

Failure of Exploiting Literature in English for Today for Developing Language Skills at the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels of Education in Bangladesh: Exploring Reasons

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Abstract

Literature is a productive and viable medium in the language classroom. The *English for Today* textbooks at the secondary and higher secondary levels of education in Bangladesh have significant number of literary works for being used for achieving linguistic skills. But unfortunately, things in the real ELT classroom are utterly frustrating. Both teachers and students try to avoid the literary contents included in the textbooks. Thus, both of them are being deprived of the pleasure and possibility of exploiting literature for acquiring language skills. Again, most of the researches carried out in this field in our context have avoided this issue and have gone through the possibility of using literature in ELT class, not considering the practicality. This study has shed light on the practical ELT field and tried to find out the causes of avoiding the literary contents included in the textbooks and suggest the language policy planners of Bangladesh in this respect.

Keywords: *English for Today*, literary contents, language skills, teachers, learners etc.

Introduction

In the English language classroom *English for Today* is the much used coursebook prescribed for the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education in Bangladesh. This text is continuously modified to suit the current realities in respect of both national and global concerns in the arena of the English language. The government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh has appointed an efficient body of ELT experts for the development of curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. No doubt, the experts have tried their best to make *English for Today* suited to and useful for the English language learners in Bangladesh considering their (learners') needs, level of proficiency, socio-cultural contexts etc.

The *English for Today* textbooks at the secondary and higher secondary levels of education include some literary contents for developing various language skills. Literature is a feasible medium of developing language skills. It can help both the teachers and the learners enhance their linguistic competence. It can be utilized to attain all the linguistic skills since it provides the learners with the scope of authentic materials- a significant requirement of the much talked about and widely used the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Sadly, the present classroom scenario reveals that both teachers and students do not take the literary contents in *English for Today* seriously. They rather try to avoid them. The present study will deal with these issues and discuss the reasons behind avoiding the literature part.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the following criteria-

- a. To discuss the possibilities of literary works for being used in language classroom.
- b. To analyze the *English for Today* texts prescribed for the secondary and higher secondary levels of educational in Bangladesh in respect of the inclusion of literary works in them.
- c. To discuss the present classroom scenario in Bangladesh regarding exploiting literature for developing language skills and find out why the learners want to avoid the literary contents included in the *English for Today* texts.
- d. To look into the reasons behind the teachers' intention of skipping the literary pieces incorporated into the *English for Today* texts.
- e. To propose ideas for policymaking and further research in English Language Teaching in Bangladesh.

Potentials of Literary Works for Being Used in Language Classroom

Literature is one of the best tools to acquire linguistic competence. There is an interconnection between life and literature, literature and language and language and life. All these three components are important and inseparable in any society. Among them, life provides the base, then language evolves and using the language literary works are created. (Sakthivel and Kavidha 2010; p. 229).

The use of literature in language teaching has a long lineage. In the 'classical humanist', standard it was

a fundamental part of foreign language teaching. In that time an understanding of foreign cultures was given more priority than achieving linguistic competence. Literature occupied the central role in TESL/ TEFL (Teaching English as Second Language/ Teaching English as Foreign Language) in the early part of the twentieth century. (Maley 2001; p. 180).

However, in recent times, there has been a ‘gradual rehabilitation’ of using literature and its value in the ELT (English Language Teaching) field (ibid).

According to Huda (2012), though generally language teaching materials do not include literature, it is not unusual using some extracts or pieces of literature in them. Many experts believe that literary texts in language teaching materials bring new flavor for the learners. If English language learning is purely language-based and divorced from any scope of aesthetic pleasure, it happens to be boring, prosaic and monotonous. Some pieces of literature in the materials may make the materials enjoyable for the students. Citing Choudhury (2001) Huda also maintains that without the help of literature language teaching process is “doomed to be unattractive and therefore, ineffective”. (P. 44).

In any learning process the learners’ active participation is essential. In language learning the active participation of the learners is also the prerequisite for successful learning. If a piece of literature is included in language learning materials, the learners feel urged to actively participate in the learning process. According to Sakthivel and Kavidha (2010) when a reader goes through a piece of literature, he or she “actively participates in the story and he questions, wonders, gets angry, cries during the process of reading”. All these feelings demonstrate the readers’ complete involvement in the learning procedure. (P. 229).

Literary pieces in materials provide the learners with authentic touch. Gower *et al* (1995) argue that authentic materials are more interesting and motivating for most learners. By being exposed to authentic materials learners get the chance of acquiring or picking up language. Authentic materials help the learners be more independent learners. (P. 83). Literature is a viable medium of authentic materials; hence, it has immense scope for being used in language learning process. According to Collie and Slater (1987), literature offers a varied body of written materials dealing with “fundamental human issues” that are stable rather than transient. Literature is valuable authentic material and though its meaning does not remain constant, it can transcend both time and culture. (P. 03). Literature is ‘authentic’ material which means that literature is actually not produced for the specific purpose of teaching a language.

Literature is a highly motivating material. Literature exposes the learners to complex themes and fresh uses of language. For example, a good novel or story may involve the learners in the suspension of the plot. A play may engage the students in adult dilemmas. A poem may extract a powerful emotional response from the learners. A carefully chosen literary material makes the learners feel that the classroom is relevant and meaningful. (Lazar 1993; p. 15). In this way, literature motivates the learners and involves them in the learning process. In this respect, Maley (2001) states-

In the language model, the [literary] text may be used as an example of certain types of pattern and structure. A more important aim may be to help students find independent ways into a text in a systematic manner. The personal growth model stresses the personal enjoyment and emotional gain students can procure by engaging with such texts. (P. 182).

Poetry has its very distinct qualities in the language learning arena. Poetry recognizes syntax, forms its own vocabulary, freely mixes registers and makes its own punctuation. Poetry is a powerful medium in the language classroom, having “fictional characteristics” and carrying its message by paying considerable attention to language which is rich and insightful. It also “draws creatively on a full range of archaisms and dialects, and generates vivid new metaphors, along with patterning sounds and ordering rhythms”. (Ainy 2011; 24). Brian Tomlinson (1986) opines that-

The main objective of using poetry in language lessons is not to teach the learners to write. Or even appreciate poetry. But to find a means of involving the learners in using their language skills in an active and creative way, and thus to contribute to the development of their communicative competence. (P. 33).

A poem can set off topics of interest for discussion, accelerate the students’ acquisition of language through activities by sharing their feelings and opinions. Once the learners build up the habit of understanding a text, they begin to enrich themselves with the language and expressions of that text. It sets them thinking. In this way they become occupied in the learning process as a “whole person”, and capture the “opportunity to express their personal opinions, reaction and feelings towards their understanding”. The text becomes a resource for generating discussion, controversy and critical thinking in the classroom, rather than leading towards a stereotyped definitive interpretation of the text. (P. 25). Citing Bellows (1961) Maley (2001) indicates the possibility utilizing poetry for language skills-

To leave poetry out of a language course...is to renounce an extremely effective and labor-saving method of absorbing useful language. It is also to abandon opportunities to humanize and warm what may also be a very dry and chilly traffic in words and information. It is to

renounce the hope of delivering us from the pedestrian writing- if not platitudes- of the textbook writer. It is to neglect an important and powerful aid in establishing in the pupils' mind a favourable mental set. It is to stop short of what might be most rewarding in the pupil's experience of the language. (P. 182).

A literary piece used in the coursebook can make the learners culturally enriched. Collie and Slater (1987) opine that to deepen their understanding many language learners cannot visit the country where the language is spoken. Literary works may be very helpful for the learners in this respect. In a literary text characters are drawn from various spheres of the given culture. The reader (the language learner) can discover the characters' thoughts, feelings, customs ideologies etc. he can know what they believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors. This imagined world provides the learners with the feelings for the codes and concerns that structure a real society. (P. 04).

Conventional texts used in ELT, which are usually only information based, come from no context. In activities with these texts, the learners are only supposed to take the role of a passive learner. Literary texts encourage the students to identify with or react against the characters that attract their attention. The learners become more active, involved and engaged while learning the language through literature.

Drama as a genre can well be utilized in the language classroom. Like poetry drama offers huge potentiality for being used in developing language skills. According to El-Nady (2000) as a pedagogical process, drama can provide the means for connecting students' emotions and cognition. With drama as a teaching technique in the classroom, students' own concerns, interests, and needs are recognized. Drama allows students to take risks with language and experience the connection between thought and action. Drama provides active communication among students and between students and instructors. (P. 41). Drama fosters and sustains learners' motivation as it is fun and entertaining. It can provide a rich experience of language for the learners. It makes the language classroom learner-centered. (Zafeiriadou 2009; p. 06).

However, not all pieces of literature are suitable for being used in language classroom. There are some major criteria for selecting a literary text for this purpose. The ELT experts put forward some criteria for selecting a literary text in language classroom. For example, Lazar (1993) opines that the students' cultural background, their linguistic proficiency, literary background, availability of texts, length of text, the text's exploiting ability and fitting with the syllabus must be considered before selecting a literary work in language classroom (p. 53- 55).

Collie and Slater (1987) believe that the criteria for suitability of literature depend on the particular group of students, their needs, interests and language level. The selected work should be able to stimulate the learners' personal involvement by arousing their interest and provoking positive reactions from them. It should be meaningful and enjoyable to have a lasting and beneficial effect upon the learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge. Thus, it is important to choose a literary text that is "relevant to life experiences, emotions, or dreams" of the language learner. Language difficulty is also to be considered. (P. 06).

Lima (2010) has shown some more criteria developed by Prowse (2002). Students' choice must be given priority. Finding a text with the right language level is crucial. It should neither be too difficult that students cannot infer the meaning of particular lexical items, nor too easy that there is no challenge no vocabulary gain. Texts should engage readers cognitively and affectively. Students would probably feel much more motivated if they can engage with the teacher in a real and meaningful discussion about the texts they are reading. Paintings and photographs can be used as both warm-up and follow-up activities. They can provide memorable material with strong visual appeal and impact. (P. 111-112).

The English for Today Textbooks in Bangladesh

In the preface to the trial edition of *English for Today* published in 2012 the chairman of the NCTB (National Curriculum & Textbook Board) Professor Md. Mostafa Kamaluddin states: "The *English for Today* textbooks have been developed to help students attain competency in all four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing." He also notes that the text gives priority to practicing language skills through various "meaningful and enjoyable activities." Of course, the book and its contents justify his claims. The contents used in the *English for Today* texts for the students of the secondary and the higher secondary levels are drawn from various angles- the experiences, knowledge, interests and motivations in respects of the learners of Bangladesh. The varieties of the contents include- national cultures, history, science, games and sports, climate change, media, communication, world heritage, pastimes, resources, foods, health, nutrition, and some literary pieces, especially short English poems.

English for Today consists of various types of contents including some literary works most of which are poems of the original English poets. Two significant points here are that the number of literary pieces in this coursebook is very few, and these literary works are hardly touched by both the teachers and the students in the language classroom for developing the language skills. Consequently, the students, by avoiding even that very few literary works, deprive themselves and/or are deprived of interesting authentic materials of learning

language skills. The present proposed study will deal with the issue and try to investigate the basic grounds of avoiding literary works included in *English for Today* by both the teachers and students at the secondary level of education in Bangladesh.

Innovation in materials design is a continuous process. But exploiting literature for developing language skills is not new in the arena of language pedagogy in Bangladesh. Prior to the CLT approach used now in Bangladesh, as well as all over the world, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) was a traditional method in teaching and learning the English language. The Grammar-Translation Method dominated the ELT field for a long time. Now its age of dominance is no more due to many backdrops of it. The GTM could not provide the learners with sufficient levels of proficiency in communicative competence. In the Grammar-Translation Method literature was explicitly and essentially used to acquire various linguistic skills- speaking, listening, writing and reading. But the reality in the classroom practice was far from the successful acquiring of these skills. The strategies for using literature for developing linguistic competence were faulty.

Now after the introduction of the CLT approach the whole body of ELT materials has been changed. The strategies for utilizing literary pieces in the language classroom have also been changed. Unlike in the GTM literature in the CLT approach is used as merely one of the contents in materials. Besides, the number of the literary works in the English textbooks has drastically been reduced. However, the effects are the same to the prior state of the GTM. Like the GTM's failure of utilizing literature in developing all the linguistic skills, in Bangladesh at the secondary and the higher secondary levels education English textbooks (*English for Today*) that are organized centering on the CLT approach have also failed to utilize the prescribed literary contents in acquiring linguistic skills. It may be because of the over-generalizing and sometimes romantic requirements of the CLT approach.

In the *English for Today* textbooks at the secondary and the higher secondary levels education in Bangladesh, there are some literary pieces in each class. Most of the literary works included are poems of the poets like Gwendolyn Brooks' "Andre", Christina Rossetti's "Boats Sail on the Rivers", John Carpenter's "Contemplation", Rudyard Kipling's "The Children's Song", Alexander Pope's "Ode on Solitude", Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening", Ralph Hodgson's "Time, You Old Gypsy Man", Charles Kingsley's "The Sands of Dee", Joann Snow Duncanson's "Two Mothers Remembered", E. Farjeon's "Books", Robert Louis Stevenson's "From a Railway Carriage", William Henry Davies' "Leisure", "Whose Child Is This?" by an anonymous poet, William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud", Robert Herrick's "To Daffodils" etc. There are simple short stories like Arnold Lobel's "The Garden", Isabella Harwood' "The Customs Officer's Story", Maria Edgeworth's "The Purple Jar" and Oscar Wild's story. There is also extract from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

Reasons of Avoiding Literary Contents included in *English for Today*

The case of the learners

Due to the disparity between the contents of *English for Today* and the testing systems language learners do not feel necessary to go through the literary contents. Testing system plays a vital role to shape learners' motivation. Learners like in our country make their study-plan on the basis of the testing system and its syllabus. So, when they see that some items included in their textbooks can be avoided because they are not necessary for their exams, they do it instantly. Literary works are not essential for their exam, that's why they do not think it essential for developing language skills.

Bangladeshi learners psychological set up is very important to discuss why they try to avoid literary contents in their textbooks. Our learners are shy and less confident of themselves. Our socio-cultural realities have made them so. "If we analyze the social context where banking education is prevalent, we will observe that outside the classroom learners are accustomed to believing themselves inferior to their elders. They acknowledge the authority of their elders, and this belief is injected in their unconscious mind. This belief of inferiority makes them willingly accept the authority of their teacher in the classroom." (Alam 2013: p. 30). Using literature for language classroom requires learners' physical performances. Our learners, as they are shy and depend on their authoritative teachers, are mostly reluctant to physically perform in the language classroom. Their inferiority complex hinders them from being free from their shyness.

The case of the teachers

The case of the testing system is relevant here also. Due to the lack of correspondence between the contents of *English for Today* and the testing systems language teachers do not feel necessary to go through the literary works. They sometimes think it waste of time to deal with literature to attain linguistic skills in the classroom.

Lack of exact pedagogical knowledge and training of the language teachers is significantly responsible for the failure of exploiting literature in the classroom. Most of the secondary and higher secondary teachers in Bangladesh are not well trained in English language teaching. Using literature for language teaching requires trained teachers. Being untrained our teachers do not know how to exploit literature to develop the linguistic

skills of their learners. They only know that literary contents are for mere providing pleasure in the classroom, so they can be avoided.

Teachers' authoritative figure in the classroom is also responsible in this case. A conservative environment prevails in the classroom, and so, learners cannot express themselves, if some of them wish to do so, due to their anxiety of their teachers' influence. Literature class normally demands friendly environment. In a language class where the teacher stands as demi-god before the learners, it is not possible to create informal and friendly environment. That's why the project of utilizing literature for language teaching is doomed to be failed. This is the case in the context of Bangladesh.

Some Suggestions

To change the present classroom scenario of using literature in language classroom some measures can be taken. They are:

- a. There must be a coherent relationship between the testing system and the *English for Today* textbooks so that both teachers and learners feel essential to go through the literary contents properly.
- b. Teachers should be trained thoroughly. They will have to have sufficient knowledge about the recent pedagogical innovation, especially, CLT.
- c. Teachers' authoritative position must be altered. Classroom situation should be in favour of the learners so that they can participate informally in performance and discussion.

Conclusion

The innovation of the *English for Today* textbooks in primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education is no doubt a revolutionary phenomenon in the history of ELT in Bangladesh. This textbook has come out as a result of frequent hard labor and intellectual attempts of several ELT experts in Bangladesh. Yet, it is not free from flaws and romantic concepts inherent especially in its design and proposed teaching-learning techniques. Using literature in language classroom is obviously an aristocratic concept in respect of the Bangladeshi contexts. It requires some basic proficiencies and capabilities from the parts of both the teachers and the learners. These pre-conditions are the inherent features of the CLT approach. Due to the non-fulfillment of these requirements the literary contents in the *English for Today* textbooks at the secondary education in Bangladesh remain untouched by both the teachers and the learners in the language classroom

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