

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Teaching English Language through Literature: A Case-Based Study Using Indian Short Stories

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Article info

Article Received: 23/02/2022

Article Accepted: 29/03/2022

Published online: 31/03/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.1.318](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.1.318)

Abstract

The ELT landscape across Indian English classrooms, especially in the semi urban and rural areas where the influence of the vernacular or the local dialect reigns supreme, the teaching of English invariably falls into mechanical patterns with monotonous textbook based chalk and talk grammar drills, the drab comprehension exercises aiming at the completion of syllabus and preparing students for exams (effectively or not) and hence failing to inspire meaningful learning. This paper is a humble attempt to propose an alternative approach: teaching language through literature. Language and literature are inseparable components in the evolution and sustaining of the language itself- but sometimes we lose this significant connect and make the mistake of considering them as two separate entities, independent of each other. The truth is- just as language is important to understand the literature- literature can also serve as a very important tool in effective teaching of the language. Drawing on a selection of Indian short stories like R.K. Narayan's *The Blind Dog*, Munshi Premchand's *The Child*, Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Panchlight*, Anita Desai's *Pigeons at Daybreak*, and the regional Haryanvi folk tale in translation- *Dhandaa Dhai Ka*— this study analyses and explores how storytelling, apart from just being a genre, can also germinate linguistic competence while strengthening students' socio-cultural and historical engagement with the literary texts. Rooted in the timeless theories of language acquisition and reader-response theory and criticism, the present paper mirrors literature not merely as a resource, but as a useful tool of pedagogic strategy of empathy, creative imagination and expression.

Keywords: ELT, English Literature, English Language, English Teaching in India, Indian Short Stories.

Introduction

Indian ELT and Indian English classrooms have a recurring pattern: English is often diminished as a subject rather than being adopted and

embraced as a language of ideas, feeling, and expression. Students invariably memorise the rules of tenses and sentence structures but ground reality is different: they hesitate to speak, write, or think in

English. The very pertinent question rears its head :can there be a way to teach English in a way which is less likely leaning towards a mechanical pattern and can be made more meaningful? Literature may offer a deeply satisfying answer here.

Short stories, in particular, have an innate quality and ability to capture the extraordinary within the ordinary. The brevity and the crispness of short stories allows the reader the room to capture the mood quickly and emotionally engage with them to great depths. In semi-urban and rural areas like Rewari, Haryana, students are often able to relate better to stories grounded in familiar settings and values. When used and curated carefully, stories can become bridges—not only between language and learner but also between local realities and a global challenges. Native and indigenous stories particularly would offer the learner a ground where their emotions resonate and their feelings find validation which makes them comfortably access the language. Unlike western texts that may seem very distant to them in socio cultural contexts, hence limiting their engagement with them, native texts reflect socio cultural values, realities and landscapes that are their own and that they can intuitively understand. This resonance fosters a sense of comfort and confidence – which makes the learners engagement with texts more fruitful and accessible. Indian tales, be it by R.K. Narayan or Premchand or any regional folk tale in translation- there is a carrying of the rhythm of the Indian life- bringing folklore, nuggets of everyday wisdom and humour alive. Learners are able to engage deeply when they see their own socio cultural contexts and realities reflected in the stories.

This paper is an attempt into exploring how select Indian short stories can be used as an effective tool to teach English language skills based on the basic premise that literature is not a luxury meant for advanced level learners but a sweet necessity for all, particularly when the texts reflect learners' own realities, proclivities and contexts.

Literature Review

The use of literature in language teaching not new and has been well established in several pedagogical theories. Ronald Carter and Michael

Long have made an observation that literature can “provide an authentic model of language use” and “stimulate interest and motivation through its imaginative qualities” (Carter and Long 2). Gillian Lazar further expands on this by arguing that literature enhances language learning by promoting personal involvement and emotional engagement (Lazar 14). Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis greatly supports the idea that the best way to acquire language is when learners are given exposure to an input which is comprehensible, meaningful and just slightly beyond their current level (Krashen 21). In an English classroom, a well thought of selection of a short story also functions precisely as one such input—rich in meaning, layered in contexts and yet accessible when facilitated by the teacher effectively with guided reading.

In the context of Indian classrooms, Pramod K. Nayar points out that there is a need for the contextualized English teaching which easily connects with students' lived experiences. He lays emphasis on the fact that the texts should not alienate or distance learners from the learning but be inviting enough for them so that they get absorbed in the language through narratives they can relate to (Nayar 87). Reader-Response Theory also, particularly as developed by Louise Rosenblatt, places a lot of emphasis on the experience of the and it's connection with the meaning-making process, clearly suggesting that reading is most powerful and effective when it is personal and participatory in nature. (Rosenblatt 25).

Despite these theoretical evidence that supports the engagement of reader through their own experiences, literature is often treated as just another subject in Indian education system. In English language classrooms, there is more focus on grammar textbooks books, while literature is relegated to be just a tool of comprehension focused on exams. This paper challenges that divide by placing literature at the centre in an English classroom to achieve language goals.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on three major theoretical arguments and perspectives that intend to explicitly establish the pedagogical value of literature in language classrooms:

1. Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Krashen avers that language acquisition heavily depends on exposure to language that is inherently meaningful and slightly above the current competence of the learner. (i+1). Literature amply offers such input by placing new vocabulary and structures within meaningful contexts (Krashen 23).

2. Reader-Response Theory (Louise Rosenblatt)

Rosenblatt's popular theory suggests that reading is a two way transactional act: the meaning emerges from the interplay between the reader and the text. This interaction becomes a learning space where language is not just studied but lived through emotion and imagination (Rosenblatt 30).

3. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The basic premise of CLT is a prioritization of communication and functional use of language. Literature—especially the short stories which are dialogue driven, are a rich source of very authentic discourse, enabling learners to accomplish learning by doing various activities such as declamations, role plays, debates, creative writing etc. All these frameworks when put together these frameworks support a shift from 'teaching about language' to 'teaching with language'.

Case Studies: Literature in Practice

Any literature can be a great source of language learning and can offer varied possibilities for teaching of language but short stories in particular can be more effective owing to their brevity which allows them to get over in one or two classes or periods and students can fully engage with the text, having an immersive experience without being tired. The beginning, middle and end of the short story offers conflict and its resolution in a very concise manner making them ideal for practising language components like sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary etc. there is also a great scope of conducting many language activities like role play,

imagining alternative endings or a retelling of the story from some characters' point of view. They are a perfect tool for practising language as well as offer a space for critical reflection- striking a perfect balance between resource as a mere resource and something to provide a deeper engagement and meaning in the classroom. Therefore, choosing Indian short stories is not arbitrary, rather its intentional so as to give the learners a socio cultural context which is their own- to engage with.

"The Blind Dog" – R.K. Narayan

The story is set in the bustling and busy streets of Malgudi, The Blind Dog is a simple and thought provoking one. The style of the prose is direct, characters are from everyday life and it's filled with compelling emotions. Activities that students can practice are dialogue reconstruction – where some imaginary dialogues between the dog and the beggar are recreated so as to bring out the emotions of the dog in the narrative. There can also be a role play debate. – two groups of students can debate the actions of the beggar- one for and one against it. This shall give a boost to the critical thinking and speaking skills. Students can also practice past tense and descriptive vocabulary based on the story. Another classroom activity might be a writing exercise, retelling the story from the dog's perspective. The story also opens up space for reflection on morality, which also naturally extends classroom discussion.

2. "The Child" – Munshi Premchand

Translated from the Hindi original story 'Baalak', this story by Premchand is a very progressive exploration of social issues like widow remarriage. Its narrative style is very simple and accessible which allows students to explore narration in the present and past tense, family-related vocabulary, or creating character sketches. One of the classroom activities could be a diary entry from the perspective of Gomti- the mother of the child and victim of patriarchal system of the pathetic treatment of widows. A comparison between the Hindi original and English translated version can also help bilingual learner to ascertain how much is lost in translation and how much is retained. A visual semantic web can also be created focusing on the

values that the story imparts- sacrifice, love, compassion, care etc and students can work together in groups or pairs to frame sentences based on those values.

3. “Panchlight” – Phanishwar Nath Renu

This story is set in the rural region and brims with rustic humour, nuggets of wisdom, irony, and local flavor. A village where owning a “panchlight” becomes a matter of status—this premise makes it a great choice for conducting activities and discussion-based learning. Students can create a mock panchayat scene, where they act as the members of the panchayat or the villagers debating the purchase or the use of the panchlight, practicing public speaking. Local Idioms from the Hindi vernacular can be translated in English also reflecting cultural connotations of local expressions. Students can also be asked to create a fictional news article covering the ‘panchlight’ controversy in the village.

4. “Pigeons at Daybreak” – Anita Desai

A more reflective urban story, the focus of this story is on figurative language, adjectives and some reflective vocabulary along with a deep delving into human emotions. The narrative primarily focuses on aging, illness, and domestic care. The language is extremely rich in imagery and metaphor, making it suitable for advanced vocabulary practice and descriptive writing. Students can write about a log summer day, adding a lot of sensory details involving senses of touch, smell, taste etc. Students can also be made to write an alternative ending to the story- may be keeping Mr Basu alive with some mellowing down in his attitude towards Otima Basu. They can also write short paragraphs about the weather, their own grandparents, or a time they felt helpless, thus relating with the experience of the protagonist Mr Basu.

5. “Dhandaa Dhai Ka” – Regional Haryanvi Short Story (in translation)

This is a Haryanvi folk tale, used in translation by the virtue of which it can be a great exercise in translanguaging- students first narrate it in Hindi or Haryanvi and then translate it in English- thus using the local flavour to develop the linguistic

skills. This is a lesser-known story, rooted in Haryana’s oral tradition, bringing local flavor into the English classroom. When taught in translation, it allows learners to compare Haryanvi idioms with English equivalents. A proverb poster can be designed by the students by compiling a list of all the proverbs used in the tale and finding their English equivalents. Other activities can include translating a particular section of dialogues, or role-playing different characters with intonation and expression. This not only improves language skills but affirms the student’s own cultural identity, encouraging a sense of pride and belonging.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt about the fact that short stories of a particular region can be a great resource for teaching the students of that particular native language. Short stories are not just suitable for this role in the linguistic sense, but they are cultural artefacts also apart from being the pedagogical goldmines. In this paper, only select stories have been briefly discussed for the exemplification and illustration of the theme of the paper but a lot of others can be used for pedagogical purposes. Each one of the stories discussed in this paper offers a unique perspective and space – an entry point into the English language classroom through vocabulary, grammar, dialogue, and emotion. More importantly, they also resonate with learners’ lived experiences and realities, making the English language classroom a classroom of relevance rather than alienation and distance. Incorporating literature into language teaching, especially in semi-urban or settings like Rewari, Haryana, brings multiple benefits: a better sense of comprehension, a deeper and longer retention, a slice and flavour of the local culture and, much greater enthusiasm in the class as compared to the regular monotony of the English classroom. But there are challenges- this particular approach or shift requires teachers to be trained well in using stories as much more than the prescribed texts they are supposed to conquer to pass the exams. With the right tools, teachers can turn every story into a language lab in its own right— and every student into a storyteller, in their own unique way.

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