

## Literary Texts: Classroom Interaction

Dr Kirti Kapur\*

### Abstract

*English language textbooks comprise literary pieces representing different forms of writing. These texts are informative and provide a rich reading experience as well as promote and strengthen language skills and abilities. All literary pieces belong to the realm of prose, except for poems. Prose is closer to our day-to-day experience of language as compared to poetry. Poetry represents an unconventional use of language. Therefore, it requires a different approach to teaching. A poem is often highly condensed and is more implicit than explicit. The rhythm and the flow of a poem enable us to understand and appreciate the poem without much effort. Therefore reading the poem aloud in the class is of utmost importance. Poetry is an experience more than just the use of language. Learners should be encouraged to come up with their own interpretation of poems. Literary prose pieces also make for interesting reading. Stories have a way with children. Their language is vivid and often learners identify with certain characters or relate with the situation presented. The purpose of a literary text is to make the reader appreciate it and not just to impart 'information'. Giving a chance to learners to make inferences about characters and happenings and draw conclusions will enable them to appreciate the text.*

### INTRODUCTION

'There are several functions of language apart from unfolding the world, language has many fictional elements. Poetry, prose and drama are potent sources not only of refining our literary sensibility but also of enriching our aesthetic life, enhancing our synaesthetic abilities and enormously improving our linguistic abilities.' English Language textbooks comprise literary pieces representing different forms of writing such as poems, stories, folktales, songs,

plays, auto-biographical writings, diary entries, interviews, essays, etc. Some pieces are useful for information and some for knowledge while others are for aesthetic appeal, appreciation and enjoyment. These texts are informative and also provide a rich reading experience; promote and strengthen language skills and abilities. They also help in understanding and developing values and attitudes, and sensitise the learners to issues such as environment, gender equality and peace.

---

\*Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, NCERT, New Delhi.

All literary pieces belong to the realm of prose, except for poems. Prose is closer to our day-to-day experience of language as compared to poetry. Stories, novels, plays are some of the examples of prose. There is prose in scientific books, newspaper reports and magazines as well. We come across more prose than poetry in the classroom as well as outside it. As a result, learners also feel more comfortable in dealing with prose than poetry.

Literary texts are also a mirror of the society and culture they belong to. In most classrooms in India, it has been observed that transaction of poetry and prose is similar, where the teacher reads the lessons and explains the meaning in Hindi or regional language and gives meanings of 'new words' without contextualising them. At the end of the text, students are asked questions which are basically comprehension questions. Students are provided with a summary of the text whether it is a poem or a prose piece and there is no scope for an individual's participation or interpretation of the texts.

Understanding and appreciating literature is a two-way process wherein the meaning is constructed in the transaction between the reader and the text. There is a paradigm shift from behaviourism to constructivism which has found a fresh perspective after NCF-2005, therefore teaching literature needs to be approached in a manner where the learner's voice finds a legitimate place in the classroom

processes. Teachers need to recognise the learners' potential and their ability to actively engage with the text.

**Poetry** represents an unconventional use of language. Therefore, it requires a different approach to teaching. A poem can communicate without being 'fully understood'. A poem can be understood at various levels therefore it is more implicit than explicit. The rhythm and the flow of a poem enable us to understand and appreciate the poem without much effort.

A poem, especially a short one, has an immediate impact on the listener and makes a direct appeal to her/ his emotions and feelings. It is perhaps in this sense that it communicates without being 'fully understood'. A poem has layers of meaning which unfold while reading the poem with proper stress, rhythm and intonation. Therefore, reading the poem aloud in the class is of utmost importance. The paraphrase while 'explaining' the meaning of the poem robs the reader of the pleasure, and the chance to come out with various interpretations for a word or thought. This in turn will help in contextualising vocabulary.

In fact, we 'do not' teach a poem except in a very basic sense. We experience it and share our experience with the learners. Poetry is an experience more than just the use of language. Learners should be encouraged to come up with their own interpretation of poems. For example, let

us look at the poem 'The Squirrel' by Mildred Bowers Armstrong from *Honeycomb*, the textbook in English for Class VII (NCERT).

*He wore a question mark for tail,  
An overcoat of grey,  
He sat up straight to eat a nut  
He liked to tease and play,  
And if we ran around his tree,  
He went the other way.*

It is imperative that the teacher should read aloud in the class and also encourage them to read on their own or in pairs. Before discussing the poem in detail, it is important to have some warm up/pre-reading tasks/activities/questions to draw the attention of the learners towards the theme of the poem.

The very first two lines of the poem— He wore a question mark for tail/ An overcoat of grey— can be used to generate interest among the learners. Some questions that can be posed are:

- What are these lines about— a squirrel, a human being, a tree or a nut?
- What does 'the tail' of the squirrel look like?
- Where do we use a question mark? (This can lead to a discussion on the importance of punctuation marks.)

The above is a sample warm-up activity. Thereafter, a discussion on theme and content will enable the learners to relate the poet's experience to their own experience of running after

a squirrel or watching birds/animals near their homes.

While reading the text, the illustration given in the textbook can be used for better comprehension. Learners can be asked if the tail reminds them of anything besides a question mark— perhaps a brush or the numeral 2? Learners can also be encouraged to extrapolate by asking if the squirrel too looks like as if it is asking a question and what that question could be?

Further, richness of language including music of words can be perceived better through listening/reading aloud than through analysing words/phrases and grammatical items. To make the classroom interaction richer, poetic devices such as, simile, metaphor, alliteration, personification, rhyme scheme can be discussed in the class and activities based on these items can be given, which will enhance the creativity of the learners.

The objective is not 'to teach' vocabulary but to ensure maximum comprehension of the text, which is integral to total appreciation. Some global questions can be asked in the beginning, and some comprehension questions can be given at the end of the poem to connect it to the immediate environment of the learners. Questions on theme and content, structure and style, images and impressions can also be asked to encourage literary appreciation among students.

A final reading aloud, preferably by the learner/learners, is always very

useful. Post reading, writing tasks based on an open-ended discussion will help the learners go beyond the textbook and relate the text to their own experience. For example, through the Poem 'The Ant and the Cricket' (Class VIII textbook, *Honeydew*) the importance of saving enough today to be ready for difficult times in the future is given. However, this message is not given in a statement. Rather, learners are taken through a story which narrates what happened to the unwise cricket at the end.

*...Says the ant to the cricket, "I'm  
your servant and friend,  
But we ants never borrow; we ants  
never lend.  
But tell me, dear cricket did you lay  
nothing by  
When the weather was warm?"*  
*Quoth the cricket, "Not I!"*  
*My heart was so light  
That I sang day and night,  
For all nature looked gay."*  
*Thus ending, he hastily lifted the  
wicket,  
And out of the door turned the poor  
little cricket.  
Folks call this a fable.  
I'll warrant it true:  
Some crickets have four legs, and  
some have two.*

Although the rhythm of the poem gives it a light-hearted song-like quality, it has a lesson for human beings of the importance of saving for a rainy day.

To make the experience of reading poetry an interesting one, we can concentrate on the theme and find ways to make learners notice how the theme is developed. One of the ways is by focusing learners' attention on the words used in the poem as well as accompanying illustrations. The students can also be asked to convert the poem into a short story. This will help them enhance their creative skills.

Literary **prose** pieces make for interesting reading. Stories have a way with children. Their language is vivid and often learners identify with certain characters or relate with the situation presented. A story helps the listener to imagine the scene and the characters as well. Stories mirror life and in doing so present the real language of communication as a whole. They represent samples of authentic language used in writing as well as in speech as reflected in dialogues and conversation. Also, stories, fables deal with various aspects of life— events and situations that enable us to understand fellow-beings as characters performing a variety of actions in a given set of social circumstances. Every story is an imaginative reflection of life around us and enables us to come closer to the real world.

The best way to teach appreciation is to first learn to understand, appreciate, analyse and reflect. For example the story *Bholi* by K. A. Abbas (Class X Supplementary Reader *Footprints without Feet*) is about educating the girl child.

*...Ramlal had seven children – three sons and four daughters, and the youngest of them was Bholi. It was a prosperous farmer’s household and there was plenty to eat and drink. All the children except Bholi were healthy and strong. The sons had been sent to the city to study in schools and later in colleges. Of the daughters, Radha, the eldest, had already been married. The second daughter Mangla’s marriage had also been settled, and when that was done, Ramlal would think of the third, Champa...*

While teaching the text important social issues can be highlighted through questions such as whether girls should be made aware of their rights and assert them? Should girls and boys have the same rights, duties and privileges? What are some of the ways in which society treats them differently? When we speak of ‘human rights’, do we differentiate between girls’ rights and boys’ rights? This helps the learners represent and reflect upon contemporary social realities and diverse thoughts.

Understanding is very essential for appreciation. After all, the purpose of a literary text is to make the reader appreciate it and not just to impart ‘information’. Giving a chance to learners to make inferences about characters and happenings and draw conclusions will enable them to appreciate the text. Interpretation and appreciation skills of the learners should be encouraged. Encouraging

learners to discuss their opinions and views makes the class interactive. The interactive method is always preferred because it paves the way for discussion on a number of inferences, interpretations and opens different doors to explore a topic or a theme by enabling learners to direct their thinking to areas such as:

- characters (who), the traits (qualities) inferred from what they speak/how they act;
- message/theme;
- setting: Where, when;
- story/plot (what); and
- the narrative/style: First or third person narrative; examples of humour, etc.

The teacher prepares them to think critically, make connections; make comparisons; draw conclusions and finally pave the way for creative thinking.

To develop the creativity of learners, they can be encouraged to convert stories/ parts of stories into dialogues; attempt a speech assuming the role of the character; express orally or by writing, the best part of the story according to them; the best character according to them; if the story or character reminds them of some event or some person you may ask them to give a different ending to the story.

Children are by nature imaginative and creative, and take delight in acting out roles or pretending to be someone else. Role-play and other drama

activities consequently lead to the active involvement of children with the text. The use of their bodies, voices, and emotions to make the language their own comprises the Total Physical Response of the learners and this ensures their complete involvement in language learning.

Children can also be encouraged to get information about their own traditional literary cultures and regions. Further discussions can be initiated in the class in different roles, characters, lifestyles, problems, attitudes and interests, etc. Since drama involves both individual and group work, the methodology should mainly be the workshop mode, where each child gets a chance to participate in all that goes on in a drama class. Children should be exposed to various independent tasks, which they take up individually as well as in groups. The teacher's role, here, is that of a facilitator and motivator. Teachers should build on the exercises given in the textbooks

and design additional tasks/activities in keeping with learners' interests, needs, surroundings and cognitive level. Literary texts also can be supplemented with films, CDs, clips, etc in order to lend it scope across the curriculum.

In addition to literary appreciation, literary texts are used for teaching of reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar, skills of communication, thinking and decision making. Literature provides students with a wide range of language varieties used in different situations thereby enriching classroom interactions.

Respecting learner autonomy, teachers must give learners freedom of expression. It will help learners enhance their confidence and they will get an opportunity to speak in the target language. The teachers need to modify their approach to teaching literature according to the genre and need of the learners.

#### REFERENCES

- KUMAR, K. 2004. *What is Worth Teaching?* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Orient Longman, New Delhi.
- NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING, *National Curriculum Framework, 2005*, Publication Department, New Delhi.
- NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING, *National Focus Group on Teaching of English - Position Paper*, New Delhi.
- ROSENBLATT, L. M. 1938. *Literature as Exploration*. D Appleton-Century Company, New York.