

Assigning English Literature to Influential Students in India

Nandini B N

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Bapuji First Grade College, Challakere, Chitradurga District, Karnataka state, India

Abstract

When an Indian student engages with English literature, they do not automatically acquire the ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge inherent to English culture. Both the teacher and the student lack a connection to the cultural and traditional backgrounds of native English speakers. Additionally, learners are often unfamiliar with the literary traditions associated with this language. Elements such as architecture, films, art, familial relationships, social values, and shared humor are typically not well understood by either the literature teacher or the student, as they do not originate from an English-speaking cultural context. Teaching English literature provides an opportunity for educators to draw comparisons between different cultures and civilizations. This comparative approach broadens students' perspectives from a national to an international level, transitioning from the individual to the universal. English Language Teaching (ELT) students can be encouraged to explore cultural concepts beyond their own, allowing them to make meaningful connections and deepen their understanding. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to link literature with culture to make ELT instruction both enjoyable and impactful. The objective of teaching English literature should be to enhance proficiency in the use of the English language throughout India. This encompasses aspects such as intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. The aim is to facilitate international communication through meaningful interactions. Students should be introduced to various forms of English from diverse regions where the language is spoken, including the UK, the US, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This exposure will deepen their understanding of the global nature of the English language and its literature.

Keywords: Literature, Language, English literature, English teaching, English language, Influential Students

Introduction:

The exploration of literature holds significant value for students across all disciplines and for individuals in general. When students engage with a foreign language such as English, it fulfills various objectives. It exposes them to diverse perspectives and ways of understanding the world. In Indian universities, students are presented with English literary works, either in their original form or occasionally in simplified adaptations published by various publishers.

In India, English literature holds a significant place in educational settings, serving to enhance the students' proficiency in the global language while exposing them to diverse cultural nuances embedded within its literary works. It is crucial that the lessons offered reflect the rich tapestry of the students' own cultural heritage, thus enabling a deeper connection and understanding of the materials studied. Despite their engagement with the textual content and linguistic aspects, Indian students often find it challenging to fully embrace the intrinsic values and societal norms portrayed in English literature, given the cultural disparity between their own roots and that of the English-speaking world. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the unfamiliarity with the historical and contextual background prevalent throughout the literary traditions, such as architectural references and social constructs that may be alien to their lived experiences. The underlying question emerges: Can one genuinely appreciate and derive meaning from literary works without firsthand exposure to the cultural milieu that birthed them? The importance of cultural literacy in literature cannot be overstated, as it serves as the gateway to a profound comprehension and appreciation of the nuances embedded within the texts. Lacking the immersive experience of life in England, an Indian student pursuing a Ph.D. in British literature may encounter a sense of detachment, thereby limiting the depth of their insights and connections to the material under study. Consequently, their interest in English literature may remain somewhat confined, as the perceived relevance and applicability to their own lives are not readily discernible. Despite these challenges, there exists a prevailing curiosity among Indian students regarding English culture, hinting at a latent desire to bridge the cultural chasm and engage more deeply with the literary offerings originating from foreign lands.

It is important to acknowledge that English literature students primarily learn about topics such as favorite sports, the current government, notable authors, and significant national events through texts like the history of the English language and English literature. Consequently, the communication between teachers and students tends to be overly academic and lacks a genuine cultural essence.

‘Our students join English courses for various purposes – to enhance their social mobility, status, matrimonial prospects, prepare for competitive examinations and the few to enter and appreciate magical world of English literature and thereby enrich their literary sensibility. A good number of them are “immigrants” or “leftovers” from other faculties – would – have – been scientists, doctors or engineers’.¹

The majority of the population in India, a country rich in diverse languages and cultures, does not speak English fluently. English is predominantly spoken by the educated population, highlighting the linguistic divide within the country. This language barrier poses a significant challenge when it comes to the study of English literature. However, one way to bridge this gap is through immersing oneself in the native English-speaking countries and gaining firsthand experience of the indigenous lifestyle. For students embarking on the journey of studying English literature, mastering the language is just the first step. Understanding English culture and history plays a crucial role in comprehending the nuances and context within English literary works. It is a progressive process where learners transition from language acquisition to cultural assimilation, ultimately leading to a deeper appreciation of English literature. As individuals delve into the intricacies of a new culture, they often experience a shift in perspective where they idealize certain aspects of the foreign culture while recognizing the unique values and traditions of their own. This cultural juxtaposition adds layers of complexity to the learning experience, shaping the way students interpret and engage with English literature.

Moreover, a pertinent question arises regarding the role of English literature education as a motivational factor in continuous learning. Does the exploration of English literary works and cultural heritage inspire students to keep delving deeper into the language and its literary wonders? This introspective inquiry underscores the dynamic interplay between language education, cultural awareness, and personal motivation in the realm of studying English literature. In conclusion, the endeavor of studying English literature goes beyond mere language proficiency; it involves a holistic engagement with the language, culture, and heritage intertwined within literary texts. Embracing this multidimensional approach opens doors to a transformative learning experience, where students navigate through linguistic challenges, cultural revelations, and motivational prompts on their quest to unravel the beauty and depth of English literature.

In the current educational context, when teaching English literature through prose and poetry, it is essential for the teacher to adopt a counseling role for the students. The English literature instructor should effectively utilize audio-visual resources available in the language laboratory and encourage students to explore books, magazines, and other literature in the departmental library. Ideally, the language laboratory and the departmental library could be housed in the same space. By utilizing the language laboratory, particularly if audio-visual readings are recorded, a native speaker can be invited to express the poem with the appropriate emotions and sentiments. To foster students' interest in English literature, dramatization of the plays included in the syllabus should be implemented. Additionally, collaborative activities such as pair work, group projects, and tasks should be incorporated. Films that highlight the social, political, and economic developments of English-speaking communities and other regions where English is prevalent should also be made accessible for viewing. Through English literature, the teacher can instill universal values in students. Furthermore, English Language Teaching (ELT) provides an opportunity for educators to compare and contrast different cultures and civilizations. This comparative analysis of literatures broadens students' perspectives from a national to an international level, transitioning from the individual to the universal. ELT students can be encouraged to gain insights into cultures beyond their own, drawing meaningful conclusions that enhance their understanding. Therefore, it is crucial for the teacher to intertwine literature and culture to make ELT instruction both enjoyable and impactful.

In the realm of education, particularly within the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT), the approach to instructing students in literature is intricately entwined with the broader concept of language acquisition. It is imperative that literature, whether classic or contemporary works, should not merely be seen as a body of text to analyze, but rather as a medium through which language skills can be developed and honed. By immersing students in literary works, educators have the opportunity to not only enhance their language proficiency but also foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, and empathy. In this context, the teaching of ELT through literature becomes a dynamic and multifaceted endeavor, where students are encouraged to engage with diverse texts, extract meaning, and express themselves effectively in the target language. Through this integrated approach, language becomes a living entity, enriched by the nuances and contexts embedded within literary masterpieces. It is through this synthesis of language and literature that students are not only equipped with the linguistic tools for effective communication but also with the imaginative capacity to explore different worlds, perspectives, and experiences. As such, the pedagogical intersection of literature and language in the domain of ELT

not only nurtures language proficiency but also cultivates a deeper appreciation for the power of words, the art of storytelling, and the beauty of expression.

“We must recognize that language is the foundation on which literature is built and without a language sensibility there is no question of understanding or appreciating any kind of literature. To those who do not have basic language competence is like building the ceiling without the walls and the foundations”.²

Many believe that one of the most challenging aspects of literature is appreciating poetry in a foreign language, such as English. To facilitate an engaging and effective poetry lesson, students can be encouraged to explore the origins of metaphors, imagery, and symbols within the poem. They should also gather information about the societal figures depicted and determine whether the themes presented are universal or specific to a particular culture. Literature enhances language skills, and studying English Language Teaching (ELT) contributes to improved English proficiency. When teaching prose and poetry, students should be prompted to analyze the author's style, which will help them understand the effects the writer aims to achieve. Learners should examine elements such as tension, sustained interest, and surprise in literary works, all under the teacher's guidance. At the undergraduate or postgraduate level, fostering discussions among students about prose and poetry is essential. Such discussions can clarify even the most abstract concepts in literature, facilitated by the teacher's support.

It is crucial to recognize the distinction between language as it is used in everyday speech and that found in literary works, such as fiction and poetry, which often exhibit a more stylized or poetic form of expression. Students of ELT in India who engage in conversations with individuals from English-speaking countries like England or America may be pleasantly surprised by the connections between literature and colloquial language, highlighting the dynamic nature of language and its various forms of communication. Merely viewing literature as a means to pass exams can paradoxically diminish the joy of studying ELT, turning the learning process into a burdensome task rather than a delightful exploration. A genuine appreciation for literature, free from the pressure of examinations, offers students an immersive experience that transports them to new realms of imagination and understanding, fostering a lasting love for the subject.

Therefore, it is crucial that English Language Teaching (ELT) instruction places a strong emphasis on developing language proficiency to meet the diverse linguistic demands prevalent in a multilingual country like India. This overarching objective should prioritize not only enhancing language skills but also fostering a deeper understanding of the nuances and intricacies inherent in effective communication. By encouraging students to engage with various forms of English from different linguistic territories around the globe, educators play a pivotal role in broadening learners' perspectives and equipping them with the tools necessary for successful international interaction and cross-cultural exchange. Through exposure to the linguistic diversity present in English spoken across nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, students can not only appreciate the global reach of the language but also delve into its rich literary traditions and historical significance. This comprehensive approach to ELT instruction not only enhances students' language proficiency but also cultivates a sense of global citizenship and fosters appreciation for the intricate interplay between language, culture, and identity within the context of modern communication dynamics.

Teaching and learning English literature in India is a multifaceted endeavor rife with distinctive challenges intertwined with promising possibilities, all of which are intricately linked to the language's historical backdrop of colonial imposition and its contemporary prominence as a lingua franca. The exploration of English literature within an Indian context not only serves as a gateway to enhanced global communication and a deeper comprehension of diverse cultures but also presents a complex landscape marked by intricate power dynamics that often mirror the legacies of colonialism. The dynamic interplay between the study of English literature and the wider societal structures in India underscores the delicate balance between embracing the language's potential to bridge diverse perspectives and the inherent risks of reinforcing entrenched colonial hierarchies. As educators navigate this terrain, they are confronted with the nuanced task of fostering critical engagement with English literature that transcends mere linguistic mastery to encompass a profound understanding of the cultural implications and historical resonances embedded within the texts. The journey of teaching and learning English literature in India thus becomes a tapestry woven with threads of rich historical narratives, contemporary socio-political complexities, and the ongoing quest for inclusive knowledge production that navigates the turbulent waters of postcolonial discourse.

Conclusion:

There is an immediate necessity for foundational research addressing the essential aspects of teaching and learning English language and literature in India. The existing curriculum requires a thorough review, and appropriate policy frameworks must be developed. This should encourage bilingualism, enhance bicultural communicative competence, and support comparative literary studies that encompass both English literature and indigenous languages. Additionally, it should foster intellectual engagement in literary scholarship, prioritize postcolonial interpretations of colonial British literature, and facilitate the exploration of both Western and Indian (Dravidian/Sanskrit) poetics. Furthermore, research should encompass all facets of applied linguistics to advance Indian languages and inform language policy.

Reference:

1. Singh, Avadash Kumar, 'Between the Metro and Municipality :Contemporary Teaching of English literature in India' in Studies in ELT, linguistics and applied linguistics" Edited by Mohit K. Ray, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2004, New Delhi – 27 p. 31.
2. Krishnaswamy, N. and Krishnaswami Lalitha, "Teaching English", Macmillan, India Press, Chennai, p. 213
3. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. (2004). Key concepts in post-colonial studies. Chennai: Routledge.
4. Fanon, Frantz. (1952/2008). Black skin, white masks. Trans. Richard Philcox. NY: Grove Press.
5. Macaulay, Thomas Babington. (1833). "Government of India: a speech delivered in the House of Commons on the 10th of July 1833." Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches Volume 4.