

Teaching Literature through the Lens of English Language Teaching: A Teachers' Challenges and Breakthrough

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Abstract

Teaching literature within the framework of English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone a significant pedagogical shift from content-driven literary appreciation to learner-centred language development. Literary texts are increasingly viewed as rich resources for enhancing linguistic competence, communicative ability, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. This paper explores the challenges faced by teachers while teaching literature from an ELT perspective and highlights the pedagogical, professional, and learner-centred achievements emerging from this approach. Drawing upon ELT theories and classroom practices, the study argues that despite practical constraints, teaching literature through ELT contributes meaningfully to holistic language education. The methods and principles of language teaching may effectively be utilised for conduction of literature classes ensuring learner's holistic language skill development. The research paper specifically highlights on the constraints a language teacher faces while teaching literature, and then the achievements that come gradually in the form of learners' overall language development. A few challenges discussed in the papers are: linguistics complexity of literary texts, motivation of learners, cultural hinderances, constraints associated to learners' assessment etc. The paper also highlights some of the key achievements that a language teachers may achieve in this process such as: integrated skill development, authentic communication, leaner's emotional engagement, development of critical thinking, teacher's professional development etc.

Keywords: teaching literature, teachers' challenges, Achievements, Cultural Mediation, Language skill development, Communicative Competence, All round growth

1. Introduction

The relationship between literature and English Language Teaching (ELT) has long been debated. Traditionally, literature was taught as a separate discipline, focusing on canonical texts, literary history, and critical analysis. However, with the rise of communicative language teaching and learner-centred pedagogies, literature has been re-envisioned as a valuable tool for language learning. In ELT classrooms, literature is no longer treated merely as an object of aesthetic appreciation but as a tool to develop language skills, intercultural competence, and critical thinking. Teaching literature through the lens of English Language Teaching (ELT) shifts the focus from literature as content to literature as a resource for language

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Published: 27 February 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i2.45551>

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development. Language teaching as a profession in the mid-1880s to the mid-1980s was involved in a process of 'search' as claimed by many pedagogical experts (Richards & Renandya 2002). The search basically was for a single, ideal method generalizable across widely varying audiences as mentioned by H. Douglas Brown (Richards & Renandya 2002, p. 9). Besides varying audiences, the single method or approach should be such that it can also be applied to teach any content or topic irrespective of their discipline. The primary focus of the applied method was on helping learners develop their abilities to perform in the language in various occasions. The focus while teaching literature has always been on learner's grasp on the content, meaning and ability to decode the textual meaning, less focus has been given on enabling them appreciate the language, decode the diction, and perform language functions while dealing with literary texts. From the English Language Teaching perspectives, Literary texts—poems, short stories, novels, and plays—are to be used to enhance learners' linguistic competence, communicative skills, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. However, this approach presents both challenges and significant achievements for teachers.

In multilingual contexts such as India, teaching literature through ELT presents unique opportunities and challenges for teachers. This paper examines teaching literature from the lens of ELT, focusing specifically on the challenges teachers encounter and the achievements they experience in classroom practice. The researcher through her personal in-class experiences, aims to establish the fact that teaching is a skill which, if attained properly will enable teachers to make classroom teaching an engaging and effective experience irrespective of what is the content. By content the researcher here means in-side content from any subject. A skilled teacher is someone who has the ability to feed all learners' needs and make them future ready. In this regard the professional development of the teacher plays a major role. With a massive shift in learner needs and awareness, there is an urgent need for enhancement of the teachers' professional development to cater to all learners' needs. The concept of teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) will be discussed in detail at later part of the research article.

Shifting the focus of the paper back to the teaching of English Literature using ELT method, it is noteworthy to mention at this point that the importance of English language in today's world is quite indisputable. Irrespective of what our backgrounds, needs, and necessities are, we all feel the need to achieve good command over English language. In this regard, ELT exponent Penny Ur (2012) mentions, *teaching priorities in English language teaching have varied over the years: fashions are constantly changing. It is important as Ur stated further, for our students to learn to use English both fluently and correctly so that they can get their message across effectively (p.1)*. In the same context, Penny Ur expressed her views that gone are the days when English language was recognised as the native language for English people. With changes in its demand and international recognition, English language today, is rather considered as the language used by educated speakers across the globe for international communication (Penny Ur, 2012, p.1). Keeping this in mind, this paper particularly aims to emphasize the role played by students of English literature to carry forward the legacy of English language in a multilingual country like India. The age-old methods of teaching literature put more emphasize on understanding the content rather than the language skills

along with the content. The researcher expects to establish that change or adaptation in the method of teaching (i.e. applying ELT in literature classroom in this context) makes the learners bridge the gap between the two.

2. Teaching Literature from an ELT Perspective

From an ELT perspective, literature is used as authentic material that exposes learners to real-life language use, varied discourse patterns, and cultural meanings. Literary texts often allow ELT teachers to exploit the text in various ways. A skilled teacher possesses the ability to mould literary texts and adapt them to develop learners' language learning and functional skills along with sound understanding of the text. As teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), besides comprehending the text, our primary concern is to develop learners' communicative competence. Communicative competence is not same as understanding the text and being able to answer literary questions. Interpreting the discourse, being able to acquire linguistic competence, by understanding linguistic expressions, displaying creativity and versatility of language forms, etc., play an important role for an EFL learner. Scholars such as Widdowson, Brumfit, Carter, and Lazar emphasize that literature supports communicative competence by integrating form, meaning, and use. To achieve this, teacher needs Literary texts to enable learners:

Engage with authentic and contextualized language

Pure literature contents provide a meaningful plot to the students, making them glued to the text and practice various language functions. These textual content act as resources for learners to practice role plays, dialogue exchange (written, spoken), script writing etc. for hands-on-practice with English language which they can apply in their real-life conversations.

Develop integrated language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)

Literary contents work as gadgets for language teachers to help learners develop their LSRW skills. The language teacher may utilize literary texts to design various tasks to enable learners work on developing their language learning skills. Role plays are a good example for practicing listening and speaking skills, scenes from plays or dramas can work as plots for language teachers for designing tasks. Similarly, learners can be exposed to practice creative writing by being engaged in dialogue writing, script writing etc. Besides these a professionally groomed teacher can utilize literary content to engage students in various activities, thereby stimulating learners for a more meaningful experience.

Interpret meanings and negotiate understanding

Literature is emotionally packed content. Reading literature help learners develop empathy and values. Literary texts give learners deeper understanding of the text along with meaningful real-life relatable content. Such material helps learners negotiate and recognise social values and imbibe in them ability of social acceptance.

Reflect on social, cultural, and human experiences

Literary texts are not mere content for enjoyment and relaxation, rather the characters reflect

social, cultural and human experiences. It acts as both mirror and voice. Writers draw their plots, characters and narratives from real-life i.e. the society. These aspects are then represented as a voice and a showcase of the societal conflicts, values, struggles and emotions which touches back the reader's emotions thereby acting as a reflective agency. Language is part of the society and every language user is an integral part of it, hence, literary texts help learners connect back to the society. One of the biggest concerns of the recent time is the gradual decline of interest to know and pass on indigenous, cultural belief and values among the recent generation. Exceptional popularity of social media and OTT platforms have shrunk their world to the screen and gradually being detached from the society. Under such constraints the teacher's challenges increase to rebuilt the cultural and societal values among ESL learners. Literary texts, in such situations may work as a helpful agency. Folktales and myths are a rich source to pass down cultural and moral values among language users. Indigenous literature often showcases regional rituals, family structures religion and identity. Thus, literature may act as a way to reflect and inculcate the above in ESL learners. Thus, literature becomes a pedagogical resource rather than an end in itself.

3. Teacher's Challenges in Teaching Literature through ELT

Although teaching of literature using techniques and methods of ELT seems to be an exciting and effective practice, teachers often face a number of challenges, which may occur during the session, before the session while preparing, after the session gets over, while post teaching activity etc.

3.1 Linguistic Complexity of Literary Texts

One of the primary challenges teachers face is the linguistic difficulty of literary texts. Archaic vocabulary, complex sentence structures, figurative language, and dense symbolism often hinder comprehension, especially among second-language learners. Teachers must constantly adapt texts to suit learners' proficiency levels without diluting their literary value. Such challenges reach their peak especially in a mixed-ability class. Richards and Renandya (2002) argue that most teachers hope for a small size class in which most if the students are homogeneous in nature in terms of proficiency. However, except one is fortunate, most of the teachers often find themselves in a mixed ability classroom with a large number of students who exhibit wide variety of abilities (pg. 49). In such scenario the teaching methodology adopted by the teacher do not promote optimal learning. Typical literature classrooms are a solid example of such. Specially in a diverse country like India, students come from heterogeneous language communities, varied socio-cultural practices and customs. Under such conditions the ESL classrooms become even more challenging, the language teacher must equip themselves with skills to adapt literary texts making them learner centred in order to benefit the learners. But often the archaic language, and related aspects hinder such practices.

3.2 Learner Motivation and Attitude

Many learners perceive literature as difficult, abstract, or irrelevant to practical language use. Examination-oriented learning further reduces students' willingness to participate in interactive activities. Teachers struggle to overcome learner anxiety and foster positive

engagement with literary texts. The researcher has practically experienced that most of the literature students behave quite passively when asked to perform language functions. By language functions the researcher means speaking, presenting, role-plays, writing comprehension etc. Learners seem to be demotivated to engage themselves in the above for various reasons such as hesitation, lack of confidence, poor grammatical and vocabulary grasp and most importantly, they are too much addicted to the so called 'ready-to-use-note-culture' that turns out the teaching-learning process into a spoon-feed practice hindering autonomous learning. A language class is supposed to be *productively noisy*, whereas, in literature classes this is a bigger challenge for the teacher.

3.3 Balancing Language Teaching and Literary Analysis

Teachers often face tension between teaching language skills and teaching literary concepts such as themes, symbolism, and stylistic devices. Overemphasis on literary criticism can marginalize language learning, while excessive focus on language may oversimplify the text. Maintaining this balance is a persistent challenge. This is more obvious while teaching poetry as explanation of the themes, concepts, literary/ figurative devices demand more attention than talking about the language structure. In literature, it is essential for the learners to understand the key concepts highlighted, characters and plot development etc. but more focus on these alienates the practice of language in real-life contexts. Such learners seem to be unable to make practical use of the language forms discussed due to more attention on the theme and content.

3.4 Cultural Distance and Interpretation

Literary texts often reflect unfamiliar cultural contexts, values, and social practices. Learners may find it difficult to relate to these cultural elements, leading to misinterpretation or disengagement. Teachers must act as cultural mediators, explaining contexts while encouraging cross-cultural comparisons. One way to address this issue could be allowing learners speak about their indigenous cultural practices and customs. This can prove to be an effective method to stimulate speaking and listening skills in the literature classrooms. Most of the contents of European or American Literature focus on the western cultures and the contents are such that the students feel not connected as those contents are from unknown cultural backgrounds to which they cannot connect. In such situation the language teacher may adapt the text by making learners speak of their native cultural practices and customs, thus helping them overcome the anxiety of studying unknown cultural contents by finding correlation to their own culture, besides the speaking sessions will help them overcome nervousness, hesitation, boredom etc.

3.5 Curriculum and Assessment Constraints

Furthermore, rigid syllabi, limited classroom time, and exam-oriented assessment systems restrict teachers' ability to implement communicative and task-based activities. Literature teaching is often reduced to rote memorization of summaries and answers, undermining ELT objectives. This is a practical issue in language classroom. Exam-centred constraints often restrict the language teachers course plan. Developing a language is a long-term focused practice which demand consistency both from the teacher as well as the learners. But the

process often gets struck due to the interference caused by administrative aspects such as course completion deadlines, exam schedule, semester break etc.

3.6 Teacher Training and Professional Identity

One of core challenges teachers face in today's world is how to cope up with the demand of the time? The global nature of the learners of this century is unlike the previous ones. Their exposure to technology, online resources, digital platforms have added rigorously to the concept of 'learner needs' (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Today's learners are more aware of their language needs and are more motivated to get engaged in classes that directly address these. Many teachers are trained in literary studies rather than ELT methodology. As a result, they may rely on lecture-based teaching and teacher-centred approaches. The lack of systematic training in ELT-oriented literature teaching poses a significant challenge. Such techniques or sessions become demotivating for the learners and they behave rigid to such practices. Teachers' need to upgrade themselves in-order to meet learners needs. Teachers, today need to be dynamic in terms of planning lessons, adapting material and engaging the learners while teaching a specific content. Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 1) in this context commented that *the need for ongoing renewal of professional skills and knowledge is not a reflection of inadequate training but simply a response to the fact that not everything teachers need to know can be provided at pre-service level, as well as the fact that the knowledge base of teaching constantly changes.*

4. Teacher's Achievements in Teaching Literature through ELT

4.1 Integrated Language Skill Development

When taught through ELT methods, literature promotes the development of all four language skills viz. LSRW. Reading literary texts enhances inferencing and interpretative skills, while discussions, role-plays, and dramatizations improve speaking and listening. Writing activities such as creative responses, diary entries, and critical reflections strengthen written communication. Literature classes adapted the right way may work as a good way to promote student autonomy. Eliciting students' view while discussing a text will help them attain fluency and boost confidence, similarly a little emphasis on group/pair work will imbibe feel of team work and integrity. Hands-on-writing sessions shall add in learners' creative faculty. A trained language teacher in a literature class can definitely help the target learners work on developing their language skills.

4.2 Authentic and Meaningful Communication

Literary contents are full of socio-cultural texts that are narratives, stories, plays which provide exposure to authentic language use, including idiomatic expressions, varied registers, and discourse patterns. The socio-cultural contents trigger learners' relatability with the content and their adaptation in real life language use. In this context it is to note that the researcher teaches both UG and PG students of English Literature in a university and practically applies the skills and techniques of language teaching in her classes. It is, at this point noteworthy that although initially the students feel a little discomfort as they are new to the teaching technique, eventually they start responding. A survey conducted among 50

students of various classes of both UG and PG as part of this research, where learners expressed that they found the classes interesting and effective. The focus on tasks and students' active participation made the sessions relevant and enjoyable. By interacting with each other they could understand the text better and connect. They even expressed by applying the interactive method they are able to make real -life use of the language. Thus it can be summed up by claiming that trained language teacher may successfully use literary texts to create meaningful communicative situations that mirror real-life language use.

4.3 Learner Engagement and Emotional Involvement

Stories, poems, and plays evoke emotions and personal responses, increasing learner engagement. Teachers report improved classroom interaction when learners are encouraged to express opinions, interpretations, and personal connections with texts. The plots and backgrounds of the texts make the learners feel connected, they get engaged with the text and respond with emotional connection. Tasks like role plays, dialogue writing, mono-acts etc. provide opportunities to the learners get engaged with the texts and respond with a deeper emotional connection.

4.4 Cultural and Intercultural Awareness

Teaching literature through ELT enables teachers to promote cultural awareness and intercultural competence. By comparing learners' native culture with those represented in texts, teachers help students develop tolerance, empathy, and global perspectives. Reading cultural and societal customs and norms represented in the texts develop learners' sense of empathy and they get an opportunity to correlate their contemporary socio-cultural practices with the others. Moreover, literary texts boost learners understanding of gender roles, society structures, cultural and indigenous practices through the characters and stories which they can connect to their respective societies. Thus, adding to their cultural and intercultural awareness and tolerance.

4.5 Development of Critical Thinking

Another noteworthy reward or achievement of a language teacher in a literature class is that literature encourages multiple interpretations and critical reflection. Teachers achieve higher-order thinking skills among learners by encouraging analysis, evaluation, and creative response rather than fixed answers. Eliciting students' views after reading a poetry/prose gradually ignite learners' critical stimuli and as they respond it adds in building their ability to critically examine texts and reflect accordingly.

4.6 Teacher Professional Growth

In order to achieve the forementioned points the teachers need to apply a good amount of skills, techniques and strategies to adapt literary texts. While teachers apply the above through ELT-oriented literature teaching, teachers evolve as reflective practitioners. They adopt innovative strategies, redefine their professional identity, and transition from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. All these eventually add in their Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

5. Pedagogical Strategies for Effective ELT-Based Literature Teaching

To address challenges and maximize achievements, teachers employ several strategies:

- Selecting level-appropriate and culturally relevant texts

This can be done by doing **needs analysis** (Hutchinson and Waters,1987) of the target group. Determining on what do they need will help the teacher to know what are their lack. Understanding the learners' needs (necessities) and lacks (gaps) is a prerequisite for any language development course.

- Using pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading tasks

It is essential for teachers to engage the learners in tasks at various stages so as to ensure step-by-step clear understanding with abilities to adapt.

- Integrating task-based and communicative activities

Research has proven that learning becomes memorable and joyous when students are exposed to engaging tasks and communicative activities. Thus, teachers must practically address this aspect in their teaching sessions.

- Encouraging learner-response and group work

Feedback ensures that the learners are not deviating from the point of discussion and it makes them confident in public speaking. Feedback must be constructive so as to ensure that it does not hurt anyone personally rather, teachers must ensure that they overcome their shortcomings through peer feedback. Moreover, working in groups moulds their teamwork behavioural patterns.

- Using multimedia, dramatization, and role-play

Since the researcher has already mentioned the importance of role play and dramatization in helping learners develop their language abilities, integration of latest AI tools and multimedia will definitely add a boon to this.

These strategies align literature teaching with ELT principles.

6. Implications for Teacher Education and ELT Practice

Teacher education programs must integrate literature pedagogy with ELT methodology. Teachers should be trained to reflect on their identity, adopt flexible teaching strategies, and view literature as a dynamic resource for language learning. Assessment practices should also shift towards evaluating communicative competence and interpretative ability. Teacher education programmes are meant for teachers to develop their skills of teaching. This development can continue even after one's formal education. The need for ongoing teacher education programmes is a recurring theme in the field of language teaching (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) in the recent years and has been given much importance due to the emergence of various teacher led initiatives such as action research, reflective teaching, team teaching, and so on. Teachers have different kinds of needs at various point of time. They have individual professional needs, needs of the institution they are associated with, and needs that

change according to time and so on. N.S. Prabhu (2012, ed. Francis Peter) views teachers' growth as something that arises from the ongoing activity of teaching—from the daily engagement in the classroom—rather than from any professional inputs to the teacher from the world of professional specialism (p.1). Teacher education is a process that takes place over time rather than for a specific period. The process can be supported at the institutional level and be taken forward by the teacher herself. Programmes to support teacher education at the institution level include attending Faculty Development programmes, workshops, seminars, attending lectures by experienced teachers. At individual level, teachers can do self-reflection practice, record their own classes, ask a colleague to observe while they teach, peer teaching etc. The key component of any teacher-training course should focus on making the trainee teachers write a lot. Writing practise should include: reflective teaching logs, reports, essays, research papers, and responses to other teachers' and students' writing (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 314). (cited from Ghosh, 2023)

7. Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, we may accept that teaching literature from the lens of ELT presents both challenges and achievements for teachers. While linguistic difficulty, cultural distance, and institutional constraints pose obstacles, the ELT approach transforms literature into a powerful tool for language development, cultural mediation, and critical engagement. With appropriate training and pedagogical support, teachers can successfully integrate literature into ELT, enriching both language learning and human understanding. Teachers play the crucial role in moulding the learners creative and academic stand points. Every teacher must take up the responsibility to help their respective learners overcome their weaknesses and apply the skills they acquire inside a classroom to their real-life situations. In the case of literature classes this becomes more apparent as learners' ability to utilize the language they practice in the texts in their actual conversation along with comprehension of the text is the demand of the time. Besides developing scholarly knowledge of the texts they are expected to apply the skill sets in experience as well.

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