



Language Through Literary Text in the Engineering Language Classroom and Laboratory

KEYWORDS

literary text, LSRW skills, communication skills, analytical skills and soft skills

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ABSTRACT Now a days every engineering student aims at learning and speaking English language to communicate with others in order to get a good job in this global village. To train the students in that direction, many of the communication skills trainers flood into the market. It shows that the importance of language in LSRW skills is very much required. This paper concentrates on discussing a literary text in the engineering language classroom as well as laboratory can be a hugely rewarding experience and learning language for both the teacher and the student. By engaging actively and critically with fiction, the students' ability to effectively use a language grows exponentially. It encourages a student to think critically and from the industry point of view, improves a student's communication and analytical skills. A questionnaire was given to 120 first year engineering students belonging to Electronics and Communication Engineering Department. The aim of the questions was to ascertain the views of the students regarding language and literature. Finally, many of the students suggested and showed interest that literature in the Engineering language classroom would give better results to learn communication skills and soft skills also.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'language through literature' is reductive in many ways, for the primary focus of literature is content; language is only studied to see how it is used to serve the content. However, in the engineering context, the primary focus must be given to language and not to content. Secondly, to teach literature requires specialized knowledge of the text, author, genre and period which may be outside the ken of most language teachers. So at the outset, it should be clear that the purpose and methodology of teaching literature within the engineering curriculum will be very different from the regular literature class. Having said that the question then arises why creative texts have at all. But studying literature especially fiction, one can get good command on vocabulary and syntax. In the contemporary scenario of the global village where English language is merely a tool for the work place, the emphasis is on 'functional' English.

Teaching literature is necessary as the students do not have any creative skills. The answer papers of the students showed no originality of thought but merely some mugged up paragraphs from 'guides' or 'all in ones' that flooded the market. Literature comes to be viewed as adequate and not erroneous preparation for any kind of professional course. So the solution proposed and accepted is to put up literature/creative texts (poetry, fiction and drama) from the curriculum.

IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

The fact is that an engineering student requires competency not only in technical register but also language register. He needs to assess, discuss, defend, disagree, ask questions, seek clarifications. For that he requires technical English. The role of language in any person's life is far deeper than a mere matter of technical tool has edged out learning through individual engagements with text, learning through activities has replaced learning through interpretation and critical thinking.

STATUS OF THE STANDARD OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

Every year the author teaches English to many engineering students who are unable to write a single coherent paragraph. Even, the students who studied in English medium for about 12 years could not write grammatically accurate sentences. So the standard of English in India is going down especially in engineering colleges, Andhra Pradesh. There are about 760 engineering colleges in our state. Recently,

from 5 years onwards, government introduced communication skills lab in the curriculum. After setting up language lab in the curriculum, students have turned up to the language register for Group discussion, extempore, debates, oral presentations and cross-floor discussions.

SURVEY

The following section of the paper presents data was collected through a pilot survey. A questionnaire with fifteen questions was given to 120 first year engineering students belonging to Electronics and Communication Engineering Department. The aim of the questions was to ascertain the views of the students regarding language and literature.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Do you think English language paper is important in the Engineering curriculum?

Yes / No

Do you think English literature should be introduced into the curriculum?

Yes / No

Which of the LSRW skills is more important to an Engineering student?

Listening / Speaking / Reading / Writing

Are you satisfied with the current syllabus of the English language paper?

Yes / No

Has the knowledge of grammar rules helped you to speak better? Yes / No

Has the knowledge of grammar rules helped you to write better?

Yes / No

Do you speak English outside the classroom?

Yes / No

Do you think an English language paper should be included in the second year as well?

Yes / No

Do you read the newspaper?

Yes / No

Do you think English literature is difficult, boring, irrelevant, or interesting?

Difficult / Boring / Irrelevant / Interesting

Did you enjoy learning English prose and poetry in school?

Yes / No

Do you read fiction (novels/short stories)?

Yes / No

Do you think literary texts (poems/flash fiction) should be included in the syllabus?

Yes / No

When you think of English literature, which three names come to your mind?

Have you read any books by Indian authors? (if yes, please specify)

FINDINGS

1. The most significant fact that emerged was 62% favoured the introduction of literature into the curriculum based no doubt on their experience of learning general English in school, for an even greater majority of 82% said they enjoyed learning prose and poetry. The main objection then would be why in spite of learning "literature" in school their command of the language is so poor. The main problem with the use of literature in the classroom is that teachers often encourage learning by rote, going by received criticism instead of focusing on independent thinking. The greatness of literature lies in the fact that it gives rise to multiple readings/ interpretations. It is the explanations and discussions of various and possibly opposing students' responses to the text that enlivens the classroom. The texts must also be chosen with a great deal of care. They must not be completely beyond the comprehensible level of the students. Classics are not the answer. To make literary texts relevant, it is necessary to focus on contemporary pieces of writing; an emphasis on Indian writing in English will give us creative works that are relevant to the social and cultural milieu of the students. At the same time it is necessary to choose texts written in Standard English for while the local patois often strengthens a creative text, we must not lose sight of the fact that our target audience is made up of engineering students.
2. The response to whether an English language paper should be included in the second year was almost equally divided with a small majority of 56% favouring the move, while 44% said they did not want it.

3. The unsurprising news is that 60% of the students do not speak English outside the classroom and 84% of the students felt that spoken English is what the Engineering student requires. This belief that only spoken English is important is a myth which is spread by the plethora of "communication skill" trainers that flood the 'market place' today. It is up to the language teacher to emphasise that both spoken and written skills are necessary and how interconnected these skills are with listening and reading skills. The impression created is that students already possess the necessary writing skills and only verbal skills need to be imparted.
4. To the question whether they read fiction, 52% of the students said they did not but 48% said they did. One lacuna in the questionnaire emerged at this point. Only 18% of the respondents had read books by Indian authors though 48% had said they read fiction. If the questionnaire had asked them to specify the last three books they had read, it would have clarified the ground reality.

CONCLUSION

By making English a commodity which needs to be acquired for successful employment, it has become necessary to ram the language down the throats of more and more youngsters. It is confirmed that an engineering student needs to proficient not only in the technical register but also in language register. Introducing literature especially some selected texts in an engineering class room gives more benefit to the student in the direction of facing interviews and participating in group discussions.

RESULT (THE SERIAL NUMBER CORRESPONDS TO THE QUESTION NUMBER)

1. Yes – 86%, No- 14%
2. Yes – 62%, No- 28%
3. S– 84%, W- 14% (One respondent said all four were important)
4. Yes – 58%, No- 42%
5. Yes – 70%, No- 30%
6. Yes – 84%, No- 16%
7. Yes –40%, No- 60%
8. Yes – 56%, No- 44%
9. Yes – 74%, No- 26%
10. D -14%, B-18%, Irr – 14%, Int – 52%
11. Yes – 82%, No- 18%
12. Yes – 48%, No- 52%
13. Yes – 46%, No- 56%
14. The first two names mentioned were invariably Shakespeare and Wordsworth.
15. Yes – 86%, No- 14%

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