

# STUDYING LITERATURE IS THE GATEWAY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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## **Abstract**

Literature of every language is the repository of the best expressions in that language. Language is employed by writers to express themselves in different genres and these creative works embellish the language, giving it more depth and variety and therefore, enriching it. Spoken language or the language of everyday use does not have the versatility to help a learner acquire mastery over the language. A sound knowledge of language cannot be acquired by ignoring the associated literature. This paper explores the reasons why learning of language is intertwined with the studying of literature and also delves into the reasons why studying literature is a preferred option for language learning. Moreover, it is important to understand that language development is a complex cultural phenomenon and literature helps the learner to understand the language in the cultural context. To learn a language without understanding the culture will result in partial understanding of the language, because the two are interdependent on each other. Understanding the culture in which the literary work is placed is a vital component of language acquisition. This paper specifically investigates the usage of literature for ELT and aims to study how the literature or literary pieces can be employed in the present day technology driven classrooms for language learning. I shall explore how literature can be an effective tool for ELT as well as the new practices that can help to make language learning more effective.

**Keywords:** Repository of best literary expressions, cultural context, associated literature, complex cultural phenomenon, language acquisition, literature for ELT, technology driven classrooms

Literature is the repository of best expressions in that language. It is created by proficient users of the language, who wield the pen to create works of enduring significance. The words and expressions used by these writers embellish the language, giving it more variety and depth and therefore, enriching it. Spoken language or the language of everyday use, on the other hand, lacks the versatility to help a learner acquire mastery over the language. A sound knowledge of language cannot be acquired by ignoring the associated literature. This paper explores in depth the reasons as to why learning of language is intertwined with the study of literature and also delves into the *raison d'être* for studying literature for language learning.

Moreover, it is important to understand that language development is a complex cultural phenomenon and literature helps the learner to understand the language in the cultural context. To learn a language without understanding the culture will result in partial understanding of the language and will hinder correct usage because the two are interdependent. Understanding the culture in which the literary work is placed is a vital component of language acquisition. This paper elaborates on the rationale behind the above contentions and also specifically investigates the usage of literature for English Language Teaching (ELT) or Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). It aims to study how literature or literary pieces can be employed in the present day technology driven classrooms for language learning. I shall explore how literature can be an effective tool for ELT as well as the new practices that can help to make language learning more effective.

Literature helps the readers to grow, learn from the characters, live vicariously and enjoy myriad experiences of life. It gives food for thought, encourages discussions, and assists in understanding the real world due to interrelated concepts. It gives a world view, teaches about the past and the prevailing cultures, it also entertains and informs as it contains the collective wisdom of the human race. Literature has rich linguistic input, offering a multi sensorial experience to the readers; it nourishes the mind, develops appreciation of cultures and stimulates thinking. Benefits of studying literature are not limited to just that, it helps the learners to acquire better language skills in all four categories- listening, speaking, reading, writing. Therefore, literature is vital for language learning and the possession of good language is the cornerstone of excellence in academics.

Using literature for teaching of English language is not a new phenomenon. Literature has been employed for the teaching and learning of language in the past and it continues to be used till date. It is a part of prescribed curriculum in a majority of the streams. Temporarily, there was a switch towards functional English but it is being replaced with literature due to better understanding of the phenomenon, that literature aids understanding and enhances the language learning experience. Genres such as poetry, drama, novels, etc are tools for language acquisition, instead of being an end in themselves.

Literature offers a richer model for language acquisition vis-à-vis ordinary language, that is, the language used for interacting informally during conversations and performance of tasks. Spoken language is a poor substitute for literary language as it is lacking not just in vocabulary but also in aesthetic appeal and “language to be found in literary texts is often particularly interesting for language learners” (Hall 9). It is pertinent to mention that writers such as poets, dramatists, essayists, novelists, etc. have accelerated English language development by offering a wider range of expressions than an ordinary language can boast of.

G.Hall in his book states that there is no clear and obvious literary/ non literary divide between ordinary and literary language based on strictly linguistic principles, but “the language of literature is noticeably different in that it is typically more interesting and varied and representative than the language of dreamed up dialogues in chemists’ shop or reprinted AIDS leaflets, as found in many of best intentioned classrooms” (11)

English language, as we know it today, is indebted to many literary giants like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Sir Thomas More, John Milton, etc. for adding new words and phrases through their canonical texts. William Shakespeare is credited with adding the disputed figure of 1700 words and John Milton with 630 neologisms to the modern English Lexicon. Interestingly, words that have become commonplace in today’s times have found their way from literature to everyday usage. Most of the words and phrases used in ordinary conversations such as, a wild goose chase, for goodness’ sake, the be-all and end-all, its Greek to me, made of sterner stuff, not slept a wink, own flesh and blood, so on and so forth, owe their origin to Shakespeare and words like endearing, ecstatic, disregard, jubilant, unaccountable, fragrance, didactic and many more, are Milton’s creations.

Literature facilitates language learning, as it equips the learners with the cognitive abilities that are required to comprehend the language as literature is the storehouse of cultural history of the people of the region to which the language belongs. Understanding the cultural context is helpful in language acquisition and language growth. Language is a product of culture and it cannot be separated from it. The words and expressions used for objects, emotions, thoughts, practices have originated from the life and surroundings of that region, as well as the religious and cultural beliefs of the people who live in that particular geographical space. So the cultural context plays a big role in language and is inextricably linked to that language. Literature of the language re-creates or captures the cultural essence, which gets embedded into the language.

This phenomenon can be better understood when we realize that some words and expressions are so peculiar to the language as well as the culture of that language, that they defy translation, as there are no words or near equivalents for the idea, act or belief in the translated language. English with its mindboggling 1, 75, 000 words still falls short when we have to translate, say, words and expressions in Punjabi like jootha, jaach, pairi pauna, balle, saanu ki, etc. into English. If a translator attempts to translate the title of the Pakistani writer Mansha Yaad’s famous Punjabi novel ‘Taawan Taawan Taara’ into English, the ‘Hardly any Star’ is a feeble translation.

Cultural positioning of the literary texts is essential as the “... readers invariably interpret texts in light of their own world view and cultural experience” and “... a text in English by a writer of a similar cultural background to the group of students studying the text may be more culturally accessible than a text written by an author from a culture far removed from the students’ own. On the hand, a text from another culture which deals with themes relevant to the students’ own society may prove to be accessible and absorbing” (Gillian 62). It is important for the learners to situate the language in a particular cultural context and literature is particularly helpful in lending a cultural perspective.

Literature is taught to improve the basic language skills of students such as hearing, speaking, reading and writing, along with improving vocabulary, teaching correct pronunciation and grammar. A fair amount of proficiency in these skills is needed to communicate in today’s world. The pedagogical approach for the usage of literature for language learning has seen a significant change in recent years, with teachers switching from lecture method or ‘Chalk and Talk method’ to using Information Communication Technology (ICT) or Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The methods that are being employed and can be employed by teachers to facilitate the language learning process in modern day classrooms are noteworthy, as they have become more technology driven in the post Covid era.

It is the need of the hour for teachers to be techno savvy and the technological shift created by the popularity of social media like Whatsapp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. has revolutionized the information sharing process in the recent years. As has been so rightly stated that “...computers will not replace teachers, teachers who use computers will replace those who don’t” ( Smith 2). Teachers have increasingly switched over to using PPTs embedded with multi media texts and files for teaching purposes and the expansion of learning opportunities. Students these days have access to tablets, smart phones and the classrooms are equipped with wi-fi enabled computers as well as projectors that can assist in language learning. It is to be noted that easy access to technology does not make them competent users of this media for language learning purposes. There is no substitute to the guidance provided by of the techno savvy and efficient teachers of the language.

Studying English literature has never been as comfortable as it is now, as technological aids are there to support the language acquisition process. Technology has changed the way the students’ learning experience can be enhanced, and application of technology has a great potential to make the language learning process pleasurable and interesting instead of being insipid and dull. Students can be encouraged to make use of applications that

can be downloaded to assist in language learning such as Rosetta Stone, FluentU, Hello English, Duolingo, Hello talk, Memrise, etc.

The adage that 'One picture is worth a thousand words' is so true and working on this premise, it is important for the teachers to design their classes by incorporating digital tools. The students should be encouraged to do preliminary research on the topic to be taken up, so that their orientation towards receiving information related to the topic under study is enhanced for optimum understanding and retention. The students can be shown animated versions of the literary pieces available on YouTube, video clips and film adaptations, if any, in order to expose the students to the cultural background, correct pronunciation and intonation. The recordings and audio-video clips containing story narrations and poetry recitations, stimulate the visual and auditory senses of students for a better learning outcome.

Internet has search engines like Google which come in handy to crosscheck the correct pronunciation of tricky words, along with the meaning of these words and their usage. Students should be encouraged to explore synonyms and antonyms and use them in sentences of their own. Students can be asked to explore the internet sources in order to go through all the information pertaining to the texts available, especially audio videos available on the topic. Students' cooperation is vital in working towards tasks which support curriculum and language learning.

In recent times, the focus has shifted from the teacher centric method of learning to a student centric method. A student who searches on Google for a video to listen to the voice of skylark while reading the poem 'Skylark' by P. B. Shelley or looks at the picture of daffodils while reading the poem 'Daffodils' by William Wordsworth will definitely have a better comprehension of the poems. The learner becomes an active participant in his/her learning process, as compared to the learner in a traditional classroom who was fully dependent on the teacher without any alternative aid for language acquisition.

Today's student is empowered but the only condition is that his energy has to be channelized and this is possible only with correct guidance. "Learners might, for example be assigned to find a text of interest on the web, summarize the text for the class, and highlight and define the expressions that he or she did not know in the task" (Chapelle 68). The learners also graduate from being passive learners to enthusiastic and pro active learners, whose interest has been stimulated with the use of technological teaching aids. The students become active and autonomous in the learning process and their power of retention increases manifold.

Technology promotes fast learning, as it is user friendly and also facilitates the acquisition of all four language related skills. Students can capitalize on the language that they have become familiar with and participate in activities that mimic real life situations. This task would help the students to utilize the language skills that they have learned. Engaging in discussions regarding the literary works can improve expression. The students could make presentations on different tasks related to the literary piece that they have read with the use of technology and this interactive learning is the cornerstone of language acquisition.

It can be safely deduced from the above discussion, that digital tools for studying literature motivate the students to delve deep into the literary texts prescribed in the curriculum, stimulates and sustains their interest for better language acquisition, and shows them new ways of interpreting texts. Literature is a vital component of ELT, and ICT empowers the students to become active participants, thereby, elevating the learning experience. Furthermore, excellence in academics is the natural corollary of good language skills.

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