

re to teach language

By Dr Shahid Siddiqui



erature is of no use in language learning, no literary text should be included in the course-books. There is no denying the fact that the syllabuses in our mainstream schools and colleges put too much emphasis on literature and there is little room for students to get exposure to non-literary texts. It is also true to some extent that literary texts alone are not enough to learn the language that can be used in daily life to carry out linguistic functions. But it is not fair to reject literature outright from the syllabus.

There is a need to strike a balance between language and literature in our textbooks. The ministry of education's curriculum wing needs to revisit the textbooks and see whether students are exposed to language and literature or whether their textbooks contain only literature. But what should teachers do? Should they wait until the curriculum planners realize the need for such a balance? Can't we, teachers, use literature for language learning purposes? How can we exploit the existing books for better academic outcomes? What changes are desired in our classroom teaching practices?

We should try to avoid getting into the trap of an either/or situation and instead think of a productive coexistence of literature and language where language might be taught to understand and appreciate literature.

Similarly, literature could be used to teach language in such a manner that the learning process becomes interesting for the student. In Pakistan where English is not the first language of students literary texts should be selected according to their linguistic levels. Also, instead of going for "grand classics", simple and

contemporary texts could be chosen as texts. Literary texts should be graded and a certain text should be taught to a certain class according to the stage of development of its members.

Motivation can also play an important role in the process of learning. So, the presence of literature on the syllabus may be quite helpful for English teachers to keep the interests of their students alive. In Pakistan where students do not have enough speaking and listening opportunities reading becomes the most important skill since it gives students maximum exposure to the target language. In that way, literature can be very useful because it has the potential to act as a very attractive source of reading.

Teachers can also play a very important part in generating interest among students for the subject. Instead of merely acting as a big dictionary in the classroom that gives out the meaning of difficult words, the teacher should adopt innovative and engaging methods and help students develop a taste for the subject.

Most teachers of literature pay extra emphasis to biographical details of the authors and literary movements. That way instead of teaching literature, they teach about literature. The teacher's focal point should be the actual text and not the secondary details about it. In some Pakistani colleges, there are separate teachers for literature and language. It would be more useful if the same teacher taught language and literature. In this way, literature and language could reinforce each other.

A language teacher should tempt his or her students to read more and more books. Sometimes a student develops a dislike for a certain text because of its difficult language and style. Here a teacher's proper guidance may help prevent the student's dislike, for that particular text, from developing. A teacher can also exploit a literary text for language purposes. For instance, he or she can arrange a number of prediction exercises on a literary text. Students can

be given an extract with no title and then be asked to guess what they think it might be. They can also be asked to predict about what might follow later, in terms of plot of character development. These activities arranged in small groups can arouse considerable interest among students. Guided re-writing can also be quite useful. The class may be asked to reconstruct a given passage or a few lines from a poem. This exercise gives students a chance to look at the different possible syntactical patterns.

Teachers also need to work on making their students a little independent. Extra spoon-feeding or underestimating student ability might lead to a situation where learners turn into passive recipients and expect their teachers to do everything for them.

In this article, I shared my observation with readers that the English syllabus heavily tilted towards literature. I also referred to a group of practitioners who believe that literature should be replaced by language and this is what Pakistani students who study English require since they have specific pragmatic objectives in mind. This article advocates a more balanced approach in curriculums, i.e., a productive blend of language and literature. The article then focuses on how we can best exploit literary books for the purpose of teaching a language.

One very familiar and expected reaction from teachers could be that they will say they have limited time and are bound by the constraints placed by an external examination system. I have no intention to underestimate the significance of external examinations or the time factor but I do firmly believe that a good teacher can, with some creativity and a little extra effort, create enough room to be able to improvise in class. ■

The writer teaches at the Ghulam Ishaq Institute of Engineering and Technology in Swabi, NWFP. E-mail: shahidsiddiqui@yahoo.com

the short stories, essays, plays and poems prescribed in the syllabus. This is a feasible method of studying since the assessment system encourages rote learning and the examination requires students to reproduce what they have learnt by heart.

The anti-literature case is usually based on the hypothesis that since lit-