

Between Text and Learner: Rethinking the Teaching of Indian English Literature in Contemporary Classrooms

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Abstract- The teaching of Indian English literature in contemporary classrooms has become an increasingly complex pedagogical task shaped by linguistic diversity, changing learner expectations, and evolving educational environments. While Indian English texts continue to offer rich cultural and social insights, students often struggle to engage with them due to language-related anxieties, cultural distance, rigid curricular structures, and examination-driven learning practices. This paper reflects on the everyday classroom realities faced by teachers of Indian English literature and examines how these challenges influence student engagement and literary understanding. Rather than approaching the issue through fixed pedagogical models, the discussion develops organically from classroom experience, highlighting the tension between textual depth and learner accessibility. The study also considers the impact of digital learning practices on reading habits and interpretative skills, acknowledging both their limitations and possibilities. By foregrounding the role of teacher mediation, contextual teaching, and reflective pedagogy, the paper argues for a rethinking of literature teaching practices that respond sensitively to contemporary learners while preserving the intellectual and cultural value of Indian English literature. The paper ultimately suggests that meaningful engagement with literary texts emerges not from simplification, but from thoughtful negotiation between text, context, and learner experience.

Index-Terms: Indian English Literature, Literature Pedagogy, Classroom Practices, Student Engagement, Contemporary Teaching

The teaching of Indian English literature has always occupied an uncertain position within higher education. It is neither entirely foreign nor fully familiar, neither purely linguistic nor exclusively cultural. It carries the responsibility of representing Indian social realities through a language that itself arrived through historical intervention. In earlier classrooms, this complexity was often taken for granted. Students were expected to read, interpret, and accept texts as part of academic discipline. In contemporary classrooms, however, the conditions surrounding reading have changed significantly. Attention spans are fragmented, exposure to digital media is constant, and learning is increasingly shaped by speed rather than reflection. Within this context, teaching Indian English literature becomes less a matter of content delivery and more an exercise in negotiation.

Indian English literature demands time. It expects readers to sit with characters, absorb cultural detail, and remain open to ambiguity. Many texts do not provide immediate gratification.

Instead, they unfold gradually, often through subtle emotional shifts or social tensions. For modern learners, who are accustomed to instant access and compressed narratives, this mode of engagement can feel demanding. The challenge for teachers is not merely to justify the presence of such texts in the syllabus, but to help students understand why slow reading still matters.

A major difficulty emerges from the linguistic diversity of the classroom. Indian higher education brings together students from varied schooling systems, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds. Some learners arrive with fluency shaped by years of English-medium education, while others encounter English primarily within academic settings. Indian English literary texts complicate this difference further. They often employ a register that blends standard English with Indian idiom, cultural references, and region-specific expressions. Students who already feel insecure about their language skills may find such texts intimidating, even when the narratives themselves are relatable.

This linguistic challenge does not always appear overtly. Many students hesitate to voice confusion or ask questions, fearing judgment or exposure. Silence becomes a coping mechanism. Teachers, interpreting this silence as understanding, move forward, unaware that comprehension has not taken place. Over time, this gap widens. Literature classes then become spaces where a small group participates actively, while others remain passive observers. The issue here is not lack of intelligence or interest, but lack of linguistic confidence.

Teachers often respond by simplifying texts through paraphrasing or summarisation. While this approach ensures surface-level understanding, it also risks reducing literature to information rather than experience. When students encounter texts only through explanation, they are deprived of the pleasure and challenge of discovery. Interpretation becomes something provided rather than something constructed. This approach may help students pass examinations, but it does little to cultivate literary sensibility.

Student engagement presents another persistent concern. Modern learners are deeply engaged with narratives through films, series, and digital storytelling platforms. Yet this engagement does not automatically translate into enthusiasm for literary texts. The difference lies not in storytelling itself, but in mode and pace. Visual narratives offer immediacy, emotional cues, and quick resolution. Literature, by contrast, demands imagination, patience, and sustained attention. When taught through conventional lecture methods, it struggles to compete with the sensory richness of digital media.

Many students therefore approach literature as a requirement rather than an opportunity. They read selectively, focusing on sections likely to appear in examinations. Classroom discussions are often limited, as students fear giving incorrect interpretations. Over time, literature becomes associated with effort rather than insight. This perception is reinforced when teaching focuses heavily on themes, symbols, and character analysis in predictable patterns. The text begins to feel exhausted before it is truly explored.

Cultural distance further complicates student engagement. Indian English literature frequently portrays social contexts that no longer align neatly with students' lived experiences. Joint family structures, rural social hierarchies, or conservative gender expectations may appear distant to students raised in urban, nuclear households with greater exposure to global culture. Without careful mediation, students may dismiss these narratives as outdated or irrelevant.

Such dismissal often masks a deeper issue. Students are not rejecting the text itself, but their inability to locate themselves within it. When literature is taught without contextual framing, students lack the tools to understand why certain conflicts mattered at a particular historical moment. Teachers therefore carry the responsibility of bridging temporal and cultural gaps. This involves explaining social practices, value systems, and historical conditions, not as static facts, but as living forces that shaped human behaviour.

The challenge here lies in balance. Excessive contextual explanation can overwhelm the literary experience, while insufficient context leaves students disconnected. Effective teaching requires sensitivity to when to pause and explain, and when to allow the text to speak. This skill develops through experience rather than formula, and it places considerable emotional and intellectual demand on teachers.

Curricular constraints add further pressure. Many syllabi prescribe specific texts and allocate limited time for their completion. Teachers are expected to adhere strictly to schedules, leaving little room for exploration or deviation. Innovation often becomes a personal risk rather than an institutional practice. While some educators attempt creative approaches, others feel constrained by examination requirements and administrative expectations.

Assessment structures reinforce this rigidity. Literature examinations frequently reward recall of established interpretations rather than original thought. Students quickly learn that deviation carries risk, while repetition offers safety. As a result, interpretation becomes mechanical. Teachers, aware of these constraints, may hesitate to encourage open-ended discussion. The classroom then becomes a site of controlled interpretation rather than intellectual exploration. Technology has significantly altered this landscape. Digital resources provide instant access to summaries, critical notes, and explanatory videos. While such materials can support understanding, they also encourage surface engagement. Many students encounter literary texts indirectly, relying on secondary interpretations rather than reading the original work. The habit of deep reading weakens, replaced by strategic consumption of information.

At the same time, technology itself is not inherently detrimental to literature teaching. When used thoughtfully, it can enhance engagement and accessibility. Audio recordings can bring texts to life, particularly for students struggling with reading fluency. Visual adaptations can help students imagine settings and characters. Online discussion platforms can encourage participation from students who hesitate to speak in class. The challenge lies in guiding students to use technology as a supplement rather than a substitute.

Teachers therefore find themselves navigating a complex pedagogical landscape. They are expected to preserve the depth of literary study while adapting to changing learner expectations. This role requires flexibility, creativity, and resilience. Many educators recognise the transformative potential of literature, yet struggle to sustain that belief within constrained institutional frameworks. Their work increasingly involves mediation between tradition and change, depth and accessibility.

Effective responses to these challenges rarely emerge from rigid methodologies. Instead, they develop through reflective practice. Literature classrooms benefit when teaching shifts from monologue to dialogue. Encouraging students to respond personally before introducing critical frameworks allows them to build confidence. When students feel that their experiences and interpretations matter, engagement increases naturally.

Contextual teaching plays a crucial role in this process. When themes from literary texts are connected to contemporary social issues, students begin to recognise relevance rather than distance. Gender roles, family expectations, migration, and identity remain pressing concerns, even if their forms have changed. Drawing such connections helps students understand literature as a conversation across time rather than a static artifact.

Assessment practices can also be adapted to encourage deeper engagement. Reflective writing assignments, group presentations, and creative responses allow students to demonstrate understanding without fear of deviation. These approaches acknowledge that literature does not yield uniform meanings, and that interpretation itself is a valuable intellectual skill. Even within fixed curricular frameworks, modest changes in evaluation can create space for originality.

The challenges involved in teaching Indian English literature should not be viewed as signs of decline. Rather, they reflect a moment of transition. Classrooms have changed, learners have

changed, and the role of the teacher has expanded. Literature itself, however, retains its capacity to question, illuminate, and connect. What it requires is thoughtful mediation rather than simplification.

Teaching Indian English literature today demands attentiveness to language, context, and student experience. It asks educators to slow down in environments that reward speed, and to encourage reflection in cultures shaped by immediacy. When approached with flexibility and conviction, the literature classroom can once again become a space where texts are encountered meaningfully. In such encounters, literature regains its purpose, not as an academic obligation, but as a medium through which students learn to think, feel, and question.

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