A STUDY OF LITERARY COMPETENCE ACHIEVED BY STUDENTS IN A TEXT BASED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The study of English Literature in India is largely teacher dependent, hence, students rarely acquire Literary Competence. This study is an attempt to remedy the situation. At the outset, Literary Competence was defined in terms of specific Cognitive and Linguistic and Rhetorical Skills and an adaptation of the Stylistics Approach to Literature was used as the teaching methodology for the experiment. The Experimental Group was taught English poetry specified in their curriculum over a two-year period with gradually decreasing teacher support. A Control Group of comparable ability was also taught the poems in the syllabus using the conventional method. The two groups were tested at the start and end of the experiment and the scripts were statistically analysed by the researcher and an experienced teacher. The Experimental Group showed significant progress on Overall scores. The researcher then analysed the progress made by the two groups in terms of the skills that constituted Literary Competence using a specially designed Rating Scale and recorded the gains made by the Experimental Group. Next, the two groups were compared on the sub-skills and it was found that special training improved some of the sub-skills significantly. Incidentally, a comparison of the Standard Deviation across groups showed that the Control Group became more homogenous, a consequence perhaps of traditional teaching which ignores individual differences. It was concluded that a text based approach to literature teaching helped develop Literary Competence significantly in students.

KEYWORDS

Literary competence, Stylistic analysis, Rating scale, Cognitive skills, Linguistic and rhetorical skills, Pre-test, Post-test

INTRODUCTION

English Literary study is a popular choice among students in Indian institutions of higher learning. This is largely due to our own rich cultural heritage, our colonial past and also due to emerging professional opportunities. Over the years, the teaching pattern has remained teacher centred, in replication of a methodology that was both native and prevalent the world over, in the previous century. However, such an approach quite often fails in effectiveness, especially, in the teaching of English Literature, due to the fact that English is, at best, a second language for our learners; hence, they do not have a native-like competence in it. This makes them over dependent on teachers for textual explication, thus defeating the very purpose of literature teaching – the development of literary competence. Hence, English teaching is characterised by a ‘flight from the text’ (Candlin and Short, 1989) – in face of a syllabus that comprises texts that primarily require a sophisticated response to language patterns.
Very often, in India where non-native teachers teach English Literature, the course degenerates into a discussion about the writer of the text, established critical opinion, background information – all of which replace the discussion of the text proper. The class is thus, marked by a lack of dynamism, with neither the teacher nor the students showing any personal initiative or interest in innovation. It is assumed that students would be competent to make critical observations about the works under discussion on the supposition that they have already learnt how to read them. Not surprisingly, students fail to do so. In order to comply with institutional goals and examination schedules, then, the teacher resorts to instruction of a simplified version of literary criticism so that students can answer examination questions without having to bother about reading the text first hand. This increases their dependence on notes, bazaar guides or potted critical judgements which can be used as an effective antidote against all firsthand experience of actual texts. The result is falling numbers in classrooms, boredom and lack of motivation among students. Their morale and motivation being low, their teacher in a desperate attempt to keep them in the class, keeps simplifying the text until it reaches the ludicrous level of a mere paraphrase.

This method certainly smoothens the student's path for examinations but hardly develops the student's literary competence. Such a surrogate reading situation has been summed up effectively by Kudchedkar, (1991) thus: ‘The B.A. English Elective Course teaches about literature rather than literature’. Students fail to realize that every text creates its own fictional world by a unique use of language, rhythm, sound patterns, imagery etc., which together contributes to meaning – i.e., Language is an integral part of Literature.

If any change is to be brought about in the situation then, the learner must acquire ‘the ability to carry out a first person activity in which one plays the role of a participant performer’ (Widdowson, mimeo). There cannot be any place for a second hand response. Literary teaching should develop a pedagogy that will guide the student towards an independent ability to read literature, which will enable him to evaluate the critical judgment of others against his own experience and make criticism an extension of his own interpretation rather than a replacement for it. A student should be trained to focus on the language of the text. He should begin at the very practical level of observing the objective features of the language in the artefact whose interpretation is open to observation by all.

With the rise of New Criticism in the 1930s and 40s, the formal aspects of literary works- its structure and language acquired importance. Close reading was advocated to understand the significance of linguistic details such as sounds, lexis, syntax, rhythm etc. This type of fidelity to a text helps in working out hunches about about a text and is able to bring out features that might otherwise have been missed out. It provides a framework that can be used to teach students to become aware of how the literary text codifies its meanings and challenges the readers to react to the theme and representation of human experience in the text independently. An offshoot of this approach was the study of style, which was a common meeting ground for literature and language studies, thus leading in time, to a formalisation of the discipline of Stylistics. Widdowson (1975) and Pratt (1992) suggest that literature and language teaching should be mutually reinforcing and not exclusive, if the students are to be taught to read literature meaningfully. This becomes relevant in situations like Indian colleges where a large number of students are from educational backgrounds where the mother tongue is the dominant medium of instruction. Their command of English is not adequate to enable them to read complicated texts independently.
This study is an attempt to put into pedagogical practice some of the insights gained from the text-centred approaches to reading literature. The researcher undertook an experiment to trace the development of literary competence longitudinally, over a two year period, through the use of stylistic analysis – a text centred approach to teach literature – specifically poetry. This behaviour was described in terms of specific cognitive skills and linguistic and rhetorical skills and was measured through tests, which were assessed normally as well as by using a rating scale developed for the purpose. A comparison with a comparable Control Group, who was taught using conventional methods, was made to determine the achievement, if any, conclusively.

UNDERLYING PREMISES

Literary competence in the prevalent teaching-learning situation was defined as comprising the following abilities:

- Capacity for independent reading and analysis of literary texts
- Ability to interpret and evaluate findings
- Formulate a coherent critical argument.

Stylistic analysis was chosen as a teaching methodology for the following reasons:

- It provides a fruitful entry into a literary text and leads to the discovery of meaning.
- It is not a sterile dissection of text but an analysis of language as a code to aid interpretation.
- It focuses on the linguistic features of the text, hence, it sensitises one to the subtleties of language use, which would result in the development of critical analytical abilities and also improve language and organizational skills.

Stylistic analysis would thus encourage students to analyse, interpret and infer meanings from texts in a problem solving manner confidently and with gradually decreasing teacher support. Over time, these students would gain literary competence and become independent readers. This enhanced competence would be reflected in their examination answers in terms of both cognitive skills and linguistic and rhetorical skills displayed therein.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Description of Groups

In order to measure the success of the experiment it was necessary to compare the learners of the Experimental Group with a comparable Control Group. The entire class where the researcher taught constituted the Experimental Group, as it was a longitudinal study. The Control Group constituted the entire class from a neighbouring college.

The comparability of the two groups was established by studying (a) the past years’ results in both the colleges (b) their socio-economic background and (c) a statistical analysis of student scripts.


**Teaching Methodology**

In the Experimental Group, the texts were explicated not by conventional lecture methods but by a guided discovery using a graded question answer method, based on the seminal work done by Prabhu (1987) for school children and here adapted for young adult learners. The analysis of textual language thus made, aided the process of understanding of the text and formulating an individual opinion on it.

The Control Group received teacher dictated notes and note-form answers, a method which was fairly representative of the regular teaching procedures of colleges in Mumbai.

**Experiment**

To measure the development of literary competence, it was necessary to record student performance at the start and end of the teaching period. The two groups, thus, were administered a pre-test at the start of the experiment and a post-test at the end of the period.

For analysis, all the scripts of the Control Group were used as the class size was small; and from the Experimental Group a random selection was made in such a way that their distribution across the spectrum of student abilities fitted in to a normal distribution.

During the two years of the experiment, the students were taught regularly by their respective teachers as discussed earlier.

**Evaluation Pattern**

The primary purpose of evaluation was to evaluate how much has been learnt and how well, after the student has been exposed to the learning exercise. Hence, this study tested the quality of learning, in a system of evaluation that under experimental conditions was made to be formative as against summative which is the normal University practice. It also needs to be assessed that, the traits seen in writing are not just a one-off venture but a representative of stable traits/abilities in the learner.

Evaluation can also be a diagnostic tool for further teaching. Hence, impressionistic marking was not accepted as the only model here – it was used along with a specially designed rating scale. The rating scale helped the assessor marked for formal and functional aspects of the written work as the criteria of marking are objective. Further, analytical marking helps build up an index of the student’s writing in terms of both holistic performance and specific abilities and are defined in performance bands and not on an arbitrary mark. They do not provide a rank order but a profile of abilities for each candidate, which is at once both an achievement as well as a diagnostic profile.

The rating scale was ratified by a three stage process for comprehensiveness and objectivity. The final rating scale had a base of 100 with a 60% weightage for cognitive skills and 40% for linguistic and rhetorical skills.
Assessment and Results

The pre-test and post-test were analysed by the researcher and an experienced teacher. They assessed the scripts for overall rating. The marks given by them were statistically analysed to measure the improvement in the achievement of literary competence in both groups from pre-test to post-test. A significant improvement was seen.

The researcher, then, further analysed all the scripts using the rating scale. This was done to study the gains made by the students during the experiment, in the various constituents of literary competence specified above. The results showed different levels of achievement.

Incidentally, the statistical analysis also threw some light on how teaching methodology impacted individual differences within groups.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the various factors related to the longitudinal nature of the experiment under regular teaching conditions, certain limitations arose in this study.

- Factors of maturity were not addressed.
- Group size was restricted due to attendance pattern and class size.
- Timetable constraints, holidays are a part of any regular teaching-learning situation which is authentic and normal, and at times they did interfere with the study.
- Stylistic analysis was the only method used for teaching, so no conclusions can be drawn about other text-based methods.
- The suitability of teaching other genres through this method was not explored.
- Individual differences in groups remained unresolved, though they were partially taken care of through statistical procedures.
- The elegance of an experiment designed for study was missing due to the reasons given earlier; but the loss of experimental sophistication was more than made up for in the authenticity of the teaching situation obtained for study.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study provides pointers, which can be studied in other similar experiments:

- Generalisations can be drawn after replication studies of a longer duration and on larger sample size are conducted.
- Other genres need to be taught using stylistic analysis as a method to establish its superiority (if at all), as a teaching method.
- The rating scale can be improved further by incorporating the views of a larger body of professionals and by testing it on a larger sample of student scripts.
REFERENCES


