

Teaching English Literature to a Heterogeneous Class: The Challenges and Problems of Differing Identities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teaching English Literature to an increasingly heterogeneous class is proving to be a major challenge in recent years, especially with the emphasis on inclusive higher education in India. The differences in educational experiences and socio-cultural background mean that both the learners and the teachers bring to the classroom certain ideas and expectations. A lack of awareness of the socio-cultural relevance of what is being taught, to whom, and how might lead to miscommunication and frustration among the teachers and the learners. The communication gap that exists between producers and receivers of a text can be attributed primarily to linguistic differences and cultural gaps. This chapter addresses some critical questions related to pedagogical interpretations and actions in the classroom: How to teach diverse learners in a complex culturally diverse setting? What challenges do teachers face in importing a foreign literature and how can they make this more relevant and meaningful in a different cultural context? How can classrooms be more interactive and communicative given the fact that students are expressing themselves in a language that for the majority of them is not their first language? This chapter is

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based on secondary rather than primary research, but it draws on the author's extensive experience of teaching English Literature to college and university students. It highlights the necessity to question the traditional paradigms within which we teach and learn English and also suggests some ways to tackle this problem and to further understand the broader socio-cultural context wherein meaning is contextually determined and constructed.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has brought the world closer. The 21st century has seen unprecedented changes brought about by democracy, free markets, and faster communication. Today we live in an interconnected global economy – the Euro symbolises the new European unity and McDonalds and Starbucks have made their presence felt across the globe. But globalisation does not lead to homogeneity. Ethnic identities and social hierarchies remain; people speak different languages and have distinctive views. In fact there are as many ways of interpreting the world and the surroundings as there are people living in it. Each one of us has cultural identifications, and associated with these are shared perceptions, experiences and behavioural patterns. The acceptance of English as an international language of communication has no doubt enabled nations to interact with each other. It is an indispensable medium to share knowledge, experience and culture. It facilitates intercultural communication and allows nations and people to share their diverse thoughts, views and traditions. But the challenge lies in learning and teaching English language and literature in a multi cultural, multilingual, multiethnic classroom.

My paper analyses the cultural repercussions of teaching English language and literature in the Indian classroom where for the majority of students and teachers, English is not their first language, nor are most of them familiar with the socio-cultural background and context of the literary texts. The cultural paradigm within which English was introduced by the colonizers in 19th century India has changed drastically over the years and so has the composition of the learners in the classroom. Early teaching of English in India was done with the ostentatious purpose of reforming, 'civilizing', 'breeding' a 'cultured' class of people who would fulfil Macaulay's vision of the subject nation and thus be instrumental in establishing colonial hegemony. The selection of authors and texts for higher English education in colonial India sowed the seeds of what later became the syllabi of most undergraduate English literature courses in Indian colleges and universities. English studies post independence continued to reflect the hegemonistic agendas of the dominant Indian elite. In recent years the government's conscious attempt to democratise

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