Literary Texts and Teaching of Language: A Pedagogic-Stylistic Approach

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Introduction:

This paper might be described as an attempt to discuss a practical methodology based on Pedagogic Stylistic approach for the teaching of literature as subject in undergraduate/Post graduate classes in India. It is also significant that we need to examine how a stylistic approach for the teaching of literature is of particular value for the study of literature as a subject in India's ESL situation and how it can rectify some of the defects of contemporary practices noticed in the survey.

In many parts of the world today there is a strong demand for English as a language of international communication and of higher education. To meet this demand, through developing communicative competency among the learners, in Indian educational institutions, there has been a tendency to teach literature without much thought to how teaching of literature can be useful in developing communication skills among the learners.

The Problem Identified

At the tertiary and higher levels, the learners are expected to appreciate literary texts, form critical judgments and they are also expected to arrive spontaneously at an appreciation of literary qualities, without much explicit guidance as to how this is to be done.

The teacher of literature has to steer his students safely through all these difficulties. Guth (1973:217) emphasizes the training over literary appreciation. He affirms:

……making students respond more fully to what literature had to offer. But in practice he often succeeded in making literature seem difficult and obscure. It often seemed that literary enjoyment was not to be had without special technical equipment. To become a good reader seemed to require above all arduous, and often discouragingly dry technical training.1

Widdowson (1975:75) makes this more explicit.

I would argue that, in most cases, the individual can only respond to literature as a result of guidance. The conjunction Reader meets Text very often simply produces bafflement: one just cannot expose students to literary writing and hope that they will be apprised of its essential message by some kind of miraculous revelation.2
Problems Currently Experienced by Teachers and Students

A stylistic analysis of a literary text, (a poem in this context), ensures the learners participation in it as the teacher puts questions to them not only on what the text communicates but also on how it communicates. Stylistic approach to the teaching of literature thus attempts to develop in the learners analytic and interpretative strategies not in relation to a given text alone but in relation to a range of language uses. This approach might be described as linguistic-pedagogic approach.

Considering the message as integrated within the text, the teacher guides the learners' attention to its unique language patterns created and how they lead to its message. To convey the desolation of the speaker, the learners are to be taught phonological patterning and the semantic patterning in the text. In general, pedagogic-stylistic approach to the teaching of literature should develop in the learners analytic and interpretative strategies not in relation to a given text alone but in relation to a range of language uses; both literary and non literary. It is not concerned at all with the transmission of facts and readymade interpretations.

Approaches and Models for developing language use

I have selected Nissim Ezekiel's representative poems for this study. The criteria for selection of Nissim Ezekiel's poems is that the pedagogic value in his poetry. That is, the selection of Ezekiel's poems to be taught will be controlled by the learner's capacity to understand the language which is used and by the potential of the texts to extend the learners' sensitivity to language further.

Ezekiel's style and his expertise in handling English language which helps/enables the learners to participate in language learning activities in the class room, and this aspect can be dealt with.

The criteria for selection of a literary text will thus be:

Linguistic and Pedagogic rather than historical, aesthetic and personal. 3

However, if literature as a subject is given a stylistic basis and treated as discourse, its textual features must be such as to relate to what the learner knows English.

The teachers of literature in India's ESL classes are called upon to impart to their learners communicative skills pertinent to the normal mode of expression, but learning materials they are supplied with are literary texts which conform to the literary mode of expression.

A central problem in the teaching of literature is to know how far the student can go on with the independent appreciation of a literary text without getting bogged down in readymade critical judgments.

We need to look at the role of English language teacher in ESL situation, the mode of communication, type of texts being used in under graduate/post graduate classes, and other problems in developing language learning skills among the learners.

Ideally, in an ESL situation, teachers are expected to confer on their learners practical language skills in the normal mode of communication. However, in India where literary texts dominate English syllabus, teachers are constrained to develop the linguistic ability of learners in the normal mode of communication with the help of learning materials which represent literary mode of communication.
The language teachers still focus on teaching poetry in detail through paraphrasing, summarizing, and translating (traditional practice). They stress on the right answers and rarely tolerate errors. Therefore, this paper focuses on teachers' classroom practices with special reference to teachers' response to the pedagogical approach to teaching of poetry to see whether the teacher makes attempts in developing language learning skills among the learners.

Stylistics is concerned with the choices that are available to a writer, and the reasons why particular forms and expressions are used rather than others. With the reading of the contribution of prominent Linguists such as Leech, Fowler, Sinclair, Mukarovsky, Roman Jacobson, Widdowson, Brumfit, Carter and others, the teachers will be able to record the following aspects in their teaching methodology.

a) style as convergence of patterns  
b) style as a particular exploitation of grammar of possibilities  
c) style as choice  
d) style as deviation approach to literary texts

The central notion of style is what is called “foregrounding”. The opposite of foregrounding is automatization, which is a process by which a previously foregrounded expression loses its aesthetic value for readers. New linguistic elements then tend to be foregrounded. Foregrounding serves as an attention-calling device in a literary passage through the use of repetition, emphasis, unexpected lexical collocations, syntactic inversion, etc.

Like its virtues arise from linguistics, stylistics has limitations. Keeping this in mind, some crucial notions can be used frequently while teaching literary texts, such as Cohesion, Foregrounding, Register, and lexical set.

The principle aim of stylistics in the classroom is to make students aware of language use within chosen texts. The classroom activities that are interactive between the text and the language learner are the characteristics of pedagogic stylistics. Pedagogic stylistics deals with the process of improving students' linguistic sensibilities, and it also includes a proactive part of reading and interpretation.

**Ferdinand de Saussure's work** on language as a system of signs, **Michael Bakhtin's** idea of dialogism, **Roland Barthes**' argument that the idea of the author as the creator of meaning, give idea to the teacher on how to handle a literary text.

The pedagogic stylistic approach can be used to make the students sensitive to various literary and linguistic characteristics of a text. Stylisticians such as Widdowson, Brumfit, Carter, Susan Mc Rae and Ursula Clark are the pioneers in the pedagogic stylistic practice using stylistics as device for language teaching.

In his slim volume entitled **Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature** (1975), Widdowson examines the nature of literature communication and stylistics as an exercise in literary understanding. He says as we have indicated ourselves, that most stylistic analyses are based on some kind of intuition, and have thus several points of contact. One can therefore look upon stylistics as a pursuit that effectively mediates between linguistics on the one hand and literature on the other, even though, at the same time, it could be
an autonomous discipline. It proves to the student how rewarding an experience the analysis of a poem or prose passage could be and how much more pleasant it is to learn a foreign language through a close reading of its literature than through the traditional ways of memorization and reproduction.

Relevance of Teaching of Literature

The emphasis in teaching of literature is mainly for exploring some of those underlying issues and concerns relevant to using literature in the language classroom (with the language learner). In this context we can raise a number of questions and ideas for reflection and discussion. Some of these ideas and thoughts should help in making more principled and good classroom decisions about why and how to use literature in language classes. The task for teachers is thus to draw on the range of insights available, and then to develop an approach appropriate and relevant to the students. Literature has a definite place in any educational institutions. But students are leery, and teachers are unsure of how to approach it because they often do not realize where the true difficulty lies.

In his article, “Introducing Literary texts in the Language Classroom” Craig Dicker writes:

One of the newest trends in teaching English as a foreign language is the literature based syllabus design. People are beginning to seriously consider the role of literature in language teaching and to a somewhat lesser extent, the role of language in literature teaching.

Our main task in the language classroom is to pinpoint how far literary language deviates from ordinary language. This will help us in teaching-learning context to know to what extent the learners will be confused or misled by studying deviant rather than normal language and how far this is useful activity for them. We teachers need to make an attempt to explain the following among ourselves:

1. The nature and distinctiveness of language of literature
2. Approach, method and technique for teaching of literature
3. The obstacles for appreciation of literary texts by the students

The poetic Style of Nissim Ezekiel

Ezekiel was a teacher both in life and poetry. He was one of the major poets in Indian English Literature, has expressed valuable ideas on literature and life in his letters, critical writings and interviews. Ezekiel stands for simplicity, clarity, coherence, lucidity and harmony in art and literature. He is opposed to incoherence and confused thinking and expression. A study of Ezekiel's representative poems reveals interesting features of his poetic language and style. Style is a characteristic way of deploying the transformational apparatus of a language. An author's stylistic preferences are highly significant because, as Ohman points out they reflect “cognitive preferences”.

Moody has expressed that the literary text must always be related to students' capacity. For developing communicative competency among the learners we need to select less-complex more-informative literary texts. Hence I have selected Ezekiel's representative poems. Some linguistic features in his poems are:

1) Ezekiel has stressed the importance of the contemporary idiom.
2) Simplicity in language and diction characterizes his poetry.
3) He uses words from the common, everyday vocabulary but by his use imparts to them a new meaning and new emotive significance.

4) He tends more and more to use conversational idiom and language and thus capture the flavor of day to day speech which is also indicative of the Indian thought process.

The following lines from *Very Indian Poems in Indian English* can be used as an illustration.

*I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting, fighting
Why all people of the world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian wisdom is 100 percent correct.

The second stanza describes even more successfully the mistakes and wrong usages of Indian English:

*Other day I am reading in newspaper
(Everyday I'm reading Times of India
To improve my English Language).

Ezekiel, in this poem has reflected not only what many Indians think, but also the way they think in India. The poem shows the many leveled functioning of the poet's irony. The poem reveals how artistically Ezekiel employs Indian English to evoke a sense of Indians and at the same time to bring the situation or incident alive to the language learners which they can participate. In this poem Ezekiel far exceeds his contemporaries.

**Proposed Methodology**

It is assumed that the methodology proposed in this section can have relevance for the teaching of literature in undergraduate/postgraduate classes. Ideally we should devise a teaching strategy that fulfills the following conditions:

1. Learners should recognize what is distinctive to the use of language in ordinary discourse as opposed to that in literary communication.
2. Learners should also recognize what is unique to the use of language in literary discourse as opposed to ordinary discourse.
3. The teaching strategy should help learners discover an interpretative technique which they could later on apply to other examples of literary discourse as well.

In this context, methodologies advocated by Leech and Short, Henry Widdowson and others are immensely useful. Leech and Short provide foregrounding model which locates stylistic effect against a back ground of more normal or expected expressions which could have occurred. Foregrounding model relates to deviation where the deviation is from the rules of the language code itself.
The methodology Widdowson advocates is a two-tier one:

1. The teacher has to set up an example of literary discourse alongside examples of conventional discourse and device exercises which lead the learner to make explicit comparisons between them. Using control passages of a conventional kind in this way, the teacher can establish the general character of both the literary and the conventional kinds of discourse.

2. Once the teacher has used control passages of a conventional kind to establish the general character of both literary and conventional discourses, he can proceed to a closer scrutiny of the way language is used to individual instances. What this involves to Widdowson, is the analysis of how linguistic elements take on particular values as they occur mutually conditioned in a given literary context.

Widdowson justifies the use of this larger-scale comparison between discourse functions in these words:

The assumption is that this approach will bring home to the learner certain ways in which literary writing functions as a mode of communicating. We can regard this as the promotion of an orientation to literary study. Once this orientation is established we can proceed to a consideration of how particular linguistic elements in a piece of writing contribute to its unique meaning.

What is crucial to the character literature is the organization of its language into patterns over and above those required by the actual language system.

Having enquired in some detail into the theoretical feasibility of a proposed methodology, I have tried to evaluate how it works in practice in the following manner:

1. Background ------- Graduate / Post Graduate students
2. Pre-Task ------- A general discussion on Scorpion (Night of the scorpion-An Ezekiel's Poem) involving students own experience.

This discussion prepared the students to encounter the poem. Asking them about their experience encouraged them to see poet's perception of 'Night of the Scorpion'.

The Text

The teacher reads the poem, with the students following it in their texts. The reading of the poem by the teacher is important because it helps the students to associate sounds with symbols. This is helpful in another way too- when rhyme schemes are discussed, the students know how the words are pronounced. This was followed by silent reading by the students.

Interpretation

Questions were asked to draw the attention towards deviant/foregrounded structures. For example:

1. Parting with his poison (line-5)
2. Throwing gaint scorpion shadows (line-12)

Moreover, the learners were asked to observe linguistic patterns. Attempts were made to encourage
learners participate in classroom activities, using deviant structures in Ezekiel's poems, without attempting to prescribe a precise set of procedure.

There was undoubtedly a scope for enriching the learners' linguistic experience, and enabling them to recognize the communicative potential of the language they were actively engaged in learning. The mode of communication in literary discourse will give them practical experience of language use and facilitate at the same time, a comparison of its mode of expression systems. This will serve to reinforce the learners' knowledge of the language system and sharpen their communicative skills in the practical use of language.

**Conclusion**

It is possible that the practicing teachers of ESL classes will find some of the practices suggested, in this study as impracticable, but it is hoped it will at least prompt them to re-examine their attitude towards literature and its relevance in the teaching of language. Literature is a means of communication, a kind of language use and as such comparable with other means of communication. It is a kind of language that it can be put to effective use as a relevant recourse in the pedagogy of teaching of English as a second language. One way to expand students' knowledge of varieties of English is through literary texts. The text should make clear the setting and role relationship of the characters so that there is a context for discussing when an informal register would be appropriate.

Ezekiel's “Very Indian poems in Indian English”, “Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa”,”Night of the Scorpion” and other poems have contributed significantly to make Indo-English poetry a force to reckon with, and are rich in pedagogic values. T

The exposure to literary discourse can thus extend the learning of the language system into the learning of language use.

**Reference**