

# **The Activities Based on a Literary Text for an ESP Classroom**

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## **ABSTRACT**

ELT experts accept the creative potential of literary text in the language classroom, but the English teachers in engineering colleges have differing experiences of the students' outlook towards it. The acceptance of a literary text depends on the kind of text chosen, the quality of activities designed around it, the type of students in the classroom and their willingness to cooperate. As a teacher-researcher, I will demonstrate how a literary text can be appealing to first-year engineering students if a suitable text is chosen. Further, appropriate activities can be improvised around the text to encourage the students to think critically and creatively, and develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities. In this paper, I will suggest six activities based on Ruskin Bond's "The Night Train at Deoli", to provide students with the opportunities to enhance their language skills and thus gain a meaningful experience. I will conclude my study with a list of guidelines for choosing an appropriate literary text and relevant activities for an ESP classroom.

Key words: Literature in ELT, TBLT, LSRW skills, ESP

## **INTRODUCTION**

Time and again, ELT experts have opted in favour of using literature in the ESP classroom even though some ESP experts like Hutchinson and Waters (2010), Dudley-Evans and St. John (2012) have encouraged using an ESP Text. Not many educators can deny the creative potential that literature can bring to the language classroom. In this paper, I will show how using literature in the engineering classroom can encourage students to think critically and creatively and also develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities. However, a literary text can appeal to students only if the right kind of text is chosen and suitable

activities planned to motivate them. This study is based on the following research questions:

1. What is an appropriate literary text for an ESP classroom?
2. What are the relevant activities based on the literary text?

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The participants of this study were first-year engineering students at SSN College of Engineering, Chennai, an institution affiliated to Anna University, Chennai. These students, admitted purely on merit, formed a mixed-ability group—those who come from English-medium schools were proficient in English and those from regional-medium schools found English difficult. Understanding the need to develop the proficiency levels of English in the students, Anna University introduced two courses—Technical English I and Technical English II—in the first and second semesters respectively. These courses were designed to develop the LSRW skills of the students. The six activities suggested in this paper were conducted over a period of two years (2015-2016 and 2016-2017 batches), to offer them a chance to develop their critical and creative thinking and enhance their language skills.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The debate still goes on whether literature can be used as a tool to learn Technical English in an engineering classroom. The experience of teachers handling English in engineering colleges has shown that if chosen correctly as per the aptitude and attitude of the students, literary texts can be fascinating for students. Choosing a suitable text is however a difficult task and designing relevant activities is even more difficult. However, if teachers find time out of their tight programme to choose texts that complement the proficiency level of the students, they can motivate them to work as a team to improve their English skills. Justifying the use of literature for language study, Alan Duff and Alan Maley (2007) in their “Foreword” to *Literature*, affirm emphatically that well-chosen literary texts offer a rich input for language acquisition because they contribute to the cultural knowledge and understanding of the students; they appeal to feelings as much as to thought; they make a contribution to the students’ personal growth; and above all, they motivate and stimulate learning (p. 3).

Collie and Slater (1987) highlight the advantages of using literature in the language classroom: it is authentic material; it provides cultural and language enrichment; and it enhances personal involvement with the text of the target language (pp. 3-6). They also advocate the short story form as an ideal way of familiarizing the learners with literature as it is handy. Short stories can be read

and reread several times, especially when a task is given as homework; they can be chosen from a wide range according to the preference of the learners in the class; and they can be dealt with in one period, with no obligation towards continuity (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 196).

Carter and Long (1991) also vouch for the use of literature to study a language. They suggest three approaches to language learning: the Cultural Model, the Language Model and the Personal Growth Model. They see the text as a cultural model; a model for grammar and language activities; and as a model for personal growth (Carter & Long, 1991, pp. 2-3). Akyel and Yalçın (1990) advocate the use of literature in the classroom (p. 175). Ur (1996) records the advantages of literature as a language teaching resource, saying that it gives pleasure while reading; it provides different styles of writing; enhances vocabulary; fosters reading skills; stimulates a discussion in the classroom; contributes to personal development; encourages critical and creative thinking; enriches the students' world knowledge; and makes the students aware of the various human situations and conflicts (p. 201).

### **ACTIVITIES BASED ON “THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI”**

The literary text chosen for this study, “The Night Train at Deoli” by Ruskin Bond, belongs to the genre Indian writing in English. As mentioned earlier, I have designed six sample activities based on the story for first-year engineering students, to provide them with the opportunities to augment their critical and creative thinking, and to improve their language skills. The activities are: (1) Reading-while-listening, (2) Critical writing, (3) Speaking and interacting, (4) Rewriting or reshaping the story, (5) Creative writing, and (6) Speaking on their own creation.

#### **Activity 1: Reading-while-listening**

Ask the students to read the text and simultaneously listen to its audio recording. Generally, while introducing second language learners to a literary text, reading or listening has been the commonly employed method. Experienced teachers have tried this method with students and found that it brings remarkable progress in language learning. It also has other advantages such as better understanding of the text; enrichment of vocabulary and grammar, and understanding the pronunciation, stress and intonation of unfamiliar words.

#### **Activity 2: Critical writing**

Get the students to write an informal review of the text. They may write a brief summary, or a critical analysis of the setting, plot, character, theme, etc., or give reasons for liking or disliking the text.

**Activity 3: Speaking and interacting**

Get the students to speak aloud what they have written in Activity 2. For example, they can discuss the plot; narrate the story; give reasons for liking or disliking the text; and comment on the language used.

**Activity 4: Rewriting or reshaping the story**

Encourage the students to rewrite the story in any one of the following cues:

Consider a different ending to the story

Place the story in a different time zone

Use the present time throughout the story

Reshape the story from another character's point of view—that of the girl, the grandmother or the station master

**Activity 5: Creative writing**

Give students 10 minutes to practice free writing on a similar or different childhood memory.

**Activity 6: Speaking on their own creation**

Give the students 2 minutes to speak on the incident they have written about in Activity 5.

**DISCUSSION****What is an appropriate literary text for an ESP classroom?**

There are several difficulties in using literary texts in an ESP classroom. Duff and Maley (2007) categorize them as: (1) Linguistic difficulty, (2) Length difficulty, (3) Cultural difficulty, (4) Referential difficulty, and (5) Conceptual difficulty (pp. 6-7). During my years of teaching, I introduced the engineering students to a number of short stories such as “The Last Leaf”; “Hunger Artist”; “Man from the South”; “Araby”; and “The Fly”; to name just a few. Unfortunately, I was met with a kind of apathy on the part of the students (John, 2016, p. 6). Thus, I arrived at the conclusion that choosing a literary text for an engineering classroom has to be done with utmost care, because engineering students are not generally attuned to appreciating a literary text; further, most of them prefer to read texts based on science subjects (John, 2016, p. 8). I also recorded the feedback of the engineering students with regard to their reading preferences (p. 7). This situation can be grasped better given that the engineering students involved in this study had an end-semester examination based on language skills and the exam did not have any reference to literary texts.

According to Lazar (1993), the three main areas to consider when choosing a

text are: (1) The type of course the students are undertaking; the level of the students and their reason for learning English; the kind of English they require; and the length and intensity of the course. (2) The type of students, that is, the students' age, their emotional and intellectual maturity, their interest, their cultural background, their linguistic proficiency, and their literary background. (3) The type of text, that is, the availability of the text, the length of the text, its exploitability, and its fit with the syllabus (p. 56).

When a literary text is chosen for an ESP classroom in India, it is desirable to pick one that belongs to the genre of Indian writing in English and set in an Indian context. This will ensure that the students are familiar with the situations described and the language used, and will hence be able to relate to the story in one way or the other. They can be substituted later with the texts of non-Indian writers.

The main reasons for choosing Ruskin Bond's "The Night Train at Deoli" for this study are the following: the students were familiar with Ruskin Bond's writings at school; his language is rather simple and therefore understandable even for regional-medium students; the story belongs to the genre of Indian writing in English; it is a story about a young boy's crush on a girl who sells baskets at Deoli station and how he wanted to meet her but could not; and finally because this experience of having a crush on someone is universal and it resonates with the students' age group.

Based on the opinion of experts, Carter & Long (1991), Collie and Slater (1987), Duff and Maley (2007), Lazar (1993) and my personal experience, I have enumerated some guidelines for choosing a literary text:

- Choose a text in keeping with the comprehension level of the learners
- Go for a text that suits the students' interest and age-group
- Select a text for which the task can be completed in one period
- Find a text that does not have any unintelligible or complicated references
- Pick a text of Indian origin based on the students' culture and surroundings
- Proceed later to texts of other cultures and nationalities (John, 2018)

### **What are the relevant activities based on the literary text?**

Activities 1 to 6 described earlier need not necessarily be used for one class or for the same group of students. Teachers can experiment with them, or may choose any one or two, according to the attitude, aptitude and the intellectual capability of the students, and also the availability of time during the periods. Activity 1, "Reading-while-Listening" should be planned as a pre-writing or pre-speaking activity only. The main activity should either be Activity 2, "Critical Writing" or Activity 5 "Creative Writing". In 2015-2016, I conducted "Reading-while-

listening” as a pre-writing activity, followed by a discussion as in Activity 3. This was followed by the main task—writing an informal review as in Activity 2. In 2016-2017, Activity 1, “Reading-while-Listening” was again done as a pre-writing activity, followed by a discussion as in Activity 3. This time, the main activity was creative writing as in Activity 5. Discussions enable students to think about a literary text critically and write about it. Several times, when a listening activity was conducted in the class, the students complained that they were not able to understand the speaker, especially when the text was by a British or American writer. On the other hand, when a Reading-while-Listening activity was carried out, the students sat in rapt attention and took part in the follow-up activities willingly. They also admitted that they followed every word of the text. The response of the students was even better when the text was that of an Indian writer or read out by an Indian speaker.

ELT experts recommend creative writing for a number of reasons. The chief among these is that when the end result is considered an achievement, most learners feel proud of their work and want it to be read out (Ur, 1996). The sense of achievement in creative writing is significantly more marked than for any other writing. I conducted a creative writing class in which I gave my students a free writing exercise of 10 minutes. All the students produced original writings, which they shared during the speaking activity. Recreating a task can thus help students to think from a different angle. This can be done as a speaking task as well as a writing task prior to a creative writing task.

Harmer (2015) says that when teachers set up imaginative writing tasks to engage students, they usually strive hard to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language than they might do for more routine tasks. For example, when students try to construct a narrative or tell stories from their childhood, they are tapping into their own experience. This activity provides a powerful motivation for some students to find the right words to express their experience. Harmer adds that creative writing provokes a kind of input-output circle.

I will conclude by adding some guidelines for choosing the right kind of activities:

- Choose activities catering to the level of the students,
- Pick out activities of short duration for “Reading-while-listening”
- Select discussion activities that enhance critical thinking
- Suggest speaking activities that can be easily handled
- Give students prep time for the speaking activities
- Use short texts for reading activities
- Start with a freewriting exercise
- Introduce the creative writing activity gradually
- Limit the writing time for the writing activity for better results

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that critical and creative thinking and language skills can be developed in engineering students by introducing them to a suitable literary text in the classroom and appropriate activities based on the text. Using the example of Ruskin Bond's "The Night Train at Deoli" to enhance the students' LSRW skills, the paper concludes with the guidelines for choosing the right kind of literary text and the right kind of activities in the ESP context.

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