



IMPROVING PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH - AN EXPERIMENT

NIVEDITHA CAROLINE LOBO

ASST. PROF. OF ENGLISH

GOVT. FIRST GRADE COLLEGE, HALEYANGADI

Proficiency in the English language is emphasised in the modern world as it is considered an essential communication skill to help acquire jobs, promote business interests and so on. However, there are many hurdles in the path of acquisition of competency in the language especially among those who have studied throughout in vernacular medium. As a teacher of English in a rural government college in Dakshina Kannada district, the presenter has seen the hesitation, fear and lack of confidence that students experience when it comes to speaking in English, even among those who get very good marks in English in the University Exams. Over the years she has tried various strategies to help students conquer their fear with regard to speaking in English. This paper presents one such attempt made to help students speak the language by making use of R.K.Narayan's 'A Snake in The Grass'. In this experiment students were given a short story which they converted into a short play and enacted the play. The success of this attempt has prompted the presenter to use this method to improve proficiency in English Language among the students of the government College.

A Literary text is an effective aid to develop language competency as it is authentic material which is not fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language. The teacher of English therefore has the freedom to use it as she sees fit, to suit her students. According to Collie and Slater, there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Short fiction is a very good resource for observing not only language but



life itself. In short fiction, characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives, and do so in a variety of registers and tones. The world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives. Moreover, the inclusion of short fiction makes the students' reading task easier as it is simple and short when compared to other literary genres and it gives them the chance to use their creativity.

Duff and Maley stress that teachers can cope with many of the challenges that literary texts present, if they ask a series of questions to assess the suitability of texts for any particular group of learners:

- Is the subject matter likely to interest this group?
- Is the language level appropriate?
- Is it the right length for the time available?
- Does it require much cultural or literary background knowledge?
- Is it culturally offensive in any way?
- Can it be easily exploited for language learning purposes?

These questions given by Duff and Maley made the presenter select R.K.Narayan's 'A Snake in The Grass' because it is interesting, the language is simple, it is short, the cultural background in many ways matches the background of her students, there is nothing offensive and it could be easily converted into a short one act way for enactment. Moreover, as the intention was to annihilate inhibitions in speaking English, the teacher did not wish to select a short one act play but a short story because the students would then have to speak out dialogues written by themselves and not simply learn by rote dialogues which they do not understand. In addition, converting a short story into a short play would in itself involve writing activity which would make them look for words in English, learn new words, improve on their skills of dialogue writing (part of syllabus) and give them a feeling of satisfaction of having created something of their own.



HYPOTHESIS

This experiment was based on the fact that mere teaching of English as per the syllabus would not equip students with competencies for speaking in English and that a teacher is required to use some innovative techniques to get students interested in the task of speaking and using English for communication.

This experiment which was an option offered to the students of II B Com (III Sem) was part of their internal assignment. The aim was to give interested students an opportunity to develop their English Speaking, Reading and Writing skills in a way that would give them a feeling of satisfaction and the results of which could be seen and evaluated and which would help them improve their otherwise nonexistent confidence with regard to the English Language.

METHOD

Eleven students of II B Com were selected to convert the short story into a one act play and then enact it in front of the class. Selection of students was based on their ability to enact and their interest to improve their proficiency in English as it was felt that uninterested students may not do total justice to the given task which may discourage other students to take up such opportunities in the future. However, it must be understood that these students never spoke in English as they felt that their English was not good enough.

The students were given two weeks' time to read, understand the story and write dialogues. They were told that they could improvise/ change/add details wherever they thought it necessary. They were given the opportunity to clarify any doubts they had. The dialogues were then checked by the teacher not to look for grammatical errors but to check if they had done justice to the given



story. Minor errors in grammar and usage were ignored. They were then given time to rehearse for 10 days as the teacher wanted to rule out the excuse that there wasn't enough time to practise. At the end of the stipulated time the students put up the short play before the class and it was really delightful to see those students who had never spoken in English converse fluently in the Language. Moreover, students did make changes in the end. The original story is about a lazy servant Dasa whose lack of dedication towards his work makes the garden overgrown and a snake is said to have entered the compound. The entire family scold Dasa and try to locate the snake by actually bringing down the entire garden however they are not able to find the snake. Dasa then appears with a sealed pot claiming that the snake is inside. However no one dares to open the pot and check the truth. They believe Dasa and praise him making him feel like a hero. However the students enacting it changed the end. In their version, one of the sons opens the pot and finds out that Dasa was actually telling a lie.

OUTCOME

It was indeed a very fulfilling and satisfying experience for both the teacher and the students. The feedback of the group was collected, which read "Thank you madam for giving us a special opportunity to present a drama. It helped us to improve our English. We want to do one more play in the next semester. We enjoyed it a lot. We got confidence to speak in English and come on the stage." The next semester, students of this class presented the 'Refund', a one act play written by Fritz Karinty. The teacher perceived an attitudinal change in the students with regard to speaking in English. Their confidence level is now high and will definitely improve with more such participation in the future. This academic year three such short stories were transformed by 30 students (10 in each group). The short stories were Stephen Leacock's ' With The Photographer', R K Laxman's ' The Gold Frame' and R K Narayan's ' The Snake in the Grass'. This time however, the students who had taken up ' The Snake in The Grass' added an extra character of the snake.



CONCLUSION

This attempt to improve the confidence of students in English can be considered successful in several respects. It enabled the students to improve their written and oral English. It also helped them to relax when communicating in English. Looking back on these experiences, some basic criteria for the use of literature in teaching can be established.

A literary piece is not an end in itself but the means of beginning a creative process in the minds and emotions of the student. For many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read in English. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. The success, of course, in using literature greatly depends on the selection of texts which should not be difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level. The use of literary texts, from a language teaching point of view, will be useful, because these texts show how language works in contexts. Besides they show how language should be used in different conditions and situations. The use of literary texts in language teaching helps not only to improve reading but also to improve listening, speaking and writing skills. It helps students acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, see how idiomatic expressions are used, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners.



REFERENCES

Duff, A. & A Maley. Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Elliot, R. “Encouraging reader-response to literature in ESL situations” in ELT Journal. Vol. 44, No. 3, p.p:191-198, 1990.

Collie, J. and S. Slater, eds. *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Custodio, B. & M. Sutton. “Literature-Based ESL for Secondary School Students” in TESOL Journal. Vol 7, No.5, p.p: 19-23. 1998.