

- Guidelines to teachers -

Teaching Literature

From a speech made at an O/L Literature seminar at NIE by Mr. Nihal Cooray, Former Director/ English and ADG/ NIE

The teacher should know more about what s/he has to teach and should know more than what is in the anthology - a collection of literary works, or the prescribed texts. Teachers should have the background knowledge in order to deal successfully with the subject in the classroom.

All material taught should be well understood by the children; the plot of a story, text, history and main characters for example. There should be complete understanding of the context of poetry, prose and drama. The teacher should be thorough with the material, as otherwise it would be difficult when teaching in the classroom.

The teacher should know what methodology must be used in teaching. This is important, as it is not necessary to give everything to the children, but to give them time to think and respond so that the teacher's task is to help them with their responses. Children should be allowed time to think and find solutions to problems by themselves rather than the teacher giving out all answers. Usually the students expect everything from the teacher and the teachers have got used to teach them rather than allowing the children to think for themselves.

The teacher should be the guiding light. Children will have to use their reading skills to get the answers. Through contextual clues, they should be encouraged to find the meaning. Also it is very important that they interact with the text. They should search through a text backwards, forwards, in and out, and also outside the text to get at the inferential meaning, which is the deduced or the implied meaning. It is not seen at once and not clearly stated.

Works such as 'Rise & Fall of Roman Empire', Nehru's 'Letters to a daughter' were not written as literary works but later they were considered as literary texts due to their richness of language.

Though children are not encouraged to refer to the dictionary while reading as it breaks up the natural process, it however serves a useful purpose in asking them to give for example the meaning of three words to the teacher by referring to the dictionary. The frequency of this activity may have to be decided by the teacher. Thus will help them to improve their vocabulary.

Giving for example a list of metaphors to the children is not either literature or language and this will not help them to learn. The students must be allowed to interact with the text, which is interacting with the writer. Where possible, the children must be encouraged to learn by heart. The teacher can ask the children what they would like to learn by heart and encourage them to do so. It may be words that they like to remember in order to use them later in their life as the case may be. What they can learn can be –

- i. the contextual meaning of the word
- ii. how to write the word – spelling
- iii. to say the word with the correct pronunciation

The students should be encouraged to store them in their memory for later usage. They should be encouraged to repeat as often as possible and provide opportunities for meaningful repetition. The students should be encouraged to relate things they learn to their life experiences as much as possible. This will make them see things more clearly in a better perspective and also make them remember them without much effort, as the experiences are closer to their own lives. This may happen when going through a poem and if they have experienced a similar situation, it may even prevent them from going further as they may be too sensitive to that particular situation. This is what literature should be and they may respond creatively and enthusiastically if these are closer to their life experiences, which may be seen by their responses, laughing or even crying. This may happen if the teacher is able to present things as living experiences, which helps to keep the interest of the children.

Teaching Literature is a living experience, which is the difference between literature and language.

Recommended reading – *Literature and Language teaching - Brumfit and Carter (1986)*

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