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A MODEL FOR INTEGRATING LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ETHIOPIA*

ABSTRACT: In the post-colonial era a distinction has developed between teaching literature and language skill courses in English. This paper suggests an integration of language and literature teaching in EFL/ESL contexts, drawing on insights from literary theory (reader response theory) and language teaching (the task based approach).

KEYWORDS: reader–response theory, task based teaching, EFL/ ESL contexts

0. INTRODUCTION: THE LITERATURE–LANGUAGE DIVIDE

During the colonial period, literature education in the African or Asian countries was not different from that of the metropolitan colonial masters. With the coming of independence in colonized countries, the English language retained a prestigious and privileged place in the curriculum of higher education. It continued to be taught as ESL (English as second language) or EFL (English as foreign language), depending on the situation. (In countries like India and Kenya, where English has deeper roots, the term ESL is frequently used, whereas in places like Ethiopia which have no English language legacy, EFL is the preferred term). The language also became the medium of instruction at different educational levels in many countries.

Initially, English study in the post-colonial period used literature for both literary and linguistic purposes. Literature was the mainstay of the Grammar Translation Method.

The curriculum that was inherited was modeled on curricula in the West, and it became the basis for curriculum design in the newly independent

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countries. The study of English literature, in particular, “developed recognizably through the nineteenth century, first in India and the imperial colonies …” (Hall 2005:42). The prevailing view was that what had to be studied were the canons of the colonizers’ educational institutions, and how they were to be taught was to be no different than in them.

There have been outcries by a number of writers (Ngugi 1986; Bhati 1977; Alam 2001) calling for the use of literature that is relevant to students in their environment, and the emancipation of the literature curriculum. In the 1970s, the teaching of literature was becoming detached from the teaching of language, mainly because of the traditional approaches of Grammar Translation Method and the Andiolingual method which made it too remote for the African and Asian learners (Hall 2005:51). Literature was perceived as an “elitist pursuit and extraneous to every day communicative needs” (Kramsch & Kramsch 2000:566).

Also at this time, structuralism in linguistics and the Audiolingual method in language teaching led to the role of literature in language learning being seriously downplayed (Collie & Slater 1987:2). English literature continued to lose its place in the ELT curriculum with the rise of communicative language teaching in the 1980s. The reasons against the inclusion of literature in language classrooms included the syntactic and lexical difficulties in literary texts, inappropriate text selection in relation to the learners’ language proficiency, age, gender, or background knowledge, the presentation of outmoded and archaic structures and words. Moreover, literature appeared to require knowledge of literary concepts like stream of consciousness or surrealism, and to be saturated with alien cultural concepts.

However, the trend of excluding literature study from language teaching classrooms was vigorously debated and questioned and in the middle of the 1980s some practitioners and language scholars resurrected literature as language learning material (Duff & Maley 1991). A number of subsequent publications herald the return of literature (Brumfit & Carter 1986; Collie & Slater 1987; Bassnett & Grundy 1993; Lazar 1993; Belcher & Hirvela 2000). The study of literature was considered
indispensable because it exposes students to meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters. Structuring lessons around the reading of literature introduces a profound range of vocabulary, dialogue, and prose. In addition to developing students’ English language skills, teaching literature also appeals to their imagination, develops cultural awareness, and encourages critical thinking about plots, themes, and characters. Other arguments provided for using literature in language education include its authenticity, its appropriateness for group and individual work, its ability to evoke fresh responses and stimulate the imagination (Brumfit & Carter 1986), and therefore its effectiveness in developing the language skills of the EFL or ESL learner. Many others (Maley 1989; McRae 1991) have advocated various purposes that literature can have and different approaches that can be employed in the ELT curriculum, in spite of the common position that they all hold with regard to the importance of teaching literature.

1. THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING LITERATURE IN ETHIOPIA

The major problems that one observes in the teaching of English literature in Ethiopia fall into three inter-related areas: lack of clarity of objectives, traditional methods of teaching, and inappropriateness of texts.

Currently in Ethiopian higher education, the teaching of literature is emphatically genre-based with the objective of imparting knowledge about the literary features of the genres and explaining the historical situatedness of literary texts. This practice is also common in India; Kudchedkar (1997) states Indian universities “do not teach the students literature but rather teach them about literature” (p.257). Such an objective is irrelevant and unrealistic when weighed against the actual needs of developing the linguistic and literary competence of students. In other words, the objectives are not relevant to the present educational reality in the EFL/ESL context where students are deficient in their English.

The method of teaching literature is another problem. While significant methodological changes have taken place in language teaching, it is
surprising that the teaching of literature is still traditional. The literature classroom is a place where the teacher tells every new batch of students the same story. The notes that the lecturer uses for his lecture are “… frozen transactions in the form of lecture notes which once written, are never discarded …” (Bhattacharya 1992:193). The lecture method does not encourage students to read texts; it does not either encourage classroom discussions, individual thinking and discovery. In a situation where the lecture method is dominant, the concern is essentially on passing the exams. Students are unlikely to read texts, and if they do not read, they can neither develop their language skills nor become sensitive enough to respond to literature.

The texts used for the study of literature are a third problem for EFL/ESL students. In Ethiopia, the canon is still in place for teaching literature. In Indian universities as well, the canon has been uncritically adopted by English teachers (Natarajan et.al. 1997). It is difficult to imagine how a 16th century poem or tales of the Middle Ages could be sources of enjoyment for the EFL learner. Besides being difficult, such texts are irrelevant for the students. It is pedagogically sound to select literary texts that show familiar environment, before the students face the challenges of texts that reflect a less familiar world.

2. AN INTEGRATED MODEL FOR TEACHING LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

The focus of this paper is not the teaching of literature to students who are majoring in English literature, but may well apply to any literature teaching in ESL/EFL contexts. The target groups are EFL/ESL students who struggle to master the English language for different reasons. The question is therefore, to investigate how the study of literature can contribute to achieving both linguistic proficiency and literary competence.

Traditionally, there has been a distinction between the teaching of literature and other English language skill courses. This happened, perhaps, as a result of the perception that linguists considered literature
as an exercise of the elite on the one hand, and on the other, teachers of literature underplayed the language elements of literary texts (Hall 2005). Foreign language learners of English find literary texts incomprehensible and language teachers are reluctant to use literary texts in their language teaching. Therefore, this calls for the ‘integration’ of language and literature teaching in EFL/ESL. In the context of this paper, ‘integration’ refers to the development of both literary and linguistic competence. This ‘integrated model’ considers the following as its major pillars:

- Appropriate judgment in selecting literary texts
- Use of tasks to target the development of language and knowledge of literary conventions
- Using a learner–centered approach.

The insights for such an integration are taken from literary theory, namely reader response theory, and task based language teaching.

3. FROM READER–RESPONSE THEORY TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Reader–response theory emerged as an alternative to New Criticism, wherein meaning lies in the text itself, and the reader is not allowed to offer his own meaning (Beach 1998; Rosenblatt 1978). In reaction to the formal and technically oriented approach of the New Critics which excludes the individual’s interpretation of a text, reader–response theory is founded on the assumption that the ‘meaning’ of a text is generated as the reader reads the text. I use the reader–response theory because according to this theory a learner can construct his own version of reality in interaction with the text. In other words, each student can respond differently to a single text and then discuss his responses with others. In the process, the student is able to practise language skills, consciously or unconsciously.

The impact of reader–response theory on teaching literature has been immense. In fact, according to Hall (2005:105) “there could be no other way to teach literature … the only question has been to discover how to
do it best within this paradigm.” A number of writers (for example, Rosenblatt 1978; Bleich 1978; Flood & Lapp 1988) have used reader response theory to address pedagogic issues related to selection of materials, methods of teaching and attitudes of teachers. There are also writers (e.g. Ali 1994; Hirvela 1996; Elliot 1990; Davis 1989) who have applied the theory for teaching foreign language classes, arguing that as a result,

- teaching becomes student–centered,
- “form” is inseparable from “content,” and
- individual responses and an engagement with the interpretive community are encouraged.

4. TASKS FOR LITERATURE TEACHING

Task based language teaching is an approach which evolved as a ‘strong’ version of communicative language teaching, in which learners themselves discover the system for learning (Willis 2004). Focus on meaning, learners’ experience as a departure for activities, student centeredness, and the use of authentic materials, are among the most important principles that task based language teaching adheres to. These principles are congruent with the pedagogic application of reader response theory that we are recommending.

There are useful insights that can be drawn from cognitive psychology, for designing tasks on literary texts. Vygotsky’s (1978) dialectic concept of spontaneous and scientific knowledge tells us that learners come to class with their own experiences; by implication, literature teachers should select texts that have in them experiences related to those of the learners and design tasks that enable the students to integrate what is in the text with their own experiences. The task design should take into account the background knowledge of the learners, their culture, their experiences in learning literature and the students’ language proficiency level. This will help the teacher to determine the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) of the learners and design realistic tasks that can be accomplished by the collaborative efforts of the learners.
5. FRAMEWORK FOR TASK DESIGN

There could be various ways in which tasks on literature could be designed. The model I suggest has six main features.

a. Forming an initial response to a literary text – Prior to any intervention, students are given the chance to reflect their primary experience of the literary work. The response could be oral or written. No pre-reading activities are given, because such activities may create a bias in interpretation. Pre-reading questions usually have prompt questions to start thinking about the text. Many of these questions are historically situated and are biased. However, the pre-reading questions can be unbiased, if designed carefully.

b. Sharing initial responses – Individual responses are shared with other students, in pairs or in groups. This helps students to understand that their initial responses may be varied. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator.

c. Understanding the text – Tasks under this topic relate to language problems that may exist in a given literary text. As EFL/ESL students, they may need help in understanding the flow of a story, or the deviant language of poetry. But these are not presented as vocabulary or grammar activities.

d. Activities on literary devices – Students need to be aware of the conventions for reading literary texts. This will help them develop their literary competence. However, in this integrated model, tasks are not designed for explicit teaching of genres, biography of authors, devices or techniques, but rather as mechanism for a better understanding of literary texts.

e. Extended activities – The tasks designed in this section are meant to enhance the productive skills and the imaginative power of the learners. They deal with social, political, and other kinds of experiences that are thematically related to what is found in the literary text. Such tasks improve the learners’ skills of writing, speaking and analysing.
f. Writing final responses – Having dealt with the basic comprehension of the text and some of the literary nuances that a given literary genre demands, the students are expected to write more refined responses than the initial ones. The writing of these final responses, does not in any way rule out the dynamic nature of reader response.

Given this basic framework for integrating language and literature, tasks designed on a poem entitled *Night-Shift Workers* by George Charlton are given below as an example. The poem was selected because in many parts of Ethiopia people work on night shifts. The feelings described are universal. Moreover, the poem provides some scope for the teaching of poetic conventions.

*Night-Shift Workers*

They have come from a factory  
Where fluorescent strips flared all night  
And ears grew numb to machinery.  
They are going home to working wives,  
To cooling beds at breakfast time,  
Undressing fatigue from their skin like clothes.  
Later to wake at four and taste teeth  
Soft as fur in their mouths.  
They live in a dislocation of hours  
Inside-out like socks pulled on in darkness  
Waking when the day is over.  
They are always at an ebb, unlike others  
Going out to work in the morning  
Where sun and moon shine in the sky together.

I. Understanding the poem

1. What is your first reaction to the poem? What is it about?
2. Who are ‘they’ in line 1? When do they go home? What is the condition at home? (lines 4 – 8)
3. What do they do during the daytime? At night?
4. Can you describe the work environment of these people?
II. Images

*Images are common in many poems. An image is a likeness; a comparison: a vivid description in words.*

Consider the following sentence:

(i) He is as strong as a lion.

In the sentence above, a straightforward comparison is made between ‘he’ and ‘a lion’.

‘as…as’ is used to compare the strength of the two. The sentence could also be written as:

(ii) He is a lion.

The same quality is compared without the use of comparison words. Sentence (i) is called a *simile*, and sentence (ii) is a *metaphor*.

Now, consider the following in the poem:

a. “Undressing fatigue from their skin like clothes” (line 6) Can you explain the metaphor in this?

b. What does it mean to live “Inside-out like socks pulled on in darkness”? (line 11).

   Is this an apt description of their lives? Why? Why not?

   Have you ever had a day when you felt you were inside-out? What happened to make you feel that way?

c. The ‘bed’ is a piece of furniture for sleeping on. ‘Going to bed’ with someone refers to sexual activity. What do ‘cool bed’ and ‘warm bed’ indicate about relationships?

   In the poem what does ‘cooling beds’ (line 5) suggest?

d. What are the ‘dislocations’ (line 9) in their lives? The poem mentions some of these. Add some more of your own.

e. Why are they “…always at an ebb, unlike others”? (line 12).
III. Connotations

Words are used for communicating meaning. But they communicate not only meanings but also feelings and attitudes. If you consider the word knife, it can simply denote an instrument for cutting. However, it may also suggest (connote) threat or menace depending on the context. The literal meaning of a word is its denotation – its meaning is devoid of emotional overtones. The range of associations, attitudes, and emotions called up by a word is its connotation.

The following words are from the poem. Do they have any connotations in your culture? Positive, negative, or neutral? Why?

(a) working wives
(b) cooling beds
(c) always at an ebb

IV. Responding to the poem

1. Read the poem several times. Did you notice any change from one reading of the poem to another? Has your understanding of the poem changed in any way after each reading? In what way?

2. In your reading of the poem, do you see a pattern of life that is different from the ‘normal’? Why do you think this has happened?

V. Extended Work

Writing Task

1. Imagine that you have been asked to write a short report about the life of shift workers. Write a report which includes the following issues:

   a. working conditions
   b. impact on home life
   c. effect on health
   d. social orientation
Interviewing

2. Do you know people in your community who work as night watchmen or factory shift workers? Have you observed or asked them about their work? Interview one of these people and report to the members of your group.

Group Discussion

3. Discuss in groups and then as a whole class what the situation ‘costs’ these workers and their ‘contribution’ to society. Is the situation also a ‘cost’ to the society? How?

6. CONCLUSION

The traditional approach of teaching literature is no longer favoured in EFL/ESL situations. The low performance level of learners, wrong selection of texts and inappropriate methods of teaching have a demotivating effect on learners. This situation has to change, such that literature can become a study area through which we can improve the English language skills of the learners, and so that they can better read and appreciate literature. Thus, the recommendation is that the teaching of literature and language should be integrated through engaging students with tasks designed following the principles of the reader response approach.

REFERENCES


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