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## Teaching English through Literature

**Dodda Durgappa**

Assistant Professor  
Department of UG & PG Studies in English  
Government First Grade College  
Gubbi, Karnataka.  
**INDIA.**

### **Abstract**

*“For last year's words belong to last year's language And next year's words await another voice.” — T. S. Eliot*

*This Seminar paper aims to pinpoint the relevant role of literature as a resource for second language teaching .Firstly, it provides an explanation of positive and negative views toward utilizing literature as a resource for language teaching. Secondly, it sketches out different methodological issues regarding the use of literature. Finally, some empirical studies carried out to examine the role of literature in language instruction are presented.*

## **Introduction**

English as a global language was not completely perceived in the early 1950s to the 1970s, but the prominence of English language as a global one came to be known only in the 1980s. There was a growing perception of the language becoming a universal language which resulted in famous authors making daring proclamations like “English is the global language”(Crystal, 1997). Language is an essential part of our quest to figure out the world .although we are probably accustomed of thinking that language simply express our thoughts and reflects what we see, this is essentially a naïve belief. Language directs our perception, and the pictures we create of our world are coloured by the symbols we see. Language is your medium to think about and talk about ideas. what we call “Knowledge”is language.

## **Key Issues in Teaching Language through Literature**

The following Six important issues pertaining to the teaching of language through literature emerge from the deliberation of teachers, discussion among teachers and research scholars:

1. Goals and Objectives of teaching literature
2. Perspectives of teaching literature
3. Role of literature in language teaching
4. Approaches to teaching literature
5. Implementation of non-native varieties of literature
6. Evaluation of students’ learning

Firstly, Goals and Objectives of teaching literature The goals of teaching literature, according to the teachers surveyed by Akyel and Yalcin (1990, p.175), are: exposing students to literature to achieve a broader educational and cultural goal, and developing ‘literary competence’. There is no mention of developing language competence. It is either assumed to exist in students a priori or expected to result as a by-product of literary studies. At the tertiary level, however, the aim of teaching literature seems to be to transmit the cultural and social values embodied in literary works considered to be the literary heritage, a goal more valid for teaching literature in the L1 situation. The problem with this aim is that the term “culture” refers to manifold concepts and experiences of cultural life in diverse settings (Eagleton, 2000). At the tertiary level, literary studies have been influenced by critical theory and sociology of literature.

It has not been very easy to define the exact nature of this competence, which refers to the ability of a good reader of literature: “the fundamental ability of a good reader of literature is the ability to generalize from the given text to either other aspects of the literary tradition, or personal or social significances outside literature” (Brumfit, 1985, p.108). The process of reading is a process of

meaning-creation by integrating one's own needs, understanding and expectations with a written text" (ibid, p.119).

In recent times there has been a discussion of the use of competence frameworks and statements for describing achievements in literary study (Fleming, 2006). The goal of teaching literature should, therefore, be to develop in the learners an adequate capacity for responding personally to literary texts, and interpreting and appreciating them appropriately. According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable a)authentic material (b) cultural enrichment (c)language enrichment and (d)personal involvement. In addition to these four main reasons, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the second language classroom context.

Second issue is Perspectives of teaching literature Literature can be viewed in at least three different ways: literature as text, literature as messages, and literature as discourse. At one extreme, the linguist treats literature as text by drawing attention primarily to how a piece of literature exemplifies the language system; at the other extreme, the literary critic treats literature as messages and searches for underlying significance or the essential artistic vision the literary text embodies. Literary discourse, an important aspect of literature-teaching, is distinguished from other types of normal discourse in several ways.

In conventional discourse, i.e. day-to-day communication, one counts on 'schematic knowledge' of contextual meaning and seeks to get some kind of convergence of these 'schemata' or frames of reference. Literary schemata, on the other hand, are created internally, within the literature itself, and are not projected from outside the text (Widdowson, 1983, p.30) Secondly, there can be no shared meaning in literature, because we cannot refer to anything outside literature as a point of reference. Literature has no referential truth value, but only representational meaning – it is representative of meaning and does not refer to any meaning outside of itself. This implies that literary discourse is dissociated and dislocated in that sense from any normal social context, and therefore requires the reader to create his or her own schematic information obtained through interpretative procedures different from those required for making sense of texts in the normal reading process.

Thirdly, the writer of literature is in a way deliberately trying to keep the reader in suspense, so the reader has to be constantly searching for meaning. The literary writer creates realities which engage people's interest and attention (and interpretative abilities) without their participating in those realities in the 'real-world' sense. In essence, the writer of literature is in the problem-setting business, and the reader of literature is in the business of problem-solving par excellence.

Third issue is Role of literature in language teaching Literature was removed from most language syllabuses as linguistics increasingly became the point of reference for language teaching. Linguists and applied linguists dismissed literature as irrelevant to language curricula because it did not seem to be down-to-earth and practical (i.e., based on flights of fancy and imagination), or related to the everyday world of the language users and hence did not offer good models for

language learners. This was regrettable and literature was banished from language curricula as a result of such “hasty decisions about language teaching methodology”, based on “very facile grounds, ill-considered grounds” (Widdowson, 1983, p.34).

Gradually, however, it was realized that, if literature of its nature could provide a resource for developing in learners an important ability to use knowledge of the language for the interpretation of literature as discourse, then it ought to be one element of the language curriculum. In other words, literature is an authentic discourse, readily available to be exploited in the language classroom in a variety of ways. This is not to imply that a ‘literary approach’ to language teaching should replace other approaches like the functional or structural approach. At present, literature is not treated as a separate and optional entity in the language classroom, but as an integral and vital part of it.

This is the result of consistent efforts of applied linguists for over three decades (including but not limited to, Brumfit 1982, 1985; Gower and Pierson 1986; Rodger 1983; Sage 1987; Maley 1989, 1993, 1995; Carter et al. 1989; Brumfit and Carter 1986; Short 1996; Collie and Slater 1987; McRae 1991; Carter and McRae 1996; Carter et al. 1997; and Falvey and Kennedy 1997). This is evident in the integration of literature with skills work, the use of media with literature and the way in which recent developments in understanding discourse (both spoken and written) are drawn upon (Paran, 2000, p.87). Some underlying issues emerge from the literature on the language-literature interface in relation to using literature for language teaching (Paran, 2000). First, the role of literature within the mainstream of EFL/ESL is still not firmly established.

In spite of the sincere and commendable efforts of the applied linguists mentioned above, there are those who argue against a special and specific function for literature in language teaching and learning, dismissing claims for such a specific role for literature as serving merely an external justification for learning modern languages, an educational rationale tied up with a historical tradition, suggesting that such extraneous goals, aspirations and traditions be abandoned (Edmondson, 1997). That the role of literature in language teaching is still not firmly established is also evident in a number of ways. For instance, the fear of using literature in the language classroom is still prevalent.

The number of hours devoted to literature on university courses for English majors is cut down, thus minimizing or reducing its importance. A majority of EFL/ESL teachers are not convinced that literature is a useful and integral element within language teaching and learning. Many teachers seem to have some resistance to, or misgivings about, incorporating literature in English language teaching (Falvey and Kennedy, 1997; Paran, 2000).

Thus, there is a need to view both language teaching and the part that literature has to play within it as part of the whole educational process and endeavour, and not apart from it (Paran, 2000). A second major issue is the understanding of what ‘literature in language learning’ actually means. At one extreme, it is understood as the transmission of knowledge about literature and the literary canon; at the other extreme, literature is given no special status, but it is used as just a resource like any other texts to further students’ communicative competence. Between these extreme positions, there are those who interpret it as the study of literature as literature, with a focus on developing students’

literary competence; there are also those who ‘use’ literature (rather than ‘teach’ it), but nevertheless acknowledge its special status within the language. It is thus clear that ‘literature in language learning’ is interpreted and understood in different ways (Paran, 2000, p.76). There is also a “tension . . . between an instrumental view of literature as beneficial to the learners’ language and a more general, humanistic view of the role of literature (including literature in a foreign language) within a public education system” The third major issue is the methodology used with literary texts and its role in language learning. With the explosion of interest in the use of literature in EFL/ESL teaching, there has been a corresponding explosion of interest and enthusiasm in the use of language teaching techniques and methods in teaching literature. Such overenthusiastic attempts have, however, come in for sharp criticism. For example, the use of stylistics on literary texts within EFL has been questioned (Gower, 1986); techniques like jigsaw reading cannot be automatically applied to literary texts, which are representational by nature (McRae, 1991, p.111); the use of cloze technique, specifically with poems, has been rejected as ‘lexicide and goblin-spotting’ (Mackay, 1992).

Fourth on is Approaches to teaching literature Despite these sporadic efforts, however, the teaching of English literature at the undergraduate level as the Literature Major has remained essentially the same throughout this long period – teachercentred and teacher-directed, the literary texts being presented to students through lectures, summaries and paraphrases, with little or no involvement of students in understanding and appreciating those texts on their own. The situation, in the past, was not different. Traditionally, the language teacher was educated in its literature, who often forced particular works of literature on students who were not yet ready for them and attempted transmission of irrelevant information about books and authors, i.e. knowledge about literature, and has nothing to do with the ability to profit from reading the literature itself (Pattison, 1963).

The teaching of English literature to students majoring in English, however, has seen very little change over the past few decades. In many classrooms, the teaching of literature has remained unchanged with emphasis on teacher-centred and text-directed approaches and methods (e.g., lectures; period and genre surveys; biographical summaries; teacher’s explication and ‘critical analyses’ of canonical texts; stereotyped exam questions requiring stereotyped answers). Teachers continue to teach literary texts “as finished products, to be unilaterally decoded, analyzed, and explained” (Kramsch, 1985, p. 356; cited in Harper 1988). Such an approach tends to minimize learner involvement, engagement and participation, and undermines the value of learners’ responses to literature as readers in their own right, resulting in frustration and a lack of interest and motivation on the part of learners.

Most of our undergraduate students also have limited linguistic and critical-analytical skills for responding to literary texts as works of art and for articulating their experiences of reading such texts when asked to do so. For them, the course in English literature may become a “painful lesson in deciphering” (Santoni, 1972, p. 434; cited in Harper 1988). The methodology has been confined almost to lectures. Classroom teaching usually consists of a long monologue by the teacher on a piece of literature, this monologue taking the form of the teacher primarily attempting to explain the

meaning of the text (often several meanings!) preceded by a 'brief' introduction to the author and his works. Teachers are not adequately trained to teach literature in innovative and creative ways.

The teacher may be much admired for his erudition or scholarship, but his lectures are little understood. As a result, students rely almost exclusively on guidebooks and resort to rote learning. In other words, there has been very little reading and study of literature with clearly spelt out objectives and methodology. Teachers who belong to the 'literature establishment' wish to follow teacher-centred activities, such as informative background lectures, reading the text (mostly aloud) in class, paraphrasing the content, presenting the critical views of established scholars and critics, leading and loaded questions for 'understanding' the text, and requiring students to produce text-related essays (Akyel and Yalcin, 1990, pp.176-177).

This 'old' or traditional method of teaching English literature as a body of received knowledge to be learnt largely through the lecture mode is frequently criticised as being too productcentred, tending to impose the meaning of texts (established by academics and professional critics) on the student (Elliott, 1990, p.192). The alternative linguistic approach to literature, i.e. stylistics, it is claimed, will help students 'appreciate' literature more, because 'linguistic analysis' will help make students' 'intuitions' about literary texts more conscious, which will in turn help students talk about texts more articulately and convincingly (Carter, 1982; Cummings and Simmons, 1983). This approach to literature through stylistics has also come in for criticism similar to the one on the traditional teacher-centred approach: stylistics also tends to focus narrowly on the words on the page as a self-enclosed system, requiring complex linguistic analysis (which is beyond the ability of most EFL/ESL students) for discovering a fixed meaning (Elliott, 1990, p.192). Stylistic activity, instead of aiding students' reading as it is often claimed, may actually impede it. It may run counter to reading, impeding students' reading potential. Analysis can help only if it is totally subservient to reading, as a supplementary tool that helps greater understanding and promotes better reading. "If we are talking about helping students to read, we need to look at what we are talking about in the classroom from the teacher's, not the academic's point of view" (Gower, 1986). It thus becomes clear that neither the traditional approach (transmission of knowledge about literature) nor stylistics approach (linguistic analysis) directly helps students develop literary competence, because both of them tend to impose meaning from without, the literary critic's or the linguist's meaning, as the case may be. Literary competence, on the other hand, comes from the student's ability to confer meaning from within.

It is therefore essential that the approach to literature and the classroom activities should help students with the process of developing this ability of a good reader of literature discussed earlier (Brumfit, 1985). The essential requirement for an effective approach to literature from this point of view is to create conditions for students to discover the meaning of texts from within themselves, develop genuine personal response to them, define and articulate their response, and negotiate their meaning as a group (i.e., intersubjectively), rather than having to receive meaning imposed from without (Elliott, 1990).

Having recognized the need to focus on the student, literature teachers are increasingly using techniques and classroom activities associated with a communicative approach to language teaching that provide possibilities for adopting a student-centred approach, such as pair work, group work,

problem-solving, information gap, attitude gap and opinion gap activities as a supplement to, and sometimes instead of, the traditional lectures, tutorials and seminar discussions (Mackay, 1992, p.199). Such techniques and activities will help to foster a greater level of interaction between the student, reader and text and between and among students. Such interactions, which are of great importance, are precisely absent in the traditional teacher-centred, lecture-dominated literature classroom. Activities presenting a piece of literature as a problem to be solved provide plenty of scope for discussion and interaction among learners because there is no single right solution to the problem presented (Widdowson, 1983). This implies that the development of communicative competence should be the last aim of any language activity.

The relevance of literature in this approach is, on the one hand, that it transmits messages. It is a way of communication between the author and the reader. On the other hand, literature pays special attention to form, and this helps the learner reflect about language, another principle and goal of the communicative method. It is important that the learners develop their linguistic competence by learning how to express meanings in English, but also that they develop their communicative competence, that will allow them to transmit messages, to use the language to interact, to communicate with other people, which is, in the end, the basic function of language.

The use of literature as a teaching tool is legitimated by the facts mentioned above, namely, because it provides with authentic linguistic (also sociolinguistic) and cultural material, and because it motivates the learners to interact. The prevalent communicative language teaching principles emphatically suggests that literature is an easily exploitable resource for language instruction. The great potential of literature as a context for pleasurable as well as useful language practice lies in its intrinsic appeal to youthful creativity, its inclusion of all the four basic language skills and more, and its wide scope for collaborative engagement among the students, in addition to individual interaction with the texts.

Whatever strategies a teacher adopts in the class, the rooted aim is that students gain a fuller understanding of the text and have linguistically and conceptually prepare themselves to study it for interpretation and evaluation.

Using the strategies discussed above, students learn how to make predictions and check them against the details in the given text. They also learn how to derive meaning of a text and form a semantic chain from the key words, examine how language is used to describe a setting and create desired effects, analyze how to assess them, and also find out ways of transferring the text and reconstructing its specific and literal meaning.

Thus, with awakened language sensitivity and improved literary insight, they gain the ability to read a literary work critically as a creative expression with aesthetic sensibility. In short, they have learned “literature through language”.

Sixth one is Implementations of non-native varieties of literature In many EFL/ESL situations, the English Major students, a vast majority of whom have low proficiency in English, are exposed to challenging and often unsuitable canonical texts, which are beyond their understanding and linguistic competence.

The teacher, therefore, resorts to lecturing, explicating and translating the texts, and dictating notes. The current practices tend to promote content-based and memory-oriented study of literature; examinations also seek to test students' memory of reproducible content (Carter and Long, 1990). The inevitable result of all of these is that the students hardly feel the necessity to have a direct encounter with the texts – they are passive listeners, and are not encouraged to react to what they read, or think critically, or do any original writing on the texts.

In this context, the necessity of knowing students' needs and attitudes towards studying literature in an ESL/EFL setting should be considered. Student's attitudes towards studying literature and their literary competence are not given due importance in literature curriculum design, and an analysis of learner needs is usually neglected (Hirvela and Boyle, 1988; Akyel and Yalcin, 1990). Students have many fears and anxieties about studying literature, especially poetry – poetry was found to be most difficult, problematic and intimidating. These fears are based partly on their lack of background or previous exposure to poetry, and partly on a certain mystique about literature (Hirvela and Boyle, 1988). Student attitudes, along with teacher goals and suitable texts, will make the course satisfying to both students and teachers.

In countries where non-native variety of English is popularly used as a second language and widely spoken with all zeal, wider functions can be served by the use of literary works written in those countries (e.g., India and Africa). The use of such texts will make it easier for the teacher to enhance students' awareness of their own society, their sense of self-identity, their communicative competence within their community and their command of the standard language itself. A pedagogy which recognizes that people learn things best when they want to learn them may justify using teenage novels and even pulp fiction (Ronnqvist and Sell, 1994). It is here quite appropriate to cite India where we have prescribed poems, stories, prose-pieces, novels, etc. written by our own authors, primarily exhibiting and illustrating Indian culture, social realities and traditions. These India English texts, incorporated with British English literature and American English Literature have proved several advantages, especially this concentrated step makes students enjoy and understand texts fuller, and because of their active involvement during learning this also prompts to enhance their language skills to their expectations. There is a strong case for incorporating multicultural literature including postcolonial literature in the literature curriculum.

Multicultural literature refers to world literatures either originally written in English or translated into English (including minority and immigrant literature); postcolonial literature is defined more narrowly as writing by the peoples formerly colonized by Britain (e.g., Africa, India) (the term 'commonwealth literature' is also used), but much of it is also of interest and relevance to peoples colonized by other European powers like France, Portugal and Spain. There is a possibility that multicultural literature may be trivialized, or misused to reinforce misconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices rather than to promote understanding of the 'self' and 'other', if teachers are not oriented to teach such texts (Cai, 2002; cited in Mohammadzadeh, 2009). The benefits of inter-mixing multicultural literature, however, are many. Students will be introduced to an exciting and challenging range of non-canonical world literature, and to the relationship of culture, history and politics to the study of literature as literature. This exposure will help students develop not only a

critical understanding of literary variations, but also a better appreciation and critical awareness of regional and global varieties of English (Mohammadzadeh, 2009).

Finally, Evaluation of students' learning. The teaching and study of literature are largely exam oriented and the evaluation of literary learning has only been emphasizing rote memory and reproduction of borrowed critical opinions with little or no attention paid to students' spoken skills. The wash back effect is negative. The focus is not on learning and liberal education, but solely on passing examinations and acquiring a meaningless and valueless paper qualification.

Conventional tests, based on content, context, paraphrasing, searching hidden meaning, description, evaluation, are surely to be retained, but not at the cost of ruining language exposures. Such conventional tests, in my objective estimation, should be supplemented, if not replaced, by others which are obviously more language-based, i.e. dealing with general comprehension, textual focus and personal response.

The assessment methods should make students go back to the text and the uses of language in it as the centre of their experiences (Carter and Long, 1990) and within the classroom, the teacher needs to devise activities that will assist in the process of developing the skill that might be measured finally in the literary essay. Assessment tasks, to be effective, should use literary texts which presuppose little background or contextual knowledge (Pieper, 2006 Reasons for Using Literature in the Language Classroom Literature is rooted in a language and language gets life thorough literature. So Literature and language are closely interconnected. Literature is an important window letting one to have a view of the world and realizing the expression of culture by means of sharing individual or collective life experience. Though the world of a novel, play, or short story, for instance, is an imaginary one yet it presents a setting in which characters from many social backgrounds are described. A reader can discover the way the characters in such literary works see the world outside i.e. their thoughts, feelings, customs, traditions, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave in different settings.

This world in a literary text can help the second/foreign language learner to feel for the codes and preoccupations that shape a real society through visual literacy. Literary texts provide aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure. Because of its symbolic density literature provides much impetus for language learning. Literature provides ample opportunities to develop students' interpretative power and it can familiarize students with many features of the written language. Study of literature is not merely concerned with skill acquisition. According to Carter and Long (1991), "Literature is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching." In view of all this contention, we could argue that there are three main criteria that justify the use of literature as a second language teaching tool (Duff and Maley, 1990, p.6).

In the first place, the linguistic criterion defends that literature should be used in language teaching, because it provides the learner with genuine, authentic samples of language, and also with real samples of a wide range of styles, text types and registers. It is extremely important for foreign language learners to be trained in a variety of registers, styles and genres and to be able to discern the function of each of them.

These different manifestations of language are not only distinctive linguistically, but also socially, they all have a social communicative function (Sanz and Fernández, 1997). This has to do with the notion of adequacy. It refers to the fact that a message needs to be linguistically correct and situationally appropriate, as regards not only its content, but also its form. The second criterion is methodological and refers to the fact that a literary text has multiple interpretations, these generate different opinions among the learners and this leads to real, motivated interaction with the text, with the fellow students and with the teacher (Widdowson, 1983).

From the methodological point of view, further aspects that favour the use of literature in the language classroom are the active role of the learner and the literary text as the central focus of attention. Learners become active, autonomous, and central to the learning process. One aspect of special importance within the communicative approach, and that is magnificently reflected in the poem at stake, is the idea of literature supplying the learner with cultural information about the country whose language they are learning (Lazar, 1993, p.16).

Finally, the motivational criterion is of great relevance because the literary text shows the real feelings of the writer and this generates a powerful motivation in the learner. With the literary text the student accesses this personal experience, if he is touched by the theme and provoked, he will be able to relate what he is reading to her world, to what he knows and feels. Designing stimulating activities that motivate the learners is the greatest challenge for language teachers, and literature has a strong motivating power due to its calling on to personal experience.

## **Conclusion**

Literature is very important for English programs conducted in most of the non-English speaking countries. But teachers over those countries face problem in literature based teaching of English. A very few well prepared curricula with supporting materials is the first problem with teachers in language classroom. In the literature-based 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. The language teacher should encourage students to read literature for their own meanings and experiences instead of being forced to accept the teacher's perception of the text literature provided examples of effective and appropriate usage of the language for the students to learn.

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