristotle, Sidney, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Eliot, Richards to structuralism to deconstruction to the End of theory, it needs luck to get an opportunity to handle it as a faculty. However the faculties are not blessed with the learners who are fully exposed to English literature and are ready to enjoy the realms of literary criticism. Sticking up to the teacher-centered pedagogy of talk and chalk will result into wastage of time and energy of the youth.

Today, there is a dearth of disinterested critics to generate new ideas. At the same time there is a need for developing the aptitude for critical thinking to make the learners rational. The school of western critical theories with the base of enlightenment to make the learner the rationalists is a rare opportunity for the

Indian learners to enhance their abilities to understand different theories.

The Experiment:

The researcher engaged in teaching the literary theories always felt frustrated for his failure in attaining the objectives of enhancing the appreciation abilities and developing the critical thinking abilities among his learners. He has the responsibility of skilling the learners belonging to diverse social, linguistic and financial background of the learners.

Keeping in mind the above objectives of the study of literary Criticism of introducing the western literary theories the researcher decided not go for the free fish but to teach them to fish. He narrated the stories of classical and contemporary English plays, novels and the short stories. He was successful in striking the cord of interest and appreciation for literature. He read out all his favourite classical poems in English literatures. Totally, it was a crash course on English Literature, a bridge course before starting the tough theories. The efforts proved time consuming and diversion from the main responsibility of syllabus covering.

To deal with every topic an innovative learner-centered, activity-based study techniques were used. For example before starting Art and its types, the learners were asked to collect the articles of art from their family collection and their own if they had created. The experience was heartwarming, the researcher felt sorry for the teachers rarely interested in the aesthetic sense of their learners. The articles proved very instrumental in explaining the difference between the lesser and the fine arts. The researcher availed the facility of Art College on the premises for further strengthening the concepts of arts.

To deal with literature and literary criticism the practicing writers and the critics from the sister departments other

languages were used and they were interviewed to share the creativity in literature and judgments in criticism. The researcher neglected the cynic's comments about the language of the resource persons.

For explaining the concept of Catharsis the DVDs of Greek and Shakespearean tragedies were fully utilized. To handle sublimity by Longinus he utilized the literary texts (prose and poetry) of the classic writers given in the text books of compulsory English book readily available with the learners. For handling the practical criticism the same source of prose and poetry section was used. In this way every effort of enthusiastic and convenient way of explaining the concepts was used.

Once the synopsis were given the learners were chosen and entrusted the responsibility of explaining the concepts after going through the original text and the judicious reference material provided from the central library. The students referred the web as per the need. To make the study more interesting the creative activities like dialogues between Wordsworth and Coleridge on poetic diction were prepared and enacted. The faculty in the role of a facilitator enjoyed the sweet fruits of his sincere efforts and corrected them only whenever they needed.

The outcome:

The researcher has succeeded in taking his learners beyond the rote learning with the help of digests and the bazaar notes. His mission of getting the learners rid of guides has been attained for greater extent. Secondly, he has succeeded in developing the skill of understanding the argumentative prose in which the author tries to convince his concept of a critical theory to his reader. He has also succeeded in inculcating the skills of critical thinking and style of critical writing. Once the concepts were clear the learners were

asked to make their own notes keeping in mind the question paper pattern to prepare them for the written examination.

Above all, he found little need of time wasting attendance exercise and noticed his changed image in the minds of his students. Finally, the performance in the written examinations has reached almost zero failure. The learners have been convinced that the theories have their own aesthetic sense and they judge the book from different angles.

Scope for the Experiment:

This approach of student empowerment to study literary criticism to generate interest among the learners can be applied to study English language and literature.

Limitations of the Experiment:

This type of effort needs lot of motivation to the learners by the committed teachers. Unless the learners are motivated to take a difficult step of self-study and prepare to equip with the basic tools this cannot be practiced. It needs efforts going beyond the routine time table by the teachers in search of self-realization.

Conclusion:

Teaching English literature and its literary theories to the learners who have lost the curiosity for England and its culture today is a quite difficult job. The learners mistaking the success for marks in the written examination are finding the study of English literature uninteresting. They follow the shortcuts and lose the opportunity of learning classical creative literary theories. The faculties struggling for the self-actualization should stop the examination-oriented study of literary criticism. There is a need for innovative way of learning the western concepts and the critical thinking.