

## **Accentuating the Importance of Teaching Poetry in an ESL Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

With the sudden growth of English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes in India during the last few decades and more specifically towards the last decade of the past millennium, the role of linguistics came to be quite often over emphasized in ELT. They became the obiter dicta in all aspects relating to ELT from curriculum designing to evaluating the terminal and expected achievement results. These linguistic experts went in the other extreme directions as the experts of literature had done earlier. The literary experts had looked with disdain at teaching language items separately from literary text and strongly disfavoured language drills at the under-graduate level. The teaching of grammar, independent of literary text, was considered almost anathema. Where the situation favoured, the linguists tended to go in the direction where only language items could be taught without any aid from literary text. However, when these linguistic enthusiasts realized that drill-oriented classes, especially with adult learners, could be monotonous and eventually counterproductive, they conceded to use prose pieces for teaching language items. Teaching of poetry for learning English or augmenting the already acquired expressive power of the learner is still not widely favoured. The focus of this paper is to emphasize the importance of teaching poetry to second language learners. It discusses how poetry helps in learning the features of modern English, and enables the learners to see how English linguistic system is used for communication.

**Keywords-** ESL, Teaching poetry, Classroom, ELT

### **Introduction**

As Cubukcu (2001: 1) mentions, poetry is a rewarding and enjoyable experience with the properties of rhyming and rhythm, both of which convey “love and appreciation for the sound and power of language”. Teaching of poetry for learning English or augmenting the already acquired expressive power of the learner is still not widely favoured. Experts in curriculum

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designing and materials production believed that poetry made the most sophisticated and complex use of the language, which required a high standard of competence among students to respond to its linguistic subtleties. On the other hand, a curious situation prevailed throughout this period of pedagogical crisis in ELT in India which roughly covered almost the latter half of the last century and continues in considerable measure even today. Teaching of poetry is considered to accord recognition to the expertise of the teacher concerned in English literature who should be opposed to the linguistic camp, comprising pedestrian teacher with only a peripheral role to play in the academic affairs in the Department of English. Any debate about restructuring the syllabus to include selected pieces of poetry for the purposes of skill acquisition in language was disfavoured. During the closing decades of the last century there has been a sudden, phenomenal increase in the student population at the under-graduate level which had received great encouragement by the policy of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government - "Higher education at everybody's doorstep." In keeping with this, new colleges and universities came into existence in almost a geometrical progression every year, reaching the fantastic number of now over 37,204 colleges and 789 universities" all over the country. It's a matter of common knowledge that because of the successive governments' lackadaisical attitude to the promotion of general higher education in the country, most of these colleges and universities remained without the minimum infrastructure facilities. This resulted in a farcical situation of teaching communicative skill by ill-equipped teachers to inordinately large classes held, in many places, under the open sky. Our concern in the present study is not to focus so much on the general state of affairs resulting from the paucity of funds and the recent cry for privatization. Our concern is primarily to examine the relevance and extent of the use of literature, especially poetry, to augment our teaching strategies at the under graduate level in Indian universities and colleges.

It is a known' fact that students pay the least heed to their language classes, which are either compulsory or selected by students of their own choice. The analysis of this lack of motivation among adult learners of English language has become almost urgent because students want quick, effective and useful command of the target language to be able to cope with the demands of the competitive era of globalization of almost every intellectual activity. In order to fully understand the confusion underlying the present dismal situations it is necessary to have a brief look at the different components of ELT in our higher educational system. These components are:

1. Clear statement of objectives
2. Curriculum restructuring
3. Teaching materials
4. Trained faculty
5. Effective teaching methodology

#### **1. Clear Statement of Objectives:**

The sine-qua-non of any ELT programme is a clear statement of the objectives of the courses designed. In ELT we all know that the emphasis ought to be on the acquisition of skills to such an extent of perfection that the learners can use it effortlessly: to express in the target language (L2) what he can do in his mother tongue (L1) and that too when it has been adequately cultivated. At the undergraduate level programme, therefore, a clear statement should be made about whether the programme aims at improving the skill of reading advance materials written in L2 or whether the learner is to acquire an internationally acceptable standard of oral communication, i.e. spoken English with its characteristic rhythm and intonation. Selection of the texts and preparation of teaching materials and determination of methodology of teaching cannot be discussed unless the objectives are clear at the back of the mind of the curriculum framers.

## **2. Curriculum Restructuring**

The most glaring issue involved in devising a programme of English Language Teaching at the under graduate level is a wide gap between assumption and reality. We assume that students have done at least seven to ten years of learning English at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, hence they must have mastered the communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) within "a limited vocabulary and has made the structural devices (the basic arrangement of utterances) matters of automatic habit." Peter Hag Boldd has asserted "we have a mastery of language when our comprehension by ear is spontaneous, our reading effortless and fluent, our use of words, idioms, and sentences in speech and writing habitual and skilful."

It is important that in devising any ELT Programme, the objectives should be clearly defined, taking into consideration the primacy of the skills to be included in the teaching system of English. This problem relates more to the learning of English language from the initial levels to the entry point into the under graduate programme at the university level. Realistically speaking all the four skills should be taught in an integrated manner, with varying degrees of emphasis on the skills, keeping in view the need of the particular group of students.

Curriculum designers have played safe by taking recourse to the philosophy of grading in a single course where all the levels mentioned above are taken care of. How far will such a philosophy carry a creditable weight is a matter of debate for which we do not have space in the present study. Leaving aside these thorny issues with politically explosive hues, we can continue our discussion about the literary material to be used for ELT at the under graduate level. As mentioned earlier in the present chapter, besides isolated sentences made up for drill practices in the classroom, prose extracts are the favourite of curriculum designers. These extracts include prose essays, short stories and complete situations from a novel. The focus is mostly on comprehension and practising stray language items for the different skills, the instances of which appear in the texts.

It is needless to emphasise that poetic composition has traditionally been considered to be a higher creative achievement than those in the prose form. Besides the above emotive and superstitious argument in favour of including poetry at under graduate ELT curriculum we will agree that it will bring variety and improve learner's motivation. We will see to what extent poetry can be used for language teaching when we come to stylo-linguistic analysis of a few selected poems in a later chapter of the present study.

It is important for the curriculum designers to keep in mind the Firthian principle of 'context of situation' in the selection of poems for the UG learners of the English language. Such a contextual framework will include the learner's age, level of literacy, social maturity, experiential range, broad social and familiar background, a real exposure to the alien culture of the foreign language; one should not forget the fact that language is rooted in a culture and cannot be said to have been adequately mastered if we ignore the cultural aspect of the language. This relates not only to poetry but to all forms of literary discourse in any language.

The anti-poetry stance of the ELT pedagogues in the past has been due to the ELT curriculum's being averse to the use of literary materials, specially poetry. This has been so because poems in the pre-independence era of English studies were selected for teaching not with an eye on their utility for acquisitions of communicative skills but for their value of cultural content and richness in moral and spiritual edification, besides aesthetic pleasure. The principle of selecting the poems for the analysis, has been that:

1. The poems should be carefully selected considering the content and language of the different pieces. The content should not be loaded with provincial cultural elements.
2. They should be interesting.
3. Their length should be as short as possible.
4. They should be a complete whole in the Aristotelian sense. Lyric, narrative pieces, ballads, sonnets, and such other poems, which are not too much foregrounded with rhetorical and prosodic features, should be preferred.

### **3. Teaching Materials**

The syllabus designers can select poems, which are easily available in print. There are anthologies and critical books where the difficult words, phrases, images, tropes etc. occurring in a particular poem are explained to help the students. But still the preparation of ancillary teaching materials by individual teachers suitable to a particular teaching context should be regarded as an essential component of the teaching strategy. The teaching materials should be prepared on the basis of the two pronged approaches to the analysis of poetry, i.e. literary as well as linguistic. This will take care of the recent developments in the study of languages in general and of English in particular in the writings of such linguists as Noam Chomsky and M.A.K. Halliday (Chomsky's Theory of the surface and deep structures for pedagogical purposes roughly parallels Halliday's Theory of the cognitive function of language and the deeper underlying meaning of poetry). This will also consolidate and expand the already acquired linguistic competence and performance of the students as well as act as

an impetus to augmenting students' motivation in responding to the various components of aesthetic and linguistic items in exploring the total significance of a poem.

The nature of the teaching materials will depend upon the requirement of a particular group of students in a specific teaching context. Properly selected poems, if presented to the students through stylo-linguistic explication of the various functional components of language and rhetorical devices can be more effective and interesting than the usually prescribed use of prose passages. But if a poem is taught through the traditional methodology of comprehending the meaning with the help of biographical, and sociological factors, it will serve no purpose of either motivating the students or bringing any intellectual excitement for keeping their interest lively. But if we point out to our students in a systematic manner how poetic language functions with foregrounded items and multiple rhetorical devices, there will always be an element of pleasant surprise and joy in learning.

#### **4. Trained Faculty**

A teacher is at the centre of any ELT or English studies programme at all levels. Even if the curriculum is defectively designed, a qualified and trained teacher can achieve the desired result by virtue of his own mental resources. If we go back again into the history of ELT in India we find that there was no dearth of qualified teachers to teach English. But with the phenomenal increase in the number of learners of English the problem of trained teachers was acutely felt from the 50's of the last century onwards. The government of India, in collaboration of the British council and the Ford Foundation of America, established the Central Institute of English at Hyderabad. The main objective of the Institute was to train personnel drawn from all over India who would train groups of teachers in their region, thus starting a chain action. This was expected to combat the problem of the shortage of trained teachers. Short duration summer institutes were organised by the UGC with the academic collaboration of the CIE (Central Institute of English), the British Council and different nodal University Centres in India to impart crash training to teachers at the university and college levels. Since the problem was of such a colossal magnitude i.e. to cater for the needs of millions of students, satisfactory achievements at the training front was not forthcoming.

Students coming to the university are already ill taught by ill-equipped teachers, whose own command of English language is questionable. They have formed wrong linguistic habits, which are required to be remedied at the under-graduate level. But these teachers at the under- graduate level, who are required to do mostly remedial teaching, should be trained in the basic principles of stylo-linguistics so that they can make the students aware of the language mechanism, the operation of which is different from other modes of discourses and communication. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of such teachers at the university and college levels. Hence the use of literature, where the greatest casualty is poetry, is sacrificed on the altar of the traditional language teaching through drills, memorization of prescriptive grammatical rules and translation from L1 to L2 and vice-versa. Quite a good number of teachers, besides being ill at ease with the mechanics of stylo-

linguistics, are generally deficient in their first-hand acquaintance with the culture of the L2. This deficiency in our ELT system is one of the imponderables about which not much can be done in the present set up where the government is not favourably inclined to take the responsibility of higher education, particularly in regard to the courses in Arts and Social Sciences.

### **5. Effective Teaching Methodology**

It has been customary with ESL experts to discuss various methods suitable to a particular group of students at a particular level of learning. Aural-oral method, linguistic method, grammar-translation method, structural approach, visual, kinaesthetic and aural-oral approaches have been quite often discussed for selecting suitable methodology for a group of students, considering the context of situations which has been mentioned while discussing curriculum restructuring. Very little thought has been paid to the use of a suitable methodology at the under-graduate level for teaching English literary pieces to develop and consolidate the communicative competence and performance of the students. Teachers of English have quite often believed that at the university level no formalized methodology can be used. Every teacher is an artist in himself and can devise his own methodology of teaching students. The method usually followed by majority of the teachers is: explaining the text where the teacher speaks and the students listen.

The teaching of poetry requires a methodology different from that of prose. For example, at the very beginning of a prose lesson the teacher can ask the students to read the passage either silently or loudly to give practice in articulation of sounds, stress, correct pauses, intonation etc. Students can comprehend the content of the passage to a satisfactory extent on their own and the teacher can only add whatever has escaped their attention. Selecting active vocabulary and useful language pattern for special attention and practice by the students can be done with no great difficulty. But with a poem it is not so. Hence here the teacher should read out the poem to the students with proper attention to the phonemic, prosodic and other technical features like run on lines, caesura and rhyming. It is after this reading out exercise that the teacher should proceed with the poem in a way where there is interactive teaching and learning and ever increasing motivation of the students. The students should be involved in the poem concerned and try to follow the development of the idea presented by the poet. The teacher can select only those useful items for practicing pronunciation, vocabulary, and language patterns, which are obviously discernible on the text pages. The drill in language items should not be over done so that students' enjoyment of the subtle use of language in the poem is not marred. The teacher, despite claiming complete autonomy of a self-styled player, has to keep in mind certain principles of teaching in general, irrespective of the level or background of the students. For example, he should be clear about his aim, lesson development, presentation and device for a feed back to check his achievements at the end of a lesson. It is a well-known fact that there are no good or bad

methods of teaching but only good or bad teachers. A truly effective teacher can make a maximal use of even a deficient curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

In the teaching of poetry at the undergraduate level, the most important participants are the teacher and the students. It is our assumption that the teacher is well equipped with a thorough knowledge of the descriptive linguistic analysis of the English language. Besides this he is expected to have a high degree of sensitivity to the various components of the English language in addition to the cultural fabric in which the language is inextricably interwoven. The student should have a reasonable quantum of sensitivity to language as well as a good grounding in the grammar of English and the cultural background required to fully explore the meaning of a piece of poetry. He should have the perceptivity to identify foregrounded items literary as well as linguistic - on his own. The sorry state of affair of students' linguistic and literary equipment in majority of the teaching contexts in India is only too well known to need any elaboration. To pass a similar judgement on the situation of faculty in English sections may sound rather presumptuous. But here too, the truth is a matter of common knowledge in the academic circle. How this problem can be tackled will be going out of the preview of the present study. But crash programmes for teachers on how to teach poetry in a meaningful way in the realistic contexts of educational institutions can be a possible solution.

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