ABSTRACT: Teachers, language experts and private sector employers continue to complain about the declining standards of English education in our country. This note raises the question whether teachers of English should use texts in their class to teach the four basic skills, or for ideological empowerment. It suggests that the production of materials for teaching English can be a collaboration between teachers of language and teachers of literature, who have an in-depth knowledge of the theories in their respective areas of specialisation.

KEYWORDS: postcolonialism, language-literature divide, learner-centered pedagogy, reader-response theory, non-native literature, canonical texts

0. INTRODUCTION

I teach in a college situated in a small city. The student population there is varied, representing different social and economic classes. The city has an army base and hence we have army children, too, as students. The typical undergraduate or postgraduate class is dominated by students with varying competence in English. I am aware that a large number of teachers, not employed in reputed institutions in major cities, teach in similar situations.

The problem I wish to raise is: should a teacher teaching English to students of mixed abilities and backgrounds use texts to teach the four basic skills of the language, or should they use them for ideological empowerment?

Many well-known academics (Nagarajan 1978; Mukherjee 1978; Desai 1993; Annamalai 2008) have lamented the decline of English in India over the years. Major employers of the country also have pointed out the dearth of good candidates, proficient in English, for various jobs in the private sector. The decline starts from the primary school and spreads through secondary education to higher education and research; the often-listed causes include poor infrastructure, outdated teaching methods,
substandard study materials, inadequately qualified teachers, inconsistent
government policies and the heterogeneity of students’ backgrounds. At
a time when we are informed by postcolonial concepts such as hegemony,
resistance, and plurality, teaching with a sense of purpose undergraduate
and postgraduate students who have come through linguistically and
academically debilitating circumstances, has become difficult.

1. BRIDGING THE LANGUAGE-LITERATURE DIVIDE

What can teachers of English do collectively for the benefit of the
learners? The word ‘collectively’ is important because the division
between teachers of language and literature is well-known. Each group
has its own notions concerning teaching methodologies, syllabus, and
evaluation procedures. The skill-oriented materials currently being used
often become objects of severe criticism. One criticism is that the
exercises in them are so devised that the learners have to arrive at
expected authoritative answers. The pedagogy used for teaching these
materials focuses on the “surface elements of language (sounds and
grammar of language),” and “attempts to reduce the most fundamental
aspect of the literary object—its hermeneutic potential, the interpretative
possibilities it inaugurates and carries” (Rao 2000:138,137). However,
the renowned critic Elaine Showalter states that one of the objectives of
teaching literature is to help learners “read closely, with attention to
detailed use of diction, syntax, metaphor, and style, not only in high literary
works, but in decoding the stream of language everyone in modern society
is exposed to” (Showalter 2003:27).

Another criticism is that to teach language skills alone is to succumb to
the market demands, commodifying students in a neo-liberal society.
Critiquing ELT concepts like learner-centeredness and learner autonomy,
V.S. Sreedhara (2000:124-5) argues that Learner centered pedagogy
creates in the learner the illusion that s/he is a free individual with free
choice, whereas in actuality, s/he is being moulded democratically to fit
in with the demands of market economy and consumerism. Sreedhara
argues that “professionalisation… has become a substitute for scholarship
and critical rigour,” and suggests that “autonomy in a truer sense would
mean breaking up of hierarchical and centralised power-structures.”
The question is how many of our English teachers are capable of empowering their students in the latter sense. A possible danger is that a little knowledge of current critical practices may result in the transmission of received or half-baked ideas that do not speak to all sections of the class. Such a transmission would appear to benefit only those who have the language to assimilate complex ideas. On the other hand, ELT experts reiterate that learner-centred teaching strategies that aim at improving language skills, especially reading, promote students’ ability to arrive at their own interpretations and conclusions. One of the stated aims of the activities suggested in the book *Literature in the language classroom* is to “help students to acquire the confidence to develop, express and value their own response … we hope that they will become less dependent on received opinion and therefore more interested in and more able to assess other perspectives” (Collie & Slater 2009:9). Similarly, in a cogently argued essay, Sandra McKay suggests that reader-response theory can be put to use in the ESL classroom, especially through non-native literary texts: “…the text is merely the stimulus; the reader creates her own poem [or novel] as she interacts with the text, bringing her own experience to bear” (McKay 1986: 194).

Teachers who attempt to practise such strategies in their classes often discover that their learners can problematise any thematic issue from the text. I remember an occasion when my M.A. students were asked to comment on these two statements made by the character Uchendu in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a novel they had to read at undergraduate level: “Mother is Supreme”; “… a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding” (1958[2004]:121). It is hard to forget the ways in which the class took these mutually contradictory statements to articulate their views which ranged from sheer male chauvinism through tender notions of motherhood to staunch assertions of women’s legitimate space in the family. The idea I wish to emphasize is that, broadly speaking, the views expressed by the language teacher and literature teacher are not totally at variance; both of them want to look at the problematic issues in the text without overlooking its linguistic features.
2. PRODUCING MATERIALS COLLABORATIVELY

If so, can these two groups of teachers come together to produce materials that are useful to our students? Notwithstanding the criticism of attempts to prescribe materials that aim to foster liberal humanistic values, it is the easy availability of such materials for all classes that has allowed learner-centered teaching to become common. Learner-centered materials are frequently produced by experts and teachers through various publishing companies. On the other hand, we hardly find study materials, produced by well-informed Indian teachers of literature and critics, that are based on Postcolonial principles and pedagogy. If teachers of literature can produce such materials, starting from the primary school level onwards, the dependence on the former kinds of textbooks can be minimised. Better still is the prospect of experts and teachers from both the areas joining hands to produce materials that can develop in the learners language skills and the true spirit of critical enquiry.

Even now a large number of our teachers impart their own ideas through lectures. Many of them, unaware of the reflection of the nation and its fragments in their own classes, think it necessary to foster the age-old values of tolerance and thus, unwittingly, silence the marginalised. Teachers’ collaborative ventures in materials production, I feel, can effectively check the liberal prescription of canonical texts and introduce young learners to contextually appropriate and linguistically graded non-native literary works, which lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, from all over the world. This does not mean that canonical texts, which can be effectively used to teach problematic themes (Loomba 1998), should be excluded from the syllabus totally. Teachers in colleges teach both skills-based ELT materials and literary works in their classes. When materials are produced collaboratively, these teachers should be given a fair representation in the activity. It is also important that before the materials are actually used extensive orientation to their use will have to be given by the materials producers. The collective effort of teachers suggested here can be extended to the other important areas of curriculum designing as well, that is, needs analysis, goal setting, methodology and evaluation. The texts and the exercises that the teachers collaboratively prepare may act as the means for learners to develop their linguistic skills and to discover the hermeneutic potential of the texts.
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