



## INTEGRATING LITERATURE INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: A SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE

Neelakshi Chandrasena PREMAWARDHENA\*

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the challenges and perspectives of introducing literature into foreign language studies at universities in Sri Lanka based on research conducted among students of six foreign languages at University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Although literature is a major component in the undergraduate study programs, the students are more inclined to develop their language skills. Thus, they devote less time to reading literature.

A major setback in integrating literature into foreign language curriculum is the lack of language competency of students at the beginning of their study programs. Apart from French and Japanese, the students have a tendency to start learning German, Korean, Chinese and Russian at elementary level. Hence, competency in the relevant language to start reading literature is acquired at the earliest in the second year. Lack of appreciation for literature, in general, due to traditional teaching methods and the stigma attached to it as being a difficult and uninteresting area also results in the students' further drawing themselves away from the literature.

While suggesting remedial measures already tested in the German study program for more effective teaching, this paper emphasises the importance of didactics in literature and training students to cultivate a learning culture that includes appreciating one's own literature.

**Keywords:** literature, literature teaching, Sri Lanka, integrated teaching, foreign language.

**Özet:** Bu çalışmada, Sri Lanka'da Kelaniya Üniversitesinde altı farklı yabancı dil sınıfı ile yapılan bir araştırmanın sonuçlarına dayanarak, yine aynı ülkedeki üniversitelerde yabancı dil öğretiminde edebiyatın kullanılmasına dair görüşleri ve zorlukları tartışmak amaçlanmaktadır. Lisans düzeyi eğitim programlarında edebiyat öğrenimi temel amaçlardan biri olduğu halde, öğrenciler daha çok dil becerilerini geliştirme eğilimindedirler. Bu nedenle de, edebi metinler okumaya daha az zaman ayırmaktadırlar. Ayrıca, yabancı dil müfredatına edebiyatın eklenmesinde karşılaşılan en büyük zorluk, öğrencilerin bölüm eğitimlerine başladıklarında dil yeterliklerinin eksik olmasıdır. Fransızca ve Japonca dışında, öğrenciler arasında temel seviyede Almanca, Korece, Çince ve Rusçaya başlama eğilimi görülmektedir. Seçilen yabancı dilde edebiyat okuyabilme yeterliği en erken ikinci yıl sonunda gerçekleşmektedir. Edebiyatın gerekliliği fikrinin takdir görmemesi genellikle, geleneksel öğretim yöntemlerinden ve edebiyata vurulan zor ve sıkıcı damgasından kaynaklanmaktadır ki bu da, öğrencilerin edebiyattan uzaklaşmasına sebep olmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, etkin öğretim için Almanca eğitimi programında denenmiş iyileştirme ölçütleri önerilmekte ve edebiyat öğretiminin önemi ile kişinin kendi dilindeki edebi metinleri anlamasıyla başlayan öğrenme kültürünü öğrencilere aşılamanın önemi vurgulanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** edebiyat, edebiyat öğretimi, Sri Lanka, bütünlük öğretim, yabancı dil

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The continuing debate and a number of studies on the role of literature in Second and Foreign Language Education bear ample testimony to the significance given by scholars in this regard. Kelly and Krishnan (1995), Gilroy and Parkinson (1997), Belcher and Hirvela (2000), Hanauer (2001), Yang (2001), Vandruck (2003), and Kim (2004) discuss how to use literature to teach English as a foreign language. In some other studies (e.g. Schröder, 1977; Weinrich; 1983; Caspari, 1994; Sell, 1995; Bredella, 1996; Keunen & Eeckhouf, 2001; Denka, 2005; Hall, 2005) the focus is on the position of literature in foreign language teaching. The common motive in

\* University of Kelaniya, [neelakshi3@yahoo.com](mailto:neelakshi3@yahoo.com)

both of these types of research is that all these studies recognize the importance of integrating literature into foreign language education and discuss the challenges faced.

Hall (2005) focuses on the development of literature studies based on classics tradition to its present day shift into cultural studies. During the early stages of literature in FLT classical works by renowned authors were integrated into the curriculum. These texts were mostly used for translation purposes and exercises on reading comprehension. This compelled the reader to concentrate on the given texts at surface level of the texts and vocabulary and not on their literary value. This also led the students to look in a dictionary for each and every foreign word they come across, and it was expected that referring to the dictionary becomes a habit students should accumulate (Denka, 2005, p.18). However, literature in FLT in its present context tends to emphasize its role in improving communicative competence and providing “a springboard for the development of critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation” (Bretz, 1990, pp. 335-338) and create an awareness in students on the culture and society of the relevant country. Thus, a lot of attention has been paid in recent years to didactics of literature.

## **2. LITERATURE IN FLT IN SRI LANKA**

The secondary school curriculum in Sri Lanka includes introduction to literature of the mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil) and English. Thus, the students who opt for a foreign language at the university are expected to have prior exposure to literary works, literary criticism and appreciation. However, the introduction of literature at early stages of the curriculum in a foreign language causes several difficulties. Apart from French and Japanese that require prior knowledge, other foreign languages offered at University of Kelaniya do not have any prerequisites to read these as main subjects. Thus a student of German, Chinese, Russian, Korean or Hindi is introduced to the basics of the respective language in the first year. While Hindi is offered by the Department of Hindi, the other aforementioned languages with a curriculum designed under a common framework are offered by the Department of Modern Languages. While the first year curriculum focuses on intensive training in language with integrated components of culture and lifestyle, the second year continues with the language skills and provides the students with an insight into the history of literature of the relevant language with selected excerpts. The third year in the General Degree Program leads to reading a selection of major literary works, which includes a selection of dramas, novels, short stories and poetry. The limited exposure to the language within a short period of time (at present 30 weeks of exposure to language in the first year with 7-8 contact hours a week), the question arises as to how much of a selected text do the students have to understand linguistically before reading gives rise to responses and intuitions. As Schulz (1981, pp. 43-53) observes, linguistic complexity of a text affects accessibility, comprehensibility, and the pleasure of enjoying literature in foreign language learning. The Special Degree Programme allocates more hours to both language and literature studies and thus the students are expected to achieve higher linguistic competence at the completion of four years. At present Special Degree Programmes in German, French and Hindi are available at University of Kelaniya.

## **3. LEARNING TRADITIONS AND TRADITIONS IN TEACHING LITERATURE**

The communicative approach adopted by current methodology in Foreign Language Teaching promotes learner-centred teaching, demanding the students to be independent, critical, logical and

analytical in their thinking and devote time to self-learning under minimum supervision. The learning traditions of Sri Lanka, however, produce passive learners heavily dependent on teachers as a result of teacher-centred learning in schools for over twelve years of their education (Premawardhena, 2006). The reluctance to express one's opinion, inability to work independently and take own decisions, heavy reliance on lecture notes read out in class, collective thinking and lack of critical and analytical skills all lead to obstacles in mastering a foreign language, as these are the very qualities that a student of FLT should not possess. Furthermore, the stigma attached to 'literature' as one of the 'must-learn-but-boring' subjects at least up to the G.C.E. Ordinary Level Examination continues at university level. This attitude towards literature as one of the most difficult and uninteresting areas of language tends to alienate students from appreciating the beauty, power and creativity expressed through language. Apart from students who have offered Sinhala/English as a subject for the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination the others have minimum exposure to reading and appreciating literature.

#### **4. STRATEGIES USED IN INTRODUCING LITERATURE IN FLT**

In contrast to the traditional literature based curriculum in a foreign language, the present day FLT focuses more on oral and written communication skills. Thus the trend to overload the curriculum with classics of each language in their original form - be it a classical drama or a novel mostly incomprehensible to beginners of a language – for the sake of reading literature does not exist in FLT anymore. The literature prescribed is carefully selected and supportive measures are taken to familiarise the students with the works. For instance, in the German Studies curriculum, dramas and novels selected are familiar to Sri Lankan audiences, such as Brecht's *Mother Courage* or *Chalk Circle*. Audio-visual media, such as films on the works and translations are made available to the students to be familiar with different interpretations of the same work, thus giving them an insight into aspects of interpreting and appreciating literary works. The students are advised against over reliance on available critical works on the selected texts and are encouraged to present their own interpretations with supportive arguments and evidence. Evaluation criteria of all course units on literature for German consist of a major component on oral presentations in German. Thus the traditional approach to reading literary texts and trying to translate every word is avoided and students develop their skills in analytical and critical thinking while learning to support their arguments with evidence from texts. In languages where acquisition of the writing systems are more time consuming as in the case of Chinese or Japanese, simplified texts are used especially when dealing with ancient literature. French and German literary works are more familiar to the Sri Lankan audience, such as *Madam Bovary*, *Les Miserable* in French or *Siddhartha* and many works of Brecht in German. Thus the students of these two languages have an advantage in literature over their counterparts offering other languages as in the case of Korean or Chinese.

##### **4.1 Literature and Society**

Irrespective of the language or the literary works selected an insight into the historical and cultural background needs to be provided to the students to understand and interpret literature of a foreign language. Just as much as language reflects the culture, traditions and beliefs of a society, the majority of the literary works too, (barring perhaps science fiction or modern historical novels; for instance), function as a mirror of society corresponding to the period where the works were produced. Hence, the bond between literature and society is as strong as that of

language and society and neither can be studied isolated from the other. As Keunen observes “the theme of ‘literature and society’ may be as old as literary criticism itself. It has only been sixties that academic literary studies recognized it in a new literary-critical discipline” (2001, p. 9).

The curriculum of a foreign language should thus include an insight into historical and cultural aspects of the relevant speech community in order to provide students with the background knowledge required to understand its literature. To facilitate students in gaining access to the information, course units on history of literature as well as culture and society are integrated into the curriculum.

## **5. CHALLENGES IN INTEGRATING LITERATURE IN FLT AND REMEDIAL MEASURES**

The stigma attached to literature as a field alien to language studies and too difficult a field of study to grasp needs to be challenged first when students are introduced to literary works in a foreign language. A survey conducted among the first and second year students of German as a foreign language in the Department of Modern Languages before being introduced into literature provided ample evidence to portray their reluctance and fear to read literary works. Linguistic difficulties, disinterest and no advantage for securing employment were cited as main reasons. A second survey conducted after a minimum of one year since introduction to German literature provided very positive results with students recognizing the pleasure of reading in a foreign language, understanding a new society and thus broadening their horizons. The didactics of literature in FLT suggest different strategies to familiarize students with understanding and interpreting literary texts in a foreign language. For instance, several works in German by Weinrich (1983), Caspari (1994), Ehlers (1992, & 1999) and (Denka, 2005) discuss the importance of teaching and reading strategies in literature, that can be easily incorporated into teaching of literature to make it more accessible to students.

The second challenge is to train the students to develop critical and analytical skills, ability to work independently and present their own arguments with supportive evidence from texts. Deviating from the learning traditions embedded in the students following twelve-and-a-half years of passive learning is not an easy task. However, inter-active, student centered teaching in the first year of FLT at the university pave way for students to adapt to new learning methods. In a fast moving society as at present, the time devoted for reading for pleasure is minimal. The present day undergraduate is not spared by its consequences. Reading is no longer cited by many students as a leisure activity. Their lack of general knowledge, information on current affairs, let alone European or Asian history required to understand and interpret literature, are a result of examination oriented learning in a highly competitive environment.

As it was mentioned before, the majority of students opting for a foreign language have not offered Sinhala or English as a main subject at the Advanced Level Examination. The prescribed literary works for the Ordinary Level Examination are long forgotten as they only serve the purpose of passing the examination. As a result, they lack skills in reading and interpreting literature. Hence, it has to be emphasized that knowing and training in one’s own literature is necessary to read, understand and appreciate literature in a foreign language. It has also been noted that there is still a tendency to use some traditional methods of teaching of literature in foreign languages in Sri Lankan universities as merely works for translations and discourse

analysis. This discourages the students to appreciate great works of literature as they are treated as tools for measuring linguistic ability and not analyzing the literary value.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the significance and challenges faced in integrating literature in FLT based on research conducted on foreign language studies at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya. The significance of appreciating one's own literature to understand literary works in a foreign language was emphasized in section (5). Hence, there is an urgent need to address the lack of interest and importance given to Sri Lankan literature at present. Integrating literature in FLT pave way for equipping students with a number of skills including development of critical thinking, analytical skills, formulating and expressing independent opinions, presenting one's own interpretations independently, improving language competence, such as reading, speaking and writing skills. Above all students are provided with an opportunity to broadening their horizons, understanding other cultures – providing a platform for cross-cultural understanding and intercultural communication. Thus, it is important to integrate literature into foreign language teaching in Sri Lanka by overcoming the challenges discussed above.

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