

Language/Literature: Classroom Enough for Both? A Marriage between Language and Literature: Everyone's Welcome

Revathi Srinivas¹

The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

Abstract: The English classroom has tended to wall in and wall out either literature or language teaching in its elementary aspects. This paper proposes to show that these are not mutually exclusive polarities but synergistic and symbiotic linguistic forms that can use the experiences developed in either area. Using a poem, an attempt is made to illustrate the commonalty of purpose. While the language teacher can deepen communicative competence, the teacher of literature can make language learning more memorable and pleasurable. Literature is not an ivory tower, nor is language learning dull practicality.

Keywords: Language, Literature, Literary Appreciation, Communicative Competence.

1. Introduction

THE TEXTBOOK in the English classroom, being exclusively communicative need-based, purveys materials designed to teach the language in a most functional manner, as seen from a pedagogical perspective, and excludes the highest and most beautiful form of language—literature. While the functional aspect is commendable and even inevitable as far as the needs of the learner go, such an attitude ignores the full potential of the literary text, not to speak of the learner's own capacities for language acquisition and use. This paper takes the view that to limit a literary text to teach a mere "communicative competence", is artificial, and will stunt pedagogy itself. Therefore literary appreciation, along with language development ought to be a crucial part of language teaching and learning.

2. Language Versus Literature and Language through Literature

The apparent dichotomy between language and literature is an endemic but fairly recent development that emphasizes utility to the neglect of the beauty that is inherent in language. The ELT classroom regarded literature as eating cake when bread was not available. While such arguments seem fairly convincing, it must be realized that literature does "appeal to the business and bosoms of men", as Sir Francis Bacon put it. In ELT, the rise of vocabulary restriction movements, notional syllabuses, and the like culminated in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that invariably became a shibboleth to the language classroom. With the pronouncement that every act should be a speech act, an illocutionary act that is demonstrable in the classroom with simple acts such as opening a window, literature was quite simply and literally defenestrated. The literature class, for its part, regarded language learning as implicit at best, and irrelevant at worst.

The tendency in the literature class to focus exclusively on the aesthetic aspects of a literary text is the obverse of the language teacher's obsession with functionality of language. But there have always been enlightened writers who saw language and literature in partnership. For example, the Modernist poets of the 20th century believed that literature had a mission—to make every word have a precise meaning. And every language teacher will immediately agree on the efficacy of this aim. Thus it is imperative that, whatever aesthetic and humanist aims literature may have, it is necessary for this fundamental purpose of precise language use to be incorporated into the literature class. This may entail the teaching of grammar, as a part of stylistic analysis, or the learning of vocabulary for a precise understanding of meaning. Let us remember that the denotative meaning, first learned, and the focus of the language class, branches out into the connotative and the metaphorical.

¹ Telephone: +91-9000611916 Fax: +910427689630
E-mail: rrevathi@yahoo.com

In the 1960s, the concept of Language *through* Literature emerged in ELT. However, ironically, instead of showing the natural affinity between the two, the concept has formalized and institutionalized the dichotomy by making a literary text merely a tool, a means to the “higher” end, of teaching language, quite often without any explicit goal in mind. It now seemed that literature was a mere door *through* which language entered and was promptly forgotten. The earlier classes had hoped that the exposure to certain select “purple passages” and good writing would somehow catch on with the readers who would then go on to produce sonorous writings themselves. The pendulum now swung the other way with language teachers looking askance at literature. But this need not be so.

The use of the sheer beauty of literature to teach language is well illustrated in Indian experience with the example the great mid-Victorian anthology, the *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrics in the English Language* (1861), in which the editor, Sir Francis Turner Palgrave, already recognizes the preeminent position of his native tongue the world over: “[W]herever the Poets of England are honoured, wherever the dominant language of the world is spoken,” he says towards the conclusion of his Preface, “it is hoped that they will find a fit audience” (Palgrave xii). Palgrave’s “they” is cleverly ambiguous; it is both Poetry’s “true accents” and “the Poets of England” (Palgrave xii). And they indeed were heard even in faraway India. The Governor of Bombay, Sir Alexander Grant, for example, wrote to Palgrave from Bombay about how “immense[ly] comfort[ing]” the anthology had been for him personally, and about his proposal to use it as a textbook for Indian students (quoted in Clausen 276). Grant was thinking essentially within a colonialist Enlightenment paradigm: “English poetry is to these people what Homer is to us” (quoted in Clausen 276). Grant’s was not after all a vain thought; poetry in Indian languages became “modern” only in the 50’s or early 60’s thanks to the monopoly of Palgrave and his ideas of poetry which our regional poets seemed to like and translate despite their genuine and strong nationalist feelings, and laid the foundations for one of the largest countries of English speakers. Today English has created a place of its own as a *lingua franca* in India, and is one of the main sources of empowerment of the masses. It is taught as a Second Language from the early years of schooling, and harnesses a variety of techniques and sources, including literary pieces, with considerable success in achieving the aims they are meant for. That literary works should be a part of the curriculum is quite natural, but without the communicative aspect present only at an unconscious level, if at all, it is a serious lapse on the part of the academy.

When the language teacher uses literature, it is usually under the duress of the prescribed syllabus. And then the work is reduced to its simplest semantic level, almost a *reductio ad absurdum*. Thus, the structures of a sentence are taken out of context, or a word is analysed in isolation, and a tunnel vision is developed in the learner. “We murder to dissect,” to take a line from William Wordsworth. While it is true that no one intends to turn language learners into critics, a lively appreciation of literature *qua* literature is an end that is most desirable even for the purpose of making language learning itself a pleasure, and a part of the learner’s nature. It is crucial in “learning how to learn”, and sustain an interest and love for language over a lifetime. For, is it not true that literature is language that is charged with meaning to an extraordinary level? It is then that the learner finds endless possibilities of meaning and in exploring them, stumbles upon the joy of discovery, and what the great Victorian T B Macaulay called “the pleasure of agreement” with a great soul. It is such experiences that make learning permanent and rewarding, and are in contrast with a soulless item on a list that has items such as “the language of telephony”.

When literature is given its true status and potential, it is culturally enriching. It has in it, apart from the language itself, an inherent sociolinguistic component that is internalized by the learner, leading to an effortless acquisition of an important aspect of language. The authenticity of the language, makes literature an inexhaustible source for a materials developer in ELT. The polysemy that is unique to literature can bring in a personal angle that mirrors the learner’s own life and creates an empathy that is closest to an eidetic experience that lingers for a long time to gain more meaning later. This is more so in the light of the fact that language learning is mostly a process and rarely a product. The memory is the soil in which language develops through thought, and none can match literature in accessing it. The point is that if a materials developer can carefully select the appropriate text from literature, there can be a holistic development of language that is based on empathy and enthusiasm.

3. Language and Literature

Literary works offer a rich and varied repertoire of form and function, theme and topicality with universality, and are a source of much enjoyment for teacher and learner alike. They often explore themes of universal concern and embody life experiences, observations and feelings evoked by them. Their concision and strong imagery combine to form a powerful overall effect. Moreover, poems in particular are sensitively turned to what, for language learners, are the vital areas of stress, rhythm and similarities of sound. In an ESL classroom, using poetry can lead naturally on to a freer, more creative written expression.

Literature is rich with intertextuality that makes the words resonate with meaning. The poem we have chosen, "This is a photograph of me" by Margaret Atwood is reminiscent of Stevie Smith's "Not Waving, But Drowning", having a similar theme, and with humor and irony of a different kind. The two poems, read in juxtaposition, can reinforce theme and form along with a feeling for language developed by contrast and conflation of meaning and diegesis. In the contemporary world, the relevance of the theme takes on an existential significance, and is immediately appealing to its readers. If we agree with language experts that more than 80% of what we know comes from extensive reading, then it is by such juxtapositioning of two poems like the ones mentioned above can serve the purpose. For the record we can suggest that E A Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy" has a similar theme. The point is that literature provides a cornucopia of fascinating materials and it would be a failure on our part as teachers not to use it. Let us remind ourselves that poets and other writers are themselves anxious to reach out to the masses and help them through their critical writings, interviews and other forms of interventions though they find some of these to be quite embarrassing. Literature has come more than halfway towards the language classroom. The modern anthology is, by default, designed for the classroom. The chances are endless, and are getting more accessible through technology such as the internet which also allows us to listen to the recitations of many writers. In short, all the language skills are available authentically and easily in literature. We need to step forward to avail ourselves of these if we have to be true to our profession and do justice to our students.

What follows is a demonstration of some select aspects of literature's place in language pedagogy in an attempt to show that it is not just language *through* literature, but that it can be language *and* literature. We have chosen a poem by the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood titled "This is a Photograph of Me". We shall study this poem by itself, and the way it is used in a prescribed textbook for the General English Course at the Undergraduate level in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

MARGARET ATWOOD
THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF ME

It was taken some time ago.

At first it seems to be

a smeared

print: blurred lines and gray flecks

blended with the paper;

then, as you scan

it, you see in the left-hand corner

a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree

(balsam or spruce) emerging

and, to the right, halfway up

what ought to be a gentle

slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,

and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken

the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center

of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where

precisely, or to say

how large or small I am:

the effect of water

on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,

eventually

you will be able to see me.)

(Damodar et al pp. 23-33)

4. Suggested Activities

4.1. Warm-up

The teacher asks a few general questions such as: *Do you have a collection of photographs? Can you recall the best and the worst photograph? Do you keep all the photographs carefully? How would you feel if you found an old photograph of the family/someone in the family?*

The learners then work in pairs and interview each other about one or two photographs asking why they dis/like it/them the most. Answers are discussed as the teacher asks students what they discovered. The teacher then asks for responses to each other.

4.2. Reading the Poem

Students are told that they are going to hear a poem about a photograph called ‘This is a photograph of me’. The teacher reads with plenty of expression and eye contact. They are given a gist question to accompany the first listening, “What has happened?” As a follow-up to the gist question, the teacher asks the students to make two columns on a piece of paper with the headings ‘personal’ and ‘general’ that will refer to the poem addressing the reader or simply presenting an idea. Reading some lines from the poem, the teacher asks the students to choose the column appropriate for each line. The columns are then discussed. The students consider whether the narrator in the poem talks openly to everybody or shares some confidential information with the reader.

The teacher then cuts the poem into individual lines, and asks students in small groups to decide on a possible order for them. It is important to stress that it is not necessary to guess the ‘right’ order: the task is to arrange the lines in a way that suggests some kind of logic. When this ordering has been done, each group is asked to supply a title for this poem, then compare it with the results achieved in other groups.

4.3. Follow-up

Learners are asked to look back at all the vivid images in the poem they have been reading and choose the one they feel is most touching and representative of the speaker. They are asked to write a short note to a friend telling him or her how they feel using the image chosen.

Learners imagine themselves to be the narrator and write a letter about their experience to a friend.

4.4. Language Focus

The teacher can draw the attention of the learners to the use of language in this poem through the following questions.

- How does the speaker show, using an understatement, that the picture is an old one (first stanza)?
- How does the speaker dramatize the situation and make it come alive? Consider the role of tense in this. Put the same in the past continuous. How do the effects change or remain the same?
- How does the poem use parentheses to create an air of confidentiality even as it fills in the background?
- What happens within and without the brackets?
- How do you think the meaning would have changed if the speaker had said, “slight slope” instead of “gentle slope”? What feelings do you connect with the words slight and gentle?
- Working with a lexicon, find out the parts of a tree in decreasing size beginning with its stem and going forward with branches. Can you form their plurals?
- Consider the word “emerge”. The dictionary says that the prefix e- means coming out, and to merge is to mix. How does the word make sense here? List out more words that use the prefix e-.
- Working with a lexicon, list out the names of water bodies such as lakes and arrange them in order of size. Do the same with hills going on to mountains.
- List out words that function both as verbs and nouns using a dictionary. Does Atwood use them in both senses? Explain.
- When does the writer use active and passive voices? Why? You may have noticed that she uses the active when she addresses the reader. Discuss the effect.

We now make samples for literary appreciation:

- What techniques does the poet use to create polysemy?
- How do the descriptions of the ordinary utilities such as the frame house contribute to the poem?
- What existential situation/s is the speaker facing?
- How is the poem a comment on contemporary society?
- Do you think the photograph captures the life of the person adequately? Give your reasons.
- Discuss how the photograph plays a central role in the poem mentioning how it triggers off feelings and memories. Is it in anyway relevant that a photograph is not three-, but two-dimensional?
- What ideas do you form of the speaker's personality? Is s/he indulging in self-pity? Elaborate.
- How does the speaker connect with nature?
- Is the speaker shifting between appearance and reality? Give reasons with examples from the poem.
- What is the tone of the poem?
- Comment on the use of irony in the poem.
- Write a note on the poet's diction showing its appropriateness with examples.
- Consider the landscape in the poem. What is its setting?
- Why is it difficult to see the speaker?
- Comment on the use of pronouns in the poem. How do they affect you as a reader?

5. Conclusion

In short, all the language skills are available authentically and easily in literature. We need to step forward to avail ourselves of these if we have to be true to our profession and do justice to our students. The language teacher has, by making it simple, helped retain a basic understanding of words. It is something that the literature student can revert to with pleasure and profit. Such attempts to get back to basics inform Absurd Drama where simple language and wordplay evoke language in its simplest and deepest sense. It is up to us as teachers and learners to grab them for their own good. The learner of literature sees how quotidian language can inspire literature, and arrive at a deeper understanding of both. We may remind ourselves here that such often quoted lines such as "headpiece filled with straw" (Beardsley et al pp. 556-558), took it from his curtain lectures, and John Millington Synge is on record visualizing the pleasure with which a Marlowe or a Shakespeare would have hurried home to note down a delightful expression to be used subsequently in their works. The point is that literature and language are, by nature, in constant interaction, and to isolate them from each other would be not only a loss to all, but in fact wrong and unnatural.

6. References

- [1] Beardsley, Monroe C, Robert W Daniel and Glenn Leggit (eds). *Theme and Form: An Introduction to Literature*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975.
- [2] Clausen, Christopher. "The Palgrave Version." *The Georgia Review* 34. (Summer) 1980 : 273-289.
- [3] Damodar, G et al (eds). *English for Empowerment*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009.
- [4] Palgrave, Francis Turner. (ed). *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrics in the English Language*. London: Macmillan, 1861.