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# An Analysis of Approaches to Teaching Literature

*Lok Raj Regmi\**

## **Abstract**

*This study analyzes the approaches to teaching literature in terms of their major concerns in a literary text, the roles of teachers and students that these approaches demand while handling literary texts, and the limitations the approaches have. The data were gathered from existing theoretical and empirical literature and analyzed descriptively and critically. The study shows that the approaches to teaching literature acknowledge literary texts for their own purposes. For example, a language-based approach treats literature as one of the authentic sources of language teaching and learning to acquire better proficiency of language by students. Likewise, information-based and new criticism approaches regard literature as material to facilitate students to acquire the skills of appreciation. Response-based and other critical literary approaches support the analysis of literary texts using different critical lenses. Concerning the roles of students under the adoption of the aforementioned approaches to teaching literature, the reader-response approach could provide enough space for the students' responses. The study emphasizes the use of multiple approaches for effective teaching learning of literature.*

**Key words:** *Authentic material, creative language use, multiple approaches, literary features, major focus, roles of students and teachers, teaching literature.*

## **Introduction**

A teacher tackles the texts of poems, essays, dramas, fictions while teaching literature. Such texts are linguistically rich, aesthetically embedded and pedagogically useful to teach language skills and contents. Hismanoglu (2005) argues that literature is one of the resources of language teaching which covers the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas, for example, vocabulary, grammar and functions. Following the same spirit, Nurhayati (2016) is of the opinion that literature, and drama in particular, contributes to the development of students' speaking and writing (cited in Fauziah, 2016). Moreover, literature has been serving as a content-rich material for informative, aesthetic and/or critical purpose in the teaching of English (language). The teaching of literature helps students achieve the high level proficiency of language, and an effective exploitation of literature in tertiary level cultivates students' cognitive skills, for example, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing and interpreting. It shows that students can

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\* Email: regmilokraj20@gmail.com

achieve such proficiency and criticality through the teaching of literature if literary texts are handled successfully by using appropriate and effective approaches. Although literary texts are interesting and motivating, they are not free of challenges to handle. The adoption of relevant approaches can address such challenges, and makes the teaching learning environment of literature more conducive.

An approach, a way of looking at things and the series of assumptions, is an overall view or idea in teaching and learning. Ubahakwe (1991) describes the approach as ‘a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of teaching and learning a subject and it is theoretical’ (quoted in Ikonne, 2016). The teaching methods have been coined on the basis of the roadmap developed in approach, and the strategies/ techniques, classroom activities are set accordingly. In this context, the approaches to teaching literature are overall views and theoretical assumptions to accomplish the whole teaching and learning process with certain goals or achievements. The knowledge and adoption of a (new) approach in literature teaching facilitates teachers to face the challenges that emerged at their forefront while they are dealing with a literary text having new subject matter. It reveals that the success and failure of teaching literature, to some extent, depends upon the approaches the teacher employs while dealing with the texts of literature in classroom. Showing the importance of approaches in teaching and learning, Brandes (1986, p.12) claims, “Learning what is meaningful and relevant depends partly on what is taught and partly on how it is taught”. Here, the essence of Brandes’s view is equally applicable in literature teaching as well. Literature is a useful resource for language development and for aesthetic purposes. For the successful achievement of the goals of teaching literature, the knowledge of a teacher alone is not enough. In addition, the teaching of literature is looking for the support of approaches. In other words, teacher’s adoption of appropriate pedagogic approach(es) can encourage students to explore literary texts for both language and aesthetic purpose to develop their language and literary competence. Such approaches in broader sense can be summarized: language-based approach, response-based approach, information-based approach, integrated approach and literary approach. Nowadays, new approaches, for example, eco-critical approach, formeaning approach (blend of linguistics and reader response), moral-philosophical approach have been found in practice. This study attempts to present different approaches to teaching literature from a pedagogic point of view.

## **Review of Literature**

Literature displays different texts: poetry, essay, fiction, drama; and can be extended to film, and other popular literature that captures the attention of potential readers. It is a content rich and authentic material that exposes students to bountiful examples of language use and to the aesthetic value of the texts. Literature, a valuable and a wider reading material, is taught at different levels of educational institutions. The teaching of literature can deserve its achievements set in its goals when a teacher handles the teaching learning

activities employing appropriate approaches. In this juncture, some of the previous works accomplished in the field of the approaches to teaching literature have been discussed.

Carter and Long (1991) have developed three approaches to teaching literature. The first approach in their discussion is the 'cultural model' which represents the possibility literature brings into the picture as regards the understanding and appreciation of different cultures. This model acknowledges literature as an expression of culture and encourages teachers and students to deal with a literary work in relation with the culture that existed in the very text. The second model is the 'language model' and it emphasizes the fact that language is the literary medium and literature is seen as an instrument to teach specific vocabulary and language skills. The last, their 'personal growth model' entails students engaging with the reading of literary texts, appreciating and evaluating them, making connections between their own experiences and the themes of the texts. The ultimate goal of these three models in integration is to develop proficiency of skills in learners.

The study of Miliani (2003) is another important work in this field in which he discussed the approaches: the traditional approach, language-based approach and reader-response approach respectively. In the traditional approach, the role of teacher is important, and while dealing with the literary texts, students are passive recipients. In a language-based approach to teaching literature, the literary texts are acknowledged as linguistically rich materials and exploited to enhance students' language skills. This approach focuses on students' linguistic enrichment. In the reader-response approach, students as readers perform the roles, they stand as active recipients and develop an independent ability to read, assimilate and appreciate literary texts. It proves that the role of teacher in the first one is a sole meaning maker of a literary text, whereas, a mediator and a constructive critique in the second and in the last approach.

Mustakim, Mustpha and Lebar (2013) in their study revealed that the teachers' employment of approaches to teach children's literature was very controlled and limited, and the stages of reading, for example, pre, while and post were not followed since there was the lack of textbooks and the teachers were compelled to depend upon the modules prepared by Curriculum Development Centre. In most of the cases, teacher centred methods have been adopted in teaching literature. Following the same spirit, Padurean (2015) attempted to explore students' perceptions towards the literary texts and teachers' use of methods. For this, she adopted questionnaires and focus group discussion as a tool/ technique of data collection. The study concluded that literary texts are useful authentic materials for their linguistic enrichment but the literary texts were not free of challenge. While dealing with such literary texts the teachers were using a teacher-centred approach and they did not have any concern for students' responses and students had to console with the notes provided by the teachers.

The next work in the seminal area was carried by Bloemert et al. (2016) in order to explore the approaches adopted by teachers while teaching literature in Dutch education. The study also discussed the adopted approaches: text approach, context approach, language approach and reader approach respectively. In adopting text approach, formal elements of literary genre were focused through close reading; culture, history and other socially rich diversities were the focuses of context approach; and language skills were the central items in language approach whereas teacher encourages students to respond to the issues existed in the literary texts in reader approach. The study concluded that all these approaches were fruitful in teaching literature to develop students' language skills, cognitive skills and intercultural harmony. Moreover, the study found that literature-based approaches were more time consuming than other language-based approaches.

As a researcher, one can see the studies that focused the use of different approaches to teaching literature, for example, teacher-based, language based, reader-based, text-based. The work of Jimmy (2015), as one of the new approaches to teaching literature, highlights how the application of ecocritical approach facilitates the teaching of literature. The study acknowledges that literature is a part of nature and it depicts the issues of human-nature contestation. Moreover, the message of literary texts is useful to minimize such contestation and stands as a solution. In this juncture, the use of ecocritical approach to teaching literature seems quite relevant. The approaches in teaching and learning literature aim at providing a framework, sequence of operation to use. They can guide teaching and learning activities, support students' engagement/ interaction and encourage motivation. In this context, the study of Khan and Alasmari (2018) discussed the model developed by Maley (1989), Carter and Long (1991), and six approaches proposed by Van (2009). Their study had summarized the approach, for example, language-based approach, stylistic approach, language-literature integrative approach, response approach. The study further highlighted the other approaches to teaching literature: the new criticism and critical literary approaches. The above studies describe different approaches to teaching literature in general and give less attention to the analysis of approaches in terms of their focus in literary texts while teaching, the roles of teachers and students in classroom teaching, and the areas these approaches do not address. The present study attempts to explore the focus of approaches while teaching the literary texts, teachers' and students' roles while adopting the approaches to teaching literature, and the limitations of them (approaches).

## **Methods and Procedures**

The present study is based on descriptive and analytical research design. In order to build the concept, Carter and Long (1991), Beach (1993), Guerin et al. (1999), Miliani (2003), Tyson (2010), Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman (2010), Tyson (2013) ), Bell (2013), and Padurean (2015) were consulted. Likewise, the empirical studies of Carter (2007), Zhen (2012), Padurean (2015), Jimmy (2015), Fogal (2015), Fauziah (2016), Bloemert, Jansen

and Grift (2016), Khan and Alasmari (2018) were used for discussions. The collected information was analyzed descriptively and analytically.

## **Discussion**

Linguistic, aesthetic and cultural dimensions embedded in literature are supportive to develop better gripping of language and the skill of literary appreciation among students. Zhen (2012) argues that language learning and literary appreciation are the characteristics of teaching literature in the context of second language teaching and learning. For these purposes, the employment of suitable approaches is important. The use of relevant approach(s) in teaching literature can work as a catalyst to ease the subject matter, to draw effective and constructive synthesis. In other words, using approaches in teaching and learning of literature leads students to articulate, explain, and analyze the ideas/ issues. It encourages both teachers and students to explore literary texts through language and other analytical perspectives, for example, gender, reader, character, textual etc. In addition, the use of approach/es provides the teachers and students with ample opportunities for literary understanding and logical conclusion through discussion and other group works. This section analyzes the approaches to teaching literature in terms of their focus in literary texts, the roles of students and teachers while dealing with the literary texts, and the limitations of approaches.

**Language- based approach.** This approach to teaching literature basically treats literary texts as means to helping students improve their proficiency of language. Maley and Duff (1990) argue that the primary aim of this approach is quite simply to use literary texts as a resource connecting students to vocabulary, language skills and other aspects of the language. This approach looks at literary texts how far they provide space to carry out language-based teaching learning activities. Muthusamy et al. (2017) claim that language-based approach aims to have genuine concerns with the language oriented activities, pays particular attention to the way language is used, and involves wider procedures for developing language competence. The teacher sets activities for students, and guides them to express their opinions as the concept of the text. This approach smoothly develops students' exposure to literary texts, extends word repertory as well as high level language proficiency in them. Students are encouraged to participate actively in the process of understanding the meaning of text although the focus lies in the linguistic enrichment of students. Moreover, it does not show any resentment to some of the lead up activities for study skills in reading literature, for example, prediction, summary, and debate.

Likewise, Carter (2007) has extended the volume of this approach to cultural aspects embedded in literary texts. He argues that literature is a part of culture and culture plays a co-constructed as well as interactive role with language in literary production. According to him, the cultural element associated with literature should be considered while analyzing

literary text by adopting a language-based approach. This approach has some limitations. Since it pays very little attention to the historical and other backgrounds of literary texts and students' experience, the language-based approach relatively speaking can make teaching and learning of literature more mechanical and arid. However, the study of Carter (2007) has suggested the stakeholders to consider the responses of students while treating literature using this approach. The aforementioned discussion shows that language-based approach treats literature as an authentic source to achieve better proficiency of language in students. The role of a teacher is a guide with major responsibilities and students are given limited roles.

**Response-based approach.** It is a reader-centered approach or student response approach in which the primacy is given to the experience of the learner in the meaning-making process of literary texts. This approach to teaching literature assumes that students are not passive recipients in extracting meaning from literary text and then responding to underlying messages. Following this spirit, Rosenblatt (1993) as a pioneer of this approach focused on efferent and aesthetic reading as two stances of reading literary texts. The former one is useful to search for information whereas the latter one is useful for critical interpretation through the transaction between the reader/ student and the text. It was further elaborated by Langer (1994) focusing on the use of prior experience, critical stance of a reader/ student. Students, while reading literature, can encounter with the message of the text and elicit meaning at a certain point. Students work together as the teacher urges and put forth their opinions, hold discussion in order to reach a logical conclusion. It leads students towards an independent ability to read, assimilate and appreciate literary texts. The teacher while adopting the reader response approach provides students with critical inputs and guides them if needed. S/he as a mediator helps learners interact with the text. McRae (1991) argues that the teacher's role is as intermediary among author, literary text and receiver in order to open up a multi-directional sphere of interaction. Since this approach keeps the reader's aesthetic experience at centre while teaching literature, the intent of literary texts, historical, cultural and other aspects embedded in literary texts have not been considered. Likewise, there is a possibility that affective fallacy (evaluating everything on the basis of readers' responses only) may occur. Keeping these pitfalls at the centre, Kellm (2009) has extended this approach to the formeaning response approach, a blended form of linguistics/ stylistics and reader response to bridge the gap between aesthetic and stylistic reading approaches, and to show how pleasure and understanding can coincide. The discussion leads to the conclusion that response-based approach treats literature as a subject for aesthetic purposes through the issues existed in literary texts. The role of a teacher is a critical input provider and the role of students is found at the centre in meaning making process of literary texts.

**Information-based approach.** This approach to teaching literature acknowledges literary texts as a source of information, for example, history, culture, politics and others. In

this juncture, Ganakumaran (2007) argues that the information-based approach regards literature as a source of aesthetics or this approach values aesthetically patterned artifacts endowed with the knowledge potentials: philosophy, culture, morality and humanities (cited in Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman, 2010). It is teacher-centred approach and s/he as a sole meaning maker of the text has to serve with a lot of input in giving students various contents of literary texts. The adoption of information-based approach in teaching literature gives a nominal attention to students' involvement and they are treated like passive recipients, however, a good pedagogic approach to teaching literature should aim at eliciting the students' response to the text and guide them to an individual exploration. The discussion shows that information-based approach treats literature as a subject loaded with knowledge potentials. The role of a teacher is spacious and students are treated as passive listeners in this approach. This approach is not free of limitations.

**Stylistic approach.** The stylistic approach to teaching literature attempts to analyze the literary use of language, the mode of literary expression. In addition, this approach to teaching literature encourages students to discuss beyond the surface meaning of text. This approach aims at exploring how the resources of language code are put to claim in the production of messages. To quote Simon (2006), stylistic approach "considers literature primarily as discourse and studies it from a linguistic perspective, which means, how literary texts exemplify the system of language" (cited in Khan and Alasmari, 2018, p. 172). It reveals that the focus of stylistic approach while dealing with a literary text is to explore how language as a system is working in order to convey a finite meaning. The teacher can display the role of a guide in the meaning making process of literary texts and students are encouraged to respond on the basis of textual features, style, and mode of communication of literary text than on the basis of their own aesthetic experience. Likewise, Fogal (2015) has extended this approach to pedagogical stylistic approach which blends the language used in literary text and the concepts as responses of students. As a conclusion, this approach to teaching literature focuses on the analysis of literary language for students' linguistic enrichment. The role of a teacher is a guide and some roles to students have also been allocated. This approach has been criticized for its traditional and a mechanical treatment of literary language only ignoring the historical, cultural and other aspects existed in literature, however, the study of Fogal (2015) has focused the concepts prevailed in literary texts.

**The new criticism approach.** It is a textual approach to teaching literature and concerns with the formal elements of literary text, and their analysis through close reading. This approach instigates students to explore the literary/ aesthetic elements of the text, their value, and analyze them accordingly. With reference to the focus of this approach, Van (2009) as cited in Bloemert, Jansen and Grift (2016) claims that the aesthetic value of literature is highlighted by advancing the students' sensitivity to literary texts through analyzing literary language and established conventions of genre in order to develop in

students the skill of reading between the lines and for the logical interpretation of the text. The role of a teacher, according to this approach, is to keep him/ her at the centre of designing activities and making meaning. Since this approach puts much attention on the close reading of literary texts, the background information of the author, the experience of students (readers) and their backgrounds have been shadowed in meaning making process of a literary text. But this approach, as it follows the objective mode of reading (the close reading of a text), is free of both intentional and affective fallacy, and it leads to more objective and independent interpretation of a literary text. The discussion shows that the new criticism approach treats literature as a source of textual/ literary features and the analysis of them leads the process to an independent and objective interpretation of a literary text. The role of a teacher is central and students remain passive listeners.

**Thematic or interdisciplinary approach.** Literary texts are wider reading materials as they encompass the texts of diverse themes, for example, education; literature and art; class and culture; gender and race; anxiety and alienation; globalization and development; population and economy. These texts for interdisciplinary reading can be further facilitated by the adoption of thematic or interdisciplinary approach. Smith and Johnson (1993) argue that teaching learning is interdisciplinary by nature. This approach assumes that the content and variegated ideas existing in literary texts are useful for wider/ extensive reading. This approach facilitates to teach the texts of inherited language and diverse themes. As a conclusion, this approach treats literature as a content rich material to expand students' horizon of knowledge. The teacher remains a facilitator and students perform some limited roles while teaching literature using this approach.

**Gender-based approach.** Our views on males and females have been shaped by our social structures. Such views have led us to mark the discrimination between the males and females. Literature as a reflection of society depicts these realities. Gender approach to teaching literature basically looks at who the characters are in the text and the roles allocated to them: submissive or decisive, and whether men and women are treated differently. Moreover, this approach accepts literature as a subject to teach for aesthetic purpose and assumes to have the issues related to gender discrimination. Tyson (2013) argues that patriarchy, traditional gender roles, the objectification of women and wrong notion of sex are the basic ideological opponents of this approach and these ideologies are responsible for the oppression of women and their failure. If this approach is deployed in teaching literature, students are asked to explore these items and analyze the text accordingly. The search for coexistence between males and females is one of the concerns of this approach. The teacher remains an independent critique while dealing literary text using this approach. Since this approach focuses on the selected items in the text, the other aspects, for example, history, class and culture the literary texts embed are not considered seriously.



**Ecocritical approach.** This approach to teaching literature is recently developed and it acknowledges literature as a part of ecology and environment (nature). While applying this approach, students attempt to explore the contestation between culture and nature, the moral question in front of man because of his destructive behavior to nature, the self-centered view of humans and the dominance of human interest to destroy ecology and environment. Jimmy (2015) pleads that the eco-critical approach motivates students to analyze how human activities pictured in literary texts destroy nature and receive the recognition of sinful job. This approach encourages students to look for the solution so that improvements can occur in the target spots.

**Marxist approach.** It is known as the social background approach and treats literature as a source of knowledge, articulation of ideas, and focuses on the intent or the substance of the text. Beach (1993) views that the Marxist approach to teaching literature regards social and historical contexts in the ground of ideology as fundamentals of analysis in a literary text. The teacher, while employing this approach, wants students to look for who the characters are in the text, their socio-economic status. Yelin (2018) argues that reading literature, according to this approach, encourages students to explore the roots of discrimination, disparity and analyzes them from theoretical perspectives, and leads them to interpretation. While using this approach to teaching literature, the teacher can ask students to suggest the solution to minimize the gulf between rich and poor. It facilitates students to comprehend the value of life. As this approach concerns the intent of the text, characters and their social backgrounds, the language aspect of the text and students' aesthetic experience have been ignored.

**Psychological approach.** It is a character-based approach and assumes that human behaviours guided by emotion play important roles in the meaning making process of literary text. This approach assumes that literature is such a vehicle through which characters express their suppression of the psyche, particularly of the unconscious. Tyson (2010) is of the opinion that the family, repression and the unconscious, dream, and the defenses are some of the basics of this approach. Moreover, this approach is interested in understanding the origin of psychological problems rather than the psychological strength. It focuses the character's dominance of the unconscious and the guidance of emotion. The other aspects of literary text, for example, language, style, and intent have not been given adequate priority while adopting this approach to teaching literature.

## Conclusion

Literature, a content-rich material and a creative language use, is an important pedagogic material and a subject in language teaching. For a successful literature teaching, the adoption of appropriate approach(s) is equally important. A teacher dealing with literary texts, for example, poems, essays, fictions, dramas and other popular literature should be

well- acquainted with the theoretical knowledge of the approaches to teaching literature and their practices. The present writing analyzes some of the existing, newly emerged and other potential approaches to teaching literature focusing their major concerns, the roles of teachers and students, and the limitations of these approaches. In a broad sense, the approaches can be categorized as language-based, information-based, response-based, and critical literary approaches. Language-based, and response- based approaches are traditional approaches, and among the critical literary approaches, some are newly emerged and some of them are derived from practices. Language based approaches acknowledge literature as a fertile and authentic source of language teaching, particularly for language development. In language-based approaches, the role of a teacher is found as a guide with major responsibility in meaning making process.

The conclusion based on the findings shows that students in most of the approaches are found as passive recipients although they take part in the activities allocated by teachers. It depends upon the practice. Since language-based approaches have major concerns with the language items in a literary text and teacher led activities, less attention has been given to other aspects, for example, students' aesthetic experience and intent of the text. On the other hand, a response-based approach looks for the issues existed in the text and students' responses on the basis of their aesthetic experiences. While dealing with literary texts employing this approach, the roles of students in the meaning making process are more prominent than the roles of teachers. This approach, since it concerns more with the aesthetic experience of students, can invite the pitfall of affective fallacy. Among the critical literary approaches, the new criticism approach deals with the close reading of the text along with its literary features, for example, figures of speech, imagery and symbols. Although this approach is loaded by the teacher-centered activities, the teacher can allocate the roles of students properly. Other critical literary approaches to teaching literature focus on the issues (ecology and environment, gender), intent of the text, the roles of characters, their backgrounds, and the dominance of their unconscious but there are some aspects and spaces these approaches cannot address. The discussion focuses the adoption of multiple approaches for effective teaching and learning of literature.

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