

USING NOVEL AS THE MAIN MATERIAL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING IN E-LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

E- Learning has become the most recent and most familiar form of distance education. E-learning or online learning is a kind of distance education that takes place over the cyberspace and it is of great use to the students who learn English language. It has gained much importance in the recent years as the minimum requirement for the learners is to access a computer, the online network and the zeal to learn the language. Language acquisition is a process by which the learners become competent to perceive and understand the language, and to use it as well. However, this paper aims to explore how the novels, the most adaptable genre of all literary forms, can be used at their best to speed up language learning in distance education. It attempts to present the idea of using a novel as an effective tool for teaching English language. In India, English is taught as a second language where literature can definitely play a major role. This paper takes up the fiction of Manju Kapur with a view to helping the learners develop their reading skills.

Keywords: Language teaching, literature, novels, learning, distance education, reading, literary text, material, course, learners.

This paper sets out to diffuse an idea that language learning can be accomplished with the help of novels.

Introduction

Using Literature for Language Learning:

It is a widely-accepted fact that teaching English has always been a platform for experimentation as various theories and methods have been propagated until the present, in this domain. The issue of using a literary text for teaching English has been one of the most controversial and debatable subject matters among the language experts for ages. Fitch O'Connell, a longtime teacher of English as a foreign language, ironically mentions: "Literature. Quite a divisive word, that. Throw it through an open window into a room full of language teachers and most will dive behind furniture, fingers in their ears and looks of horror on their faces." (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/get-lit-literature-a-teachers-best-friend>)

Carter and McRae emphasize using literature to aid the students to go beyond "acquiring basic knowledge of the language and to learn how the language works"(10), because using literature augments the language skills. Chenfeld illustrates the significance of literature: "Through literature, we discover what is possible in human experience and imagination, and our own lives grow in richness and depth." (211)

Literature Review

(i) Arguments that Resist the Use of Literature in Language Teaching:

Several theories have been proposed to argue that literature is not relevant to those who are interested in learning language. As per the perspectives of many theoreticians and language practitioners, a literary piece cannot support the learning of the low-level learners. Moreover, the use of literature improves only the reading and writing skills. Sandra McKay, in her seminal text *Literature in the ESL Classroom* published in TESOL Quarterly (1982) argues as it follows:

First, since one of our main goals as ESL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. Second, the study of literature will contribute nothing to helping our students meet their academic and/or occupational goals. Finally, literature often reflects a particular cultural perspective; thus, on a conceptual level, it may be quite difficult for students. (529-36)

(ii) Arguments that Support the Use of Literature in Language Teaching:

Much attention has been drawn to the usage of literature in language learning. For this reason, literature has an important place in the mainstream of language teaching. Literature is regarded as a potential source for language development, because teachers have started to realize that there was something wrong in ignoring literature (Lima, 2005, cited in Lima 2010:p.110). Nowadays, the language instructors utilize literary texts as a pioneering idea to teach English. Dicker (1989: 6) states that "one of the newest trends in teaching English as a foreign language is the literature-based syllabus design". Many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern.

In this modern era, the mastery over the language has become the key determinant for all successful careers. However, the learners face tremendous challenges in terms of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. At this point, literature can be taken as one of the best tools for the teaching of English. In the words of Fowler, literature can be used for language teaching, because it reflects the imaginative basic human situations, man's suffering of injustice and his conflict with his followers (Fowler, 1965: 218-19). Obediat (1997: 32) asserts the significant role of novels in classroom as they facilitate the acquisition of linguistic competence. As Obediat defines, the students in fact benefit from literature as they acquire a native-like proficiency in English language. They put across their ideas in English efficiently, learn the characteristics of English, study how the linguistic structure is used for verbal communication and understand how the idiomatic expressions and phrases are used to speak precisely. Custodio and Sutton (1998:20) also illustrate that literature can open horizons of opportunities, making students to interrogate, read between the lines, bond, and explore.

In the words of Widdowson, "The study of literature as an important factor in creating an intimate relationship between the reader and the literary work, and between the reader and the language on the other side." (Widdowson, 1975: 73-4) Several studies agree that it is highly advantageous to use literature for language teaching. As Chih-hsin Tsai appraises: "The novel course involved in this (his) study, with no focus on literary qualities of the novel nor focus on explicit language learning work, falls in the quadrant exemplifying extensive reading" (105). Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater in their book *Literature in the Language Classroom* cite the four important reasons for the addition of literature in language teaching curriculum - valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement (1987). Similarly, Alan Maley in his critique *Down from the Pedestal: Literature as Resource* assets the following reasons for the use of literature in teaching English: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity (1989). Thus, the prior researches in this regard substantiate the argument of this paper.

Criteria for the Selection of Literary Material

Despite the disagreements in approaches, all these language practitioners have emphasized that the language instructors should be heedful of the literary pieces they select and a lot of focus should be made while choosing the materials for teaching. This is because, the material should be sound. Besides, an irrelevant material will spoil the time and passion of the learners who tend to learn the language through e-learning. At this point, this paper aims to acknowledge that the novels of Manju Kapur can be used for the learners of distance education, because they are very lucid and readable for any language learner.

Diverse Ways by Which Manju Kapur's Fiction can be used by Online Learners:

Language acquisition is an art which involves self-study. Our world today is obsessed with doing everything quickly which includes learning too. E-learning is done through electronic means which incorporates web-based learning, virtual classrooms, digital collaboration and delivery of content through internet. Moreover, the online learners utilize a plenty of audio-video materials and slides (e.g. You Tube lessons), teleconferencing sessions, and videoconferencing sessions. The modern technologies are accessed by everyone at the present time as they are less expensive and online learning environments are becoming widely used for teaching and learning purposes. In addition, they provide full classroom setting for employees and everyone is able to access the facilities at their own space.

The uses of E-learning in Language Learning:

According to the report of The Web-Based Education Commission, "Preparing students today for tomorrow's workforce has a lot to do with teaching about how to use and evaluate knowledge. The Internet is rapidly

becoming the biggest repository of information we have ever known". Paul Levinson, the author of *The Soft Edge*, states: "Online learning can be a lifeline to those who have obstacles, such as geographical distances or physical disabilities." Of course, the uses of e-learning are tremendous in this modern era. Like the classroom teaching, various activities are used in the online teaching and they are very beneficial to the language learners. The uses of the teaching and learning activities are:

- They are best-suited for employees when they encounter difficulties in their workplace and try to improve their language.
- The activities can be practised at any time from any place even in the absence of computers. Many a time, the smart phones are used to serve the purpose.
- People from all age groups are benefitted.
- The students get rid of their shyness, fear and a sense of inhibition to learn and speak the language which normally takes place in the conventional classroom atmosphere.
- Unlike the classroom teaching, e-learning is a good platform for the learners to ask questions without reluctance and get their doubts cleared.

As Sarah Cordell talks about the distance education and e-learning, "They're right there. They're listening. And they like talking to each other, typing to each other. That, I think, is a big attraction, because they get to engage real time with the other students as much as with me (the teacher)." Though E-learning is a modern method of distance education, the students are provided with ample opportunities to study and it is of much use to the students who struggle to read and speak English.

Importance of the Sub-skills of Reading

The primary objective of this study is to develop the reading skills of learners in on-line education. Listening and reading are the receptive skills because learners feel comfortable to receive the language and understand, but in terms of speaking and writing, the learners need to apply these skills to produce language. 'This paper lays emphasis on teaching reading through literature', it is important to know about the sub-skills of reading.

Even though there is no agreement among the theoreticians about the sub-skills of reading, this paper sketches the findings of the theoreticians like Renandya and Richard Day. The latter claims that the goal of teaching reading is to make the students enjoy at first. In his words, "The ER (extensive reading) approach allows the students to read, read and read" (10). The reading skills are divided into two primary sub skills – the intensive reading skills and the extensive reading skills.

According to Renandya, extensive reading is a simple one as the learners pick up the language by understanding messages. He demonstrates the most essential characteristics of an extensive reading course (144-145). Firstly, students start reading the materials. Secondly, they understand the reading materials by themselves. Thirdly, they categorize the varied materials in terms of topic and genre. Fourthly, they find reading so easy and start to concentrate on the post-reading activities like designing a book or poster, reading aloud the highlighted parts, listening to role-plays, discussions and speeches and learning the meanings of new words and phrases.

Course Material and Methodology

As per this research, progress in the reading skills of the students was focused. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) was selected to be the main course material. Chapter XVIII with 15 pages is taken for study. Its content is not lengthy compared to the other chapters of this novel and it is positively motivating. Many times, even the advanced learners would become discouraged when they come across too many new words while reading with zeal, but this excerpt is readable and sufficiently challenging. In this course, the online instructor prepares a set of exercises based on vocabulary, phrases and sentences with a view to improving the extensive reading skills of learners. In addition, the names of people, location, events and things cited in the fiction are in the list of exercises.

This research based on reading skills was done at three levels. During the first level of reading, the online learners understood the text. Then they began making inferences of the text. Thirdly, they got ready to evaluate the text. The learners were asked to read the given excerpt and adequate time was also given to them. At the end, simple exercises were given to the learners that consisted of both objective and descriptive type questions. The post-test results paved way to the better understanding of the learners' reading experiences and the findings were also useful to learn about the differences in learner's perceptions. In order to facilitate the comprehension of the text, worksheets were prepared which helped the learners enormously. The online learners took about 20 to 25 minutes to fill in the worksheet. The students indeed paid tremendous interest to do the exercises.

Worksheet 1

A. The following words are the meanings of certain words in the given text. Find the exact words that accurately match their meanings:

1. Uncertainly (11)
2. a little (8)
3. open space (9)
4. anxiously (14)
5. emerge (6)
6. radically (12)
7. pretentious (9)
8. hurling (8)
9. grope (6)
10. allegation (10)

B. Write any 20 words in the excerpt that end with ‘-ing’. The first two words are given below.

Examples:

1. fumbling
2. concluding
3. -----
4. -----

C. Write any ten short sentences with adjectives that compliment the character of Virmati (from the given excerpt). The first two are done for you:

1. Virmati was fully wrapped due to cold climate.
2. Her voice in the gathering was husky and carrying

D. Virmati, Leela Mehta, Saubhagya Sehgal, Begum Saba Malik, Swarna Latha, Professor Harish and Mohini Datta are the characters shown in this literary piece. Based on their role and activities, find out who the character is:

1. Whose fingers and toes were freezing and wrapped with a shawl in the first scene?
2. Who says the words, “Beggars can’t be choosers”?
3. Who is the woman sitting beside Swarna on the stage?
4. Who is the cousin of Virmati in this story?
5. Who is sick in this novel, looking ill and yet had to attend the conference?
6. Who is mentioned as the chairman of the reception committee?
7. Who feels in the novel that the traditional role of women is changing due to their participation in freedom struggle?
8. Name the character that is cited in the list above but an absentee to the conference?
9. **Try to elucidate the meaning of the following words taken from the excerpt:**
Creak, clenching, obscure, enthuse, upliftment, groan, reluctantly, irresolution, delightedly, provocation, prominent.

Worksheet 2

What kind of inferences can be made by reading the literary text? Answer the following questions in detail.

1. Explain the struggles and conflicts that women faced those days to get educated.
2. Was it easy for Indian women to take part in the national freedom fight? What are the inferences that you can make from the given text?
3. The attitude of Swarna Lata was entirely different from that of Virmati. Interpret.
4. How did you feel when you happened to read a story that took place in 1940s? Do you think the women mentioned in the novel were really happy and more independent than the women of the current period? Explain your views.

This sort of questions lead to the extensive reading and the students would really intend to go beyond the text in order to know its inferences. These inferences would surely make them discuss in groups keeping in mind the social, cultural and political contexts prevalent in the nation.

Findings and Analysis

In this online education experiment, the novel of Manju Kapur was used to teach a small set of 15 learners. The effort was not a part of the mainstream e-learning and therefore it had to be carried out separately. The learners were not pressurized to study because in the e-learning setting they felt free and there were no tests or exams for them to take. As far as the learners were concerned, they found the pleasure of reading which indeed enhanced their reading ability. The ensuing learning of the language was not quantified. The given literary piece

familiarized the learners with vocabulary improvement, new syntax, innovative ideas, grammatical knowledge and linguistic input. The excerpt organized the interrelated skills- reading and writing which are most often separated in the traditional classroom teaching.

The material taken from the novel *Difficult Daughters* created interest in the minds of the readers and led them to read it enthusiastically. The learners unconsciously learnt various vocabulary items along with grammatical structures. Moreover, they improved their pronunciation by reading aloud extracts from the novels in the group. Teaching reading skills through the spectacle of Manju Kapur's novels obtained the desired result in language learning. It helped learners organize their ideas, discuss online and share their experiences.

The Future Scope and Limitations of the Study

Without sowing the seeds, no one can harvest. Likewise, only when a teaching method is implemented, its success will be known. There are few things under the sun that do not have two sides. Similarly, this study also has both pros and cons. This course helped the students to think beyond the text and even stimulated their creative writing. For instance, the students learnt a lot about the difficulties that women confronted while pursuing education and participating in freedom struggle. Even though this reading course has been designed with a view to helping the target learners in mind, it is yet to be examined for its fruitfulness. This study is a division of the ongoing courses on the use of literature in language learning. Hence it is believed that this research will pave way to the growth of new reading skills enhancement courses in the days to come.

Language and Style in the Novels of Manju Kapur - an Overview

Manju Kapur's use of language is highly remarkable and her vocabulary is neither too complex nor too simplistic. Her choice of diction makes her novels absolutely readable. Her style of writing expresses her dramatic story-telling method. Her novels can be taken for language learning in distance education as McKay argues, "literary texts are representational rather than referential" (McKay, 1994). Her novels are thought-provoking and make the learners more creative which invite the learners to respond. The multiple layers of meanings in her novels provide opportunities for developing the interpretative and inferential skills of the learners. Her novels provide rich materials for the students in the experimental group to discuss their own attitudes towards English. Such discussions served dual purposes; while the learners were able to clarify their own subconscious attitudes towards English, they were also able to put their speaking skills into practice by discussing their ideas.

Apart from the story-line, readability and lucidity are the two major distinguishing features that led to the success of the novel. Manju Kapur employs a dramatic technique of story-telling for which she uses distinctly lucid style. Her vocabulary is understandable to all sections of readers in which she voices her joys and hopes by using colorful words and creates a wonderful cultural context for her novels. During an interview with Jai Arjun Singh, she explains the circumstances that led her to choose a lucid style in her novels. As she mentions, she has to remove 30,000 words with a pain in her heart in order to fulfill the demands of the publisher who insisted on cutting the words.

By profession, Manju Kapur was a teacher at Miranda college, Delhi where she had been teaching English for more than thirty years. Manju Kapur says the following in an interview, published recently by the Hindustan Times: "I wish I could teach and write at the same time. I left it (teaching) with a great sorrow, because I like teaching". She longs to be assigned as a part-time teacher somewhere where she can enjoy teaching and pursue her writing career. Manju Kapur has written and published six novels - *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *Immigrant* (2009), *Custody* (2011) and *Brothers* (2018). Manju Kapur maintains the practice of narrating her fiction in an absolutely comprehensible manner.

Conclusion

This study tries to explore that novels can be effectively used for learning English in e-learning. Though there are a few limitations, novels are certainly considered as the rich source for language learning. For numerous learners, novels can definitely open gates to motivate them to read in English language. Literature is an ideal vehicle for interpreting language as they mirror reality. Novels facilitate learning by creating the better understanding of the human lives by creating an unseen world in front of their eyes which obviously leads them to get interested in the story line and learn the language unknowingly. The success of learning the language greatly lies in the selection of an uncomplicated text. For this reason, Manju Kapur's novels have been chosen as the recommended material.

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APPENDIX

Excerpt from *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur

1. Winter in Lahore, and conferences take place fast and furious in the city. Important people arrive, inaugurate them, make speeches, have their photographs printed in the newspapers, along with an account of what they said, and then move on. In one month alone there is the Anti-Pakistan Conference, the Arya Bhasha Sammelan Conference, the Urdu Conference, the India History Conference, the Punjab Azad Christian Conference, the All India Sikh League. The atmosphere is charged, and voices reverberate with self-awareness. On a very cold Saturday in January, 1941, the weatherman forecast rain and fog during the day, accompanied by strong surface winds. By afternoon, the girls in RBSL College Hostel were able to admire the accuracy of his predictions. It's raining, Swarna,' stated Virmati tentatively.
2. Virmati wriggled further into her quilt till it was over her shoulders. Her shawl was wrapped around her head. Her fingers and toes were freezing.
3. Nobody is like you, Swarna, thought Virmati. I am not though I wish I were.
4. Virmati made her own way more slowly. Despite the cold and rain the hall was packed with girls seated on the floor almost up to the stage. More were standing against the walls. She edged her way towards a space at the back, hoping she would be able to hear Swarna from where she was.
5. 'That we are. My poor parents rue the day, they sent me to Lahore to study', said the second girl, laughing.
6. The Inquilab Zindabad was sung, and Virmati looked up tears in her eyes. The song was so moving. The students' flag representing freedom, peace and progress, was unfurled. There was a hush in the hall and it was clear most of the girls identified with it. Now Mohini Datta was explaining the meaning of the flag, how freedom was necessary for the development of the human spirit, how war especially affected women, how progress was their object so that freedom could be enjoyed by all classes of people, even the lowest of the low.
7. Leela Mehta's short speech was concluding. Virmati tried to concentrate. 'And lastly, she thundered, 'we want not only degrees but constructive work. We demand the right, the privilege of doing something for our country. Friends, comrades and here her voice dropped dramatically. That is the real Inquilab. Not slogan shouting. Not posturing, and empty speechmaking. If you, the hope of the future generation, can achieve some difference in the lives of your fellow men, then indeed you are the true wealth of your nation. The hall broke out into thunderous applause as she sat down.
8. Virmati's hands clapped too, as loud and as long as the others. Then Miss Saubhagya Sehgal, chairman of the reception committee, gave the welcome address. I didn't know we were still at the welcome stage, thought Virmati. Miss Sehgal regretted that the leaders of India were keeping back progressive forces and doing their utmost, though in vain, to come to a compromise with British imperialism. She praised the students' involvement in the satyagraha movement, as a result of which 360 students in Bengal were already in jail.
9. Virmati shifted her feet away from Swarna's. She was feeling too ill to respond.
10. 'Soon your course will be finishing here my love', the professor's words dropped with an unpleasant sound into Virmati's deep contentment. She didn't know why, unless the very slight uncertainty in his voice was the cause.
11. 'There's more than one way to commit a crime.
12. 'I break my engagement because of you. Blackened my family's name, am locked up inside my house, sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace..... Why? Because I am an idiot.
13. One after another, voices spoke into the microphone, voices from Foreman Christian College, Kinnaird College, Lahore College for Women, Rawalpindi College, Fateh Chand College for Women. All the women had such strong opinions. Virmati was amazed at how large an area of life these women wanted to appropriate for themselves. Strikes, academic freedom, the war, peace, rural upliftment, mass consciousness, high prices due to the war, the medium of instruction, the Congress Committee, the Muslim League, anti-imperialism, Independence Day movement, rally, speeches. Virmati's head was swimming. They were talking a language she had yet to learn. She began to feel stifled. Her legs had gone to sleep. She shifted uncomfortably on her haunches, the cold from her feet seeping into her despite the heat of the bodies around her. She felt out of place, an outcaste amongst all.
14. 'Why don't we get married? You say your family makes no difference.'
15. Heavy applause broke out as Swarna finished speaking. As the final resolutions were being formulated, Virmati wondered about her friend. She had known she was well known, but had not realized the extent of her reputation. Her heart felt dull and heavy within her. The whole afternoon had been interminable. She wondered

whether she would ever get out, ever see the sky again. At last the final resolution was moved, seconded, and adopted. The crowd around her began to heave and rise. Some of the girls left, but many moved towards the stage. They haven't had enough, thought Virmati resentfully. She could see a group of people clustered around Swarna, could then see Swarna and her cluster join the bigger one around Leela Mehta and Mohini Datta. Should she wait or go? She hung about irresolutely for a few minutes and then made her way slowly out of the hall. Once outside gulped in the cold, fresh, rain dampness, her lungs getting rid of the moistness produced by the myriad breathers inside. She decided to carefully make her way down the slippery steps.

16. Virmati had only to mention Swarna Latha for the professor to explode, and he shouted, shaking with anger, 'What does this Swarna Lata know of my situation, pray? How do you know of them, Viru? How does she know of the difficulties I face at home?'

17. What's wrong? All of a sudden... you jump up and behave as though I have committed a crime.

18. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds,
