



The Role of Literature in Achieving Students' Proficiency in the English Language Mixed Classrooms: An Explorative Approach

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Abstract

In India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, many students do not possess the desired level of competence in their English language use though they study it as a second language for their degree course. Therefore, this paper tries to find out the role of English literature in achieving students' proficiency in the use of the English language. For this purpose, using English literary texts have been explored as a suitable resource in achieving the desired proficiency among the learners of English as a second language. Hence, second year students of the Department of Economics of Sir Theagaraya College, Chennai-21, chosen for this study. For authenticity, Questionnaires were administered and participant observation were also taken into account for assessment. Finally, it was discovered that students who had more exposure to literary works of various genres became more proficient in the use of the English language. So, It has been concluded that exposing students to literary works in the form reading, listening, roleplay, acting and reciting will enhance their competency level which they require for effective communication.

Key words: Tamil Nadu, The English Language, Second Language, competency, proficiency, literary works, communication

It is a well-known fact that English language in India enjoys a very prominent status as it has become the most widely spoken language in the world. According to Lane, mother tongue speakers of English in America and other European countries are about "360 million people" (n.p.). He also observes that about half a billion people living in the former British colonies in Africa, Asia, and Northern Europe speak English as a second language (n.p.). At the same, in other parts of the world, it has been used as an official or foreign language, or trade language, or simply acquired for communicative purposes. That's why Hornby observes that "one in five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence (R 91).

Therefore, English language has become a language of international diplomacy and political propaganda, trade, international sports commentaries, music and entertainment industries, communication, science and technology, and lots more. So, Indians particularly Tamilians interact in English with the international community to meet their requirements and demands of the modern world including their technological advancements. As a second language in India as well as Tamil Nadu, English serves as a medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. So, a reasonable degree of proficiency is needed in the language for a successful educational carrier in India.

Despite the functional usage of the English language globally, and the need for proficiency in it, even many educated Indians commit grammatical and expression errors. Therefore, this study explores how Indian learners of English pay more attention to the study of literature in English; the opportunity of encountering the language in their daily communication; the type of literary pieces to which they are exposed and how naturally they acquire language skills from them.

The following research questions will assist the researcher to investigate to find out the role of Literary texts for developing the learners' English language skills.

- i. Are ESL Learners exposed to English literature texts in their degree course?
- ii. What is the motivation level which the ESL learners have to study literature for language development?
- iii. How far the literary texts benefit the learners to achieve proficiency in the English Language?

Generally, human beings use language in different contexts, which determines the type of language that is used in that context. This happens because, the language that is appropriate in one context may be inappropriate in another. Literature is one of such areas in which language is used uniquely to communicate meaning. Actually, literature means, "works of art in the form of 'high art' composed in prose or verse form" (Simpson, 2004, p. 2). That is, literature is produced "from the imaginative power of man" (Ezeaku, 2014, p. 1). And then, a good number of imaginative literary texts still exists as oral traditions in the forms of undocumented folk tales, proverbs, folk songs and dances, myths and legends in less literate societies of the world.

It is very clear that literature and language are interconnected or interlinked. Hence, there is no literature without language. Also, literature makes use of a specific language that is more patterned and more figurative. Here, the literary artists go for elegance in their choice of language. To achieve this, they use all the stylistic embellishments they can avail themselves by foregrounding their language in order to achieve the desired effect.

That is why, linguists usually differentiate between language acquisition and language learning. Because, language acquisition is the subconscious process by which infants acquire their native or first language. The infant simply picks up the language by staying or mingling around people, often family members, who speak the language. And then, the effective language learning takes place as the learner makes conscious efforts to understand and use a language, including the teachers' continuous instructions on the language.

Actually, the second language learning takes place only after people have acquired their mother tongue or native language, and then want to develop competence in another language for instrumental or integrative purposes. To facilitate language teaching and learning, teachers test and adopt different learning theories and methods put forward by linguists, sociolinguists, psychologists and educationists. Interestingly, there are three important learning theories that have been influential in second language learning situations for many decades now are the behavioral, cognitive and sociocultural theories. The first theory,

Behaviorism focuses on the formation of second language (L2) habits, cognitive focuses on the single hypothetical learners internal information processing and transmission of L2 input and output; sociocultural theory attempts to capture the context, action, and motives of second language events between individuals who are simultaneously social and cognitive (Xiangui, 2005, p. 120).

The **Behaviourist theory**, explains language learning in terms of verbal behavior in which an activity that is reinforced is practiced until it becomes a habit. A learner who forms the habit of reading literary works soon discovers their innumerable contributions to the learning process in the areas of the vocabulary and the grammar of the target language. This naturally motivates him or her to read them again and again and more. According to cognitive theorists, language learning involves “gradual automatization of skills through the stages of restructuring and linking information to old ones” (Xiangui, 2005, p.122). hence, a learner who understands the importance of literature in the acquisition of a target language and reads it as often as he/she should has unlimited access to the language because he/she finds himself or herself in the world created by the artist in which the actors or characters live and interact with one another. This method gives him or her the opportunity of gradually picking up the underlying grammar of the language, by linking new knowledge to already existing ones. The sociocultural theory treats the learners as social beings and active participants in the learning process. This theory sees language learning as a means of equipping students with the skills and competence to use the target language both in and outside classroom setting. Later, the learner by learning a new language joins a new culture (Xizngui 2005). In this way, literature exposes the learner to the target culture, making him or her an insider in the community created in the text.

So now, this prepares us to the discussion of the genres of Literature. These include poetry which is the oldest form of literature, and the first to gain the attention of scholars, probably because it existed in its oral form in most societies of the world ever before the invention of writing. Because of this, several poets have defined poetry in diverse ways. For instance, William Wordsworth has defined poetry as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility” (Lyrical Ballads). And then, Egudu (1979, p. 4) defines poetry as “the method of literary expressions which suggests by means of imagery, rhythm, and sound”. So, Poetry can better be enjoyed when recited because that is when the sound effects are mostly perceived and appreciated.

Normally, poets use more imageries and figures of speech in their poems in order to exhibit their feelings and emotions effectively. And also, they use such imageries to produce figures or pictures in the minds of the readers or audience, by appealing to the five senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Even the Figures of speech also refer to ways of using language to convey a meaning beyond the literal

meaning of those words. They also go beyond the graphological, phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic rules of the language in order to convey their intended message. The exploitation of language to achieve special poetic effects is uncommon in our day to day use of languages, and this displays special mastery of the language on the part of the artist, and constitutes poetic license. Consider this excerpt:

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.
We would sit down and think which way
To walk, and pass our long Love's Day.
(Marvel, 2017)

Therefore, the above language of poetry is not marked by rigidity of rules. Because the form of any language gets changed based on the context in which language is used. Mastery of poetic devices adds to the competence of the learner as well as boosts his/her confidence in the use of the language. Recitation of poems sharpens the intellect and makes the memory to be at alert.

And then, prose is another important genre in any language. Because it has two major sub-genres named fiction and nonfiction. So, Fiction is about imaginary stories with fictitious characters, events, and settings. It comprises of novels, drama, poetry, legends, myths, horror, fantasy, fairy tales, short stories, historical fiction, science fiction, and others which involve fabricated stories. Actually, the word 'Fiction' was derived from the Latin word 'fictio' which means 'a shaping', 'a counterfeiting' (Kenedy and Gioia, 2005, p. 3). The works of fiction may be enjoyed by real persons but they usually spring from the writers' complete imaginations. So, they render imaginary stories concocted from life experiences and events.

And the next genre is drama. Here, audiences are not only exposed to correct usages but also learns to complement their speeches with the right actions and tunes in order to communicate the desired message. In drama acting, Dramatic monologue is a special communicative technique which really train the learner in the act of rhetoric which helps them develop the speaking skill. Apart from presenting real life use of language, drama employs the use of dialogue to a large extent. As the audience watch the actors take turns in addressing each other, they are trained in the use of the language in conversation of our day to day life. So, plays dramatize different aspects of the life experiences of humans as they live in their society. Language is a viable tool used to recreate human experiences in drama. It is used to piece together all the elements of drama to produce the comprehensive work. So, the audience watch the actors use well-constructed expressions in the English language, and pick language from there.

Hence, the oral and written feedback of the learners in the classroom reveal that the majority of the students strongly affirmed that the literary works they read have impacts in their acquisition and use of the English language, while a few of the respondents said literary works do not have impacts on their use of the English language. Further, some students are of the view that paying more attention to literature can make them better users of the English language. Therefore, the overall feedback of the students affirms that literature helps in achieving proficiency in the English language.

The analysis also revealed that the students are motivated to read literary works for entertainment and enlightenment purposes, as well as to become proficient users of the English language and good literary artists. A good number of students believe that literary works is useful in the acquisition of the English language, and the more the attention to pay to them the more they become proficient in the use of English.

To conclude, literature plays important roles in the learning of the English language. Novels written by proficient users of the English language expose language learners to acceptable expressions in the language, thereby bequeathing them unconsciously with the rules of the language. Drama exposes them to the use of the language in real life situations. Through learners learn to engage in sustained interactions. Recitation of poems makes the memory to be at alert and equips the learners with the knowledge of ways of expressing themselves with finesse as it is deploys figurative and ornate language. Literature, generally, helps improve the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of language learners, so the more language learners are exposed to literary works written in the target language, the more they become proficient in the use of the language. It is therefore recommended that more exposure to literature in English is help them achieve the desired proficiency in the language.

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