

***English Language and Literature Education as a Tool for
Opinion Formation and Influence***

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Abstract

The present world, replete with strong opinions in the form of influencers and media houses, is a difficult place to navigate without the ability to think independently and the confidence to voice ideas. In Ayn Rand's classic *The Fountainhead*, Ellsworth Toohey demonstrates the might of words that can mould popular opinion and shape history. In the process, he lays bare the fragility of the collective mind that can be herded in any desired direction by an eloquent articulator. This danger inherent in the inability of an individual to form independent, well-reasoned opinions can be effectively alleviated in the English Language and Literature class. Literary exposure provides readers with opportunities to inspect and analyse the work from their unique point of view. This critical appreciation can help them hone their ability to form opinions and influence listeners using relevant textual evidence. The current study is the result of the observation that despite sufficient exposure to literary texts, learners at secondary and senior secondary levels in India frequently need the teacher's help in decoding and analysing literary texts. As a result, they become the teacher's echo instead of an individual voice. This qualitative study used Active Learning techniques to read Literature with different groups of Grade IX learners. It aims to demonstrate that an active engagement with the reading process can help learners become independent readers who can form individual opinions and influence listeners by expressing their ideas using relevant textual evidence.

Keywords: Active Reading, English Literature, Textual Interpretation, Opinion Formation, Textual Evidence

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum Framework and Status of English language in India

English language is “an integral part of the Indian multilingual repertoire,” and acts as a “passport to social mobility, higher education and better job opportunities” (NCERT). This has important implications for teaching and curriculum planning as English language introduction “is today being demanded by everyone at the very initial stage of schooling” (NCERT, 2006).

Place of Literature in English L2 Curriculum

The syllabus exposes learners to literature as the curriculum architects believe that “literature should play a pivotal role at the secondary stage of education” (NCERT).

Hence, in India, learners have ample opportunities to read age and level-appropriate prose, verse and drama texts. By the time they reach Middle School, they have received at least six years of instruction in the language and gained exposure to literary works.

Expected Learning Outcomes

The NEP 2020 recognises that learners should “think critically” to be able to thrive in the rapidly changing knowledge landscape in a world with dramatic scientific and technological advances. The document voices the need to empower learners through discovery, analysis and exploration (Ministry of HRD, 2020).

To facilitate this aim, schools are expected to encourage learners to:

- explore concepts, analyse and organize information... and express their ideas (NCERT, 2019).
- At the same time, learners are expected to:
- read with comprehension and not merely decode,
- construct meaning by drawing inferences and relating the texts with previous knowledge,
- express their thoughts effortlessly, confidently and in an organized manner,
- and develop imagination, creativity and aesthetic sensibility, and appreciation (NCERT, 2019).

Role of the English Class

The English class can facilitate these goals by helping learners read “literature from different perspectives and engage in activities for developing communicative competence” (CBSE, 2022-23). Through exposure to literature, which is but a mirror to society, the language and literature class can hone learners’ critical thinking, interpretation, and opinion formation. Through nurturing their higher-order thinking skills, the English class can instil the confidence to share their opinion and justify their stance.

Need of the Hour

These expectations are perfectly in sync with the need of the current times. In the 21st century, when the world is inundated with information from sources like the internet and AI,

and teeming with myriad views in the form of electronic media and social media influencers, our learners need to be able to form individual opinions, justify their stance, and convey their ideas confidently.

A failure to do so might make it difficult for them to hold their own around people with differing views.

The Classroom Reality

The challenge, however, is that the classroom reality is quite different. Despite exposure to literature in the form of stories, poems and plays, quite often, learners require teacher intervention to help in decoding the meaning, identifying and appreciating figurative devices, forming an independent opinion, and sharing their opinion on the literary value of a text.

In the context of EFL, appreciating English Literature can be challenging for learners due to various reasons.

1. **Knowledge testing:** Generally, during classroom discussions and exams, teachers ask a greater percentage of knowledge-based questions, rather than inference-based, or analytical questions. Loban highlighted that learners are asked to look for “trivial information,” while there is a need to emphasize reading beyond simply “what happened in the story” (Loban, 1954). Though critical to testing understanding, such fact-based questions can stem the development of learners’ analytical abilities.
2. **Washback:** This focus on facts rather than analysis could probably be a result of the washback (also known as ‘backwash’) effect as knowledge of facts generally helps learners perform satisfactorily in examinations. A case in point can be the 2022 CBSE English question paper in which the questions, according to teachers and students were, “direct, rather than being based on extrapolatory perspective,” and based on “basic comprehension of the plot and theme” (Indian Express, 2022).
3. **Transactional methods used by teachers:** Teachers in India frequently resort to antiquated teaching methods such as translating texts, providing word meanings (Kalia, 2017), and delivering simplistic explanations of texts rather than inviting discussions. In such a learning environment, Learners begin to “accept the aesthetic judgements of their teachers” (Loban, 1954) rather than engaging with the text. Additionally, they influence learners with their own interpretation of the text (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017) which makes the learners get the incorrect impression that there is only one correct interpretation.
4. **Class Strength and Available time:** Schools in India generally have more than thirty, even as many as fifty-five students in a class. With teacher–student ratio as a concern (Rao, 2018), it is an uphill task to motivate everyone to participate in discussions in the available time of 40 – 50 minutes. As a result, the teaching of literature is robbed of discussion and ends up becoming a lecture where learners don’t get the opportunity to brainstorm.
5. **Different Learner Ability:** Owing to a wide range of geographical, cultural, economic, and educational contexts in India, there is a lack of a uniform policy governing the introduction stage (Rao, 2018) and content coverage in the teaching of

English. Due to “a diversity of schools and linguistic environments” (NCERT, 2006) the teaching contexts in schools vary substantially in India. In addition to the type of school, learner exposure to the language also depends on opportunities provided by their home and society.

Due to this diversity, learners are poised at widely different proficiency levels and owing to changes in schools or shifting cities, learners with wide variations in their language proficiency are frequently found together in the same class. Hence, it is difficult for teachers to cater to these differences.

6. **Denotative Vs Connotative Use of Language:** Literary texts pose an additional level of complexity because of the figurative use of language. For an Indian student, who is still in the process of unlocking the potential of the language, it becomes challenging to decode the connotative layer of meaning.

As a result, unless we find a way to nurture independent readers who can form their own opinion regarding texts, learners will continue to depend on the teacher to handhold them through the reading and interpretation process.

Consequences of Teacher-Dependence

The famed Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky aptly said, “A book read by a thousand different people is a thousand different books.” However, when learners wait for the teacher or the support material to act as the fount of knowledge, their voice is stifled. This hampers the development of a vital 21st-century skill, critical thinking, which is reflected in the ability to “effectively analyse and evaluate evidence, arguments, claims and beliefs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The inability to think critically adversely impacts the formation and voicing of individual ideas. As a result, learners start looking up to the teacher to provide direction to their thought process. They need the teacher to decode the meaning and critically analyse texts. A lack of confidence in their own views and interpretation hinders the development of their individual voice and they become an echo of the teacher’s ideas.

In addition to the immediate effect of shaking their confidence in reading independently, this leads to the long-term impact of making them lose interest in extensive reading. The importance of extensive reading in second language development is well established. The English class must instil the confidence to approach literary texts independently and inspire them to read extensively.

Failure to address this at the school level might also have dangerous implications in the real world replete with opinionated people and influencers. If learners do not develop the skill of forming individual views and using relevant supporting details to convince others of the merit of their ideas, they might not be able to convince people with differing viewpoints.

Aim of the Study

Hence, in this study, I aim to establish the utility and importance of Active Learning, specifically, Active Reading, to hone learners’ critical thinking and nurture their ability to

independently analyse literary texts, form an individual opinion, and use textual evidence to share their ideas and influence the listener.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Active Learning

Active Learning draws upon the theory of constructivism which proposes that learning is a process where new information is added to the foundation of prior knowledge (Feder, 2022). Simply put, it is the opposite of passive learning where instead of sitting listening to teachers and accepting their explanations and interpretations, learners engage with the text to make meaning. It “involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). In addition to making the learning process immensely interesting and productive, Active Learning can make learners powerful thinkers and better at arguing their points (Bean & Melzer, 2021).

Reading: An Active Process

Instead of being a passive recipient of the ideas presented by the teacher, an ideal reader is an active participant in the meaning-making process, drawing upon their own experiences to generate meaning. Rosenblatt explains it through the term, ‘transaction’, where “the meaning is being built up through the back-and-forth relationship between reader and text during a reading event” (Rosenblatt & Karolides, 1999).

This transaction exemplifies Tarkovski’s assertion stated above because readers sometimes bring “very different assumptions about people and society to the reading” (Rosenblatt & Karolides, 1999).

Active engagement with texts through tasks that make learners think helps the development of critical thinking skills (Haggard, 1988) and nurtures their ability to develop an independent opinion.

Previous Studies

A 1996 study established the importance of “The Use of Critical Thinking Skills in Literary Analysis” on college freshmen and demonstrated that the use of critical thinking skills in literary analysis can help students struggling to form well-reasoned arguments (Esplugas & Landwehr, 2008).

Current Study

This study, centred around the secondary and higher secondary levels, argues that the first steps towards the ability to analyse texts independently should be taken at the school level as not all school students will go on to focus on literary studies in college. Irrespective of the choice of subject in college, the ability to read a text, form an opinion or response, and communicate individual ideas is an important life skill. Hence, it should be nurtured at the school level.

To this effect, the present study aims to demonstrate that the use of active reading can hone learners' critical thinking, opinion formation and expression, which are core skills that everyone must possess to be able to navigate the world confidently.

METHODOLOGY

The current paper is the result of research conducted independently over a period of two years. For this qualitative study, the data was collected through the participant observation method where the researcher observed the difference in learner activity and performance while teaching classes taught using the traditional approach and the Active Learning approach.

Participants

The study involved teaching a particular verse to six different groups of learners. These learners, taught in groups of eight to ten, belonged to various private schools in India. Their language proficiency was at the required level and school, they were used to being taught using the traditional method detailed below.

Observations that Inspired the Research

While teaching students in grades IX and X, the researcher noticed that despite sufficient exposure to literature through their textbooks, learners required the teacher to 'explain' the text to them.

Consequently, the teacher's ideas influenced their opinion on characters, plot, and writer's craft. Learners displayed limited confidence in interpreting the connotative meaning, and their individual response to literature and events was either non-existent or unconvincing. They were unable to find relevant supporting arguments or textual evidence to convince the listener of their ideas.

To counter these limitations, the researcher employed Active Learning and Reading techniques to observe how it helped them critically analyse literature to form an individual opinion and identify textual evidence to argue their point of view convincingly.

There is a host of Active Learning and Reading techniques (Iowa State University) that can be used to increase learner participation in classes. I used a wide range of those techniques with many literary texts and always found the interaction to be livelier, and learners surer of their understanding. In the present paper, I am detailing the employment of the activity 'Think-Pair-Share' for teaching the seminal work, *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost to grade IX learners in India.

The Traditional Method

Generally, literary texts are introduced through a discussion where the teacher acquaints learners with the important place the writer/ poet/ playwright holds in the literary landscape. In the case of the text in question, the textbook presents the poet as someone, "who writes simply, but insightfully, about common, ordinary experiences" (NCERT, n.d.). Some teachers, while introducing the work in the class, add additional biographical information to help learners understand his literary greatness and the inspiration behind the work.

The theme of the poem is then presented in the textbook by mentioning, “This well-known poem is about making choices” (NCERT, n.d.). Additionally, the class is involved in a pre-reading discussion where they recall if they ever found themselves at such a crossroads.

After this preliminary discussion, the text is read either individually or collectively and discussions, which are a mix of line-wise or thematic explanations, are held to ensure that learners understand the work.

Impact: Immediate

The immediate impact on the learner is that once the literary value of the poet is established, the learner is awed by the stature. Consequently, while reading the work, the learner can find only examples of elevated ideas and appreciable expression. Even if individual learners feel that some ideas were mundane or insufficiently developed, they dare not pit their thoughts against such a literary genius. Consequently, in the ensuing discussion, learners try to stifle any criticism or observations they might wish to direct towards the work as they don’t have the courage to suggest that they could make an addition to the text. They wait for the safe route of the teacher explaining the most commonly accepted interpretation and adopt it unquestioningly.

As far as their response to the work is concerned, one important reason behind an abiding interest in a literary work, beyond the time and place of its creation, is the way individual readers respond to it. When a framework of ideas is presented before learners get an opportunity to construct their individual opinion regarding the themes, content, and aims of work, they become wary of approaching it from their viewpoint.

Impact: Long Term

Over some time, this approach silences any possible dissenting voices. Before expressing their views on anything they read, learners start feeling the need to know about the popular opinion regarding the writer before they can voice their individual thoughts.

Their imagination becomes limited and the expanse of possible interpretations becomes quite narrow.

An Alternative Approach: Active Learning

Procedure

To provide free rein to learners’ imagination, I invited them to read the verse, *The Road Not Taken*, without any moorings of the poet’s name or writing style, literary or historical background, and the reception of the work by literary critics.

Active Learning Technique used: *Think-Pair-Share*

Step 1: THINK

They simply engaged with the text to answer a set of questions that were designed to engage higher-order thinking skills, as defined by Bloom’s Taxonomy.

To ensure that learners get the opportunity to think about the work employing a range of cognitive domains, the following Task Sheet idea was created.

S.No.	Question/ Brainstorming Topic	Cognitive Domain	Keyword
1	Read the title and guess the theme.	Synthesis	Predict, propose, estimate
2	Read the poem once or twice and identify the characters, setting, and action.	Knowledge	Who, what, where, tell, recall
3	What is the poet's dominant thought in the beginning? How do thoughts change throughout the poem?	Comprehension	Explain, outline
4	What is the reason behind the poet's state of mind?	Comprehension	Interpret
5	Identify the characteristics of the roads mentioned by the poet.	Application	Choose, select, identify
6	Is there a figurative meaning to the poem?	Analysis	Discover, examine, inspect
7	How would you have reacted in the poet's situation?	Synthesis	Construct, create, develop, imagine, estimate, theorize
8	What is the poet's message?	Synthesis	Estimate, develop, theorize, propose
9	How would you have reacted in a similar situation?	Synthesis	Imagine, theorize, elaborate, construct
10	If you were the poet, what would you write differently? Why?	Synthesis	Imagine, compile, create, develop
11	Do you think the poet's thought is justified? What are the reasons?	Evaluation	Decide, evaluate, justify, criticize, assess,
12	Choose the words or phrases that you find impactful. Justify your selection.	Evaluation	Choose, evaluate, justify, prove

Table 1: Task Sheet_ Teacher's Copy

Instructions to learners:

- Attempt the first question after reading just the title, before reading the poem.
- For the rest of the questions/ brainstorming topics, responses can be written sequentially or randomly.
- Read the text once or twice before beginning to write ideas.
- Along with the response, mention the reason for your opinion. It could be based on textual evidence or your inference.

Learners' Copy:

The questions/ brainstorming points provided to the learners:

S.No.	Question/ Brainstorming Topic	Response	Textual Evidence/ Justification
1	Read the title and guess the theme.		
2	Read the poem once or twice and identify the characters, setting, and action.		
3	What is the poet's dominant thought in the beginning? How do thoughts change throughout the poem?		
4	What is the reason behind the poet's state of mind?		
5	Identify the characteristics of the roads mentioned by the poet.		
6	Is there a figurative meaning to the poem?		
7	How would you have reacted in the poet's situation?		
8	What is the poet's message?		
9	How would you have reacted in a similar situation?		
10	If you were the poet, what would you write differently? Why?		
11	Do you think the poet's thought is justified? What are the reasons?		
12	Choose the words or phrases that you find impactful. Justify your selection.		

Table 2: Task Sheet_ Learners' Copy

Step 2: PAIR

Once learners completed their response sheet individually, they were paired up with another learner and instructed to discuss the responses with each other.

At this stage, if their responses were similar, their belief in their interpretation became stronger. Alternatively, if they came across some alternative ideas, they arrived at a consensus through a discussion where they employed textual evidence to prove the validity of their ideas.

Step 3: SHARE

At this stage, the pairs were invited to share their interpretation with the rest of the learners. At any point, if the ideas differed, the entire group came together to brainstorm and arrive at the most plausible explanation. The teacher also weighed in with background information and the dominant discourse regarding the literary work.

Findings

- **Classroom Environment**

The approach resulted in an energized discussion that reflected independent thinking. In the initial stage, if the class was quiet, it was not due to boredom or fear of expression. On the contrary, it was due to deep engrossment in the text. Consequently, when the discussion was opened to the whole class, everyone was quite confident and excited to participate.

- **Opportunities for Language Development**

Traditionally, learners get limited opportunities to speak with partners or the whole class. When a discussion is underway, they are expected to think of ideas and formulate their response in a brief span of time.

‘Think-pair-share’, provided ample time to form a response in the ‘think’ stage. Additionally, in the ‘pair’ stage, they were able to speak confidently in the absence of fear of censure by a large group. Consequently, by the time they reached the ‘share’ stage, they were quite confident of their ideas and were able to speak confidently to -influence the listeners.

- **Individual Opinion**

In the lessons taught earlier, learners used to approach the work with the information that the ‘road’ in the poem is a metaphor for choice. When the connotative meaning was provided upfront, the sense of achievement in decoding the puzzle presented by the poet was missing.

Now, they discovered this idea on their own. In the process, they undertook their own journeys of arriving at the meaning.

Many learners began by perceiving it to be an account of a physical journey and read the descriptions of the road as a literal word picture. After discussions with peers, when they arrived at the figurative layer, they felt an immense sense of achievement.

Additionally, it helped them feel confident and excited about reading other literary works and arriving at the poet’s message.

- **Personalization**

Earlier, learners used to focus on the poet’s circumstances that inspired the work.

Now, however, learners shared many personalized examples of dilemmas, for example choosing a holiday destination, a dress for a party, a subject stream, or a career, where they felt like they were standing at a ‘fork’.

Once they recalled having faced a dilemma in their lives, the work became real for them and they could immediately relate to the line “sorry I could travel both”.

- **Alternative Interpretations**

Traditionally, learners would be too focused on the conditions in Robert Frost’s life that inspired him to write the poem. At the same time, they wanted the teacher to provide them with an interpretative direction to start decoding the work. When they feel a dependence on the poet’s background or the literary age, they are not able to engage freely with the words in front of them. Consequently, to read any new work, they needed to have some background information.

Learners were also able to provide a modern take on the poem, confidently diverging from the traditional interpretations. Commenting on the lines, “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back,” they said that with the opportunities these days, it is possible for people to juggle options rather than making definitive choices. E.g. one could pursue an online course in music along with a college degree in Mathematics. Hence, they can travel both ways, albeit with a difference in the way they are treaded.

- **Waning Teacher Dependence**

In the earlier discussions, they would always look up to the teacher to pass the final judgement on whether the poet was happy or regretful of the decision. Here, they were able to discover an inherent confusion when they started thinking about the two possible meanings of ‘sigh’ – where some learners perceived it as a sigh of relief while others looked at it as a sigh of regret.

- **Confident in making suggestions to alter the work**

I also noticed that the learners were extremely confident in making alternate suggestions in the title or content along with sound logic for the same. E.g. an alternate title suggested was “The Road Less Travelled” as they noticed that one of the distinctions was that it ‘wanted wear’ and the poet also says that he took the less travelled one.

- **Alternative Themes Brainstormed**

Since the theme of ‘choice’ was not introduced at the beginning, learners came up with different ideas. For e.g., one idea suggested was ‘boldness’ – since the poet took a chance on a path that was previously unexplored.

- **Increased Confidence and Interest in Extensive Reading**

The experience of using Active Learning made the learners feel confident about reading beyond the curriculum. They were able to see how individual or team brainstorming can help them decode and analyse a text.

At the same time, they realised that there is not necessarily a correct and incorrect interpretation of literary texts. The text can mean different things to different people and all they need to do is find relevant evidences to justify their stance.

CONCLUSION

This is ongoing research and I wish to experiment with many more active learning techniques with different texts. Based on the observations with this study, it can be concluded that using Active Learning techniques for reading in class can help facilitate an important aim of English Language and Literature teaching, namely nurturing learners’ ability to form independent opinion on literary texts and using textual evidence to convince others of the validity of their interpretation.

Whenever learners feel uncertain about the meaning or message of a text, teachers may provide scaffolds such as lexical support or discreetly draw learners’ attention towards an important aspect of the text. Helping them with decoding, interpreting, or analysing the text, however, can be self-defeating to the purpose of the class. On the other hand, leaving the learners without any direction could also lead to frustration. Hence, the use of Active Learning comes to the rescue by engaging learners in such a manner that textual exploration becomes an organic process rather than a forced one.

Active Learning ensures that in addition to decoding literature, learners make use of the language while thinking or expressing themselves. Since using language for communication is the key to developing proficiency, learners will develop their linguistic proficiency as well.

All the information about the poet and the times should be provided in such a manner that it does not interfere with the meaning-making and opinion formation regarding the text. Hence, we can provide this either after they have engaged with the text, or in such a manner that it does not interfere with the individual thought process.

As far as possible, we should let the learner engage with the text as an individual, forming opinions unique to themselves. Once that happens, they are easily able to find relevant textual evidence to influence others.

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