DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CLASSROOMS THORUGH LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract. *With ten years of learning English as a second language at schools it has not become a reality for the university undergraduates in Sri Lanka that they become proficient in English. The exam-oriented studies of the present Sri Lankan educational system which was derived from the British colonial rulers encourages and also develops a textbook culture which would promote communication in English. In order to maintain international contacts, to use it in education, science, medicine, engineering, technology and business, and to lead a modern life, there was a need for Sri Lankans to study English. Therefore, experts of English language teaching have to find possible methods to teach it successfully in order to make the students perform their activities well in English. There was a time when it was felt that teaching of any language cannot be divorced from its literature. It is assumed that literature would arouse interest among the adult learners of English. The present study is to find out the possibilities of using literary texts to promote effective language learning at university level focusing on developing writing skills. The paper analyses how pieces taken from English literature and literature in English could be used in classrooms teaching English for Specific Purposes in order to motivate adult learners to become proficient in General English in the first phase. The study was conducted using questionnaires, interviews with the students, lecturers and administrators. Five workshop sessions were conducted at different intervals during the three-month study. The researcher was able to record the students' involvement in the learning process from their written performance. The paper analyses and proves qualitatively how the students improved in their proficiency through teaching of literature.*

Key words: *culturally-friendly texts, non-native English Literature, syntactical and linguistic features, Inter-disciplinary course*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankans learnt English by virtue of British colonial rule. But when it got its independence the governments changed the medium of instruction from English to Tamil. After the mother-tongue medium was introduced the teaching of English has become an

uphill task in the universities too, except for the English medium courses. Therefore, experts in teaching English language have to find possible methods to teach the language successfully at schools in order to make the students perform their activities well in English. At the tertiary level, the English language has become an indispensable subject particularly to those who are interested in Science, Medicine and Engineering. English language teaching in the universities concentrated mostly on reading skills in the seventies as reading comprehension was essential for doing reference in English. Though there have been divergent opinions in categorizing skills in the order of preference, the need for competence in the second language is highly expected from students. The question raised here is how far all these targets could be achieved. To look at the situation in the University of Peradeniya, particularly at the Faculty of Engineering, students are taught English under the title 'English for Science and Technology'. To acquire competence to receive and transmit information in English, merely teaching of lexical and syntactic features often used in science related articles is not helpful (Gunawardena in Gunasekera1994). It is assumed that the undergraduates have to be taught language using literary texts in order to improve all four skills. In this present study, developing writing skill is looked at.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Broadly, there are two categories of people who need English language in the modern society. One category of people can be described in terms of 'English for Occupational Purposes' or 'English for Careers'. A few sets of sentence patterns and a certain amount of vocabulary, would be enough for them to use the language in their careers. Their need is now being described in terms of 'English for Specific Purposes'. Their positions require only routine language usages. However, at their higher level of writing research papers, they have to be proficient in achieving a higher standard in their comprehension capacity and writing skill.

The other category of people who need English language is the academics and students at the tertiary institutions, especially at universities. Their needs are now being described in terms of 'English for Academic Purposes'. This category of people uses English to write assignments, reports, and various other writing pieces, all of different nature in English. In other words, they have to read a lot in English and also have to use the language orally at seminars, conferences, in presentations, and face to face communications like interviews, discussion, etc. Therefore, their requirements are manifold and they cannot be satisfied merely by learning a few number of sentences, structures and a certain amount of vocabulary in English. The cultural aspects and the delicate nuances of the English language could only be acquired through learning literature in the English language.

It is true that courses like ESP or the subject-divisions English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Science and Technology (EST) have to concentrate on the specific vocabulary and other necessary aspects of language teaching. But before coming to that stage there is a need to motivate the students to learn the language and expose them to syntactical and linguistic features of the language. In the first phase, general proficiency in English should be achieved and it is termed 'General Purposes English'. At this stage, literary texts would be very much helpful to a learner to gain familiarity with many features of the written language - the formation and function of sentences, the variety of

possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas - which broaden and enrich their own writing skill. The present study presumes that the use of literary texts would pave way for achieving this proficiency.

Literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material that is important in the sense that it says something about human issues. Literature is full of authentic materials in the sense that it is full of real situations described and lively characters portrayed (Hill 1886). According to Mckay (1982), literature does indeed have a place in the ESL curriculum as it could provide a key to motivating students to read in English. The advantages of using literary materials in language teaching were recommended by language specialists in the early sixties. Jacobson (1960) argues that literature and language are inseparable and any single piece or special property of language is related to its literary aspects. Learners should be exposed to various functions of the language, like city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertisements, and newspaper or magazine articles. Literature will help in this process by complementing such materials (Collie and Slater 1987).

In the 1970's prominence was given to literature to facilitate discourse. This resulted in designing the curriculum accommodating more of literary components that would be given much room for the function of facilitating discourse (Sharma 1978). In the eighties, Long (1980) writes that the goals of language teaching had widened in the seventies and the educationists were aware that language learning need not be confined to learning the structure of the language and the use of the language but the learners should develop a feeling for the language. Literature exposes students to complex themes, and to fresh, unexpected used of language. Literature is very much rich in multiple levels of meaning (Lazar 1993). Mckay (1982) questions whether literature should be part of a curriculum for English as a second language (ESL) and answers positively. McKay brings in Widdowson's (1978:3) argument of two levels of linguistic knowledge, usage and use. Bhatti (1991) places the views against literature in language teaching. But he concedes that literature makes the most creative use of language and even the complex structures stimulate the learner's mind and engage him in problem solving adventures.

Brumfit (1986) states that literary texts are readily available sources of reading. Littlewood (1986) presents the relationship between literature and language and emphasizes its need in a language teaching course. The role of literature in second language teaching was weakened with the cry for ESP and arguments were put by exponents of ESP that literature has no place in ELT. Master (1998) also reasons out the importance of getting a solid grounding in English for General Purposes (EGP) before becoming involved with ESP. He supports the other argument that ESP students need to be proficient in general English to meet the demands of real language use under stresses of emergency, memory lapse, fatigue, difficult working conditions. In some cases, having experienced limitations of ESP, curriculum designers for engineering ESP in Singapore and in Sudan have introduced EGP in the form of literary fiction (p.721). Therefore, one can agree that the need for general proficiency in English becomes essential to any learner who wants to use it efficiently in the academic field before he or she turns towards ESP.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is to find out the possibility of using literary texts to promote effective language learning at university level. The general objectives of the study can be outlined as follows;
1. To identify the problems in reading skill at university level.
2. To find out whether use of literary pieces in English language teaching would pave way for promoting language proficiency in writing skill.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The research was done making references to relevant books and journals along with interviews conducted with my academics, students and researchers. Questionnaires were also used to collect necessary information and data in relation to English language teaching at secondary and tertiary level. The researcher undertook the present student study of using literary pieces in language teaching at the University of Jaffna in order to see the possibility of motivating students to learn the language successfully. An experimental study was carried out with a sample population at the Faculty of Arts in the University of Jaffna for fifteen weeks. One was treated as experimental group for administering the study and the other was a control group. Teaching of literary materials was done in the experimental group along with pre- and post-test. These tests were conducted in order to assess the improvement of students in the experimental group in contrast to the control group after following the fifteen-week programme. Classroom observations were made and recorded in order to analyze the progress. In-course tests were also given to both groups to see the differences in improvements achieved by them. When selecting genres of literature only short stories were selected for their length and the vocabulary which is comparatively and reasonably simple (Hill 1986). Five short stories written by English and non–English writers were selected.

The following table shows the grading they got in the Level 1 examination of the First-in Arts Examination.

Table 1 Grades obtained at the Level 1 Examination

Group	A	B	C	F	Total
Control group	04	06	09	01	20
Experimental group	02	05	12	03	22

In Level 2 students are given more practice in reading. Also, they are given more practice in the writing skill as well. A pre-test was held before the experimental programme commenced in order to identify the problem areas of the students. This consisted of a reading comprehension passage with two sets of exercises. One was a ten questions true or false exercise, and the other 'Wh' question five in number. A post-test was conducted to assess students' improvement in the writing skill. The test was once again designed with another piece of comprehension passage and a writing exercise. This time the passage was a little longer but of the same standard. Three tasks were designed, such as completion of missing words five in number, 'true' or 'false' five in number, and 'Wh' questions. The writing exercise was designed to provide more chances to write at length. At the end of the

test another questionnaire on literary materials was administered to the experimental group as it was taught with literary materials.

5. ADMINISTRATION OF THE STUDY

The following results were found when an assessment of student's interest in learning English was made.

Table 2 Student's interest in learning English

Group	No. of students	Percentage	Total
Control group	18	90%	20
Experimental group	19	85%	22

5.1. Identified Problems

The duration of the pre-test was for one hour. The following problems were identified:
a) Lack of reading ability to understand the passage
b) Weak writing ability
c) Poor knowledge of grammar.

Students had comprehension problems at word level. That is, they had vocabulary problems at sentence level, too. They had the tendency to attempt to understand the passage by understanding the meaning of every word. They were unable to work out the meaning of sentences and derive the gist of the paragraphs. The other problem they had were complex sentences and idiomatic phrases in the passage. When students were asked to write about themselves they were unable to write sentences in full. They made errors like omission of articles, inappropriate use of prepositions and wrong use of words. In some cases, word order was not observed and failed to maintain subject-verb agreement in forming sentences. Inadequate knowledge of grammar caused problems of comprehension which resulted in their inability to write complete sentences grammatically. Even in the writing test, they failed to write about themselves correctly. The following table categorizes different problems on the basis of their performance.

Table 3 Number of students with problems

Group	Pronunciation	Grammar	Writing	Reading
Control G.	25	18	18	18
Experimental G.	14	20	21	21

As the present study concentrates on the writing skill, their problems were almost the same. The age range of students from both sexes in the groups was 22-24. Almost 90% of them were from rural background where facilities such as help from others to learn English, availability of books and dictionaries were not found. The rest 10% were from the urban middle class where they get elders like parents or relatives or retired government servants who could help them in learning the language. However, this 10% too, was not proficient enough in writing. They were able to write only memorized letters and essays. Out of twenty students in the control group eighteen students were very weak in writing skill.

6. CONCLUSION

The pre-test conducted at the beginning of the experimental programme helped to identify the problems faced by students in their language learning. Students' improvement was noticed in their performance at the post test.

Table 4 Students' performance in the post test

Percent. of performance	70/100%	50-69%	25-49%	Less than 25%
Control group	10%	30%	50%	10%
Experimental group	9.5%	81%	9.5%	00%

The improvement of the experimental group in the post test proves that the use of literary texts had helped students to overcome difficulties and problems they had before, whereas the control group did not show much improvement as far as the problems were concerned. Much interest was shown by the students during the sessions. On the contrary, the control group faced problems of understanding the subject-oriented passages with new vocabulary and difficult sentence structures. In answering questions on reading comprehension, they wrote only short answers and did not show much enthusiasm in writing complete answers. An improvement was achieved in the reading skill of the experimental group.

Table 5 Students' performance in the tests

Group	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5	Test 6
Control group	43%	39%	41%	40%	42%	45%
Experimental group	45%	52%	55%	60%	63%	65%

The development in the writing skill of both the group is very interesting. There was a big change in the performance of the experimental group. Students were highly motivated and their urge to write more to the question on writing given in the test was higher than in the pre-test (see the Table below). On the other hand, there was not much improvement in the performance of the control group and they did not show interest in learning.

Table 6 Performance in the tests

Group	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5	Test 6
Control Group	40%	39%	40%	42%	45%	47%
Experiment. G	40%	42%	50%	52%	56%	60%

The writing tasks given in the pre-test revealed many a language error by the students. The error analysis leads to suggestions and recommendations to solve students' language problems, and points out how use of literature would help language learning. There are limitations like short span of time, not accommodating other groups from medicine or engineering, non-inclusion of video and audio recording for data collection due to financial constraints and the non-availability of assessment of other two skills, namely listening and speaking due to practical problems.

The present study concentrated on developing students' writing skill at the university level. It analyzed how literary scripts in English could be used effectively to promote language learning. It analyzed how pieces taken from English literature/literature in English could be used in classrooms teaching of English for Specific Purposes in order to motivate adult learners. Therefore, literary pieces could be incorporated in the syllabus of the ESP courses at university level.

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