

Asynchronous Learning of English through Children's Literature

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Abstract

Children's literature is one of the means of creating opportunities for communication and language development in the regular classroom atmosphere through listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. By exposing students to values in life it kindles their interest in Children's literature. This is an integrated and multifaceted perspective to promote appreciation of Children's literature and language proficiency at the Under Graduate level. Perhaps the most challenging part of teaching literature is developing the critical and creative potential of the students. With these aspects as the prime focus, the present framework covers knowledge based on literature, skill and value based concepts under the umbrella of English as a core subject. The paper aspires to answer the question "What is it like to prepare multi dimensional syllabi based on Children's Literature?"

Keywords: Integrated learning, Mood based learning, Curriculum design, Children's literature.

1. Introduction

Pedagogical study of a foreign language like English is a paradigm shift from the traditional teaching learning methods. Introducing Children's Literature across the curriculum is a means of introducing multilayered texts to facilitate students' attainment of critical literacy. Knowledge of the content coupled with collaborative inquiry differentiates one learner from the other individually and places him/her on par with the other learners. Performance based assessment can be done by preparing modules to be adjusted to fit the reading level of the students. The reading level can be judged by introducing Indian tales, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* upto the Enid Blyton series further to the present and the latest Geronimo Stilton series. Curriculum design and delivery has close link to monitoring and evaluation too. Dr. Jamuna's *Children's Literature in Indian Languages* is quite exhaustive and simple for a beginner to get a comprehensive idea of the availability of books regarding the topic.

The idea behind implementing this is to facilitate the development of language and strengthen the link between language and arts – a pedagogical teaching-learning aspect. Designing curriculum is worth the process if it turns out to be well-defined and implemented at the right time in the correct format. Kready opines "that the field of children's literature is largely

untilled, inviting labourers, embracing literature which should be selected from past ages down to the present (online). That “teaching-learning methods are as top-down as curriculum development which hardly pay heed to opportunity for the learner to take part in learning process” (20) has been objected by Rabbani in an article on “Challenges before Indian Higher Education”. Further, he gears up the institutions to say that “The time is ripe to merge general higher education with skill-based education and professional education so as to better harness benefits from both ends” (24).

1.1 Objectives

- ❖ To analyse the benefits of learning a language through Children’s literature
- ❖ To bridge the gulf between language and Children’s literature
- ❖ To help learners absorb ethical and moral values through Children’s literature
- ❖ To create technology integrated tasks to meet the needs of the tech-savvy world
- ❖ To analyse the efficacy of blended learning and integrated learning by implementing it in the curriculum
- ❖ To provide a possible framework which is cost effective, easily implementable and outcome based
- ❖ To give a pedagogical analysis of the study of a foreign language
- ❖ To break socio-economic and cultural barriers

1.2 The Choice of Children’s Literature

- Collaborative in nature
- Creation of virtual learning environments
- Activates self learning
- Can easily lobby the curriculum framers in integrating into the syllabi
- Critically integrated and multifaceted
- Extends and relates text books in diverse ways
- Enhances their appreciation towards literature on the whole
- Socially and culturally relevant
- Multidisciplinary in function
- Can be asynchronous as any other type of learning
- Can accommodate different learning styles

2. Major Aspects

The following are the aspects considered in this paper:

- Building vocabulary by introducing stories by the famous author Geronimo Stilton (Italian literature)
- Symbols through children’s literature – fantasy stories and fables as mentioned by Suniti Namjoshi (Indian Literature)
- Folk tales and fairy tales in Children’s literature (American, British and Indian literatures)
- Letter writing to a friend - values to be learnt through Children’s literature
- Report writing and journal entry – based on Enid Blyton series (British Literature) and Adeline Foo (Singaporean Literature) – every day diary writing task
- Teaching to write the central or main idea of the story
- Environmental education and Eco criticism through the short stories and novels of Ruskin Bond (Indian Literature)
- A youth’s response to Children’s literature – Creative writing and opinion pieces
- Interpretation of Texts.

2.1 Building Vocabulary by Introducing Stories by the Famous Author Geronimo Stilton (Italian Literature)

One of the most popular children's book series, the Geronimo Stilton series offers rich vocabulary pertaining to a particular field. The Stilton series can be used to promote the development of vocabulary for students. *Christmas Catastrophe* talks about the protagonist meeting with an accident and admitted in a hospital. The author describes the tour the protagonist takes just before leaving the hospital after recovery by taking him to various departments in the multi-speciality hospital thereby introducing the readers to a variety of words in the medical field. Readers tend to decipher the meaning according to particular context and retain a rich vocabulary with them.

Eg: Mighty Mount Kilimanjaro, A Very Merry Christmas, A Fabumouse School Adventure, Deep in the Jungle, Rumble in the Jungle, The Stinky Cheese Vacation.

Stilton uses onomatopoeic words in almost all the books. Words like munch, splash, rattle, fizz, gurgle sizzle, whack, snap, beep etc. are part of the regular story to introduce rich gifts of imagination. Apart from these, plot related questions, relating one situation to the other, identifying character traits and personalities based on the description of the author and further identifying the elements of character are some of the areas that can be implored from this series.

Reading lays the foundation for other academic skills. An early mastery of reading is often a good predictor of future academic success. Stilton books are simple, entertaining and written in an understandable language.

2.2 Symbols through Children's Literature – Fantasy Stories and Fables as Mentioned by Suniti Namjoshi (Indian Literature)

Suniti Namjoshi, a fabulist and myth-maker is also essentially Indian in nature. Once her friend Gillian Hanscombe remarked "every time you ask an Indian a question, you will get a story as an answer" (Vevaina 197). Her Indian sensibility has urged her to convey her message to the world in the form of fables, parables and revisionist myths rich in Indian culture. Her collections include *Aditi and the One-eyed Monkey*, *Aditi and the Thames Dragon*, *Aditi and the Marine Sage*, *Aditi and the Techno Sage*, *Aditi and her Friends take on the Vesuvian Giant* and *Aditi and her Friends Meet Grendel*. Animal characters are in abundance in all her works which favour reading for even learners at the initial reading stage. Apart from these, the common African folk tales and the traditional American folk tales are rich in interpreting the nation's cultural background. Thereby it is multidisciplinary in perspective.

With Suniti Namjoshi's works abounding in myths, symbolic of people's hopes and fears, the symbolic tales of distant past leads to social values and topics of cultural context. They can also be read in the contexts of psychological, archetypal and cultural criticism.

2.3 Folk Tales and Fairy Tales in Children's Literature (American, British and Indian Literatures)

Heike vom Orde summarises Bruno Bettelheim's *The uses of enchantment* in "Children Need Fairytales: *Bruno Bettelheim's The uses of enchantment*" and mentions why children need fairy tales:

- They help children to project and thus foster their development.

- They offer knowledge of life from the inside.
- They help to dispel fears.
- They correspond to the child's thinking and experience (17).

Further, "The language style is succinct and direct" (Stoodt 185). Tales, which have been integral part of childhood experience are interesting for adult readers to relive their childhood days and understand the concepts better. The tales, usually in complete harmony with one another, are thrilling and entertaining. Moreover, they not only enhance the imagination of children but also adults. When writing about the role of folklores, Kim highlights that the folk tales "frequently emphasized values for global citizenship, such as respect for diversity, human rights, and sustainable development, which stories touch on, still remain to be discovered and translated into daily life".(1) Folktales also embody the popular attitudes, beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of the society where the stories originated, thus, enriching children's consciousness and appreciation of the cultures of other people.

Kready is of the opinion that it is necessary that learners understand what "fairy tales must possess as classics, as literature and composition, and as short-stories; to trace their history, to classify the types, and to supply the sources of material" and further adds that one needs to "describe the telling of the tale: the preparation it involves, the art required in its presentation, and the creative return to be expected from the child (*learner*)" (web). 'Alice in Wonderland', 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'The Golden Ball' from English literature and 'Jackal or Tiger', 'Diamond cut Diamond', 'The Fisher girl and the Crab' from Indian literature are some fairy tales that are interesting to read.

2.4 Letter Writing to a Friend – Values to be Learnt through Children's Literature

Based on the values learnt in the above context, learners can cultivate the art of letter writing. The context should be focused. If the story is from American literature, learners can be trained to write a letter to a pen friend in America. In the mean time, they also get to learn the vocabulary and the spelling of American English. Context-specific stories and stories which come under the purview of a geographical framework are worth reading under this area. Meigs asserts that "There is a power and life in those stories which have penetrated through every superimposed layer of time, through conquest and growth and Christian conversion" (4). With such value-filled literatures, learners try to imbibe certain values the authors had intended for. It is culture-specific and value-based. These values cross cultures and continents.

2.5 Report Writing and Journal Entry – Based on Enid Blyton Series (British Literature) and Adeline Foo (Singaporean Literature) – Every Day Diary Writing Task

A chronicle of the daily activities by characters in the novel can be taken into consideration. Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series, with twenty five novels, consists of incidents which take place during school holidays. The settings, though similar in nature vary from one novel to the other where children enjoy the rural background with adventures, picnics, a ride from one end to the other and the simple joys of childhood. Similarly, Adeline Foo's range of books is interesting for a first timer as a writer of diary.

A journal entry chronicling the day's activities would be a befitting task to trace the places the characters had gone, through which the art of diary writing or journal writing can be introduced. This should be the first step since the following points would reinforce the importance of journal writing:

- Hand written entry alone should be accepted.
- Less importance on grammar and sentence structure.
- Compilation of thoughts at random.
- Use complete sentences.
- Give a theme / topic for your writing.
- Check for errors in spelling using a dictionary.

2.6 Teaching to Write the Central or Main Idea of the Story

Spotting the theme to write the story is the first step to make words become whole sentences. The central idea is also the unifying idea in a story. A series of stories or novels by a single writer is to be taken and the central idea of each of the novel has to be noted down and learners should be taught to bring out a link between every idea in the stories involved. This helps them to learn the following aspects:

- How to find the main idea.
- Forming a link between two aspects.
- Frame connecting sentences.
- To bring out a connected and a wholesome idea from the author's perspective
- Writing topic sentences / paragraph sentences.

2.7 Environmental Education and Eco Criticism through the Short Stories and Novels of Ruskin Bond (Indian Literature)

Interaction between literature and ecology and human being's coexistence with nature are highly environmental-oriented aspects to be introduced. Ruskin Bond has serious concerns over the depletion of nature and its resources. The scenic settings of Dehradun and Mussoorie reflect his concerns and worry and hence he tries to convey his angst through his books. 'No Room for a Leopard' is about deforestation and its after effects; 'The Tree Lover' and 'The Cherry Tree' depict the man-nature bond and there have been hundreds of short stories and some novels all of which have a close rapport with nature. Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* is a canonical text in literary environmentalism written in 1971 and which has set the tone of readers from children to adults and for reading from the primary to the University level. These texts can be analysed from the context of Eco criticism, an emerging field.

2.8 A Youth's Response to Children's Literature – Creative Writing and Opinion Pieces

Creativity is natural. A creative mind is a natural mind. The imagination gained by reading some just-for-fun stories and not-so-real stories should be spurred in writing creatively. Opinion pieces include Letter to the Editor, Editorial, Article, Column and Op-ed in a newspaper. Learners should be taught and encouraged to write such pieces by introducing the nuances applicable to each type of writing.

2.9 Interpretation of Texts

The last and the final stage can be including PG Woodhouse and Rohd Dahl's works. Interaction with the above texts will help the learners to attain global understanding, give their personal responses towards the story and give multiple interpretations to the novels in the light of various critical tools.

Writing an essay based on a symbol or a quote helps the students gain an in depth understanding of the text. Discovery Education's Lesson Plan Library has given a sample plan of analyzing the text in a proper method. Some of the points covered were:

- The first paragraph should include a thesis statement that (1) identifies the quotation or the symbol to be written about and (2) identifies a theme or main idea of the novel.
- The next paragraph should give the writer's translation or paraphrase of the quotation or the writer's associations with the symbol.
- The next paragraph should explain how the quotation or symbol informs all parts of the novel—beginning, middle and end.
- The final paragraph might explain how an intense study of the quotation or symbol helped the reader get more out of the novel (Donley).

Enunciating the multidimensional perspective of the usage of Children's Literature books in the curriculum will not suffice if blended learning is not taken into consideration. As part of virtual learning, blended learning is the hall mark of the present and the future and is known for its feasibility, high reliability, versatility, cost effectiveness, veracity, resourcefulness, flexible learning modules and collaborative nature. While 'mood based learning' ('Mood based learning' – a module created and presented by the author at the International Conference on Outcome Based Learning at Anna University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, on 01st and 02nd March 2013) is a learning strategy based on the mood of the learner and it is far above e learning process, it has closer relation to blended learning. Hence a teaching learning model based on blended learning for the above pattern can have the following components:

- Brain storming
- Intro to basic concepts – to set the tone of the content
- Aim / objectives of the course
- Introduction
- Content to be delivered
- Conclusion
- Summation
- Wrap up
- How have they been benefitted
- Take home message
- Real time discussions
- Exercises

To make blended learning effective:

- Harness teacher's potential, tap student's capacity and infuse with technological knowledge.
- Should be appealing to the five senses – audio, visual, lingual, sensorial and sometimes tactile too (in the sense of the learner's enjoying each module as a befitting feast).
- Shift from facilitator / instructor-centered learning to learner-centered learning.

All the above mentioned aspects are easily adaptable alongside Children's Literature.

3. Conclusion

Learning should be learner paced, blended, integrative and outcome based in nature. Many approaches have been formulated in a country where English is not a native tongue. A method which would be a holistic process to develop one's academic personality through diversified

approaches would lead to hybridisation in the teaching learning process. Such a method will be an acceptable paradigm shift in the study of a foreign language like English.

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