



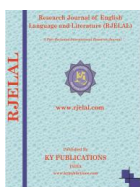
## CHALLENGES IN LEARNING 'ESL' THROUGH LITERATURE IN INDIA: A CRITICAL STUDY

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### Abstract

The main aim and objective of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in India is to underscore the basic elements of literature that can help promote a reader's understanding and intuitive capability so that the reader gets self-motivated to learn a language and use it very skilfully as a means of communication as also for creative writing. We know that 'Literature' is the media of teaching and learning authentic language. Language generally gets identified literature. The current historical positions regarding the use of literature in English language teaching, and the inclusion of literary texts may foster the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (LSRW) followed by Critical Thinking and creative thinking skills. Literature is the basic tool for teaching and learning language. Literature is the place of foundation where language gets the highest position. It is clearly observed that an ideal literary text with good quality can stimulate the language learning process among the readers and it can elicit a wide range of responses from the learners which are facilitating for language learning. It can stimulate imagination of the learners; make them use new and beautiful words in their conversation. The basic aim of this paper is to present the fact that the use of literature for language teaching purposes can promote literary understanding and general linguistic awareness among teachers and students of English in general. Hence Learning English language through Literature is an innovative approach to the language learning process. This paper highlights the ultimate role of literature in the teaching and learning English as a second language.

**Key words:** language, literature, listening, speaking, reading, writing, literary text, linguistic awareness.

### Introduction

In the current scenario of 21<sup>st</sup> century world of globalisation, English is considered as the language of world's largest population firmly establishing its powerful status as the language of communication (lingua-franca) in almost all sectors right from education and computer to the field of

trade and commerce, science and technology, business, entertainment, politics, agriculture, international and bilateral relations, economic affairs, so and so forth. Language and literature are inseparable and their teachings should be complementary to each other. Michael Short's comment in this regard is worth mentioning: "Literature and language teaching should be linked

and made mutually reinforcing" (Short and Candlin 1986). Literature studied for aesthetic enjoyment only and language studied without literary texts both are insufficient and far from yielding satisfying results. Language is the blood of every culture, tradition and society. It plays a vital role in establishing social relations through effective communication and interactions and provides identity in a society. The absence of this can be felt only by the people with speech or hearing disabilities who participate but only partially in social interactions. In India, we have English as a common language that bridges this gap.

Language is learnt through literature. Actually, Language teaching is a process whose aim changes not only from country to country and culture to culture but from individual to individual. In fact, it is up to individuals to decide whether literature will be somehow included in the course syllabus or particular lesson plans. If so, teachers then have to decide on which texts to include, for what purposes to use them and what activities will be done to explore the texts and promote language development. If literary works are selected according to the needs, level of learners, and age of learners, then Literature will be the effective for teaching and learning Language. The scope and significance of English is well recognized by everyone in the fast changing world.

English is the native language in countries like U.S.A., U.K., South Africa, Australia and others in Europe but it is a second or foreign language in the countries of Asia such as India, China, Gulf countries and others. English has been scattering with a greater pace in India but many difficulties are encountered in teaching and learning it. To overcome these barriers, a host of courses, training programmes, classes and interactions are made available. Literature is generally used in English Language Teaching (ELT) for the development of knowledge about the language. It helps the learners to get familiar with the socio-political backgrounds of target language society and also makes them understand how communication takes place in a particular community. This broadens the understanding of human nature. Literature deals with universal issues by creating a thought among

the people that they are also the part of the whole humanity.

People can learn the various structures and functions of language through literary text. It inculcates their communicative skill of the language. It is a part of communicative language learning. It supports the positive view of using literature in language learning and shows that literary texts especially stories can be used in the language learning for developing the major skills as well as different sub-skills of the learners. There are various reasons for reading an ideal literary work. One of the main reasons is, it enables the reader to learn the language. By reading literature the reader can develop language skills unconsciously without much effort. It helps the learners to get familiar with the socio political backgrounds of target language society and also makes them understand how communication takes place in a particular community. This broadens the understanding of human nature.

Extensive types of methods, techniques and approaches came into existence in the field of teaching and learning English and its application has been embarked long years ago. Initially, when English became a subject in schools and colleges, English literature is used as a major tool to learn English and still today in most of the Indian universities it is continued as a greater and effective method of teaching and learning English language. This paper brings out the conceptual issues and challenges towards the role of literature in the teaching and learning English as a Second Language.

### **Objectives of the Research**

The objective of the current research is to promote and enable learners and teachers of English to use literature in ESL class rooms. The study supports the view of using literature in language learning process and shows that literary texts especially stories can be used in the language learning for developing the major skills as well as different sub-skills of the learners. The present study also gives its focus on the role of literature in improving language learning skills. The use of literary texts aims to enhance language skills like – listening, speaking, reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

**Methodology**

A vast range of methodological, technical and theoretical experiments are noted in teaching and learning English in Indian classrooms. Learner centered approaches gained prominence and at the same time, proved more beneficial in the process of teaching-learning English. The study current study is descriptive by nature. It is mainly upon the Primary and Secondary sources of data collection. The primary data is collected by being directly involved with the teachers and learners in Schools and colleges of Odisha in India and the secondary sources are based on the journals, magazines, periodicals, Research Reports and Websites.

**Major Issues and Challenges of Learning ESL through Literature**

To acquire mastery over literary texts, we basically have two concepts — the concept of language and literature. In order to have a clear understanding, let us know the few definitions. Language generally is defined as a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular country or area. There are different types of languages, which include first language (mother tongue), second language, body language, modern language, etc. But in this article, the point of study is learning English as the second language through literature, which is also defined as a language that one speaks in addition to the language one learns as a child (mother tongue). Experts are of the firm opinion that the knowledge of literature primarily prepares the foundation for language learning. Literature does not confine its area to entertainment, but enhances students' general use of language since communication takes place all the time in literature. The learners gain knowledge of universal themes such as love, war, loss, etc. that are not covered in the language learning curriculum but only through literature. The learner accomplishes manifold through literature as: cultural assimilation or acculturation; language development and competence; conflict resolution; a good liberal education and development of desired and desirable attributes. The experts in various universities have realized its importance and incorporated literature even in the engineering

disciplines so that the integration of both language and literature can enable the learners to learn ESL effectively. In India, Literature-in-English is treated as a separate subject. That is why English language is prescribed as a general subject for all students at senior secondary level of education and Literature-in-English is restricted to only Art students. To ensure correct understanding of English language, science and engineering students should be offered Literature-in-English.

According to Onukaogu (1999) literature is categorized into four, namely fiction, fact, content area text and newsreel. Fiction consists of poetry, prose and drama. It has been observed that literature has been seen from different perspectives by literary writers and experts. Pearse defines literature as written or oral composition deriving from and mirroring a society and the historical experiences of the society and its people. Corbin (1996) sees it as an experience and imagination. Some other researchers see it as a body of written texts produced by a culture and highly valued within that culture over a period of time as part of its literary heritage (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). Hence, in offering English literature as a subject, works of writers such as Shakespeare, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Tagore etc. become the essentials in the understanding of English language as a second language as such literatures clearly represent the traditions, customs and cultural heritage of people. The reading of literature is an interesting activity and an active process where learner develops his/her vocabulary, knowledge and comprehension skills. This promotes innovative learning as the learners are free to take significant stand towards interpreting meanings which makes them see literature as a personal experience and take responsibility of their learning.

If the purpose of learning a language is communication and literature is communication, then the two are two sides of a coin, which are not separable (Adesuyi, 1991). When people speak, read novels, newspapers, etc., language is being used to express their thoughts and experiences. The language of a people replicates their idiosyncrasy as part of an area, society or a country, which is emulated in their norms, beliefs, customs,

traditions, culture, tastes and preferences. These are very well expressed in literary texts, especially fiction. A language therefore, is both a component of culture and a central network through which other components are expressed (Lado, 1964). The fact that Literature-in- English and English language are twin subjects, which if taught together, enhance the understanding of other subjects (medium is English) and also widen the scope of reasoning of students in their world view is lost on them. However, this system is beset with a number of problems. First and foremost, as no specific number of periods is allocated to Literature in English, the teachers are faced with the problem of balancing the time allocation for the two aspects of the new subject at the engineering level. Secondly, deriving from the first problem, teachers at this level of education, do not normally give enough attention to the literature aspect of the subject in the engineering first year class as many of them do not even know the rationale behind merging the two.

#### **Challenges faced by Teachers and Learners:**

While doing my research on the concept of 'Teaching Language and Literature in the ESL class rooms in India', I observed that some language teachers and learners find the study of literature very difficult because literature has an emotive and figurative use of language. The literary discourse, no doubt, is a poetic one, different from expressive (letter, diaries, essays etc.) and transactional (advertising, business letters, editorials, instructions etc.) one. Another barrier is the uninhibited treading into the world of imagination on the part of the literary writers which makes it difficult to invest the literary content with a uniformly accepted meaning. Yet another difficulty is bridging the cultural gap and comprehending a discourse totally alien to the learner's socio-cultural background. But it is up to the teacher how to excite the imagination of learners and how to make his or her teaching most effective, rewarding and refreshing.

However, literary texts remain an unavoidable tool in the hands of language teacher. It is in the teacher's domain as what to teach and how to teach and how to use poetry, drama, prose, short stories or novel for language teaching.

#### **Relevance of Using Literary Texts in Language Acquisition:**

Literature is seen as a medium for the students to develop their appreciation of different language systems. Moreover, studying literature can foster the students' interpretations add enhance their language and communication skills. Literature is inherently authentic and provides authentic input for language learning (Ghosen 2002; Shrestha 2008; cited in Khatib, Ranjbar and Fathi 2012:p.13).

In case of teaching language through literature, the text acts as a material to promote critical thinking and to develop language. The stories of reasonable length that are loaded with Vocabulary and have compelling topics are encouraging for the students. McKay (1982: 536) rightly points out "success in using literature greatly depends upon a selection of text which will not be overly difficult on either a linguistic or conceptual level".

Since the ultimate goal of the EFL classrooms is "acquisition" of English .Stylistics is the direct application of linguistic evidence to interpret and analyze literature and stylistic analysis strongly represents the EFL instructional perspectives (Short, 1996 cited in Kellem, 2009). Through stylistic analysis the students can have the opportunity to explicate the formal features of English including the levels of phonology, vocabulary, grammar and discourse and relate them to an understanding of the texts. According to Povey's (1972) observation "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax" (cited in McKay 1982: 529). This can help the learners to facilitate the language learning.

The idea of using literary texts in EFL classroom is supported by Mortimer J. Adlert and Charles Van Doren ( 1972) who claim that literature is valuable authentic material which offers "authentic" samples of language - for example, travel timetables, city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertisements, and newspaper or magazine articles. Learners are thus "exposed to language that is as genuine and undistorted as can

be managed in the classroom context." At least, literature can bring us a great deal of cultural information. Adlert and Doren also claim the vital role of literature in cultural enrichment and linguistic enrichment. However, these two authors stress upon the personal involvement that literature fosters in readers. Personal involvement can be understood as the readers' close contact with the characters or the engagement in the event of the story, the sharing of emotions and feelings between readers and characters, between readers and the author, and among readers themselves.

Therefore, students would have a chance to learn through literary texts in the classroom and then improve their language awareness and cultural understanding.

#### **Selection of Literary Texts**

The effective use of literature in the ELT depends on the appropriate selection of literary texts. Literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, it is important to select themes with which the students can identify. Certainly, one common experience of most ESL students is their struggle with a language and culture with which they are unfamiliar. Thus, literature which deals with either of these themes should be highly relevant to them. (cited in McKay 1982, p.531-532)

Text selection is a 'crucial factor' (Maley, 2001: 184) in making literature a resource for linguistic development, personal enrichment and cultural appreciation. McRae (1997) also says that "careful text selection is fundamental to the successful use of any kind of representational materials" (1997:49). Collie and Slater (1994) suggest that text selection depend on "each particular group of students, their needs, interests, cultural background and language level" (1994: 6). Robert Hill (1995) demonstrates two sets of criteria in his essay. Lazar (1993:52) also talks about some criteria. Combined criteria from all the sources mentioned above are formulated in the following section:

- The student's linguistic proficiency
- The student's literacy background

- The student's cultural background
- The student's age
- Student's level of understanding
- Interesting texts
- Availability of required literary the text

#### **Language Skills Development**

Literature can be a great potential resource in teaching language and communications skills, specially speaking skills for the language learners. Belcher and Hirvella (2000) hold that literature is rich with innumerable authentic tokens of language for the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (Crain,1993; Fitzgerald,1993; Nasr,2001, Spack,1985; Stern,2001; vandrick,1996; cited in Khatib 2011:p.203). Sandra Mackay also argues that "literature can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge both on a usage and level.

#### **LSRW Skills : (Listening , Speaking , Reading and Writing)**

**Listening:** It is one of the most important skills but often neglected in the classroom. Without proper listening and understanding, learners would not be able to acquire the English language. Listening process includes three elements—input (utterance), processing (understanding the utterance and restructuring it) and response (another utterance from the listener). Learners must listen to a good kind of English and try to comprehend it. There should be focused and purposive listening and not the hearing only. It builds platform to speaking activity.

**Speaking:** Speaking is a second skill in the order of natural language acquisition. It has a great significance in the face-to-face communication. It is a common fact that most of the students lack oral expression skill; there are only a few students who speak in the classroom and they try to grab the whole activity. Sometimes, such students force to others to withdraw from the activity. It is teacher's responsibility to involve all the students and give them equal opportunity to participate and inspire the mute students. If a teacher gets a good response from the learners, s/he is going in right direction in teaching them the basic skills through the story.



**Reading:** Developing reading skill is very essential to acquire the second language. The story can be divided into three reading stages—pre-reading, actual reading and post-reading. Actually we have talked about the process of reading in the listening activity. What we need to do is to integrate these skills. Reading can be of different kinds like extensive reading, intensive reading; skimming, scanning and purposive reading. Attempting all this kinds would be beneficial for learners. State the importance of silent and aloud reading for different purposes.

**Writing:** Writing is the last but more significant skill to gain mastery over English. Most of the times, writing is the result of learners understanding of the text. It is an expression of other three skills. This skill is dominated by the skill of speaking and reading. But it is the most essential requirement of our examination system as almost all examinations are based on writing. Many students take interest in writing than speaking or reading aloud. It is teacher's duty to construct and shape the writing skill of all the students in the class; after all they have to write answers in their final examinations.

#### **Learning Grammar and Vocabulary in ESL Class rooms:**

Various studies prove that literature is replete with various vocabularies, sentence patterns, words-order and grammatical items which help the learners to learn the target language. Literature is also a good resource for increasing word power. In other words, literature involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose (Van 2009; cited in Khatib 2011:p.202). Also Arther (1968), believes that syntactic knowledge and vocabulary enrichment can be accelerated through literary texts.(cited in Khatib 2011:p.202). Reading short stories and novels can expand vocabulary Knowledge of the learners. For example, Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is a novel with so many new words and it can be prescribed for intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners.

#### **Conclusion**

The present has undergone the experiment that the ESL can be learnt through literature

effectively as the learners consider language as an important human heritage and is precious to the personal and social well-being of the speakers of the language. Literature provides authentic material. It is observed that the learners are exposed to actual language samples from real life and literature acts as a beneficial complement to such materials. Using literature in English Language Teaching (ELT) has beneficial to facilitate intelligence and sensibility training, to stimulate students' creative and literary imagination, to improve students' general cultural awareness, and to enhance the psycholinguistic aspect of language learning. In the ESL classroom, literature can be the primary material of teaching the target language, providing authentic and real contexts of communicative situations. It also provides the pleasure of learning a new language with and through interesting stories. Students can extend their knowledge and experience of the world by reading literature. Though there is a few limitations, literature is viewed as a rich resource for language learning. For many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. In other words, literature is used to 'put students in touch with some of the more subtle and varied creative uses of language' (Carter & Long, 1991, p.2, cited in Zyngier 1994:p.9). Our success in using literature, of course, greatly depends upon a selection of texts which will not be overly difficult on either a linguistic or conceptual level. It is noticed that language learning through literature has following advantages like- i) it promotes psycholinguistic aspect of language teaching, ii) it stimulates student's creative and literary imagination, iii) it facilitates intelligence and sensibility training, and iv) it improves learner's cultural awareness. To conclude literature indeed has a strong place in the ESL curriculum and teaching language. In this light, literature is regarded as a beneficial medium in language teaching.

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