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Education
Dawn

Using literature

IN Pakistan most of the schools and colleges are following literature-based textbooks at different levels. Students are required to study almost all genres of literature including short stories, poems, essays, plays and novels. This extra emphasis on literature has invited a lot of criticism from a group of practicing teachers and linguists.

They consider literature as a luxury which our students in Pakistan can ill afford since they are not equipped with the basic language skills needed to use language as tool of communication. Before discussing the legitimacy of this objection, it seems appropriate to have a look at the basic objectives of those studying English in Pakistan. The learners, beyond the school level, study English mainly for two reasons: (a) to acquire higher education in different fields; (b) to get good jobs.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives the students are required to learn basic language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing to use the language in an effective way. Do existing textbooks enable students to achieve these purposes? For this we can look at the English syllabus for intermediate students for the Punjab Board of Education. The students are required to study the following four books: Book 1 (short stories and essays), Book 2 (short stories and essays), Book 3 (poems and plays) and a novel by the name of *Goodbye Mr Chips* by James Hilton)

At one glance, one can have a fair idea that all the four books contain literary texts. Most of the course designers are those who come from a literature background and this is shown in the books that they have prescribed for the course. In Pakistan, like in many other developing countries, the emphasis is on 'classics' or a 'high calibre' literature which actually leads to disillusionment about the subject. I quote here a few lines taken from *Youth and age* by Coleridge, also included in the intermediate English syllabus. Look

at the underlined words and decide whether they can be of any use for students in real life.

*Ere I was old? Ah woful
ere/Which tells me, youth's no
longer here! O youth! For years
so many and sweet! Tis known,
that thou and I were one! 'Tl
think it but a fond conceit!
It cannot be that thou art gone!
Thy vesper bell hath not yet tol-
l'd! And thou wert aye a masker
bold! What strange disguise
hast now put on! To make
believe, that thou art gone?*

When the students at intermediate level in mainstream colleges come across this kind of text, they are completely lost. They find themselves unable to appreciate and enjoy poetry because they hardly understand the archaic vocabulary used in the poems.

Apart from the choice of literary texts, the teaching methodology further demotivates the students. Most of the teachers do not have formal training in the teaching of literature or language. So they tend to teach the way their own teachers taught them, i.e., through the grammar-translation method. In a number of schools, English is being taught by the teachers whose area of expertise is not English. The teaching in most intermediate classes is carried out in the form of a dull one-way monologue. The teacher comes to the classroom, opens the book, and explains the difficult words. Every line is read aloud by the teacher followed by its translation into the mother tongue. The whole classroom time is consumed in "teaching" and explaining the books from cover to cover. The students do nothing except listen to the teacher's monologue and later learn the 'notes' from the 'help books', popularly known as guides, to pass the examination.



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There are some set questions about these books that always come in the examination paper. The students, without bothering about the actual textbooks, prepare for the examination from 'help books' that provide them with a short cut to passing. These guides contain summaries and readymade answers to questions on