

UGC Minor Research Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title of the Project: *The Teaching of Literatures in English in India: Current Perspectives*

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The Project was undertaken with a view to examine the uses of non-native literary text in the Indian classrooms, where English is taught as a second language. For a long time, following the Western modes of teaching and learning, we in India have used texts written by European and American writers which mostly have non-Indian backgrounds. The students who read and study such texts in English are faced with two problems: one, they have to struggle with the unfamiliar culture depicted in the texts; two, the struggle to comprehend the culture has to be done in a language—English—which they are not well-versed in. These two issues have been under discussion for some time now and its result has been the introduction of texts by Indian authors and/or by non-European and non-American writers. The inclusion of such texts has had positive impacts, one being the students' enthusiastic engagement with the texts and the consequent increase in learning outcomes.

However, one of the questions that has been neglected over the years is, how should the non-native literary texts be actually taught in the typical Indian classroom, which comprises a large number of learners whose basics of English are too shaky? This implies that teaching such text should be guided by a knowledge of certain methods and techniques. What is to be done is to exploit the learners' familiarity with the culture depicted in the text. They should be encouraged to engage in efferent and aesthetic reading. The efferent reading helps learners focus on the linguistic elements and the latter form of reading enables them to focus on textual implications. These two readings give them knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, etc. on the one hand and of the socio-cultural bearings on the other.

These methodological suggestions are illustrated in the present project with the help of a non-native novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. It attempts, first of all, to pinpoint the parallels between the cultural practices presented in the novel and those in a typical Indian village. The project further illustrates how the linguistic items can be presented in contexts, especially to teach vocabulary and usage. Finally, a series of questions prompting aesthetic reading are given to generate ideas from the learners. The argument is that non-native texts can be used more effectively than their Western counterparts to generate responses of the learners and that such texts will strengthen the linguistic capabilities of the learners.

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SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE PROJECT

The Teaching of Literatures in English in India: Current Perspectives

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The present Project begins with the assumption that English has a changed role to play in the era of Globalisation. The demand for English has been on the rise since the mid-1990s and it has been felt by all nations that survival without English is a difficult proposition. As such nations across the world have been teaching English in different ways—as a Foreign Language, International Language or as a language to be taught for specific purposes. India was fortunate to maintain the legacy of the language for over two centuries because of poor government policy, appointment of ill-qualified teachers, poor infrastructure, impractical methodology, etc. However, the standards of English teaching in India have been declining and learners from rural areas find it difficult to gain as much proficiency in the language as their counterparts in cities. This has created a wide proficiency gap which has affected the rural youths' chances of getting jobs, especially the private sector, particularly in BPO industries or IT companies. The **first chapter** of the Project extensively deals with the above points.

The **second chapter** deals with the advent of Postmodernism and postcolonialism and its impact on the Indian academy. Conservative academics, the chapter states, resisted the inclusion of Postmodern/Postcolonial critical theories in the syllabi, for they found no use for it; they felt impressionistic criticism had its value in the Indian classroom. However, there were also progressive scholars who argued in favour of the theory, for they were well aware of the immense interpretational possibilities the theories opened up for teachers and students alike. The new ideas of Postmodernism and postcolonialism, they argued, would make the text a site of contest where traditional notions about the role of the teacher, students, readers, etc would be challenged. Thus they envisaged the classroom to be a place of empowerment and original thinking rather than a place where an all-powerful teacher would transmit his received knowledge/ideas. The progressive scholars further argued that studying English Literature alone should not be the practice, but students should get a chance to read a representative selection of texts comprising Women's writings, dalit literature, gay and lesbian writing, etc. In short, the change expected is a change from English Literature to Literatures in English.

Whether these ideas of dealing with texts can be actually practised in the classroom or not is the point illustrated in the **third chapter** of the Project. Taking an African novel, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as an example the chapter illustrates how the text can be used for *efferent* and *aesthetic* readings, ie. how it can be used for teaching language and developing critical thinking in the typical Indian ESL classroom.

In the **last chapter** an attempt has been made to critically evaluate the Indian academic tendency to adopt all the methods introduced in the West, especially in England and America. The two approaches dealt with are the Structural Approach and the Communicative Approach. The blind

adoption of foreign methods in India, the chapter argues, has been harmful to our English teaching for it totally ignored the wide gap in English proficiency that exists between the rural and urban students. Between the two Approaches, is argued, the former—with its emphasis on elaborate form-focused practice—had a better impact on our learners than the latter. So at least in teaching the linguistic aspects, we need not discard the positive aspects of the Structural Approach. The chapter also underscores the value of indigenous methods which would enhance the creative thinking abilities of the learners.

This report is a summary of the Conclusions and findings of the study.
