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Teaching Literature in the Intermediate EFL Classrooms in Bangladesh: An Integrated Approach

Research Paper

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Abstract

The study explored the perception of integrating literature for the higher secondary students at Bangla medium colleges of Bangladesh. The researcher brought out both the views of the English teachers and the students about using literature in English language classes and the benefits, scope, and challenges of integrating literature in English language classes. The researcher selected four urban colleges and managed to interview four teachers from them. Two were from the same colleges where the researcher surveyed the students and two were not from the same colleges. An expert opinion was also taken about the subject who has a long teaching career in English language teaching and is directly connected with the curriculum of Bangladesh's higher secondary students. Teachers' interviews were tape-recorded, and students' opinions were collected through a survey questionnaire where there were eight questions mixed up with both open-ended and close questions. The researcher interviewed 50 students selected by their college authorities and teachers. Research shows that both the groups agreed that the integration of literature would positively affect the students. One area where teachers' opinions and students' opinions were poles apart was the intention of the implementation. Teachers' opinions were that the students do not want to study literary part in the language class because it does not come to the examination. Whereas students' opinions were that they would wholeheartedly welcome the literary elements in their English class where majority thinks they would love to learn extra things other than items which come in their examination.

Keywords: Literature, incorporation, language teaching, higher secondary level

1. Introduction

English is taught as a compulsory second language subject for twelve years in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. From 1996 Communicative Language Teaching method in the classroom was introduced, and communicative English textbooks entitled "English for Today" was also introduced. In the secondary and higher secondary levels, the national curriculum textbook board (NCTB) from 1995 recommended only one English book, "English for Today", which had numerous units of skill-based comprehension work based on short non-fiction passages and almost nothing on literature. Recently, this book has been supplemented with one grammar book. This transition took place with the purpose of helping students express themselves using the L2. Unfortunately, the objective did not successfully serve its purpose, which was evident from the students' proficiency entering universities in consecutive years. However, students who should have developed reasonable competence in

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English after more than a decade of learning English often fail to succeed in English language communicative skills. They have difficulties also in comprehending the nuances and acquiring some creativity and versatility. Alam (2005) contends that relegating literary texts from the Intermediate syllabus has brought a setback in students' ability to think critically, interpret and deconstruct texts, be aware of the importance of form and structure, gain insights into the importance of perspective and context, and get sensitized to reader responses.

As teachers of English as a Foreign Language, our main concern is to help learners acquire communicative competence. For this reason, the researcher tends to focus on teaching standard forms of linguistic expression. However, despite gaining linguistic accuracy, it is apparent that EFL speakers still have difficulties comprehending the nuances, creativity, and versatility that characterize even standard and transactional forms of English.

Communicative competence is more than acquiring mastery of structure and form. It also involves developing the ability to interpret discourse in all its social and cultural contexts. For this reason, the use of literature in the EFL classroom can provide a powerful educational tool in learners' linguistic development. Literature is also lovable and pleasurable. It has universal appeal, and it appeals to the hearts of the learners. Because of this strong appealing quality, literature finds an everlasting place in the memory of the learner. So, literature is a useful medium for language teaching. However, the key objectives of the present research were (i) to find out about students' and teachers' perceptions about the integration of English language and literature, and (ii) to find out the present state of literature in language classrooms in the college level of Bangladesh.

2. Review of Related Studies

Literature review analysis allows the researcher to gather the proved and defined facts about the research issue and problem (Creswell, 2003). The Oxford Wordpower Dictionary defines literature as "writing that is considered to be a work of art" ("Literature" 1998:370)

McRae (1999) distinguishes literature as two types. Literature with a small 'l 'means the selection for short, imaginative texts not typically considered to be literary. John Mc Rae has termed them as literature with a small 'l '(Mc Rae 1991; McCarthy and Carter 1994 in Carter and McRae 1996). Literature with small 'l 'includes advertisements, newspaper headlines, articles, jokes, puns, songs etc. (Carter and McRae, 1999:7). And literature with a capital L means- the classical texts e.g., Shakespeare, Dickens etc.

Language and literature are two sides of one coin (Lazar, 1993). Literature functions as a mirror that reflects the flourishing and incredible diversities (Lazar, 1993) of life, belief systems, values, behaviors (Joseph, et al., 2000), history, and culture presented in language (Bruner, 1996).

Researchers are very optimistic about the role of English literature in English language teaching and think that such integration can bring positive effects on improving and developing learner language. As Yuksel (2009) in her study showed the benefit of literature in language classroom through other linguists' opinions,

"Most of the studies that examined the relationship between literature and language teaching have articulated four benefits of literature: (i) literature helps developing linguistic knowledge both on usage and use level, (ii) literature may enhance students' motivation, (iii) literature has the potential to increase learners' understanding of the target culture, (iv) literature may help develop skills of cognitive and critical thinking (Lazar, 1993)." Therefore, more and more researchers advocate implementing Literature in English language classroom.

Duff and Maley (1990) state that "there has been a remarkable revival of interest in literature as one of the resources available for language learning" (1990:3).

In the introduction, Ronald Carter and John McRae said about all the essays that "none of the contributors to this volume sees the teaching of literature and the teaching of literature as language as disconnected pedagogic practices". They also mention what Malay (1989) says about using literature as a linguistic resource: "Literature is language in use and can therefore be exploited for language learning purpose."

As Fakrul Alam puts it that the inclusion of literature in language classroom will "develop a love for the language' (Alam, 2007:374). Brumfit and Carter (1986) stated that literature would be "interesting, enjoyable and stimulating" for the learner. He also quotes from Michael long's essay in Literature and Language Teaching, A Feeling for Language: The Multiple Values of Teaching Literature" where Long indicates that current textbooks of language learning worked in the monologic mode, whereas literary texts would be intrinsically more dialogic (Alam, 2007, p.376).

Some of the more advantages pointed out by Ur (2003) and Lazar (2002) are, Literature in language class is motivating, authentic materials for the students, available around us, helps student to understand another culture, develops students' interpretive skill, very enjoyable, expands students' language awareness, at the same time make the student aware of contextual dialogue of a foreign language and culture, encourages students to talk about their opinion and feelings and also encourages empathetic, critical and creative thinking. It is highly valued and has high status and contribute to world knowledge. It raises awareness of different human situations and conflicts.

Ur (2003) also pointed out some disadvantages with literature teaching language of the literature may be difficult for foreign language learners to read simplified versions can be used in the class, but these are a poor representation of the original. Many literary texts are long and time-consuming to teach. Culture might be alien for the learner. Using texts as a basis for language teaching may spoil learners' enjoyment and appreciation of them as literature. Students of science and technology may find literature irrelevant to their needs.

Tasneen (2003) pursues a research endeavor to find out the view of both teachers and learners about the use of literary text in language classroom in Bangkok. In her study, she found out that both the teachers (37%) and students (68%) believed that literature was an asset to be used as the language teaching resource. She also showed that 88% of the teachers thought that, for the students, the linguistic level of the text and sometimes the cultural unfamiliarity hindered their comprehension of the texts.

Rahman (2005) found that English literature students' exposure to English is negligible (28% and 31% never read English non-fiction and fiction books) in Bangladesh.

Su (2010) has done research to see students' learning outcomes and achievements and to probe into justification for literature teaching in the EFL context at a University of Science and Technology in Taiwan. After the finishing of the whole course designed with literature the data she found was as follows:

Before the course, students' lack of interest in or knowledge of Western literature was evident. A majority of the students (61.5%) demonstrated their predisposition to low motivation in learning Western literature, while only a minority (32.6%) indicated their interest in literature. The same majority of the students (61.5%) also reported their absence of knowledge of Western literature, while 38.5% had very little understanding of it.

After the course, students' attitudes distinctly altered. Two-thirds (65.2%) demonstrated their progress in developing interest in and knowledge about English, compared with the 61.5% absence of interest in English knowledge in their pre-attitude survey; they transformed themselves from being uninterested learners to interested ones. Approximately one-third (28%) maintained that they became more sensitive toward the esthetics of literature as well as to the happenings around them. It is also found that around 98% of the students supported the statements that the teaching content helps enhance the understanding of Western culture, history and politics and helps enhance the knowledge of English and motivate them for further reading in English literature.

3. Methodology

To build a suitable research method to gather data and information, a researcher should have a research philosophy. Using this concept would be easy for the researcher to connect the research problem with the research objectives and select a research method (Easterby-Smith et al., 2006). There are different types of qualitative and quantitative methods are used by the researcher to gather their data, such as case study analysis, interviews, observation, self-administered questionnaires, semi-

structured interviews, etc. These methods help collect primary and secondary data for the research (Crowther and Lancaster, 2009). The researcher prepared a survey questionnaire for the students with eight questions. A semi-structured interview session was for the teachers and experts' opinions to get qualitative data.

English language instructors from four different colleges of Dhaka participated in this study and their teaching experiences ranged from 6–20 years. All of them have Honours and MAs in English literature. One of them has BCS, and one has ELT as their added qualification. The researcher also took an expert opinion about the research topic who has MA and PhD from a well-reputed foreign university and 30 years of teaching background in ELT and is actively involved in the curriculum of English textbooks for higher secondary students of Bangladesh. Participant students in the questionnaire study were 50 in number, and all were studying in the intermediate level; their mean age was 17-19 years. The participant students' native language was Bengali. There were 28 male (56%) and 22 female (44%) participants. There were four teacher respondents and one expert.

As three out of five interviews were taken in English, there was no need to transcribe them, but the rest of the two interviews were mixed with both Bangla and English languages. So, the Bangla parts of these two interviews were translated in English, and the quotation was used in the results and findings section.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Teachers' views

Teachers were asked almost the same questions the students were asked in their survey questionnaire to see whether their opinions matched with each other or not. In the interview, the researcher tried to find four major themes. They are:

4.1.1. Definition of Literature

The definition of literature found from the teachers and expert opinions are as follow:

"Literature and language are not conflicting because literature is written through language. It is actually how a teacher interpret things in the classroom." (Expert's opinion)

She further added:

"Literature is anything that is written, and does not necessarily have to be creative literature, it can be even a prose piece form, anybody who has written general piece of writing; I will also consider these as literature." (Expert's definition)

"Literature is part of language; we can't separate literature from language." (Interview 3)

4.1.2. Incorporation is possible

The teachers' interviews all agreed that the inclusion of literature would be better for the students. Expert teacher's opinion about the possibility of inclusion of English literature from her own teaching experience was,

"I used an emotional poem …. It is about a little girl who was in a car crash…. actually, bleeding to death. In the last line, she breathes her last. It was so touching that I actually used this in a language class. I used this text to generate the interest of the learners. The important thing in language class is that you use interesting texts and ideas. We looked at the poems from the problems of the society. I found that some of the kids were crying. And what I did, I exploit this poem for further language use. I put them into groups, and they have actually to identify the problems. And most of them came up with true drug problems. I related it, and then I gave a role-play saying, 'you know your friend is a drug addict, but his parents do not know this. Now, what do you think about your responsibility about this?' We put them in some challenging situations, and they thought about it and related it to social issues. Many ideas came up. The bottom line is that my objective was to make them use the language. And they all were using English. So, it was a lovely class. And I put them together, can you make some posters on how to raise awareness about this. This is what I mean that you can use literature; It does not have to be Shakespeare."

One participant suggested by logical explanation that children learn language through rhymes and so to the grown-up students who can be able to do it. But there should be a well balance. "Literature is part of language; we can't separate literature from language" he continued. He even commented, "If you want to improve CLT, you must integrate literature." (Interview 3).

Another teacher of echoed the same view by telling,

"I tried several times to teach literature in the class and they enjoyed it. I was discussing the summary of the poem and the students enjoyed and it proves that if we could teach language through literature, the class will be successful." (Interview 4).

One teacher was quite emotional to say, "Some are interested to learn English language through literature. They go to my house, take books from the library, I appreciate them. …."

He continued, "They would be more interested, language class would be more successful. In our country there is no opportunity to communicate through English outside the class room."

Strongly supporting the literature as an integral part of language the same participant said,

"Teaching language through literature will go with the CLT approach. Students will certainly enjoy. Literature is a part of life. If I read a literary part, they can match things with their own life…literature is nothing but the human characters… So, literature must be included in our teaching method". (Interview 4)

Expert teacher also echoed the same about literature, "literature and language are not conflicting because literature is written through language. It is actually how a teacher interprets things in the classroom."

4.1.3. Benefits of using Literature in language Class

"It will be very attractive and informative … will give good result… only one part is not enough for learning a language, both part is needed." (Interview 1)

Another participant suggested that incorporating literature in language class gives bigger range for teaching language. He stated:

"When you use literature in language class, students listen more, and it helps to increase their comprehension level. It provides more opportunity for teachers… and it becomes more effective and enjoyable to the students… language is modified, purified and ornamented through literature. So, when language is taught through literature it gives a learner in depth knowledge about language. It is something deeper and more effective. Literature gives the learner an opportunity to explore the language. It makes language lively, interesting and add juice to the class". (Interview 3)

"Any literary part can be motivational for the students". (Interview 4)

4.1.4. Anticipated Challenges

'How could you read literature, if you don't know the language?' Expert teacher's opinion about the inclusion of literature in the language class and she further added it would open up scope for the students' route learning from a cheap guide book.

"Inadequate vocabulary stock might result from their disinterest in literature… there is no scope for literature in language class because of the present structure of the syllabus. There are a few literary parts, but we avoid them because these are not important for the exam and we don't teach them in the class. In last ten years, no questions came from any literary extract". (Interview 2)

He said that those who came from Bangla medium schools would not have the ability to understand English literature well. In the Bangladeshi context it is challenging to implement.

All four participants have claimed that the present curriculum, syllabus and exam-taking system are faulty.

Students' attitude toward learning literature is another problem area according to three participants. They claimed that, student is exam-oriented. "They want to pass and get more marks. They don't want to learn extra."

Another teacher claimed that, "the students enjoy literature, but our exam system does not permit us to teach that because, in a test they don't write about literature, they only write about language." (Interview 3)

Expert opinion about our testing system, "We all are very resistant to change. I think that the biggest crime that we have is the test. The test is so geared to route learning."
This very participant also opines that:

If a teacher does not have a good command of literature, it is very tough to integrate literature in language class. A teacher must be well versed, he should know what he is teaching about. In a communication class, like how to describe the things, one can refer to Wordsworth's daffodils. (Interview 3)

"If I try to give them any part of literature they don't get interested. As most of these do not come in the exam, they get frustrated. The main obstacle is that the level of the students is not same. We cannot make the class effective. Most of the students only try to get high marks not to learn additional knowledge." (Interview 4)

Two teachers among four mentioned that authority of the school doesn't let them teach material outside the syllabus. One teacher raised his voice, saying the use of literature in the language class is the demand of time. (Interview 3)

4.2. Students' view

Total eight questions were asked in written format to the students group. Out of 8 questions, 6 had two parts comprising a closed one and an open one. When the researcher went to the details of observation, very interesting findings were revealed.

At the beginning of the survey question, the researcher wanted to know their literary knowledge and also, at the same time would be able to grasp their reading habit. So, the first question the students were asked was whether they had read any other English books other than the textbook at home; 41 students (82%) gave a negative answer. The remaining nine students (18%) had exposure to books other than textbook. The reasons behind the negative answers about the first question were variable. 10 out of 41 mentioned the financial reason where they were incapable of buying English books for further reading. Another 12 of 41 categorically expressed their lacking of understanding the English language correctly to enjoy English literature books other than the textbook. The rest 19 felt no urge or importance of reading another book not necessary for the examination. The affirmative answer group (n=9) was also not entirely homogeneous. 3 out of 9 could mention some names of the books they read. Among the writers, Shakespeare, Sir Arthur Conan Doyale were depicted. One of them described "Chowdhury and Hossain's guidebook for intermediate examination as a literature piece. Others even could not remember specifically the names of the books they read in near past. While asked them whether they would enjoy reading English story books of any type, the percentage for the affirmative answer was totally different from the previous one. 92% of the students showed positive interest in enjoying English story book. While asking the type of story books in English they liked most, they preferred more of adventure, comics, and action type books. Only 8% of the students were reluctant to say yes. One of them just said "I don't understand English well. My back ground of English is not well; first I have to improve my back ground". While trying to find out the minimum level of their knowledge about English literature, a question was asked to tell some names of the famous writers of English they can remember. 40% of the students (n=20) could write down some names like Shakespeare, Sir Arthur Conan Doyale, Guntar Grus, Salman Rushdi, Orundhuti Roy etc. Rest of the students (60%) kept it blank.

Though in previous questions, the feelings and concepts of the students towards English as a whole were not that much encouraging and rather self-conflicting, the answer to the question of whether they enjoy English Language classes, 92% of the students said "yes". And which part of the language class they enjoy the most, half of the affirmative group was interested in grammar part. The reason behind their affinity towards grammar was almost anonymous in that grammar part would provide success in examination as it is calculative and easy to memorize and easier tools to gain required marks in exam. The rest half of the positive groups are well interested in literature, essays, composition, and poems. Because these are elaborative, informative, quite understandable, and enjoyable and need not to be memorized in accurate fashion. The opposing group (8%) just described English class as boring, non-impressive, and unable to draw any attention and interest as they cannot

understand properly the classes because of the poor background and of course the way of teaching was also a major concern for them to be interested in English language learning.

The questions towards the focus group of 50 students were projected to understand their in-depth choice and judgment in different ways to end the study's purpose. So, the researcher sought their opinion about the incorporation of literature in language class. Total 43 students (86%) unanimously accepted this point and expressed their logical explanation behind their acceptance. The reasons they have showed were very much informative and simple, quotable, and reasonable, and so to be analyzed in depth. Like, one of these affirmative groups said, "With the help of literature, we will learn and know English better. It will be good for our future".

"If we are taught using literature, everybody will be interested in English and learn this language"-one told. One student termed it as an exciting tool to give a different taste in the learning process. Being a Bangla medium student, one expressed his concern in this way, "one should study not only Bangla literature but also English literature. This will open up exercising English literature among the students". Some said it is positive because it will motivate them to read and enjoy English literature at home in their leisure time. To be noted, one remark of a student was, "Yes, of course, literature is the most important part of each language, and that is where we can find some interest. The Grammar part is needed for us to study English in schools. So, why shouldn't we learn literature in the intermediate level". If the affirmative group is summarized who are in favor of learning English language through literature, 9 of 43 students said it an enjoyable one, four remarked it as both enjoyable and justifiable, 6 added it as an essential means to understand different culture, 15 mentioned it as an adjuvant to improve the vocabulary and to broaden the horizon of their literature knowledge. Three of them termed it a practical one to communicate well with foreigners while going abroad. Three of them thought it better for future life. The rest three felt it as a morally benefited one, as literature is the hub of moral values. The seven students who were skeptical about incorporating literature in language were much more concerned about grammar and according to them, it will rather hamper grammar learning. One student mentioned that as he was a science student, literature would not help him at the tertiary level, so literature in the language class is unnecessary (Ur, 1999).

The researcher has broadened fact-finding questions by asking them whether they have ever come across any literature piece in their one decade of English language classes which have made them enjoy the class. Only 16 students said "yes". The rest, 34 students (68%), were in a negative mood. Among these 16 students, most of them experienced a good time in English class while literature was taught along with their day-to-day class schedule. Two of these students recollected a storybook, "Oxford reading circle" in their school taught side by side in English classes. They enjoyed it a lot, and it gave them a variation and enriched their vocabulary. Two students mentioned that when literature was taught, the class became less monotonous. One student elaborately remarked, "Yes, I enjoyed a class where we asked different questions to our friends about the literature taught and talked with each other, and it had helped us to broaden our English vocabulary."

The researcher categorically asked whether they like to confine themselves in learning the items necessary for their examination. Out of 50 students, 98% of students said "no". They wanted to know more than what is essential for exam purposes only. The reasons they have focused on were also fascinating. One of them said, "We need more knowledge, we want to face the new world". Some of them explained that they should be taught more stories, poems and other staffs to broaden their wisdom. One student expressed his interest more in literature to be read in classes, which would be more enjoyable and useful for their future. Most of the students preferred lessons more than the exam syllabus to achieve more competence in language.

When the researcher asked them whether any part of the language textbook motivated them most to know about English language, 26% answered negatively. Among them one wrote, "To tell the truth, there were no such topics in our textbook. All those which were included, were to teach English as a mode of communication. They were not included to arouse our feelings about the English language."

The remaining 74% (37 students) students found something interesting to motivate them for English. Among 37 students, 17 found the English Grammar part as the most motivating one for them. The rest 20 students emphasized the "How to improve English" part as encouraging one to learn English language more.

5. Discussion

From the analysis of the study, it has been observed that most of the students do not have any exposure to English literature book other than the textbook. Only a few percentages (18%) are interested and can enjoy reading additional English literature books. This finding is not unusual or unexpected; instead, it showed the students' present reality in Bangla medium schools. The study found that most of the students did not know the great field of literature, as Rahman (2005) found in his research almost the same scenario. But they (92%) were eager to be familiar with literature. At the same time, a big ratio (92%) of the total population likes their language class. So, the love for literature and language are equally driven in the study population and logically, it reflects if literature could be incorporated with language, there will be no conflict between these two, many linguists also spoke the same (Students' love for language also represents students' liking for the age-old system of Grammar Translation Method. Among the four teachers the researcher interviewed, one teacher commented that without grammar knowledge, literature teaching is impossible, and students' lack of vocabulary stock would be another hindrance. Some of the students also gave the same reason. The current findings concerning this issue are also echoed in multiple essays edited by Carter and McRae (1999) and Alam (2007). Students' answers about the inclusion of literature in language class reflected the same as other researchers (Ur, 2003, Collie and Slater, 1999; Alam, 2007) said about its advantages. Their enthusiasm (86%) was noticeable. Both teachers and students agreed that literature in the language class would be motivational (Lazar, 1993; Su, 2010), and helpful in developing their linguistic knowledge (Lazar, 1994; Su 2010). Few participants commented on the inclusion of the literature in language class to learn more about foreign culture and education, which would help them broaden their opportunities abroad (Lazar, 1993).

6. Conclusion

After the discussion of data, it seems that an integrated approach in language teaching using literature is possible in our curriculum. However, what is lacking in most of our English classes is the integration between language and literature. So, we need the abolition of Literature teaching but the right choice of the texts and a change in the methodology adopted. The teaching of literature can also be justified because the cultural backgrounds of the literary work would broaden students' views on other cultures by stirring up reflection, inducing feeling, and stimulating action. The teaching of literature helps learners in gaining not only communicative but also creative competence. It also enhances and encourages students' reading practice which is a dire necessity in our present curriculum. It is also evident that students and teachers are eager to explore the world of literature through language. It seems from findings that the syllabus and our exam system are barriers to the implementation of literature in the language class of the Bengali medium students of our country.

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