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Teaching English Literature to the Open and Distant Learners in an EFL Context: An Empirical Study

Research Paper

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating the possibility of making literature an effective area of study for the learners of the open university who will be receiving education through distant mode. It speculates and discusses how the benefits of teaching literature could be spread throughout the target society to minimise the discrepancy between different educational opportunities offered to the individual. To combine these aspects and present concluding recommendations, the areas discussed are the advantages literature offers both from a humanistic and a linguistic point of view, and the role of open university in catering to the needs of the masses. This helps establish the facts incorporated with literature teaching in a language-dominated world. The teaching of literature through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Distance Education (DE) systems is possible and accommodates the students' needs from elementary to tertiary level. The researcher administered a questionnaire among 50 MA students at the University of Warwick, UK. In order to serve the purpose, both quantitative and partly qualitative investigations were made. The study among other possibilities shows that the promotion of learner autonomy develops a sense of responsibility in the learner towards learning and achievement. This also enhances their understanding of self achievement, confidence, and self-reliance. As the concept of open university is becoming more and more popular, it is believed that through proper use of the rich resources available there the benefits of literature teaching can reach the masses at the grassroots level. Moreover, as open university expenses are comparatively affordable in the context of Bangladesh, introducing literature in the English classroom could be beneficial, lead to a positive impact on learning, and ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, English, EFL context, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The unique, world class approach of open universities through distant learning mode enables one to learn in one's own time and pace, at home or from anywhere that is convenient to the learner. The students can read, watch, or listen to material supplied, and do course activities and assignments with regular support from the tutor at the assigned tutorial centres. Open universities represent a new wave in education. They are the sources of hope, inspiration, and encouragement to people who

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are deprived of participating in mainstream education. Imparting education through distance mode, open universities usually give opportunities to learn from a distance instead of attending regular face-to-face classroom lectures. Thus, they provide a second chance to learners, not allowing time, space, or place to act as barriers to education.

The following sections of the article focus on the open learning and distance education system and on the benefits that literature offers in the English classroom as a need-oriented subject. To reinforce the assumptions and findings from a library-based research, a questionnaire survey is conducted among teachers from different nationalities. The data gathered is hoped to reinforce the possibilities that ODL offers in an EFL context, such as Bangladesh.

1.1. The Idea of the Open University, and Distance Education

Open learning and distance education are approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place. For many learners, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities.

As identified by Rao (1989:x), the overall objectives of the open learning system (OLS) could:

- strengthen and diversify degree, certificate and diploma courses related to the needs of employment,
- provide access to higher education for large segments of population,
- provide an innovative system of university level education flexible and open in regard to methods, pace of learning, combination of courses, eligibility for enrolment, requirement of entry, conduct of examination, etc., and finally,
- contribute to the improvement of the educational system by providing another opening complementary to the traditional system.

As noted by Brande and Van (1993), the open university usually has a multimedia approach to learning which includes the use of television broadcasts, correspondence texts, video and audio materials as well as face-to-face tuition.

1.2. Open University and Learner Autonomy

Promoting learner autonomy can be justified on pedagogical grounds, since 'Adults demonstrably learn more, and more effectively, when they are consulted about dimensions such as the pace, sequence, mode of instruction and even the content of what they are studying' (Candy, 1988: 75). According to Boud (1988: 23):

> *The main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instructions*.

The learners belonging to an open and distant education mode therefore, are expected to:

- take responsibility for their own learning and ensure the concept of learner autonomy,
- choose their own time, pace, and place of learning according to their needs and convenience,
- carry out their learning activities individually and in groups,
- be active and alert throughout the programme,
- assess their own progress.

2. Literature Review

Language textbooks provide examples of usable referential language, which learners are encouraged to adopt, follow, and manipulate in each series of contexts. As a result, the learners may show the ability to negotiate some communicative/grammatical formulaic expressions to gain the requisite marks in the examinations and feel satisfied with such an achievement. The following sections discuss the benefits that literature could offer in a language classroom.

2.1. Literature Teaching, Humanistic Education and Language Learning Benefits

According to McRae (1991) language is used for much more than simply conveying information. The absence of imaginative content limits the learners' imaginative involvement with the target language and leads to a one-dimensional learning achievement. On the other hand, representational

materials going beyond the purely referential, bring 'imaginative interaction, reactions and response into play' (McRae, 1991). It is worth remembering that genuine learning achievement goes far beyond mere mastery of functions and grammatical rules. Literature provides a special way of helping learners interact with their surroundings that can produce an immensely satisfying effect. And this satisfaction comes from the fact, as Hook *et al*. (1970:39-40) put it:

> *Literature is not factual as an encyclopaedia article is factual…. Literature is concerned with why things happen, on the motivations of man.*

2.2. Developing the Fifth Skill Leading to a Long-Term Benefit

Apart from the four skills of language - speaking, listening, reading, and writing, what everyone needs but quite often ignores is the fifth skill: *thinking in English.* Unless one starts thinking in a language, one cannot possibly begin expressing oneself fluently. Referential language does not require much in the way of thinking but a memory for vocabulary and an ability to manipulate grammatical forms which can easily lead to discouragement and demotivation in an L2 context. On the other hand, representational materials expand the student's fifth skill by making one curious and motivated to think *about* the context of the situation and consequently become more aware of the factors involved in the production and reception of any communicative act.

2.3. Literature and Self-motivation: Personal Growth and Learner Autonomy

According to Lazar (1993), literature helps promote individual development and education of the whole person, providing materials beneficial for creating analytical and critical abilities. Kress (1988:141) takes the argument into the social sphere:

> *texts are always and everywhere enmeshed in the social structures. It is that dynamic which gives rise to what we call style in text, and it is that dynamic which ensures that language is everywhere a part of social life.*

The purpose of teaching is to help learners to reach the stage where they can operate autonomously, i.e., without teachers. The personal growth model of literature teaching assists learners to achieve an *engagement* with the texts, to appreciate, evaluate and understand better the relationships with people and institutions around them (Carter and Long, 1991). According to Bassnett and Grundy (1993:5), 'Learners-by-choice are more motivated than learners-by-compulsion'. Thus, interesting literary texts are likely to develop the habit of looking forward to the unpredictable nature of the materials which usually contrasts with the predictable ones in textbooks.

2.4. Literature and Language Development

According to Carter and Long (1991:2) 'Language is the literary medium, and literature is *made* from language' - this realisation will lead to a better understanding of a literary text. Literature as a source of enjoyment can become an integral part of language learning. Using the language model for teaching literature, the teacher demonstrates what 'oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed', that is, puts learners in touch with some of the more subtle and varied creative uses of the language.

2.5. Teaching of English Literature to Open University Learners

The discussion until now establishes the assumption that representational materials are good resources for the self-learners of the open university. To assist them in their learning the learners could be provided with a *Student's Guide*. According to Carter and Long (1991) student-centred approaches, assisted and monitored by the teacher, are more likely to deliver a lasting enjoyment of literature and the competence to read literature for oneself. This will also without doubt, enhance their competency in English.

A learner here will enjoy full support throughout one's studies. An assigned tutor (or study adviser depending on the teaching arrangements for the course one chooses) would guide, advise and offer comprehensive feedback on his/her coursework. Support is also offered by other open university staff and fellow students at tutorials, or as part of the global community of open university students who can be reached through online forums.

2.6. The Use of Representational Material and Setting up of a Self-access Centre

As pointed out by Lazar (1993), 'A literature self-access centre is a library or small collection of texts for students to read on their own with minimal supervision'. The centre will offer literary texts from different genres along with a collection of video and audio recordings of plays or films based on novels, fictions, etc., to initiate motivation in the learners. Learners will be encouraged to enjoy literature by themselves. They will listen to or read, and later talk/discuss/argue about the text, which will promote their language acquisition and enhance their self-confidence and independence as learners.

3. Methodology

In order to assist the library research, a questionnaire survey is conducted among teachers of English of different nationalities. The questionnaire aimed at eliciting a general view of the teachers' attitudes towards literature and distance education. To serve the purpose, both quantitative (which provides precision) and partly qualitative (which offers more detail about the whole picture) investigations were made. As Best and Kahn (1989: 89-90) suggest:

> *Quantitative research is based more directly on its original plans and its results are more readily analysed and interpreted. Qualitative research is more open and responsive to its subject…. It is possible for a single investigation to use both methods.*

According to Blaxter *et al.* (1996), qualitative and quantitative data taken separately provide only a partial description of the whole situation. Bell (1993) suggests that the open-ended questions be used to give the subjects an opportunity to express their personal views and support the choice they made in the close-ended ones. And Dubin and Olshtain (1996) suggest that these types of questions provide information to support the interpretation of other questions. Keeping in mind these points, some close-ended questions were used to obtain quantitative data, whereas, from the open-ended questions (also from suggestions and comments related to the close-ended ones) qualitative data were gathered. The close-ended questions were based on a *scale*, devised to discover 'strength of feeling of attitude' (Bell, 1993:139). According to Bell, the most straightforward attitude scale is probably the Likert, one which asks respondents to indicate strength of agreement or disagreement with a given statement or a series of statements on a four-point range of strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), agree (A) and strongly agree (SA).

The questionnaire was distributed among 50 MA in English students, University of Warwick, UK, of diverse nationalities and with teaching experience of different years' duration. It was believed that the data collected from the chosen subjects would project a concrete scenario from diverse backgrounds. It was manageable to accumulate data via email correspondence. The researcher herself studied at Warwick University. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: **Section A** was designed to receive feedback regarding literature in English lessons from a teacher's point of view; **Section B** contained questions on distant/open modes of learning to gather a general opinion on distance education. The questions were prepared in a way which the researcher believed would bring out adequate evidence regarding English teaching as an L2 through distance education around the world. 46 out of 50 questionnaires were returned.

4. Findings and Data Analysis

Section A of the questionnaire attempted to bring out the attitudes of the teachers towards using literature in improving learner's competency in English.

Part I: Personal data

Q. 1. How long have you been teaching English?

Number of years	1-5yrs.	6-10yrs.	11-15yrs.
	54.58%	31.81%	13.61%

Q. 2. The age group of your students.

Age group	5-15	16-25	25+
	31.81%	54.56%	13.63%

Q. 3. The levels of the students you teach.

Beginners	Elementary	Lower-intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced
12.18%	12.72%	10.18%	34.11%	30.81%

Q. 4. Nationality

The respondents were: Chinese, Chilean, Dominican, Egyptian, English, Greek, Japanese, Kazakh, Spanish, Taiwanese, Thai, Turkish.

The data on personal information obtained from Questions 1-4 show that the respondents have different experiences in teaching and deal with different groups of learners belonging to different age groups. They are of varied nationality.

Part II: Attitudes towards literature in the foreign language classroom and the methods used:

Q.1. Literary texts provide many possibilities for foreign language teaching and learning.

SD	D	A	SA
	18.18%	31.81%	50.01%

The data on Question 1 make it clear that majority of the respondents strongly agree that the use of literature in the language classroom is very relevant, providing many possibilities for teaching and learning.

Q.2. Literary texts provide many possibilities in the ways that:

a. they are valuable authentic materials.

SD	D	A	SA
		36.36%	63.64%

b. students get in touch with universal human values through literature.

SD	D	A	SA
	13.63%	40.9%	45.47%

c. they bring students into contact with real language.

SD	D	A	SA
	13.63%	36.37%	50%

d. they help increase the student's vocabulary.

SD	D	A	SA
		50%	50%

e. they provide examples of the language grammar structures in use.

SD	D	A	SA
	4.54%	54.54%	40.92%

f. they have motivating effect on the learner in language learning.

SD	D	A	SA
	9.09%	59.09%	31.82%

g. they can stimulate personal involvement of the student.

SD	D	A	SA
	22.72%	36.38%	40.9%

Q.2. had 7 components. The data elicited show that most of the respondents agree that literature is valuable authentic material. It places students in touch with universal human values, provides real language, and helps increase vocabulary and provides examples of the grammar structure of the language in use. The respondents also agreed that literature has a motivating effect on the learner and can stimulate her/his personal involvement.

Q.3. Literature texts can promote individual development and general education of the whole person by:

a. stimulating imagination.

SD	D	A	SA
	4.54%	43.9%	51.56%

b. encouraging students to work creatively.

SD	D	A	SA
	9.09%	40.9%	50.01%

c. providing materials for creating analytical and critical abilities.

SD	D	A	SA
	4.54%	50%	45.46%

d. developing confidence and independence in expressing student's own ideas, opinions, and emotions in English.

SD	D	A	SA
	18.18%	36.92%	44.9%

The data on Question 3 show that most of the respondents are inclined towards literature, agreeing that literature can promote individual development and general education of the whole person by: stimulating imagination, encouraging students to work creatively and develop confidence and independence in expressing their own ideas, opinions, and emotions in English, and providing materials for the creation of analytical and critical abilities.

Questions 4 and 5 invited the respondents to make **positive** and **negative** comments about using literary texts in English lessons. A summary of the points made by the respondents reflects that literature contributes to the student's language ability and speaking skills and can help the creation of the whole person. However, appropriate selection of texts seems a little problematic at times.

Section B of the questionnaire attempted to elicit a general view of the respondents towards distant/open learning system in connection with the use of literature in developing language skills. The data obtained on the questions are presented below:

Q.1. There being no barrier of age, space, time, open/distant learning mode is likely to cater to the needs of people from all walks of life.

SD	D	A	SA
		60.7%	39.3%

Q.2. The learners possibly will have access to varied texts that will help them achieve/learn the target language better.

SD	D	A	SA
		60%	40%

Q.3. Since the learning responsibility lies on the learner, s/he will be found highly motivated.

SD	D	A	SA
		60.7%	39.3%

Q.4. There being no regular classes, working people may feel greatly relieved and thus motivated having all the facilities offered by the open/distance education system.

SD	D	A	SA
		70%	30%

Q.5. The learner can choose his/her own convenient time to study, which is motivating for him/her.

SD	D	A	SA
		59.1%	40.9%

Q.6. Media based (Radio/TV etc.) lessons could be a source of interest and motivation.

SD	D	A	SA
		60.7%	39.3%

Q.7. Open/distant learning mode being comparatively convenient, would attract a large number of students.

SD	D	A	SA
		60.9%	39.1%

Q.8. Since age is no problem in open learning system, it can provide greater opportunities to people who want to come back to the formal educational stream.

SD	D	A	SA
		60%	40%

Q.9. Distance education may help provide job benefit to those who have no chance to go for another degree in a conventional institution. They can continue to study while in job.

SD	D	A	SA
		60.7%	39.3%

Q. 10. In distance education, the question of student alienation and loneliness arises - this can be minimised through the offer of tutorial classes, keeping regular contact with the tutor, media-based programmes, email, etc.

SD	D	A	SA
		60.7%	39.3%

Questions 1-10 were related to general features of ODL. The data obtained on the questions show a positive trend towards the system. The respondents agree that:

- there being no barrier of age, space or time, the open learning mode is likely to accommodate the needs of people from all walks of life.
- access to varied texts will help the learners to learn the target language better.
- learner autonomy will have a motivational impact on the learners.
- working people will feel motivated as they do not have to attend regular classes and can choose his/her own time to study.
- lessons based on the electronic media (Television, radio, etc.) could be a source of interest and motivation.
- the convenience of the open university will attract many students.
- the question of student alienation and loneliness could be minimised by offering tutorial classes, media-based programmes, e. mail correspondence, online video correspondence, online group chats, etc.

Therefore, the above data analysis strongly indicates the positive effect that literature offers in promoting language skills of the open university distant learners in the EFL context of Bangladesh.

5. Recommendations

In order to provide maximum benefit to the learners in an atmosphere where English is a foreign language, teachers should involve them in a variety of activities, e.g., pair work, role-play, question-answer, discussions, projects, etc., given in the textbook and also prepared by themselves. Student participation should be given priority over teacher input as the basic skills of language can best be practised through learner-centred activities. Tasks should be interesting and relevant to the learners' life and environment.

The language for tutorial management, such as instructions given, question-answer sessions by the teacher/students should be English. Using English for these purposes will increase the amount of practice in writing and speaking skills. The students should be given the impression that English, like the mother tongue, can be used for real life communication. The immersion in English might initially pose some problems of understanding but if the technique of all-English presentation and practice is continued, the learners will quite soon develop their comprehension capacity.

Learner autonomy being the key, the open university distant learners will develop a sense of responsibility towards learning and achievement rather than waiting to be spoon-fed by the teacher. This will enhance their sense of self-achievement, self respect, confidence, and independence. The practical argument for promoting learner autonomy is that in the long run a teacher will not always be available to assist, and students must face the world themselves with confidence. Finally, learners will certainly become more efficient in their language learning if they no longer needed to depend on their teacher for resources or for solving their problems (Cotterall, 1995).

6. Conclusion

Apart from getting a degree, the students of all levels starting from preliminary to the tertiary level should be encouraged to write and talk in English. A central strand of the material may usefully be literature-based. Inclusion of literary texts would help learners become independent in their thoughts if they are encouraged to work intensely and independently.

Learning language from literary pieces would open up a wide horizon for the learners who eventually would be able to shed off their fear of English and get over their psychological impediments towards learning the language. In conclusion, it is reiterated that literature can play an efficient, vital, and beneficial role in developing humanistic and linguistic skills that can be offered to all through the medium of ODL system. As the open universities, including the Bangladesh Open University are becoming more and more popular, it is believed that the benefits of using available literary texts can reach the masses at the grassroots level. Moreover, the comparatively affordable expenses offered by the Bangladesh Open University could be beneficial, have positive impact on learning, and ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

This small empirical research aimed at exploring whether it is possible to integrate literature in the development of language skills and, if the realisation is positive, how to make the benefits accessible to the privileged and non-privileged people who are eager to develop their communicative skills. The findings of the study open up avenues leading to further research interests, for example, learner autonomy and error correction, developing thinking and speaking skills in English, communication breakdown and recovery, and finally, foreign language acquisition and its usage in real-life situations in an EFL context.

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