

IS IT LANGUAGE OR LITERATURE?

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Abstract

The Study in hand is a survey of the views of the students of English in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibb, with the purpose of finding out whether these students are interested in studying the language or rather the literature. The researcher hypothesizes that learners join the English Department for the purpose of studying literature. This hypothesis has been rejected and the alternative hypothesis that they are interested in the language, itself has been accepted. The results show that the majority of the learners join the English Department for the purpose of studying the language rather than literature. The study sheds some light on the nature of literature that is offered to the learners of English. For the researcher, the content of the literary material is outdated and far remote from the learners' everyday concerns and the contemporary affairs. The study concludes with the researcher recommending that further studies have to be conducted in this area. He also recommends that if literature is a must, then at least it has to include modern literature. Whether dealing with the content or with the form of literature, the syllabus has to be updated. He further suggests that if the main interest of the learners is the language itself, then means other than literature, can be tried so that learning language can be more realistic, effective, and connected with the real world of the learners.

Introduction

For various reasons, some of which are justifiable and some are not, we do things in our life without seeming to bother asking ourselves why we do what we do and for what purpose. In other words, ambiguity or aimlessness can become our aim without our

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awareness. This aimlessness can be very serious when it enters the world of educational institutions, universities in particular. This vagueness of aims is confirmed by Sharyan (2003: 402), when he says that the existing syllabi in the Departments of English ...do not offer clear aims and objectives. In the English departments, in the Yemeni Universities and in many other countries, students spend four years- sometimes even more- studying English; most of this is done by studying the English literature not the language. It has not occurred to us (as teachers of English) to ask ourselves why they have to do that i.e., studying English literature; is that based on their own needs or interests? Or has it to be done only because it is there? What do our learners of English, in particular, really want? Is it the language or the literature that they are looking for? This study is an attempt to address such questions; it is based on surveying a group of students learning English as a foreign language in the English Department with the purpose of finding out if they are really interested in the literature, not something else. It also aims to examine if that makes a difference at all.

Statement of the problem

What do the students want to study when they join the English Departments? Are they interested in English literature or language?

Sub problems:

1. It is not clear what learners of English really want- literature or language!
2. The syllabi and the contents are out of date.
3. Students of English literature do not know their own literature.

The hypothesis

- ❖ It is hypothesized that studying literature is the students' main objective for joining the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts, Ibb University.

The alternative hypothesis

- ❖ It is hypothesized that students who join the Department of English are interested in learning the language rather than the literature.

The rationale

Life, as regards interests and occupations, has changed a lot all round the world and it will continue to do so. People are getting more and more pragmatic. Things are sought or done for their practical utilities. This is almost true of language learning; it is studied not for its sake but for what it yields. In other words, foreign languages are studied for purposes other than themselves and these purposes are more or less practical (Harmer, 1981:1-2). Now, can literature be those other purposes? Are the learners really interested in studying literature? Our intuition and common sense tell us that studying literature cannot be the students' main objective in joining the Department of English; for, though literature is studied for a purpose, yet the purpose is rather for leisure and/or pleasure and not for real and practical uses at least in a country like Yemen where more and more people are getting jobless day by day and life has become too difficult for learners to spend years of their life just to do a thing for its own sake. This is true of the learners of English, at least in our Yemeni universities. It is not hard to think that learners join English departments to learn the language to achieve some practical objectives and that is to get employed, to survive. This does not necessarily mean that they are not interested in the language itself; they are, and this is what makes them more enthusiastic to join the Department of English.

Of course there are several means to studying a foreign language; literature is one and, so far, has been the dominant one. But is it really the only and the best medium or are there other means by which the same target –learning the language – can be achieved? It can be the best means when there is interest but when the interest is lacking, the case is rather different. The best thing for us is to come

down to the learners and find out whether they have real interest in literature or not and whether studying it will make their life a better one, from economic and social points of view.

This study is an attempt to find out what the learners want.

The Review of the Related literature

Whether the learners need language and not literature is an issue that has not been given its due attention. People are oblivious to that and this might be due to lack of awareness. However, some hints have been made by some of those who are concerned. Yalden, for example, indicates that the subjects (of ELT) will not be regarded as attached specifically to study literature, on the one hand, or completely independent on the other. It will be closely connected to the purpose of the learner (Yalden, 1987: 59). Kharma and Hajjaj point out that it will be misleading to think that learning a second language has a literary and artistic aim (1988: 44). A more recent statement by Sharyan (2003:400) saying, "*the primary aim is learning the language, not literature*" can be considered a very bold one in this regard.

Regarding learners' needs, Kharma and Hajjaj (1988:45) point out that the need for learning a foreign language is instrumental and the purpose is pragmatic. This is in harmony with what is claimed in this paper. Harmer (1981:2) asserts this saying that students or people in general want to study English because they think it offers them a chance for advancement in their daily life. He goes on to say that good knowledge of English helps one to get a better job than if he only knows his native language. Sheerin (1991: 151) says that needs analysis should include areas such as the ultimate purpose for the use of the language, the skills required ...She adds that learning takes place most effectively when the students are actively involved in the process (of learning). Sharyan (2003:390) refers to these needs as the *felt* needs (as felt by the learners themselves and *perceived* needs (as seen by course designers...etc.) He is of the opinion that we must attend to both kinds of needs.

As far as goals of learning a foreign language are concerned the long-range curriculum goals of the students should be identified, coordinated with the external goals of students and society (Papalia, 1976:63). For Sharyan the basic goal of foreign learners of English is the communicative competence. In other words, it is the language that is aimed at by learners rather than something else.

The methodology

To ascertain his personal views and experience on this topic, together with the casual interviews with different types of students, the researcher conducts a survey based on a questionnaire; the students concerned are asked whether they are interested to study the language or the literature. Some other relevant questions are also dealt with (See the questionnaire in the appendix).

The subjects of this study are the students of English level four, in the Faculty of Arts. They are 41 in number both male and female and of which the latter comprise 18 of the total number.

The Instruments

Besides the casual interviews and the frequent observations by the researcher of the students murmuring against studying literature and the lack of other things that can be more important to meet their needs than literature, the researcher made use of a questionnaire as a handy instrument to get a systematic and objective response from the target group. Most of the questions are close ended to make it easy for the responders to answer the questionnaire. When necessary, open-ended questions are included.

The limitations of the Study

This study is limited to level four students of English in the Department of English Faculty of Arts, Ibb University. This is because this group can state their own needs and wants clearly, unlike the junior level students who are less able even to state their real aims for studying English.

Content validity

The researcher did his best to deal with this specific and clear phenomenon by increasing the number of questions so that all the aspects of this area are dealt with.

The items of the questionnaire are also given to some specialists who approved their relevance to the phenomenon under study. In addition to this, this study has been presented in the symposium held on 19-20 May 2003, in the Faculty of Arts, Ibb University. Some subjective assertions have been criticized by some experts and have been modified as a result. No other objections by whosoever were made All this guarantees other types of validity as well.

Reliability

Ten copies of the questionnaire were given again to ten of the students who had already taken them. These ten have already written their names on the answer sheets. When comparing the two versions of each student, the responses were exactly identical. This shows that the items are reliable.

The Findings

The results of the questionnaire are presented in the tables below:

Table (1) Results of questionnaire

YES	NO
12	27
31	10
4	36
40	1
16	23
31	10
23	17
33	6
11	30
2†	9‡
14	22
12	29

† Students who were able to give examples

‡ Students who could not provide examples

Table 2 detailed results

QUESTION No:	SEX	YES	Total	NO	Total	TOTAL RESPONSES	NO RESPONSE	NOTES
1	M	7	12	14	27	21	2	
	F	5		13		18		
2	M	19	31	4	10	23		
	F	12		6		18		
3	M	-	4	22	36	22	1	
	F	4		14		18		
4	M	21	40	1	1	22		
	F	19		-		29		
5	M	11	16	13	23	24		
	F	5		10		15		
6	M	20	31	4	10	24		
	F	11		6		17		
7	M	14	23	8	17	22	1	
	F	9		9		18		
8	M	20	33	-	6	20	2	
	F	13		6		19		
9	M	7	11	17	30	24		
	F	4		13		17		
10	M							1•
	F							1•
11	M	6	14	14	22	20	4	
	F	8		8		16		
12	M							6■
	F							6■
TOTAL		215		182		397	12	2/12

• Students who say they read extra English literature
 ■ Students who say they read Arabic literature
 M= male
 F=Female
 Students are required to give examples

THE DISCUSSION

As seen from the results shown in table (1) above, the majority of the students reacted to the questionnaire as follows:

Twenty-seven out of the total number 41 said they have not achieved what they expected. Thirty-six stated that literature was not their priority in joining the English department. Only four students said their objective was literature. On the other hand, almost the entire sample said they joined the department in order to study the language rather than literature. Thus the research hypothesis that studying literature was the objective for joining the

English Department was rejected .The second alternative hypothesis that their objective was only to study the language was accepted.

CONCLUSION

The results, as shown above, are straightforward, and clearly show that most of the students are not interested in literature. Or, to put it differently, their main interest is the language not the literature. However, they do not mind if literature is there in the course curriculum as far as their main objective-the language is achieved.

We can say that we need to take the matter seriously and start finding out what our students really want. If they are only interested in the language - and I believe this is the case - let the focus be only on the language and there are many ways of achieving this target. English for specific purposes is just one possibility. If, on the other hand, they are interested in literature, let that be the case but at the same time they should be introduced to the modern literature, which is more practical, and whose language matches that of everyday language. Let us take it for granted that our students are interested in studying the English literature; there is no harm in that but let us be honest and realistic and take them to the present. Let us shake off the archaic dust of Shakespeare and let their mad love of him die with his immortal songs if that love will make them oblivious and unmindful to what is going on around them. It is time that they are taken out the shells of Shelley's odd odes so that they live the culture and literature of the present day English people. No more do we need to busy them with the TIGER of the dark forest of William Blake but rather with the lion man of the contemporary civilization. In other words, our students should have a real picture of the present English literature and this never conflicts with the aim of learning English as a language. But we have also to question this in view of the fact that understanding English literature presupposes knowing one's own literature. This may lead us to think of studying Arabic literature through the medium of English, that is to say, the translation of masterpieces of Arabic literary works.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that there should be general assessment and reassessment of the situation regarding the content of the syllabus whether it meets the needs of the learners and the demands and ideals of the society.
2. It is also recommended that students' needs be taken into account, whether these needs are objective or subjective.
3. Awareness should be created among all types of learners of their real needs and wants.
4. If literature is a must, it should be of the modern time dealing with contemporary and current affairs rather than the remote and forgotten past.

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Appendices

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Spending four years learning English, do you feel your objectives have been fulfilled?
2. Did you enjoy what you have learnt?
3. Your objective in joining the English Department was studying E literature?
4. Your objective in joining the English department was to learn the language?
5. Are you of the opinion that English can be studied through Arabic translated literature?
6. Do you think the syllabus in the department is relevant to your future needs?
7. Do you like the English literature?
8. Do you like the Arabic literature?
9. Do you read for any English writers outside the syllabus?
10. If the answer is YES give examples?
11. Do you read for Arabic writers?
12. If the answer is with YES give examples?