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5The Role of Literature in ELT:
The Pros and Cons

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There has been a seductive hard-to-resist kind of but ill-founded emphasis on creative literature in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, which presumably extrapolates to all language teaching. The paper tries to elucidate the relationship between language and literature, which is germane to the issue. It shows, pace Damodar Thakur (2003) for example, that the relationship between language and literature need not be seen as a symbiotic one. The paper argues that creative literature **NEED NOT** (or **CAN NOT**) be used as material in the teaching of a human language as a second or foreign language. Using it is fraught with unacceptable oddities and conceptions of language and literature that are not right.

Language is by no means dependent on literature for its sustenance and development. A group of speakers who are linguistically alive and vital, who are in fact people who keep vibrant the interfaces between language and nonlanguage, would do. Languages have survived and thrived and will survive and thrive without any written literature. (Every good speaker of any language has the seed in him of whatever language one may see in any form of literature of that language.) It is literature on the

contrary which owes its being to language, as do all crucial aspects of man's existence and efflorescence. In fact as John Saul pointed out there is a single definition of civilization, then it is language. "The single and shortest definition of civilization", says John Ralston Saul, "may be the word 'language' ... Civilization, if it means something concrete, is the conscious but unprogrammed mechanism by which humans communicate. And through communication they live with each other, think, create, and act." It is easy to see that if you substitute the word, 'language' in the above definition by the word 'literature', it hardly makes sense. The reason it hardly makes sense is that language and literature are fundamentally and foundationally different. Language is basic and literature derivative. Language is a way of looking at the universe, man's great means of expressing himself. Being as it is his major, if not, the only cognitive tool, it is much more fundamental to man's existence than literature. Language can exist and flourish without the prop of literature. Language enables and empowers man in hundred different ways unlike literature. Atleast the enablement and empowerment that language can effect is infinitely more fundamental and infinitely more indispensable to man's efflorescence than that effected by literature. Man can jolly well live very effectively and fulfillingly without doing or reading any creative literature whereas we can imagine the kind of life that a linguistically challenged man lives. A linguistically challenged person can exist, even live but has per force to lead a much more impoverished life than someone who can speak. This is the reason we say that language and literature exist on noticeably and remarkably different planes and are not comparable in value.

If the argument in the foregoing paragraph is true, then it follows that it is entirely possible to teach any language without teaching any part of its creative literature. There would be to be sure many speakers in any speech community

who are good speakers of that language and who are successful in life without necessarily having read any creative literature in that language. One needs to realize this.

Damodar Thakur (2003) lays out reasons why one needs to bring in creative literature in ELT. Let's examine his arguments for bringing in literature in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Thakur founds his plea for teaching language through literature first by saying that one should pick examples from literature to teach grammar points. He avers that examples from colloquial speech are dull, lifeless and puerile. He declares that life is already dull and boring, that man is suffering from a sense of ennui and angst and alienation, and so why make ELT still more unbearable and boring by not using examples from literature, he seems to be asking. The last point does not merit extended comment. It is like asking, life is already dull, why make it more dull by talking about something as boring as how and why a falling object falls the way it does, what happens when a human foetus forms, why sounds behave the way they do in language and so on. I think there is no relationship between the way ELT is done and the philosophies of Existentialism, Nihilism and so on. Thakur's argument that it is in fact the case that one of the reasons ELT has failed is because the teacher has used ordinary sentences as examples, and not examples with a 'literary flavour' needs to be addressed. If one is teaching relative clauses Thakur prefers examples like

Blue are the hills that are far away

Someone who is born in a stable is not necessarily a horse.

to

The man who you met yesterday is a cobbler.

London which is the capital of the United Kingdom, is very crowded.

If one is teaching conditional clauses, Thakur prefers examples like

If you are afraid of loneliness, don't marry (Chekhov)

A book is a mirror. If an ass peers into it you can not expect an apostle to peer out of it.

to

If you go there, you will certainly meet him.

Presumably to teach the present tense, he would prefer

Breathes there the man with soul so dead

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time

And to teach equational sentences he would presumably use the very literary

they are but lighted fools

It is clear that there is something wrong here. There is a mixup of purposes. The purpose of teaching a language is completely different, I submit, from that of teaching literature. Language and literature are different arenas of human intellection. The depth of thought that examples illustrating grammar points enshrine is completely irrelevant simply because mastering the code is what language learning aims at and not addressing, as Thakur puts it, the deeper and abiding needs of the learner. The tool is what we are aiming to get at and not what the tool can express. The depth of thought can in fact be distracting for the learner as we can see in some of the above examples. Secondly and equally importantly, having decided what grammar points to teach how does one go about searching for literary pieces which may have sentences which illustrate the grammar points. It is clear as daylight that literary pieces were not created to systematically teach a grammar point. That was not and can not be their purpose. So we need to do some unguided ad hoc search. And even if we find some sentences to illustrate some grammar point as Thakur has apparently done in his article, how about practice sentences? Is it the

argument that we need all ten or twenty practice sentences with great depth of thought? One gets wise to the absurdity of this idea of using literature in language teaching if we go thinking in this direction. Supposing I have taught number in English and have the following sentences for the learner to practise and internalise number with:

1. A dog is an animal
2. A fish can swim
3. A potato is a vegetable
4. A chair is made of wood
5. A cow gives milk
6. A dog hates a cat
7. A box has a lid
8. A writer writes a book

I am asking the learner to put the above into the plural. Am I to scour all of English literature to get nondull, nonflat and nonpeurile and enlivening examples to replace each of the above? This is a rhetorical question.

I have taught, let's say, the suffix -ness or -ing and so on. To let the learners practise these and come up with new ones, do I go to creative English literature to get enlivening examples? A rhetorical question again!

Language is our cognitive window to the world out there. To speak it means well to master a code which enshrines this cognition. Mastering it by no means means deepening one's sensibilities or sharpening one's sensitivities the way creative literature may do. It is inane from the point of view of language learning to say that 'to be or not to be' is a better sentence than 'to be well or to be ill' or 'if you are afraid of loneliness, don't marry!' is better than 'if you are afraid of darkness don't go out at nights' and so on. For a person who doesn't know the language or barely knows the language, the former allegedly 'flat' 'dull and 'peurile' sentences should

be as piquant as the latter sentences with 'literary' flavour. Dubbing such sentences dull and boring is similar to saying, as I said earlier, that getting to know why a falling object behaves the way it does is dull and boring.

Language teaching, I reiterate, is not an attempt to deepen one's sensibilities, widen one's horizons, enlarge one's sympathies, and so on, which function creative literature may do, and in fact good creative literature does. To acquire a language, says a Czech proverb, is to acquire a soul. Acquiring a soul in the sense of acquiring a way of looking at the universe is to learn to master a unique and original way of cognising the world. Having mastered it the learner can use it and come up with sentences with literary flavour. For example in Mao Naga, a language spoken in Manipur what are called equational sentences are marked by a sentence-final *ko* while other declarative sentences are not. This fact itself must be piquant and exciting to the learner. It is difficult to see that an additional depth of thought added to such sentences will make them that much more exciting.

ai kolamai-koe "I am a plainsman"

ai ni-koe "I am you" (sentence with a literary flavour?)

I am suggesting that the second sentence could be positively distracting. The first sentence, the form of it must be equally piquant because the learner is new to it. Language learning is all about mastering forms that go with associated meanings. The forms themselves must be exciting to the learner. In English the negative of 'must' is not 'must not', (because a sentence such as I must not go means I am obliged not to go whereas we need a sentence meaning I am not obliged to go), but 'need not'. This is exciting in itself. It is not necessary to add depth of thought to sentences illustrating the difference simply because that is NOT the purpose of language learning. Inducing great depths of thought into the learner is not the purpose of any language learning. That is done by other disciplines. I thus

disagree with Thakur when he says that “underlying the need to acquire a linguistic means of communication the learner has the unstated and enduring need to obtain from whatever he does a sense of exhilaration and illumination, a sense of extension and augmentation.” The latter may be done by enterprises like literature as a body. It is not the purpose of any language learning. I am going to China, let’s say, on a lucrative assignment, and as a precondition I need to learn Chinese. Why on earth should I want my Chinese-learning programme to give me a ‘sense of extension and augmentation’, a ‘sense of exhilaration and illumination’ except as Chinese as a code, as a window to a different world gives me? What this means is that the Chinese equivalents of

If you are afraid of darkness don’t go out.

would more than do. The Chinese teacher does not have to go search for enlivening illuminating examples like

If you are afraid of loneliness, don’t marry.

People advocating creative literature as a part of the process of second/foreign language teaching are not clear whether creative literature needs to be taught as full texts or only specific sentences need to be picked up to be taught. We have addressed the latter. Thakur says toward the end of the article under question that ‘the type and quality of literature to be used as material for language teaching will depend on the age and the cultural background of the learner and on the level at which language teaching has to be done. Fairy tales for example will be useful for language lessons for children. Parables, anecdotes and simple short stories etc for intermediate learners and unabridged classics for advanced learners.’ Here the idea is presumably the whole text.

There is a problem here. How can one use the whole text unless all that linguistically happens in the text has already been taught? The ideal thing to do it seems to me

is to bring in the types of texts Thakur broaches after all grammar points have been taught without any help from creative literature, which means that creative literature has a place in language teaching only at the end of grammar-teaching, after a minimal competence has been achieved in the language, I am not against teaching grammar and all that goes into what is called ‘communicative competence’ in terms of narratives and discourses. Teaching grammar in appropriate rigged up narratives only recognises the natural narrational, discursual, and conversational embeddedness of language. The teacher can rig up his own narratives to teach the grammar points in question as no creative literature is designed to teach grammar.

To perorate, here is a rigged up narrative marrying imaginative discourse with grammar (number)

A king had three wives. Kings as you and I know have more than one wife. A king having one wife was unheard of in those times. His first wife bore him one child, a boy, his wife three children, two boys and one girl, and his third wife one son and two daughters. All the wives led fulfilling lives as queens usually do with kings. The king had one artificial tooth as against thirty two natural teeth. One of his sons had six toes on his left foot. The feet of the other children were all normal. Like King Ashoka lined all roads of his capital with trees, this king lined all roads with booths for the sake of the people. One such booth vended the daily necessities of the citizens. There were booths (and not *beeth*) for daily necessities. The king set up different fora for redressing the citizen’s grievances. One such forum was for...

REFERENCE

- Damodar Thakur (2003) *Language and Literature: A Symbiotic Relationship* Teaching Language Through Literature: Problems and principles (part one) Sanaa (Yemen): 9 June 2003 Yemen Times.