
TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF ELT: AN ILLUSTRATION

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Abstract

Literature as a favourable tool for English language teaching/learning has often been neglected and hence study of literature has been eliminated from the English language curriculum. In fact language and literature go hand in hand in enhancing the learning experiences of a L2 learner because literature is a rich language learning source. Even the textbooks prescribed for language study also fail to speak about the artistic making of a literary piece and its aesthetic effect. The textbooks are prepared only with a language orientation and do not regard the literary value of a given poem prescribed for study. ELT practitioners need to sensitize students towards the literary competencies to be sensitive to the various styles, forms, conventions etc. of language. This paper underscores the importance of study of literature in English language learning at the under graduate (UG) level in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where study of literature is relegated into the background in preference to language orientation. An attempt is made to discuss the viewpoints of great scholars like Widdowson, Littlewood, Brumfit and Carter, Collie and Slater, and Lazar, to name a few, on using Literature in the study of language. Notions like Defamiliarization and Foregrounding are used in the analysis of a selected poem by way of illustration. The conceptual framework provided in this paper can be applied to analyze and interpret any literary work in TESL classrooms to enhance the language learning experience.

Introduction

There has been a change of attitude towards teaching of English as a second language at different levels of formal education in many non-Anglophone countries and Commonwealth nations in particular where English has been taught as a second language. The change is a shift towards teaching language skills for communication to the exclusion of literary sensibility.

As Collie and Slater point out:

Literature was thought of embodying a static, convoluted kind of language, far removed from the utterances of daily communication. Because of this it was sometimes tarred with an 'elitist' brush and reserved for the most advanced level of study Moreover, in some cases literature was also seen as carrying an undesirable freight of cultural connotations. What was needed was a more neutral, more functional kind of English, shorn of any implication of cultural imperialism and relevant, in a way that much of literature is not, to the demands of particular uses in business, trade, travel and tourism, advertising, and so on (Collie and Slater 1996.2).

Thus English literature was excluded from TESL curriculum. This however was not without serious disadvantages.

Against this background, there has been a new trend which emphasizes the study of literature, not only as literature per se but also literature as a rich resource for foreign language teaching and learning. A number of scholars like Widdowson, Littlewood, Brumfit and Carter, Collie and Slater, and Lazar, to name a few, argued that Literature also should be included in the study of language, with special reference to TESL.

As long ago as 1960, the eminent linguist and literary critic, Roman Jakobson declared, “A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unacquainted with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms” (Jakobson 1960: 377).

The arguments forwarded by scholars in favour of inclusion of literature in TESL curriculum may be summarized as follows:

- i. Literature provides valuable material for study.
- ii. Acquainting the ESL learner with the native cultural situations enables him/her to imaginatively understand and appreciate the culture of the native speakers and thereby enriches the cultural experience of the learner.
- iii. A study of literary texts also contributes greatly to the development of language skills of the foreign learner. It exposes the learner to lifelike contexts which offer rich lexical and syntactic materials.
- iv. A study of authentic literary text fosters personal involvement of the EFL learner besides exposing him/her not only to the rule-based system of English but also to its social, cultural and semantic systems. The learner who is personally involved in reading literary texts, thus, moves much beyond the mechanical structural aspects of the foreign language.

Recommending the study of literary texts in the context of second/foreign language learning, Littlewood observes:

Literary texts have a different relationship to external reality. They, too, depend upon it for their raw material and for their interpretability, but after selecting elements from it, aim to combine these elements into a new portion of reality which exists only within the text and from his knowledge of the world. His relationship to a literary text thus differs in important respects from that of a reader of an informational text. The reader’s creative (or rather co-creative) role, and the imaginative involvement engendered by this role, encourage a dynamic interaction between reader, text and external world, in the course of which the reader is constantly seeking to form and retain a coherent picture of the world of text. The possible static and unquestionable reality of the informational text is replaced by a fluid, dynamic reality, in which there is not final arbiter between truth and falsehood. The possibility exists for a meaningful dialogue with the text or, at a group level, about the text (Littlewood 1976, quoted in Brumfit and Carter 1987:5).

From the above quotation it may be noted that Littlewood makes a distinction between ‘informational’ and ‘literary’ texts.

The Concept of Literary Competence

Another important dimension emphasized in this context is the notion of literary competence analogous to ‘linguistic competence’ (Chomsky 1957), ‘communicative competence’ (Hymes 1972) and ‘discourse competence’ (Widowson 1975, Canale and Swain, 1980). For instance, Brumfit and Carter explain ‘literary competence’ as follows:

Literary education is seen by many as the inculcation in students of the kind of sensitivity to literature which allows discrimination of the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’. When we have achieved defined capacities for judgement, then we have acquired a literary competence and can be awarded appropriate ‘qualifications’ (Brumfit and Carter 1987:16/17)

They also state, “. . . teachers need to make provision for sensitizing students or . . . developing in them the necessary literary competence to be sensitive to the kinds of styles, forms, conventions, symbolization etc. . . .” (op.cit: 18).

Literary competence is different from Chomskyan’s concept of linguistic competence and the concept of communicative competence forwarded by Dell Hymes. However the three types of competencies are mutually complementary.

Literary Competence

This notion already mentioned above refers to the ability on the part of a reader or listener (either native or non-native) to appreciate, respond to, and enjoy the experience of reading or listening to literary texts.

Lack of this ability (i.e., Literary competence), according to Culler, will have the following consequences:

. . . anyone wholly unacquainted with literature and unfamiliar with the conventions, by which fictions are read, would . . . be quite baffled if presented with a poem. His knowledge of the language would enable him to understand phrases and sentences, but he would not know quite literally what to make of this strange concatenation of phrases. He would be unable to read it as literature . . . because he lacks the complex ‘literary competence’ which enables others to proceed. He has not internalized the ‘grammar’ of literature which would permit him to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings (Culler 1975: 44, quoted by Brumfit in Brumfit and Carter, 1987: 185).

That is, anyone who responds to the reading of literary texts by interpreting, appreciating and enjoying them by virtue of their ability or “internalized grammar of literature” to transform linguistic texts into structures of new literary meanings, may be said to have “literary competence”.

The Concept of Literariness

The earliest literary scholars concerned with the form of literature were Russian Formalists who inquired into the form of literature and found that literary form is made up of certain poetic devices like poetic use of language, imagery, rhyme etc. and the use of these poetic devices leads to a specific literary or

aesthetic effect called "defamilimization". Thus the literary form comes into existence (Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", in Lodge 1988: 15-30). Later, Structuralists employed the concept of 'literariness' as a distinguishing feature of literary texts as opposed to non-literary texts. For instance, Todorov argues that the object of poetics is not the literary work itself but the properties which make a particular discourse a literary discourse (Todorov's "Definition of Poetics" in Newton 1988: 86-89).

It can be seen that these attempts at identifying "literariness" or the properties of literary texts rather than at defining literature are more practical and useful compared to the traditional attitude to take literature for granted and to accept the "informed opinion" of critics on what literature stands for.

Some properties of literary texts like metaphoric use of language, symbolism, alliteration, rhyme, pun, emotional impact and universal appeal can also be observed in the so-called non-literary use of language like proverbs, advertisements and political or ideological slogans. Consider the following instances:

I) The early bird catches the worm.

Time is money.

Walls have ears.

(Proverbial sayings)

II) The manager has personally passed all the water served here (A notice in a Mexican hotel cited in Simpson, 1997: 72).

III) Connect yourself to the world.

(an advertisement of a mobile phone company)

IV) Workers of the world unite!

(a political slogan)

Properties of Literariness/Literary language

Axis Transfer

It is useful to consider Roman Jakobson's explanation of speech functions and speech factors before examining 'literariness' or the properties of literary language. Stating that any speech event in communication embodies six speech factors (viz. addresser, addressee, context, message, contact and code) and six speech functions (namely Emotive, Conative, Referential, Poetic, Phatic and Metalingual), Jakobson proposes that depending on the focus on a particular factor which is oriented towards a particular function, a given speech function is realized in a given speech event. In this context he explains that when the speech factor of 'message' is oriented towards the 'poetic' function, the resultant speech event will be literary, i.e. it will be a spoken or written literary text. Further, Jakobson observes that "the

poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Newton 1988: 75/76). In other words, when the equivalence of items on the paradigmatic (or selectional) axis is projected into the syntagmatic (or combinational) axis, the result is metaphor and the reverse results in metonymy.

From Jakobson's exposition, we may say that the transfer of equivalence from the items of one axis to the other axis leads to poetic or literary language. We may specify this property as "axis-transfer".

Medium Dependence

Also that communication in language can be through two chief media; speech and writing. That is, literariness can be found in oral medium and written medium of language.

A number of narrativists have attempted to describe the structure of narratives of oral medium right from V.I Propp (1928/1968) to William Labov (1972) and Roland Barthes (1977). Research on narrative structure or form is still being carried out even at the present.

Likewise, a vast body of literature has been produced in the written medium.

The point here is that the kind of literariness found in these two media has an identifiable quality. This is analogous to what Aristotle distinguished as 'mimetic' and 'diegetic'. For instance, dance, chorus, music and spectacle cannot be expected in an epic poem because these properties are found only in drama. Likewise, long and grand epic similes and metaphors cannot be found in drama where dialogue between characters should be clear. Only in long speeches and monologues in drama there may be some elements of figurative language, but certainly not "epic similes". In poetry again there may be sub-genres like lyric, ode, sonnet, ballad etc. which is not like the division in drama like tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy etc.

The above generic distinction within both media illustrates the literary quality known as 'medium dependence'.

Code Independence

A related aspect of literariness is code independence. Although literature is medium dependent and genre dependent, it is not always bound by the rules of the language code. The following examples illustrate how literary expression violates the normal and accepted conventions of the English language as a code.

a) Deviation of Syntax and Punctuation

Me up at does
out of the floor

quietly Stare

a poisoned mouse

still who alive

is asking What

have I done that

You wouldn't have

(eecummings)

b) Violation of Collocation (Collocational Clash)

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes.

(T.S. Eliot, "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*")

c) Discourse with Unusual Organization

He is not here; but far away

The noise of life begins again,

And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain

On the bald streets breaks the blank day.

(Tennyson, *In Memorium*)

d) Violation of Sender/Addresser/-Receiver/Addressee Relationship

e.g. I am the enemy you killed, my friend...

(Owen)

(Addresser: a corpse)

I am not yet born; O hear

Let not blood-sucking bat or rat or the stoat or

The club-footed ghouls come near me.

(Mac Neice)

(Addresser: a foetus)

I come from haunts of coot and hern...

(Tennyson)

(Addresser: a brook)

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,

From the seas and the streams;

I bear light shade for the leaves when laid

In their noonday dreams.

(Shelley)

(Addresser: a cloud)

In these examples, according to Widdowson, "The normal amalgam of sender/addresser is dissolved: it is not the sender who is doing the addressing and not the addresser who is doing the sending" (Widdowson, 1975: 48). Thus, code independence leads to certain asymmetries of which displaced interaction is one.

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Re-registration

Another important dimension of literariness is the potential of literary texts for re-registration. This refers to the possibility of converting a literary text belonging to one genre into a different genre. In the history of world literature, there are a number of instances of this kind of re-registration. For instance, the dramas of William Shakespeare were retold as prose narratives by Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb in their *Tales from Shakespeare*.

A modern novel written by E.M. Forster, a noted British novelist, entitled *Passage to India*, was re-written as a drama of the same name by Ms. Shanta Ramarao. The great epics of Homer and Virgil were retold as prose narratives. The Biblical themes have been re-written as two great epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, by the great English poet, John Milton.

Note that this property of literary texts is very useful in teaching/learning English as a foreign language for such activities/tasks as writing summaries, dialogue, role-play etc.

Semantic Density

This is a very important property of literariness because, many literary critics have emphasized that literary texts have plurisignification or multiple levels of meaning. For example, as long ago as 1930, William Empson (a distinguished follower of I.A. Richards) illustrated in his popular work *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) that literary texts are often rich in meaning because of their 'ambiguity' or multiple meanings. Likewise, Roland Barthes, a noted French critic and semiologist of the late twentieth century, established with his convincing analyses that literary texts have multiple levels (or codes) of meaning (*Image-Music-Text*, 1977).

A simple line from Shakespeare like:

"Frailty thy name is woman" (*Hamlet*) can have at least four meanings: One-Hamlet's meaning, two-Ophelias's meaning, three-patriarchal implications, and four-feministic interpretation. Likewise, Hamlet's

inaction or delay of action was attributed to his 'Oedipus complex' by critics of psychoanalysis while all readers of Hamlet may not agree with them.

Another example is Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*. In general, it dramatizes the life story of Prospero, the real duke of Milan cheated and thrown into exile by his treacherous brother. Living on a lonely island with his pretty daughter, Miranda, Prospero manages to live happily on the island because of his knowledge of magic. He keeps a spirit, Ariel, as well as a savage, Caliban, by name, under his control. Prince Ferdinand, lands on the island by accident along with his father and other courtiers, and falls in love with Miranda and the play ends on a happy note with Prospero, Miranda and others returning to Milan. Post-colonial critics, for example, George Lamming in his *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), considered this play as an example of colonial domination of the East by the West. George Lamming debunks the hierarchy of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban dramatized in the play. The play clearly illustrates the superiority of the Western civilization to that of the East, represented by Caliban, a West Indian (Krishnaswamy et al, 2001:93-94).

Likewise, a humorous interpretation of William Blake's popular poem, *The Tyger* is also possible. Blake was a great poet who inspired the great Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Shelly, and was rightly called 'the prince of spiritual revolt'. His poem "*The Tyger*" has profound spiritual meaning according to critics. But Stanley Fish, a noted American critic, gave a new interpretation to the poem, "*The Tyger*". To quote Krishnaswamy et al:

In his popular book *Is There a Text in this Class?*(1980), Fish reads William Blake's *The Tyger* as an allegory of the digestive system—a first person lament of someone who had violated a dietary prohibition against eating tiger meat and finds that the forbidden food burning brightly in his/her stomach, making its fiery way through the forest of the 'intestinal night' (i.e., the tract), beating and hammering like some devil-wielded anvil. Then that person asks, 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' The speaker pays the price for the sin committed (Krishnaswamy et al. 2001:67).

Even though this interpretation of the poem is not acceptable to many literary scholars and critics, the point to be noted is that such an interpretation or meaning is possible. This example also illustrates the semantic density or multiple layers of meaning that a literary text can offer to its readers.

Alienation

Not only because of the poetic devices, literary texts produce an effect of defamiliarization on their readers but also because of a special combination of the poetic devices. Such a combination may be called 'formation'. This formation in literature leads to the literary effect of Defamiliarization (Alienation or Deautomatization). In other words, the form of a literary work provides a new 'vision' to the reader.

Generally, our vision loses its original sensitivity due to familiarity. The process of Defamiliarization removes the cover of familiarity that surrounds our vision and shows the world familiar to us from a new vision of the world known to us. This quality of art and literature was designated as Defamiliarization or Alienation by the Russian Formalists. The well-known Russian Formalist critic, Viktor Shlovsky explained Defamiliarization, as follows:

. . .the essential function of poetic art is to contract the process of habituation encouraged by routine everyday modes of expression. We very readily cease to see the world we live in, and become anaesthetized to its distinctive features. The aim of poetry is to reverse the process, to defamiliarize that with which we are overtly familiar, to ‘creatively deform’ the usual, the normal, and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded vision in us. The poet thus aims to disrupt ‘stock responses’, and to generate a heightened awareness to restructure our ordinary perception of ‘reality’ so that we end by seeing the world instead of numbly recognizing it or at least that we end by designing a ‘new’ reality to replace the (no less fictional) one we have inherited and become accustomed to (Quoted in Hawkes 1977:62).

Let us take the example of Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Hamlet*. In real life, if a prince behaves as Hamlet does, we hate him and call him a coward, because he remains inactive and lets several opportunities to avenge his father’s murder, lapse. His delay of action vexes us. But in Shakespeare’s play Prince Hamlet’s character is formed in such a way that we as spectators or readers start admiring him and sympathizing with him. We remember him forever as a great tragic hero. Here the credit goes to the playwright Shakespeare, who delineated Hamlet’s character within an artistic frame of vision. That is, Shakespeare successfully defamiliarized the character of Prince Hamlet.

Foregrounding

This aesthetic quality functions strongly in art and literature and because of this, foregrounding is effected through which even the very ordinary objects, events and feelings appear in a new angle and in this way in art or literature one single aspect is foregrounded, as proposed by Jakobson and Mukarovsky. As explained by Mukarovsky, the language of literature is foregrounded against the background of its commonly used forms of synchrony.

For instance, the British poet, Dylan Thomas, in one of his poems, employed a new expression, ‘a grief ago’. But in English, ‘ago’ is an adverb of time and occurs only in such time phrases as ‘a month ago’ or ‘an hour ago’ in the past tense. Here Thomas used it with a noun that describes an emotional or psychological state i.e., ‘grief’. By coining this new phrase, Thomas succeeded in producing the effect of Foregrounding. We can find such examples in other literatures also. Usually, such new expressions come under figures of speech, rhyme, rhythm, etc.

The above mentioned conceptual framework can be applied to the analysis and literary interpretation of any literary work, poetry in particular, as illustrated below by the analysis and interpretation of a poem selected for this purpose. The poem is a popular one, 'The Solitary Reaper', by William Wordsworth.

This poem is included in the English textbook of UG II year under the Common Core Syllabus in the erstwhile combined state of Andhra Pradesh, and published by Orient Black Swan, in 2009. The editorial board has treated this poem also like other prose and poetry lessons. The editorial aid given at the end of the lesson consists of a glossary, comprehension questions, followed by grammar practice and vocabulary check. Except a few remarks at the beginning of the lesson about the poet and about the poem there is nothing about the artistic making of the poem or its aesthetic effect. Nowhere do the editors provide any guidance for a literary appreciation of the poem. This is the principal gap found in the textbooks which are prepared with a language orientation and without any regard to the literary value of a given poem prescribed for study. In this paper an attempt has been made to fill this gap.

Illustration

'The Solitary Reaper'

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

(William Wordsworth)

The poem consists of four stanzas each with eight lines. The metre is Iambic Trimetre and the rhyme scheme is ab, cb, dd, ee. Of them the first two are feminine rhymes, and the last four are masculine rhymes. This information can be profitably used to teach English rhythm to the learners of Spoken English because stress-timed rhythm is a significant phonological feature of Spoken English. One of the important goals of prescribing poetry for study is to familiarize students with the rhythmic patterns of Spoken English.

Thematically the first stanza presents a physical description of the sight and the sound which celebrate the solitary reaper singing in the field. In this stanza there is also an invitation to the reader who is supposed to be a passer-by. The poetic persona wishes that the passer-by also should stop and enjoy the reaper's song or he should proceed on his way silently without causing any disturbance. Thus the communicative event takes place between two persons namely, the poetic persona and the passer-by who is the implied reader.

The second stanza provides a poetic or metaphoric description of the reaper's song. The song of a nightingale that provides relaxation to the groups of travellers across the desert sands of Arabia, or the

song of the cuckoo which is, a flow of music across the distant islands of Hebrides cannot stand in comparison with the song of the solitary reaper.

The third stanza represents the poetic persona's inquiry about the theme of the reaper's song. He makes a conjecture about the nature of the theme: it could be a sorrowful theme of past wars or it could be a rustic woman's song of a familiar issue or it could be a matter of sorrow, loss or pain in the past, the present or the future.

The last stanza is a description of the effect of the reaper's song. Even though the poetic persona doesn't understand the theme of the song, he was profoundly influenced by its melody and melancholy. He feels that the song has no ending and its influence continued to affect him long after his actual listening to the song. Thus this poem is a perfect example of Wordsworth's definition of poetry that it is a flow of powerful feeling and emotions recollected in tranquillity. This is how Wordsworth derived unending pleasure from his communion with nature. Now let us see how the poet has employed Defamiliarization in order to achieve a specific Foregrounding in the poem.

Defamiliarization

Women reaping in the fields alone was a common sight in the Highlands of Scotland. The poet makes this common or familiar sight uncommon and unfamiliar by associating a plaintive song with the solitary reaper. This is how the poet has employed the poetic or artistic process of Defamiliarization.

Foregrounding

The Defamiliarization resorted to by the poet highlights a common and rustic field reaper into an artistic sight which evokes an unending delight in the poet or any passer-by. Thus common sight and sound are foregrounded such that they produce an immense aesthetic delight in the reader.

Conclusion

This analysis illustrates how great poets like Wordsworth, in addition to using common poetic devices like metre, rhyme, and figures of speech also employ processes like Defamiliarization to produce the effect of Foregrounding which, at the same time, is the source of artistic achievement and aesthetic pleasure.

The above illustrated analysis of the literary text is to be supplemented with the normal language work at the end of a lesson.

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