

Popular culture and the teacher of English: an observation



Aysha Viswamohan makes a case for learning about the L2 culture along with the language

Introduction

To say that English has acquired a cult position in the Indian ethos amounts to stating the obvious. However, what the teachers of English in India need to reappraise are our methodology and technique to cater to an increasingly changing clientele. No longer do we teach only 'English' literature; our students are also not merely twenty-somethings or younger any more. Whether we are addressing a regular classroom set-up or training professionals from diverse fields, teaching of the English language can be more effective if we introduce something which is not prescribed, something more unconventional.

'Popular culture – should we use it?'

Should a teacher of English use elements from the popular culture of the target language? This is a question which is often discussed within the four walls of the staff room, and invariably elicits mixed response. The most frequently asked questions are 'where', 'what' and 'how'. While most teachers can perceive the efficacy of using materials like films, songs, and television programmes in teaching situations, when it comes to the actual use, they tend to become wary. However, we would all agree that a target language is learnt faster when the learner is surrounded by it. Also, it is a proven fact that learning is more enduring and pleasurable when teachers adopt unorthodox methods. Here, I would like to share my experience as a non-native teacher-trainer (and learner) of the English language, which has been enriched by the use of popular culture.

Literature classroom and cinema

In India, some of us would remember as students being shown films based on literary masterpieces. Teachers of English literature would often bring in video cassettes of 'Pride and Prejudice', 'Wuthering Heights' or 'Hamlet'. This was practised, mainly, in order to supplement the written text and to relieve us of monotony.

However, one feels that there is an enormous amount of instruction/interaction that can take place with the aid of films. Cinema is a powerful audio-video medium, and if judiciously used, it can

lead to a lot of learning. To begin with, a film can add to the understanding of the period: the socio-political milieu, the ambience, the lifestyle, and also the language. While teaching drama, I have often resorted to introducing my participants to films like 'A Streetcar Named Desire', 'The Crucible' or 'Henry V', to name a few. No doubt, a well-made film can break the monotony. In addition to this, it also transports the learners, the non-native speakers and often first generation learners of English, to an era and culture with which they have a very limited amount of familiarity.

But this should not be the sole purpose of films in classroom. As a matter of fact, watching films should invariably lead to a discussion of the various scenes, characters, dialogues, plot, and even music. And from this point onwards, a teacher of literature can follow a Communicative Language Teaching method, where the learners can draw from a literary as well as a celluloid source. In fact such can be the impact of cinema, that it can force even the most reticent and uncommunicative student to discuss the finer aspects of the film animatedly. For example, while discussing the characters in 'The Crucible', a rather shy student observed how vulnerable Abigail Williams was and how 'protective' he felt towards her. This was, of course, prompted by the fact that Winona Ryder essayed to perfection her role of a woman scorned. Students can also be encouraged to write/discuss the manner in which the film has digressed from the literary source.

Language classroom and popular culture

Nowadays, English language learners in India often express a desire to learn not just the pronunciation, but also the idioms and slang of the target language. When we talk about the target language, it need not be just the standard British variety, but also the Australian and American form of the English language. This is a field where films as well as songs can help.

For familiarising the participants with the Australian accent, I have often resorted to using clippings from films like the 'Bangkok Hilton' and the 'Crocodile Dundee' series. While the former makes engrossing viewing because of its intense portrayal of a father-daughter relationship, the latter always finds takers for its humour. Television

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serials like 'Neighbours' can also be used with some amount of success in a language classroom.

Films like 'A Room with a View,' 'Howard's End' and 'The Remains of the Day' can be used to sensitise the learners to the nuances of British accent. One can also add names like 'Four Weddings and a Funeral', 'Nine Months', 'Arthur' and 'A Fish Called Wanda.' All these films are replete with wit and sophisticated humour, which go down very well with learners of all age groups. Teachers can use small chunks from these films, which can be used for testing listening comprehension; learners can always be encouraged for a repeated viewing of the same scene. These scenes can also be used for discussing idioms, slang, phrasal verbs and vocabulary. Similarly, films like 'In the Name of the Father', 'My Left Foot', and 'The Age of Innocence' can be used to spark off a debate on the judicial system, societal treatment of people suffering from nervous/physical disorders, and social repressions. These films, after all, address universal problems and audience from any corner of the world can identify him/herself with these issues.

Similarly, songs can also serve well in a language classroom. One can use 'Sacrifice' and other songs by Elton John; 'Faith' and 'Last Christmas' by George Michael; or 'From a distance' and several other songs by Cliff Richard. 'You are so vain' by Carly Simon and 'We are the world' by various artists are also popular songs that can be enjoyed by the listeners and are easy to comprehend. And although Elvis Presley, Neil Diamond, and Jim Reeves may not be contemporary any more, their songs work well, primarily due to their clarity and also because these singers repeat a number of lines. Elvis' 'Are you lonesome tonight?' and 'Margarita'; Diamond's 'Song sung blue', 'Brother Love', and 'Forever in Blue Jeans' and Reeves' 'We thank thee' have such an undiminished quality and timelessness about them, that they can never really

be 'out-dated'. Thus, feel-good songs, with quality lyrics, never fail to reinforce the process of learning.

Needless to say, songs and films have a way of filling the participants with enthusiasm in a way which cuts across age/sex/cultural barriers. Their use instills the class with a sense of belonging, promotes better interaction, and facilitates positive attitudes among the learners. The not-so-proficient learners are also motivated to learn the language better as they feel that their insufficient skills act as deterrent in their whole-hearted participation.

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What should not be used? A few suggestions

- Films and songs which depict excessive sex and violence.
- Films which lack human compassion and sympathy, which make insensitive remarks against a race, language, community or country.
- Songs with overdose of instruments, with little amount of lyrics; likewise films with emphasis on visuals with little dialogues.

Time to get over the post-colonial hangover

We live in times when talking about linguistic hegemony has become a trend. Can a teacher of English live with the allegation of promoting the 'other' culture, leading to 'cultural hegemony?' To this one can only answer that if one has strong cultural ties, mere use of popular culture can never shake its foundations. If we believe in the collective ownership of the English language, shouldn't we be inclusive of its culture as well? Moreover, isn't it about time we start thinking in terms of one global culture instead of 'theirs' and 'ours'? As teachers of language, these are issues which need to be addressed.

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