

TEACHING LANGUAGE FROM LITERATURE BACKGROUND: BRINGING THE BEST OF TWO WORLDS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English Foundation courses at the undergraduate level by teachers from literature background is a common scenario in the private universities of Bangladesh. Though there have been debates regarding the appropriateness and eligibility of literature teachers teaching language courses, one must recognize the fact that the basic problem is that of high demand and low supply of good language teachers. This paper addresses some of these much-debated issues, and also explores the possibilities of a more integrated teaching approach, which not only allows a literature-to-language shift but also makes the best use of the skills of teachers from a literature background, and investigates whether this exchange is salubrious enough to complement the purpose of language teaching.¹ Because of the limited scope of this paper, we will limit our discussion within the boundaries of private universities and will base it on our own teaching experience within a similar background.

I. INTRODUCTION

English is now the most dominant language of the world and there is a renewed emphasis given on the teaching and learning of English in most countries of the world, and Bangladesh is no exception. In order to address this global demand of English, most private universities offer compulsory English Foundation Programs that are designed to give intensive training in English language. It is a common knowledge that when the private universities started there was a dearth of English language teachers, and teachers with literature background obviously had to be employed to teach English Foundation courses. There have always been debates regarding the appropriateness and eligibility of literature teachers teaching language courses, but one has to recognize the fact that the basic problem lies less in the question of eligibility of teachers, but in the high demand and low supply of good language teachers, especially when there has been a sudden rise in the number of private

universities in Bangladesh. This paper addresses some of these much-debated issues, and also explores the possibilities of a more integrated teaching approach, which not only allows a literature-to-language shift but also makes the best use of the skills of teachers from a literature background, and investigates whether this exchange is salubrious enough to complement the purpose of language teaching.

Therefore, the questions that this paper aims to address are:

Can literature be an effective vehicle for language teaching? If yes, then how can teachers with a literature background be made effective agents for language instruction?

Section 1 will discuss the background/situation of English language teaching at the school level, especially in the mainstream Bangla-medium education system. It will also investigate the

1. Dr. M. Shahidullah, *Need for English in Bangladesh: now and then*: <http://www.weeklyholiday.net/020802/mis.html>

positive aspects of using literature for the purpose of language teaching at the university level. Section 2 will narrow the argument down by focusing on the role that literature teachers can play in teaching English foundation courses, and also will try to justify their existence in language teaching programs.

Section 1: Language and literature: can there be a happy marriage?

The majority of English teachers at the university level have a Bangla Medium educational background at the school level. English was (and still is) taught as a compulsory subject, and it can be said with confidence that in all schools (urban, semi-rural and rural) English was taught in a grammar-translation method. The reasons behind using grammar-translation method are many: it has been traditionally handed down to us from the British System (with the original purpose of making some clerks for the British Raj); it has enjoyed a reputation for being effective as the 'evidence' of learning English has always been being able to 'translate' from Bengali to English. Other practical reasons may include that in a non-English speaking environment, grammar-translation method is often the only practical teaching method, and also because there has been a dearth of teacher-training programs because of resource constraints. Therefore, in general, almost all Bangla-medium students like us not only studied all subjects in Bangla but also learnt English in what can be called in a 'semi-Bangla' environment. Under the syllabus of Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSC) and Higher School Certificate Examination (HSC), English was taught in 2 parts: Literature and language. It is rather difficult to claim that we, the students learnt good English in those 12 years, and the evidence of this can be seen in our struggle and difficulties faced in the initial phase of university life.

It is true that only a handful of students will learn English for the sake of their love for the language, and for the majority of students, English is no longer a language, it is a 'skill' that is vital for surviving in this competitive job market. With time and the demand of a fast-changing world, the basic objectives of those studying English have proved to be: (a) to acquire higher education in different fields; (b) to get good jobs. To achieve these objectives students are required to learn basic

language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing to use language in an effective way.

Though the demand for learning 'English Skills' has increased, teaching methods, environment and resources haven't changed much in all these years. Even though English is now learnt primarily for 'job market' purpose, one cannot deny the fact that English, or any language for that matter, can be learnt if we fail to inculcate a love or desire in students to learn that language.

Keeping the demand of time in mind, the English curriculum for SSC and HSC has been revised and the teaching method has been updated to communicative method where there is no literature, and great emphasis is put on functional English. Literature has been greatly discarded as it is considered to be a 'luxury' for students of developing countries like us. But unfortunately, many teachers like us observe that our students who were taught in the communicative method (with little or no literature component in it), do not achieve a satisfactory standard of English. If this is the reality, then shouldn't we take a moment to ponder on what might have gone wrong with all our well-intentioned revised curricula and new methods, and to look into the possibility of combining literature and language for a more effective way of teaching 'English', both at school and university level? For the purpose of this paper, we will now concentrate on English Foundation Courses at the university level.

For the English foundation courses, universities follow different curricula, text books and teaching methods, but what is common in all these courses is the special emphasis given on correcting grammar, spoken English, and presentation skills. These skills are considered to be useful for further studies and in the job market. There is hardly any literature component in the foundation course curriculum apart from occasional use of short stories and small articles. The anti-literature case is usually based on the hypothesis that literature is of no use in language learning.

There is no denying the fact that to some extent literary texts alone are not enough to learn the language that can be used in daily life to carry out linguistic functions. But, we will argue that it is not fair to reject literature outright from the syllabus, which in turn, will help to make a case for using

English teachers with literature background for the maximum benefit.

We recognize that it is very easy to get into the trap of an either/or situation, but can we not instead think of a productive coexistence of literature and language where literature might help to understand Language as well as work as a foundation to inculcate in students an appreciation for English language? Literature can be used to teach language in such a manner that the learning process becomes interesting for the student. Of course, caution should be taken in selecting literary text-materials according to students' linguistic levels as well as the purpose of the course.

Therefore, we are not advocating that language should be completely taught by literary text, rather we feel that there is a need to strike a balance between language and literature in our Foundation courses for the following reasons:

- a) **Motivation:** Most of our students come to the foundation classes with low or no motivation to learn the language. This lack of interest and motivation is understandable to a great extent because their experience (except a few) with English learning has not so far been very exciting, or inspiring. English is the need of the time, and need is not always the best motivating factor. It is also true that, most of our students have almost no habit or love for reading (be it Bangla or English), and with the aggression and domination of Hindi satellite channels, the second language of urban youth is now 'Hindi'. Therefore, with urban youth constituting the majority of the students in private universities, it is a challenge, if not an impossibility, to bring motivation in English classes. Is it at all possible to light a spark of love or desire to learn English in two semesters?

No doubt, it is a tough task, but is to a great extent achievable. One way could be the presence of literature on the syllabus that may be helpful for English teachers to keep the students interested. In a country like Bangladesh where students do not have enough English speaking and listening opportunities, reading can prove to be the most important skill since it

gives students maximum exposure to the target language. In that way, literature can be very useful because as it has the potential to act as an enticing source of reading.

- b) **Encourage the growth of independent long-term learners:** In Bangladesh teachers are believed to be the 'grain house' of knowledge, and thus, there is a tendency on the part of the teachers (also expected of them) to spoon-feed student by underestimating their ability to learn on their own. This tendency and practice often leads to a situation where learners turn into passive recipients and expect their teachers to deliver everything for them. Such an attitude can be harmful for teaching any subject, but definitely fatal for language teaching.

A productive blend of literature and language can bring life to the language learning process, and hopefully train the students to become independent long-term learners of the language. Over-emphasis on grammar and correctness of it assessed through dry detached exercises can be intimidating for most students, and moreover, a failure to score in exams/assessments can be demoralizing. The same goal can be achieved through the use of literature where a scope for appreciating student's understanding or interpretation of a theme/ concept can work as a reinforcement for learning grammar so that he/she can express views in a more comprehensive manner. Once students find confidence in their own abilities, they automatically turn into life-long learners.

- c) **Literature is authentic material:** Literature is a language in operation. In the case of English language, there are many standardized versions of it that are accepted throughout the world. English literature cuts across continents and cultures in contemporary times. The wide range of Modern English literature from different corners of the world can be used as authentic material in language classes.

The use of standard, authentic material is

an important issue for our students as a majority of them have a misconception of what is 'standard English'. What they watch on films, read in magazines and especially practice in 'chat rooms' is often considered as Standard English that can also be used for academic and official purposes. Many teachers like us struggle to convince our students to learn to differentiate between 'colloquial' and 'Standard' English. Good, interesting but contemporary authentic materials from literature can be a solution for this problem.

- d) **Literature encourages interaction:** Literary texts are often rich in multiple layers of meanings, and can be effectively mined for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions. This can be a more effective way of teaching listening and speaking skills than depending solely on audiotaped and heavily accented English conversations.

In fact, the integration of literature into the ESL reading classroom is not a new concept but rather a resurrected one, as more and more teachers and researchers in the field of ESL instruction have seen the value of literature in interdisciplinary studies: "*The study of literature must be a social experience [in which] students [are] given numerous opportunities to share their written and spoken responses with the teacher and with each other*"¹

Section 2: Literature Teachers teaching English: asset or a burden?

As has been mentioned before, teachers with a literature background somehow have found their way into language teaching but their experience, skills and expertise are either belittled or not recognized as qualitatively diverse. According to a survey of people's view of teaching, 34% agreed on the point that *teaching is an art not a science*.² If that is so, then it is not very difficult to see how the background in literature, which makes people aesthetically sensitive, cannot but be an aid to the

whole scheme of language teaching at the foundation level.

As university teachers we encounter students both from Bangla and English medium, though the ratio of Bangla medium students far exceeds that of English medium. With a few exceptions, it is common to find a gap between what our students are supposed to know (in terms of English) after 12 years of schooling and what they have actually acquired.³ So, at the university level, when teachers try to train these linguistically unprepared students in English, it proves to be too huge a leap for the learners to take in within a semester or two. It requires a lot of facilitation on the teachers' part to minimize the gap. When students come to university, they stand at the portal of higher education, zealous and eager to be initiated to the new life. These young people are on the look out for something new and interesting to learn. The language teaching process at this level should take this fact into consideration. So, to make students encounter a teaching method, which is only skill based and technically sound may become reminiscent of their school years, hence boring and dry for them. As a result, teaching English language at the face of students' resistance only makes the whole endeavor more painful and taxing, if not impossible.

The question is how a language teacher with a literature background fits into this scenario.

For this let us first see what these teachers are trained in, namely literature. It is difficult to supply a watertight definition of the term "literature" but what can be asserted is that *literature is not the name of a simple, straightforward phenomenon, but an umbrella term, which covers a wide range of activities. However, when it becomes a subject of study, it may be seen as an activity involving and using language.* The claim "*the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation*"⁴ is based on the realization that literature is an example of language in use, and is a context for language use. Thus, studying the language of literary texts as language in operation is seen as enhancing the learner's appreciation of

1. Scalone, *Distant Thunder: An Integrated Skills Approach to Learning Language through Literature*, University of Michigan Press, 1999

2. <http://www.eltforum.com/interactivities2.asp>

3. Sujit K. Dutta, 2001, *English Language And Literature In Bangladesh: Towards A Methodology* in Fakrul Alam, Niaz Zaman, Tahmina Ahmed Ed. *Revisioning English in Bangladesh*, UPL

4. Widdowson: 1971

aspects of the different systems of language organization.

Besides, it would be totally wrong to equate the study of literature with that of a large volume of canonical texts, in a language unintelligible to a layman. It is not study for its own sake. Rather it's an interface of many studies, namely, sociology, history, philosophy, and of course language. Moreover, at least in Bangladesh, **a student of literature shares the same curriculum with that of linguistics for three years. And it's only in the final year that they specialize in their respective field.**

Therefore, a person who has spent a considerable period of time studying literature must be equipped with the required knowledge of the intricacies of language and also has an inherent interpretative ability. And when h/she goes to teach language, it is not with a blank slate, rather with *confidence in working with a language using a variety of integrated activities, with language-based hypotheses and in classes where investigative, student-centred learning is the norm.*

But why do we see literature background for teachers of language as a problem? Is it because we think literature classes require creativity, while English class requires skills?

Or

Is it because Literature is still seen as a body of knowledge that ought to be learnt for its own sake?

The process of creativity and the entire body of literature are traditionally given an honoured and elevated status that has sustained its elitist nature. A consistent assertion that literature illuminates the mind with no specific aim in terms of objectives only serves to make literature an unpopular subject to be incorporated with language teaching. It is our mistake when we think that while English language teaching is a structured business, literature teaching is separate, elitist, and sometimes comprising of purposeless poetry recitation! It is time to re-examine our attitudes towards these approaches and try to assert the value of literature teaching from several aspects, primarily, literature as an agent for language development and improvement, and for cultural enhancement. It is perhaps time for us to take a fresh look at literature as an appropriate vehicle for language learning and development

since the focus is now on authentic language used in authentic situations.

Now lets have a look at the debate regarding the legitimacy of these teachers from the literature camp, believed to be trespassing into the language world.

“It is believed by many linguists that in most of the second language situations if the English teacher is primarily a teacher of literature, then s/he may not prove to be an efficient teacher of language unless s/he has been trained.”⁵ Training, practice and experience are of course indispensable, but they are so for people from any discipline, be it linguistics or literature. That is why in spite of brilliant academic results some people just fail to be successful teachers. And if training in methodology can improve the performance of a teacher from a linguistic background, it is difficult to understand why the same cannot happen to a teacher from a literature background. As far as the contents of fundamental level English courses are concerned, there is hardly any scope of a person from a linguistic background having an upper hand over a literature person, because what is taught at this level are the basics of English, over which people from both streams are supposed to have command.

One very important allegation against teachers with a literature background is that the language class they take, very often becomes reminiscent of a traditional literature class, where the teacher generally assumes the role of an interpreter rather than facilitator. Though this allegation can occasionally be right, the general assumption that a literature class is a dramatic monologue by a teacher delivered for a group of passive students is equally wrong. One must understand that the topic a literature class deals with are generally not explicit but suggestive, that ensures students' participation, which makes it a **doing course** as opposed to a **knowing course**⁶.

Teachers teaching English language from a

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5. Begum Shahnaz Sinha , 2001, *English phobia in our schools and colleges*, in Fakrul Alam, Niaz Zaman, Tahmina Ahmed Ed. , Revisioning English in Bangladesh, UPL
 6. Sujit K. Dutta, 2001, *English Language And Literature In Bangladesh: Towards A Methodology* in Fakrul Alam, Niaz Zaman, Tahmina Ahmed Ed. Revisioning English in Bangladesh, UPL

literature background are often blamed to be ‘de-motivated’ themselves. This is a serious allegation and demands an in-depth understanding of the situation. In private universities, in general, two English courses of 6 credit hours are compulsory for all students irrespective of their major area of interest. These courses are designed to optimize their ability to grasp the four basic skills of English with special emphasis on writing for academic purposes. As has been mentioned earlier, students for whom English is just a prerequisite for their desired degree, very naturally have no interest to take these courses. Private universities usually need to admit as many students as possible for their financial survival, and as a result there may be a large number of students who are at times discouragingly low in quality. These students are left in the hands of the teachers of English (of both backgrounds). There are very few private universities that offer majors in English Literature, and due to the dearth of students interested in literature, the English Departments of private universities have to rely on the foundation courses for their survival. English Departments are repeatedly entrusted with this complex enterprise, which soon becomes exhaustive for these teachers. The immediate result is that they feel coerced, drained out, and de-motivated towards the whole idea of teaching language.

All these factors may work as barriers in ensuring the complete participatory teaching of English Language, but these are not insurmountable problems. These can be taken care of by eliminating the factors that create the circumstances as stated above. Teacher’s training, capacity building, incentives and a broader perspective can improve the present situation.

II. CONCLUSION

The bias against teachers with a different background does not necessarily stem from any specific drawback in teachers rather; we can trace its origin in normal human nature prone to be skeptical about anything beyond the prescribed norm. English is an essential skill that all our students must be equipped with, and there can be new ways of meeting this ever-increasing demand for skilled English teachers. Teachers with English literature background are people equipped with such tools that could actually be an asset when it comes to English language teaching. English is a subject that is culturally feared by almost every

student in Bangladesh. A teacher with sensitivity, better understanding of human psychology, society, with compassion along with the command over the intricacies of language can easily help eliminate fears and communication barriers, which can otherwise be lethal for the language learning atmosphere. A combination of teachers with literature and language background can actually be a strength for an English Department that is given the responsibility of equipping students with English language skills at the beginning of their university life. Teachers with literature background teamed with teachers with pure language background are resources that add to the value of any language program.

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