

English Literature Teaching in Yemen: Problems and Prospects.

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Abstract

In Yemen English literature teaching is a challenging job. It is demanding for both teachers and students. Despite the high level of motivation the productive ability of the Yemeni graduates is not commensurate with the literary courses they are taught during their stay in the college. Quite recently, the students in schools have been exposed to some literary pieces in English. When they come to college they are too weak to adjust to the demands of the syllabus of the department of English. English literature teaching formally begins here in the colleges of Arts and Education from the second year. In the first year of their studies they are taught grammar and usage and the skills and they are expected to have a sound foundation of the English language, and to be able to cope with the literature courses, which they are not able to. By raising some vital questions the present paper looks at the problems of English literature teaching in the universities of Yemen and suggests solutions from pedagogical point of view: a) Are the Yemeni graduates able to cope with the demands of the real-life situations, when it comes to use their skills of the English language in the real world? b) Should literature be taught as language or be taught as literature? The present paper also looks at the possibilities of comparative and contrastive studies between Arabic and English literatures as a potential source of student's enhanced linguistic abilities and literary competence.

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1.Introduction:

The most important reasons for teaching literature are that literature a) is a potential source of vocabulary enrichment, b) provides an easy access to motivating content material, c) encourages language development, d) sharpens student's interpretative abilities and e) educates the whole person. Besides, if the students are highly motivated and if they find that their learning is of great interest and relevance to them, they can learn the language better. Duff and Maley (1991, p. 3) hold that "literary texts offer genuine samples of a wide range of styles, register and text-types at many levels of difficulty". Krashen (1981) also suggests that the learners need some challenge in order to progress but if the challenge is too big or too small or non-existent, the learners do not progress. Literature with its wealth of vocabulary and its rich variety of structure and style, can offer a challenge if materials are judiciously selected. In Yemen, in all the universities the number of literature courses is more than the courses related to language or linguistics.

It is true that "The language-oriented courses lay the foundations for language proficiency - which is a fine task indeed-but which fail to provide actual exposure to the language at its best to help develop subtle and sophisticated language knowledge. Such courses, as Joseph John (1989) perceptively remarks, cannot provide students with much language competence, with an "awareness of the full range of its expressive potential" (Obeidat: 1997, p. 30). Then, what are the problems involved in English literature teaching in Yemen? Why do we fail to get the expected results? A review of the syllabuses in the departments of English of the universities of the Arab world made by Zughoul (1986)

shows that the emphasis on the literature component in the departments of English of the Arab world is less compared to the emphasis on the language and linguistics courses. Unfortunately Yemen is not included in that list. However, my point is this that despite the fact that in the syllabuses of the departments of English in the universities of Yemen the literature component is more, then why the desired result is yet to be achieved?

2. Historical overview:

In Yemen, a majority of the population remained illiterate⁽¹⁾ in 1985. In North Yemen, “After the overthrow of Muhammad al Badr in 1962, the newly formed republican government faced the task of autochthonously creating modern health and educational systems” (Nyrop. ed. 1986, pp. 103-104). In South Yemen, “By 1985 the government had accomplished a great deal in raising the educational level of the population” but in spite of the “ important gains in the general educational level of the country’s population, in the mid-1980s the government continued to experience difficulties with education and was unable to meet its own goals” (*Ibid*, pp.227-230). Messick (1993, p 101) “attributed a fundamental vitality and openness to a type of learning of “unfamiliar things”, of “useful knowledge”, that seemed to fit consciousness of change and advocacies of “modern” goals”. These goals were sought to be achieved first by Lancaster-method schools called *madrasa rushdiya* and later by *madrasa ‘ilmiyya* and the Quranic schools².

The importance of English literature as a potential source of language learning material, though late, has been recognized and has found place in the curriculums in the Yemeni schools and colleges. Literature has been an integral part of life in Yemen but

its place in the curriculums in schools and colleges came to be recognized late. After the Revolution of the 1962 Arabic literature was included in the syllabuses of the schools in Yemen. The history of English language and literature teaching in Yemen is the result of the attitudinal change regarding the role of the individual in the society in its social, political, and economic functions both on the national and international scales. English being the *lingua franca* of the world, there was a need to nurture individuals to cope with the growing demands of the English-speaking men and women in the national and international affairs. English was made a compulsory subject in 1970, and it is significant to note that it was in the same year that Sana'a University was founded followed by University of Aden in 1975, both of which have grown rapidly since the 1970s, so much so that now there are five other universities. All these universities, in their syllabuses, have the number of literature courses more than the courses in language and linguistics. Despite that the general level of student's competence is not very satisfactory. However one cannot deny that there are some excellent students in the schools and colleges of Yemen. At the time of supervising practice-teaching sessions, term papers or having classroom interactions with students one can find real good students. Why do not they sustain? Why do they not maintain their levels of linguistic and literary competence when they go out of the precincts of the college? Why do they not keep up?

3. Recent trends in English literature teaching:

The post-World War scenario of English Literature teaching reflects emphasis on language-based approaches. In recent years, the language-based approaches have gained a much wider acceptance in pedagogy than previously. Carter and Long (1990, p217) are of the view that an integrated approach to teaching

literature would "foster an activity-oriented, student-centered, and language-sensitive approach". This activity-oriented, student-centered approach to teaching literature "emphasizes the individuality of the students and relies on group discussion, questioning and reflecting" (Prasad: 2002, p2)³. Recent studies (Akyel and Yalcin: 1990; Birch: 1989; Brumfit: 1985; Carter: 1988; Carter and Long: 1990, 1991; Carter and Nash: 1990; Carter and Simpson: 1989; Collie and Slater: 1987; Duff and Maley; Lazar: 1993) in this area have shown that when a learner is exposed to the literary texts he uses his linguistic knowledge to the maximum to interpret the meaning. In the course of doing so he learns language. Besides, his awareness of the world also reaches a broader horizon.

4. Advantages of English literature teaching in Yemen:

4.1 Overall development of learner's skills and personality

A survey conducted at the University of Ibb by Prasad (2002) shows the response of the students of English specialization regarding the importance of teaching English poetry. "The students themselves have come out with those aspects, which they think will improve their language skills and critical and creative abilities" (Prasad: 2002, p 11). Although this survey was mainly conducted to show the importance of teaching poetry yet the benefits listed below will be equally significant for students dealing with other genres of literature.

- a) Exposure to standard language
- b) Development of language skills
- c) Encouragement for using a dictionary
- d) Enhancement of expressive potential
- e) Enhancement of grammatical competence
- f) Understanding of different layers of meanings of words
- g) Ability to concentrate

- h) Delight of discovery
 - i) An intellectual challenge
 - j) Development of critical thinking
 - k) Encouragement for creativity
 - l) Ability to see life with a new perspective
 - m) Creation of a world view
 - n) Understanding of emotional universals
 - o) Growth of individual response
 - p) Interaction with the best minds of the world
 - q) Creation of self-confidence
 - r) Sharpening of the imaginative faculty
 - s) Fostering of organized thinking
 - t) Freedom of using language
 - u) Source of enjoyment
 - v) Understanding of a particular time-frame
- (*Ibid*, p11)

A similar survey done by Mahmud Salih (1986) supports the teaching of literature in the Arab world. Based on an analysis of questionnaires distributed among 118 Arab students majoring in English, Mahmud Salih (1986, p 25) comments:

The student survey shows that language skills seem to develop through studying literature in English. The positive impact of literature upon language skills is by no means novel, since students exercise or practice all of the skills in literature courses. During a literature class, they are required to listen to what an instructor is saying, they must jot down notes, they often ask or answer questions, and they are frequently required to read passages relevant to the idea(s) under consideration.

It is significant to note that the observations of Obeidat's (1997) students have confirmed Salih's findings. His students

tend to agree that literature helps them 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 (*Ibid*, p 30).

While talking about bringing a change in the ways of teaching of English literature in the universities of Yemen Khawlah Ahmed (2001 p, 390) also expresses similar views, "Since the literature of a language entails all the specifics of that language from its grammar and vocabulary to its skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, these skills can be developed around the reading of a literary piece of work".

Thus the advantages of English literature teaching in the universities of the Arab world in general and in the universities in Yemen in particular are wide-ranging. These advantages range from the linguistic competence to the literary competence of the learners goading them in their socio-economic, academic and vocational pursuits. Yemen, a country with a glorious past and promising future cannot achieve its developmental goals in its socio-economic, academic and vocational areas without producing "a new type of individual" (Michel Foucault: 1977 cited in Messick: 1993, pp 102-103) who will be able to cope with the demands of fast-changing national and international scene.

4.2. Measure of learner's linguistic competence and performance

As already has been shown above that the Yemeni students have considerable interest in literature and they are aware of its benefits they should be given proper intellectual and pedagogical climate for realizing optimum benefit from English literature teaching. Replying to those who want to get rid of literature Widdowson (in Rossner, 1983, p34) argues, “ being old-fashioned is not in itself a good reason for getting rid of anything. I think literature was got rid on very facile grounds, ill-considered grounds”. He further argues in favour of keeping literature in the curriculum and strongly opposes those who want to ignore literature stressing the importance of linguistics and language skills:

Literature was ruled out of court very largely because linguists, generally speaking, are not literary scholars...It is rather surprising how few people concerned with language have any interest in the knowledge about literature (*Ibid.* p34)

In Yemen the purpose of teaching literature should be to understand, analyze and express ideas clearly and cogently. Besides, English literature teaching programmes should be organized in such a way so as to encourage in learners the values of self-study and to enable them to develop their reading and expressive skills. Thus English literature teaching can be used to measure learner's linguistic competence and performance. Learner's knowledge about English literature should not be overemphasized instead the emphasis should be on improving learner's language proficiency, cultural knowledge and analytical ability.

4.3 Vocabulary enrichment and the ability to use words appropriately

In EFL situation English Literature teaching can be a potential source of vocabulary enhancement. It can also help learners to use words in their appropriate contexts. In a study to analyze learner's errors in their three domains: spelling, grammar, and use of words Prasad (2002)⁴ finds that there is no significant difference at 0.01 between the two groups of students in the use of words. On the other hand in the domains of spelling and grammar there is some significant difference at 0.01 between the two groups of students. This study was conducted at the University of Ibb on the students of final year B. A. and B. Ed. specializing in English literature by giving them a task to write poems in English. It is hypothesized that the students' exposure to the various literary texts in the course of their studies has enabled them to acquire a certain level of proficiency in the use of words. Richards and Sampson (1974. p 15) are of the view " At the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort." English literature teaching will yield rich dividend in future of Yemen in terms of expressive abilities of Yemeni students. Without word-power the powers of comprehension and expression will be weak, and faulty. Emphasizing the importance of vocabulary Wilkins (1977, p 109) has rightly observed, "While without grammar very little can be said, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed".

4.4 Broadening of cultural insights

The rich literary heritage of Yemen can be exploited by a teacher of English literature teaching in Yemen by "integrating the psychogenetic and sociogenetic factors" (Prasad: 2002, p 4) of the Yemeni students of English. Study of English literature will help

learners to develop insights to understand their own culture. English literature teaching is important in Yemen to facilitate contrastive and comparative studies between Arabic and English literatures.

5. Problems of English literature teaching in Yemen:

5. 1. Absence of effective classroom teaching at the school level

The absence of effective classroom teaching at the school level has a direct bearing on the performance of students at the university level. When the students come to college their skills and knowledge are not enough to help them comprehend the courses they are going to study at the college level in the universities of Yemen. The reasons for the absence of effective classroom teaching are mainly, socio-economic, cultural, motivational and institutional. The following analysis done by the Government of Yemen in partnership with UNICEF, the World Bank and Radda Barnen amply shows that there is a lack of effective classroom teaching at the school level. The excerpts are from the same regarding quality of education, teacher performance and the curriculum content and relevance:

- a) The quality of education received by those children enrolled in school is generally very low in Yemen, meaning that even the minority of children who successfully graduate from the basic cycle are not equipped with the basic knowledge and skills they will need in their adult lives (UNICEF: 1998, p 9).
- b) Teacher performance and teacher morale are also adversely affected by poor working conditions. Overcrowding in classrooms is a major problem, particularly in the urban areas. A UNICEF survey showed that, pupils per class ratios were as high as 100 in some schools. Teaching aids are rarely available, especially in rural areas (*Ibid.* p 10)

- c) The content and relevance of Yemeni school curriculum are also important quality concerns.... A more comprehensive approach to curriculum reform, which takes into account the capacity of teachers to implement it and covers the complete basic cycle, is clearly needed (*Ibid.* p 11)
- d) The quality-related concerns facing the education system discussed above have resulted in low levels of student performance. A recent learning achievement assessment, administered to a sample of 983 fifth-grade pupils in seven governorates, found that students performed poorly in all three of the subjects areas covered (mathematics, science and Arabic). Eighty-five students failed the mathematics portion of the test, 80% failed the Arabic portion of the test. Only 3% of mathematics students, 5% of Arabic students and 14% of science students received satisfactory passes (*Ibid.* p 13).

5. 1.2. Lack of trained teachers at the school level

The Situation Analysis of Basic Education in Yemen (*Ibid.* p 10) reports, “ In-service or on-the-job training is available only once a year, and is not attended by many teachers”. A few years ago writing his PhD dissertation Abdulmalik (1991, p 60) observed, “ Of all the factors associated with poor efficiency, officials consider the shortage of trained Yemeni teachers the most serious”. Fuller (1989), Chapman and Snyder (1989) hold that the teacher training is an important correlate of teacher’s classroom practices. Trained teachers were observed to teach more effectively than the teachers with no training. After a lapse of 7-8 years UNICEF Report does not show a considerable improvement in the situation. There is indeed a need of re-thinking. It is important that the teachers at the school level in Yemen with their proper training and

the awareness of the needs of the country should enable the learners achieve their goals.

5. 2. A freshman's struggle to bridge the gap between desire and constraint

A freshman joins the department of English in the faculties of Arts and Education in the universities of Yemen with a desire to learn English. His four skills are not adequate to meet the demands of the curriculum in the departments of English of the universities in Yemen especially when he has to study courses like *Introduction to Literary Forms*, *18th C Novel* and *Elizabethan Drama*. There is an obvious gap between his desire and the demands made upon him by the new educational environment he has come across. Both teachers and students go through tests and trials. Would it be a wise step to remove these courses from the syllabus? Are they not “emotively sustaining or imaginatively exciting” (Thakur: 2002, p1)? Students are too weak to comprehend these courses. Their major time is spent in learning how to write correct English. By the time they are able to understand the content of the courses the semester is about to be over! Then they rely on the handouts given by their course instructors. They memorize the ready-made material and pass the exams without reading the major portions of the original texts (Sharyan: 2002). Students' limited skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing, do not help them fulfill their desire to study English, as they should – by achieving proficiency in English. Their limited linguistic ability is a hindrance in decoding the literary meaning in literature.

5. 3. Lack of library facilities

English literature teaching in Yemen suffers enormously because of lack of library facilities. Lack of library facilities is one of the serious constraints on development in any academic institution. It

is a stumbling block in day-to-day work and in academic research. Firstly, students have no texts, no reference material, no journals and therefore no motivation to know, understand, learn and conceptualize the topics they study. Secondly, research plays a central role in the academic work of students and faculty at colleges and universities. As a result, college and university libraries (also called academic libraries) are often considered the most important resource of an institution of higher education.

6. Suggestions:

6.1. Effective classroom teaching at the school level

Effective classroom teaching is the *sine qua non* of any classroom environment whether in a school or a college. Students should be made aware of the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking at the very beginning. They should be also made aware of the importance of studying English in English. They should not depend all the time on translating their words and sentences into their mother tongue for comprehension. Though using the mother tongue for more technical and abstract vocabularies is always advisable. Teachers should give more examples, more questions and more feedbacks to facilitate learning. In order to encourage learners to develop writing skills without errors of spelling a teacher should read a passage and tell learners to write after him. Teachers should use language which learners can be able to understand and encourage them to participate in the class. If learners' skills will not be developed before they join the college they are able to take the maximum benefits of English literature teaching.

6.2. Necessity of evolving an integrated approach to teaching English literature at the college/university level

Looking at the social, academic and vocational needs of the Yemeni learners of English it is necessary to evolve an integrated approach to teaching English literature at the college/university classrooms in Yemen. This integrated approach calls for the spirit of tolerance and assimilation; tolerance for the traditional approach to teaching English literature and a clear perspective and confidence to assimilate the recent language-based, learner-centered, activity-oriented approaches to teaching literature. In order to ensure maximum possible benefits, in Yemen, English literature should be taught with the following aims and objectives:

- a) It is of utmost importance that students should be thoroughly trained not only to write correct English but also to organize materials in well-developed paragraphs and essays.
- b) It is equally important that students should be taught to answer the questions. They should be warned against writing irrelevant material or reproducing memorized material vaguely related to the topic.
- c) Students should familiarize themselves with the prescribed works. Lectures or notes about literary works are helpful and necessary but can never be a substitute for the careful reading and the understanding of the works themselves.
- d) Students should be encouraged to think logically. They should be guided through discussions to express their own reactions to the works they are studying and to find similarities and differences between works, types, ages etc. – in short, to discuss, comment on, and analyze any literary subject or work.

* [a), b) , c) , d) & e) are taken from a selection of literary texts edited for the Arab world for which I could not provide the reference . My apologies .]

- e) Whenever possible students should be given more than just the works prescribed by the syllabus. This will increase their understanding and the ability to appreciate literature, and will be aid to more mature commentary on and discussion of general or specific topics.
- f) Students should be made aware of the importance of taking down notes during the lecture.
- g) Students should be encouraged to think that literature is not different from language. They should be made aware of the importance of the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking and to integrate all these skills for a better understanding of the English language and literature.
- h) Students should not be treated as passive ‘sponges’. They should be encouraged to participate in the classroom discussion. Discussion will lead to students’ enrichment of ideas, thoughts and experience and will also instil in them self-confidence.

6.3. Judicious selection of literary texts

Students might have acquired some kind of a level of linguistic competence but they need literary competence to be proficient linguistically, literally and analytically. This is indeed a difficult task. Culler (1975, p114) says that the learner at this stage “has not internalized the ‘grammar’ of literature which would permit him to convert linguistic sequences into literary sequences and meanings”. He further says, ‘understanding of literature also depends on experience and mastery’ (*Ibid.* p 114). However, Fowler (1986) believes in the cultural relativity of literary competence. According to him, literary competence “is not one single skill but it is variable related to cultural circumstances” (*Ibid.* p 176). In the light of these two significant views one cannot ignore the limited literary

competence of the Yemeni learners of English and their cultural conditions. Therefore it is important for the teachers of English to select texts, which are not sensitive in the context of Yemeni culture, and to select those texts, which will enable them to “internalize the ‘grammar’ of literature” as well as help them in linguistic proficiency.

6.4. Filling the post-intermediate void

Even after the students, in their first year/first two years of college/university education, acquire proficiency in their four skills they are not able to communicate effectively (either in speech or in writing) outside the classroom – in real life situations. At his stage, they suffer from what Nakuma (1995) has called ‘the post-intermediate void’. Teachers of English will be able to fill this void by offering them courses in literature, which are more interesting and challenging for their overall development. An integrated approach to teaching literature might be a possible solution to help them out of this crisis.

6.5. Role of the teacher in the classroom

Despite the phenomenal development in the means of communication and their inroads into classroom methodology of teaching a teachers’ role in teaching and moulding the learner’s personality cannot be underestimated. Teachers of English literature in Yemen should take into consideration the socio-cultural and psychological conditions of the learners to facilitate learning. He/she should prepare the students to understand the values of self-study and critical thinking. Classroom is a place where learners should learn the language and literature to cope with the social, academic and vocational demands of their career. Classroom is a place where learners get training under the

apprenticeship of a teacher who is a facilitator of learning. Providing readymade material, which has no viability in study and research, is to hinder the proper development of their abilities. Teacher's place in the classroom is very central in terms of his personality, behaviour, and style of presentation, ability of classroom management and his rapport with his students who look at him as a role model.

6.6. Building a good library and reading room

Lack of library facilities is a serious handicap for both teachers and students. The universities of Yemen should seriously think about developing good libraries and reading rooms. In absence of these no approach however modern and convincing will be able to help the works of teaching and research. In the universities of Yemen there is an urgent need to build good libraries to improve study and research in the area of English literature teaching and leaning.

7. Conclusions:

English literature teaching in Yemen has a vital role to play. It can help students in acquiring the English language, developing their critical and interpretative abilities, and enhancing their worldview. But there is a need to have well trained teachers in the schools, to integrate traditional and new approaches to teach literature at the college/university level, and to build library facilities to create an academic atmosphere for study and research.

If taught properly, English literature can provide learners with rich learning opportunities in language, context, understanding and production. Literature can stimulate the imagination of the learners and as a result can help them acquire language by exposure to texts, which can be enjoyed and understood. Literature with its verbal power, rich extra-linguistic context, sophisticated formal

characteristics and multidimensional semantic universe can be immensely beneficial for the learners.

In Yemen, literature matters a great deal. The knowledge of Arabic literature the students possess from their cultural heritage can be helpful during their study of English literature in colleges/universities. Because of their previous knowledge of Arabic literature, comparative and contrastive studies can make their literature learning and language awareness more productive, intellectually stimulating and aesthetically satisfying. Secondly, these studies might open new vistas of academic research.

In Yemen, English Literature teaching matters for growth, for understanding, for inspiration, for communication, for composition, for appreciation, for perception and for overall development. But it is important to use it with prudence to make it both useful and beautiful. Shakespeare's Portia gently pushes the doors of our consciousness humming the following lines inspiring us for such an image:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.

(*The Merchant of Venice*: Act IV, Scene I, ll. 181-184)

Notes

- (1) It is worth noting that in Yemen, in the past, despite illiteracy, “poetry was the supreme means of expression surpassing all other means”(Bahaddin: 1981, p 8 Trans. by Safwan Shweter, III, Arts student). What I want to emphasise here is the fact that Yemen enjoys great love of literature. This supports my point that literature can be used as a potential resource for language development of the Yemeni students.
- (2) See *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Messick: 1993, pp108-116) and *Children and Women in Yemen: A Situational Analysis Basic Education 1998* (The Government of Yemen in partnership with UNICEF and the World Bank and Radda Barnen: 1998, p 3). In the latter it is reported: “The development of the current educational system began in 1962, the year of the Revolution, though education through schooling became available on a large scale for Yemeni children only during the 1970s. Prior to this, schooling consisted primarily of traditional Quranic education, and was beyond the reach of most children”.
- (3) A paper entitled Crossing the ‘Gate of Tears’ on the Wings of Poesy: English Literature for ELT Classrooms presented on 1 April 2002 at the First International ELT Conference organized by Hodeidah University in March-April 2002.
- (4) An unpublished paper Language Acquisition With Minimum Errors Through Enjoyment in which the data have been analyzed by using Critical Ratio by dividing the students on the basis of their motivation into two groups: Enjoyment Group and Non-Enjoyment group.

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