

Literature in English language teaching – a two-way process

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1. Abstract

The low language proficiency among the teacher trainees at the National Colleges of Education (NCoE) is a grave concern. This situation creates a challenge to the trainees' academic activities, while being a critical factor when deciding the quality of English teachers. The prospective teachers' low language proficiency is a severe impediment despite the continuous remedial measures taken by the college management, and it is a huge challenge in the literature classroom leading to moments of frustration and despair for the trainer. However, handling both literature and language skills provided the perfect platform for the author to integrate literary texts in ELT. This intervention is based on a number of beliefs of the author and was done as experiential teaching. It succeeded as a process of experiential learning and a range of positive outcomes were discovered. The participants were a group of 33 prospective teachers between the ages of 23 to 25. This paper discusses the significance of incorporating literary texts into ELT and demonstrates how their trainees' enhanced language proficiency in turn reinforces the teaching of literature. The paper also highlights the necessity to select suitable teaching methodologies, techniques and text types and concludes with suggestions and recommendations to standardize the delivery of teaching modules of English language and literature at NCoEs. The empirical data for the study is drawn from the writer's intervention via experimental teaching, interviews with trainers and trainees, success stories written by participants and a survey of literature.

2. Sub-theme

This paper falls under the sub theme Empowering Teachers to Teach Literature and discusses the benefits of incorporating literary texts into the ELT classroom at one NCoE. The major point emphasized is how the teaching of literature can be empowered as a result of improved language proficiency via the said practice.

2. Story

The low Language Proficiency (LP) among prospective teachers of English at the NCoEs is a concern for the stakeholders. This is affirmed by the author's experience of handling literature over the years, and that of fellow educators teaching other subjects. Despite the remedial measures taken by the management, the issue persists and gets renewed with the enrolment of every new batch. This identified inadequacy not only poses a challenge to academic activities, but self-defeats our ultimate objective of ensuring the quality of teachers. The criticality of the issue on hand dictates that it should be dealt with urgently, with short to middle-term actions leading ultimately to a permanent remedy. In addition to the intervention by the management, trainers take the initiative to help trainees to develop their LP and to facilitate their academic activities. The language inadequacy of the trainees places before them a

challenging impediment when handling literature and in most instances, de-motivates and diminishes the trainer's enthusiasm. Therefore, the author who teaches both subjects made use of this advantageous context, and decided to incorporate literary texts into ELT, governed by the beliefs she held. Firstly, with the understanding that the trainees lacked the habit of reading in English, it was believed that the enthusiasm and pleasure of reading should be shared with them. The second belief was that literary texts can help learners to engage in Language Learning (LL) while improving their communicative abilities. Thirdly, that the practice would provide lessons for life and the positive impetus to grow personally and socially while enhancing their cultural awareness. The overall belief was that the improved LP of trainees would facilitate the teaching of literature. Although, the intervention was done as experiential teaching during a period of one year, it proved to be highly beneficial to both subject areas. It was distinctively observed that the practice adopted, empowered the trainees to learn, enhance and sharpen their LP, while this skill and language enhancement complemented the learning of literature. This joined-up approach has had a dual positive outcome. Hence, the experimental teaching was transformed into a process of experiential learning and the new knowledge brought a sense of empowerment to the author. Another critical outcome through this process and via interviews with language educators revealed that there is a seemingly lack of uniformity in ELT at NCoEs. Although the ESL syllabus provides the competencies and suggestions for text-types and delivery methodology, it is relatively silent on the materials and approaches to be adopted. Hence, the liberty for the trainers to utilize materials they prefer, or which are easily accessible, leads to inconsistency of content, approach and delivery. This background led to the survey of literature to examine the scope of incorporating literary texts in ELT and to endorse the benefits discovered through the intervention. Additionally, available approaches and models to integrate literary texts will be discussed, while making recommendations to improve the content and quality of ELT.

The teaching of literature has recently been endorsed as an important component of ELT. There has been much discussion on the significance of teaching any kind of literature, as part of an ESL syllabus. The opposition towards literature is attributed to the impact of the approaches practised during the period prior to the seventies and the prevailing ideas in ELT methodology. The approaches in ELT during that time emphasized the structural methods to LL, a methodology that was incompatible to teaching literature, and therefore discouraging. Nevertheless, current approaches have re-examined the value of literature in ELT and emphasized its worth. Researchers have confirmed the significance of this practice, and emphasized it as an agent for LL, development and cultural enrichment, because literature provides authentic language and situations. The advent of the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (CLT) too has influenced the re-emergence of literature in ELT, as it requires the provision of authentic, pleasurable and cultural material. The ELT field in Sri Lanka too emphasizes the need to adopt CLT with the aim of developing communicative competence. Therefore, the integration of literature in ELT for the trainees would be a key value-addition initiative as it creates greater learner involvement, meaningful LL and the adoption of learner-centred methodologies. However, to reap the benefits of this practice it is imperative that appropriate teaching techniques, strategies and tasks are employed.

Recent literature introduces different models, theories and methods that are based on different conceptions of literature. The most popular is the approach proposed by Carter and Long (1991) to justify the use of literature in ELT. The 'cultural model' discusses the possibility that literature brings with it a regard to the understanding and appreciation of different cultures and ideologies. This is beneficial because LL also means learning the culture of its people.

This model asserts that literature helps to build up individuals' perception of feelings and artistic forms. The 'language model' introduces language as the literary medium and literature as an instrument to teach specific vocabulary and structures. The 'personal growth model' requires the learners to engage with the reading of literary texts, appreciate and evaluate cultural artefacts. Accordingly, this three-fold model encourages learners to have an understanding of the society, culture and ourselves as we function within the society. Hence,

learning literature educates the whole person while promoting LL, enriching learners' language awareness and interpretation abilities. Therefore, it can be emphasized that NCoE trainees will benefit significantly if texts from their literature syllabus are utilized in ELT, while the practice in turn can reinforce the teaching of literature.

4. Lessons and/or Recommendations

The study revealed that literature in ELT has dual benefits as it endorsed the ideas that trainees could develop their LP and become rejuvenated learners of literature. At the end of the intervention participants were requested to put pen on paper and share their experience. Their feedback revealed that this practice encouraged trainees to read, be thorough and familiar with the literary texts, while being motivated to learn literature. It was observed that the trainees with their developed LP were active in the literature classroom, more open to discussions and approached the writing tasks with enhanced confidence. It was with a sense of achievement that the author observed the trainees' transformation and read their success stories, as it provided much empowerment to handling literature. The data analysis of the study was largely qualitative, while the marks obtained for classroom assignments provided for quantitative scrutiny.

It is pertinent to indicate the advantages of this practice, but the key to success depends on the works and tasks selected. Thus, a text which is extremely difficult in linguistic or cultural levels will reap few benefits. Hence, the solution would be simplification, extracts or simple texts. Simplification is not an encouraged option because of its reduction process, in which the original book is shortened in characters, situations and events, vocabulary is restricted, and the structures are controlled. Extracts are advantageous because they remove the burden of intensive, lengthy reading. However, the use of simple texts, by non-native writers would be a better solution because of their availability, and as they retain a balance between the native and metropolitan cultures, while creatively presenting social conflicts into literary expressions. They become unique in the way English is used to present local, national and individual sensibilities. These literatures also present cultural contexts that learners can identify with, and thus become authentic, meaningful, and appropriate for ELT. The NCoE syllabus provides a varied range of texts to be selected from as it includes poetry, drama and fiction by native and non-native writers. Hence, curriculum developers should select texts that are simple and appealing to the trainees while helping to achieve the goals of a language course. It is mandatory that language is considered the central concern and not give prominence to literature, when designing a syllabus based on this concept. It should also recommend task-types, teaching methodologies and forms of assessment, to ensure uniformity when it is implemented.

The study endorsed the view that literature in ELT not only enhances the language proficiency of the trainees but also empowers the teaching of English literature. The practice will also contribute to ensure quality NCoE products. There is much scope for further research in this field in Sri Lanka as it has not been dealt with previously. It is also recommended that further studies should include participants from the other NCoEs as the sample for this study was limited to one institution.

5. References

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