
Redefining Teaching: Poetry as an Effective Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract: English as a second language has always been a hard nut to crack for the students in general and those from the rural areas in particular. The English teachers have an important role to play in facilitating the students to learn English language to meet the needs of the current job market. Hence the teachers have been adopting innovative techniques to make students well versed in the language and to come out of the inhibitions and apprehensions associated with the learning of the same. The current paper discusses one such approach- the possibility of enhancing the communicative skills of the students through teaching poetry.

Keywords: Literature, Poetry, Communication, Sylvia Plath, Mushrooms.

Education in its general sense is a form of learning skills. Knowledge and habits are transmitted from one generation to another generation through teaching, training, research, etc. According to Pestalozzi, a famous academician, "Education is natural, harmonious and progressive development of man's innate

power" which means education inculcates certain values and principles and also prepares the human being for social life. The structure of education in India is the same as that of any other developed country. The aim of education should be to sharpen the intellectual and communicative capabilities of the students. This process ought to start at the grass root level of education. Unfortunately, this aim is not realized.

Workforce endowed with Linguistic competence is the most important asset that any nation can have. However, one must not forget that education is also a basic right. Only those who can understand what is going around them and in the world can shape their lives and make right decision at right time. Decisions matter when vital issues like organizing their finances or exercising franchise are at stake.

Without doubt, effective communication is an economic resource, especially, in the context of globalization and communication-oriented modern world. If a company, a community or a nation cannot communicate effectively it cannot sell its ideas. If it cannot sell its ideas it will be out of business within no time with little hope of recovery. These

issues are most conspicuous in the areas of service sector too.

Effective and adequate communication is also a prerequisite for participation in development, the propagation of information, exchange of ideas and the negotiations at international level. Countries and business communities which cannot communicate with partners in the rest of the world will be left behind. Inventors who do not communicate with others will not reap the fruits of their inventions and may not contribute towards development – albeit inadvertently. Given this point of view, it can definitely be claimed that effective communication is a weapon in many domains ranging from labour issues to gender inequality, from environmental issues to political issues. Without effective education, there cannot be effective communication. Language skills of students and teachers are essential to teaching and learning process. Only development of language skills can promote effective communication.

Communicative competence of students in rural areas leaves much to be desired. This poses a formidable challenge to the teaching of English in rural region. Teaching complex aspects and nuances of English language is an uphill task. We the teachers of language are left with a few poems, short stories, a novel and a drama to equip the students in English language. But with the semester system and a very shallow foundation in language at the elementary level this hardly proves effective.

Why do we need literature for learning language?

Literature has influenced the humankind from times immemorial. We are interested in telling and listening to stories, poems and lend our ears very eagerly to stories or poetry. Hence the flow of learning a language will be easier through literature. Using novels, short stories, poems and other forms of literature to teach language is an invaluable experience. That too when a foreign language is taught within the four walls, the media must be attractive. Teaching a language only through grammar is a myth. Both teaching and learning process become dull and drab. So the utility of the language becomes complete when it is learnt within a proper framework. Literature which is nothing but a mirror held to the society will serve that purpose. I need not mention here again the atmosphere of interest which it will create in the classroom.

Case Studies and the Findings

For the purpose of this seminar, I consider two poems prescribed for I BA and I B Sc students; 'Mushrooms' by Sylvia Plath for I semester and 'Still I Rise' by Maya Angelo for II semester. I thought of taking these two poems as the theme is similar. It is not expected of me to narrate the manner in which the poems are taught in the classroom. We all have our own methods of teaching. Yet I would brief the method which the teachers usually adapt to teach in the classroom.

We generally start with reading the biographical details of the poet, stressing upon the uniqueness of his/her style,

autobiographical influences on the works of the poet, etc. At the second stage, we usually read out the poem twice or thrice, give a pause, later make the students read the poem at least three or four times to familiarise them with the poem. The third step includes telling them about the structure of the poem, giving them the theme of the poem exploring it line by line, giving the meanings of the difficult words and focusing on the hidden meanings of words, pointing out the images and symbols and most importantly connecting the theme of the poem with some incident or character that is familiar to us or quoting parallel incidents. Once we are done with the teaching of a poem, we generally ask the students to come out with their views on the poem taught. At this juncture I should reiterate that in my experience the responses of the students differ from one stream to another. To assess the capability of students I distributed a questionnaire consisting of the following questions among the students.

1. Reading poetry enhances reading and listening skills. Do you agree?
2. Have the poems 'Mushrooms' and 'Still I Rise' improved your vocabulary?
3. Have you read any other poem similar in theme of these two poems?
4. While a poem is being read out in the classroom, can you grasp the theme of the poem?
5. Repeated reading and listening familiarises the words and hence

improves vocabulary. Do you agree?

6. Do you think the communicative skills of students can be improved through language teaching?
7. Your suggestions regarding the improvement in classroom teaching.

Obviously, the response of the Science students differed from that of the students of arts stream. While majority of science students assertively responded to the questions and were clear in their answers, majority of arts students answered vaguely. After getting the feedback, I have maneuvered the result of the data as follows.

The students from the science background are from English medium. They know reasonable English and hence comprehend the poem easily. For the first and the second question their answer is absolute yes. For the third question many came up with the poems and short stories that they had read in their mother tongue. For the fourth question about 60% of students said that they could grasp the theme of the poems as the language is simple. They also opined that grasping of the theme is impossible if the language is complex. For the sixth question, their answer is that the communicative skills of English can be improved by using a single language in the classroom or much of English should be used and little of mother tongue is to be used. They are of the opinion that when the poem is explained to them in detail, it adds to their vocabulary,

enhances their communicative skill and enriches their language ability.

But the case of students from arts stream is different. From their feedback it is evident that though it is quite difficult for them to comprehend the meaning of the poem at surface level, with the repeated reading and line by line explanation, they grasp the theme of the poem and are able to express it but in Kannada. As far as the vocabulary and communicative skills are concerned, the impact is minimal on them. They are insistent upon using more of mother tongue rather than English language in the classroom. The use of mother tongue in teaching them may be a factor that makes them grasp the lecture.

How do we account for this situation?

The translation method that is followed to teach English text also contributes for the inadequate acquisition of communication skills. Use of mother tongue should be restricted only to translation, not to teach the text. Use of mother tongue is useful as far as the better understanding of the text is concerned. But this method is definitely a stumbling block for the better learning of the language. Hence the practice of translation should be adapted only to strengthen the hold of students on English language.

Another aspect that adds to inadequate acquisition of communication skills by students is that of classroom conditions. In most of the colleges, the student-teacher ratio is very high. Hundred plus students are taught at a time by single teacher. Interactive sessions which include activities like group discussion or debate is

impossibility in such classrooms. Grammar is just taught to complete the ritual. So teaching grammar is reduced to a mere formality. It has succeeded in defeating the very purpose and distorting the very meaning of education. Skills can be achieved only through constant practice under proper guidance and which cannot be done in a huge class.

The institutional lacunas like inadequate infrastructure also contribute for the inadequate acquisition of language skills. In addition to classroom teaching, students also need to be exposed to other ways through which they can acquire skill. Language laboratories are meant to serve such purposes which are not found in majority of higher education institutions. Further, libraries and reading rooms enormously enhance the communication skills. Constant exposure to quality journals and newspapers enables students to learn by imitation the way in which the journalists communicate. This is possible only when there is a rich library. Today, unfortunately, reading habit of the students is dwarfed as the libraries cannot cater to the needs of the students beyond examination.

Again, there is a mistaken notion that English belittles the importance of mother tongue. Spoken English is sadly neglected in the colleges and an all-round effort is required to promote the same. The text books on English language need to be designed as to help teaching and learning spoken English. It is true that writing is important. But speaking is equally important. The lessons prescribed in the

text books may help the students to learn written English but not spoken English. It is high time that the text book should be designed to acquire necessary skills required to meet the requirement of competitive job market.

More than anything, the attitude of rural students towards English language should be changed. English is still a foreign language for them and the notion that it is too tough has frozen in their minds. Erasing this prejudiced opinion among the students is the biggest challenge which needs to be addressed immediately. Once this notion is removed, automatically a rapport can develop between the English teachers and the students which can in turn lead to smooth and effective learning. The English teachers need to be saved from the ubiquitous situation of mere translators in class rooms. This has indeed become the predicament of an English teacher now a

day especially in rural belts. What are we then and what are we doing? Are we language teachers or translators or Masters of Literature?

Time has arrived for introspection – not only on students learning but also on our roles as teachers – ENGLISH TEACHERS.

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