



'Where the Mind is Without Fear' as a tool for teaching essay writing to college students

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Abstract

Literature and language teaching are popularly mistaken as two distinct domains of language. In reality they are two intertwined aspects of a language. It is pertinent to channelize literature, an output of the masters of a language as an input to the learners of that language. Literature as a tool for teaching has gained acclaim though not widely practiced in non-native English classrooms. Literature is studied for aesthetic appeal and for the content and not utilized as a tool for teaching language skills. The paper attempts to exploit 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', a verse in Gitanjali, and a masterpiece by Rabindranath Tagore as a tool for teaching essay writing.

Key words: essay writing, cohesion, impact, stylistic devices

Background

Lingua franca status of English has assigned significance for learning it. Mastery in English leads to widening of knowledge, rendering an opening to a career and aiding in development. These implications of English learning have led to setting of varied objectives for English teaching, opportunities for innovative teaching practices, the challenges faced and the researches on providing solutions for it. English teaching practices have started inclining towards the use of digital tools, however utilizing literature as a tool for enhancing language skills has got its own precedence over other tools.

Considerable numbers of teachers deem the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy choice (Sage 1987). Custodio and Sutton (1998:20) explain the potential literature has in opening horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore. Using poetry as a teaching tool is well explained by Saraç (2003:17-20) as he describes the educational benefits of poetry in providing readers with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the grammar rules, syntax and vocabulary; triggering unmotivated readers through explorations and different interpretations; evoking feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind, introducing figures of speech (i.e. simile, metaphor, irony, personification, imagery, etc.). The paper explores the scope of using 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', a verse in Gitanjali, and a masterpiece by Rabindranath Tagore as a tool for teaching essay writing.

Methodology

Objective: To use the 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', as a tool for teaching essay writing

Teaching Methodology: Lecture supplemented by scaffolding method.

Lecture components: briefing on essay writing – introducing, 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', using 'Where the Mind is Without Fear' as a sample to teach essay writing techniques

Briefing on Essay Writing

Essay is a piece of writing expressing the writer's knowledge and points of view on a given topic. Writing an essay starts with jotting down striking points that the topic triggers in the mind of the writer. Based on those striking points introduction could be written. Three to four striking points could be converted into subtitles. The subtitles should be written in the form of captions. Elaboration of each subtitle has to be made in two or three paragraphs. Writing a conclusion is the summing up of the ideas conveyed in the essay. Conclusion could be written in six to eight lines.

Editing should compulsorily be made before the submission of the essay to correct the grammatical and spelling mistakes made while writing the essay as it's quite natural to commit mistakes while writing an essay in a second language.

Teaching of essay writing could be made interesting by having a prose poem, 'Where the Mind is Without Fear' as a sample. The poem acclaimed for its literary exuberance could well be used as a sample for explaining the importance of instinct to write, formation of ideas, elaborating ideas, cohesion of ideas and use of stylistic devices.

Introducing, the poem, 'Where the Mind is Without Fear'

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

Where knowledge is free

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depths of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

*Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action into that heaven of freedom,
my father, let my country awake.*

- Rabindranath Tagore

Where the mind is without fear is one of the verses of Gitanjali, a Nobel Prize winning masterpiece of Rabindranath Tagore. The poem was written when India was in struggle for freedom from the British rule.

The poet in his prose poem creates an imagery of a country where the people enjoy freedom of expression, equality; where there is purity of thoughts and actions; where perfection is reached through hard work and fair means; where reasoning is not lost by superstitions and old beliefs; where people are open minded to new and good things. The poet ends his prayer by wishing his country to wake up into that heaven of freedom.

W.B.Yeats in his introduction to Gitanjali appreciates with wonder the genuineness of thoughts; exuberance of poetic skills that would surpass time and regions; reach humanity and mingle with the soul.

"Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence. These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life, or be carried about by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth" .- (W.B.Yeats,1912)

Characteristics of a good essay learnt from ‘Where the Mind is Without Fear’

Instinct to Write

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free*

Rabindranath Tagore registers in the poem his longing, his prayer for a country where people could live with respect and dignity with no fear and discriminations. The strong patriotic mood makes the poet to picture a world which will be free from subjugation and slavery.

“Outwardly, the poem is a prayer. It expresses Rabindranath Tagore’s magnitude of thought which demands his country’s redemption. The poet expects that his countrymen should be fearless persons. They have to move in society with self-respect and confidence. In this country, education should not be the monopoly of the rich and the affluent.” (Wadikar, 2013)

Students could be directed to learn that Rabindranath Tagore’s urge to share opinions or thoughts has laid the foundation to the formation of ideas. Students are taught that belief in worthiness of one’s ideas and strong faith in the genuineness of the thoughts result in drafting a good content of an essay.

Formation of Ideas

*Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depths of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;*

Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian nationalist and visionary wanted India to awaken to a bright dawn of freedom. Freedom that he envisions is not restricted with freedom from slavery but also from our own mental chains. He is aware of social issues that entangle his countrymen and the necessity of elevating above these to be liberated both socially and spiritually.

“Tagore’s love for his land was too great. Rabindranath Tagore was a great patriot who loved his country more than anything else.Rabindranath was a great dreamer who dreamt of an ideal society in which there is tireless action, real freedom of action, absolute equality of classes and castes. Tagore expresses his deep sentiments...” (Pradhan, 2002)

Students could be instructed to discern that Rabindranath Tagore’s words reflected his thoughts. His words are the outcome of his strong thoughts. His purity of thoughts has laid foundation for right sensitivity which in turn gets reflected in words. Students should train their minds to be sensitive and that would make them resourceful enough to form ideas over a topic

Elaborating Ideas

*Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action into that heaven of freedom,
my father, let my country awake.*

Rabindranath Tagore makes it clear not to make his love for nation blur the glaring reality that prevail in the country. He deplores over the prevalence of superstitious old habits defying the logical reasoning. He is also worried over the closed mind sets of people which restrict the flow of new ideas and actions. This

clarity over the complete picture not obscured by partial, one-sided approach makes him talk about things that need transformation.

Students could learn the importance of a clear mind that could see the complete picture of a thing or an issue. To create an impact, the students should develop analytical mind that could analyze in all possible aspects and render deeper meaning to our understanding which would subsequently lead to clarity of thinking. This clarity of thinking gets reflected in clarity of expressions. Students could also learn the art of being subtle while analyzing negative aspects of a topic. They could understand this through Tagore's subtle portrayal of a reverse picture by writing upon what the country should be instead of stating how the country is.

Coherence of Ideas

'Where the Mind is Without Fear' demonstrates the art of achieving coherence.

The poem opens with the prayer for people living with fearless minds and self-respect; such people would be the outcome of equality in education; opportunities of literacy to all without discriminations would unify the country; unified people could maintain the harmony of the country if truthfulness becomes their core values; the truthful, unified people would aim to achieve perfection through diligence and hard work; purity of thought and action would make people to see the wholeness of things without partiality, they would not allow logical reasoning get lost in the superstitious old habits; such impartial open mindedness would lead to incorporation of new thoughts and actions; such a country would be a heaven of freedom, and Tagore prays his country to be like it.

Coherence is the action or fact of forming a united whole and it is also the quality of being logical and consistent. The ideas depicted in the poem, 'Where the Mind is Without Fear' are flowing out with an underlying connection with each other. One idea is logically connected to each other. Students could be taught to learn the art of achieving coherence in their essays as it decides the appeal and impact of the essay from Tagore's poem.

Stylistic Devices

In 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', Rabindranath Tagore uses Imagery, the use of visually descriptive or figurative language, to picture free India even before Independence; Anaphora, the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or verses (in the poem the word 'where' is being repeated in almost all the lines except in the last); Alliteration, the repeated use of the same consonant sound at the beginning of each word in a line of verse (in the poem the examples of alliteration are: head held high/ where the world /dreary desert sand of dead habit)

Apostrophe, a figure of speech in which some absent or non-existent person or thing is addressed as if present and capable of understanding(in the poem the poet 'uses my father', father refers to God / 'let my country awake', country refers to the people)

Metaphor, a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them "Where the clear stream of reason"... in the above line the reason has been compared to the clear stream.

Personification is a figure of speech in which human characteristics are attributed to an animal or an object or non-human things. "Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection", in this line the abstract idea tireless striving has been assigned with a human aspect.

Literary devices that could be used in an essay are Allusion, Diction, Epigraph, Euphemism, Foreshadowing, Imagery, Metaphor/Simile and Personification. Students could understand appropriate

use of stylistic devices like Imagery, Metaphor/Simile and Personification through Rabindranath Tagore's effective handling of it in the prose poem, 'Where the Mind is Without Fear'.

Conclusion

Pedagogy of English is an evolutionary field incorporating a wide range of teaching practices and teaching tools. Literature can be a powerful tool for teaching all four primary language skills, namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills. The scope a prose poem like 'Where the Mind is Without Fear' has in explaining the importance of 'instinct to write', 'formation of ideas', 'elaborating ideas', 'establishing cohesion of ideas', and 'use of stylistic devices' in essay writing is attempted in the paper. Teachers looking for teaching tools could have in mind the list of reasons forwarded by Maley (1989) for regarding literature as a potent resource in the language classroom which include Universality, Non-triviality, Personal Relevance, Variety, Interest, Economy and Suggestive Power and Ambiguity.

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