

Teaching English Literature in the Contemporary Classroom: Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies

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Abstract: Teaching English literature in contemporary undergraduate and postgraduate classrooms demands pedagogical approaches that respond to changing learner profiles, policy reforms, and rapid technological developments. Traditional lecture-based methods, while effective for content transmission, often fail to address issues of student engagement, critical interpretation, and contextual relevance. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India foregrounds learner-centred, multidisciplinary, and flexible pedagogies, offering new possibilities for literature teaching. At the same time, emerging digital tools and artificial intelligence present both opportunities and ethical challenges for literary instruction. This paper examines the major challenges faced in teaching English literature today, including declining reading practices, linguistic diversity, and theoretical complexity. It further explores pedagogical strategies aligned with NEP 2020 and evaluates the role of technology and AI as supportive tools rather than replacements for human interpretation. The study argues that effective literature pedagogy in the twenty-first century depends on a balanced, reflective, and inclusive approach that integrates policy awareness, critical pedagogy, and ethical technology use.

Keywords: English literature pedagogy, contemporary classroom, NEP 2020, learner-centred learning

1 | INTRODUCTION

English literature holds a central and enduring position in higher education, functioning as a discipline that extends beyond language acquisition to foster critical thinking, cultural awareness, ethical sensitivity, and interpretive competence. Through engagement with literary texts, students develop the ability to analyse complex ideas, question dominant narratives, and understand diverse human experiences across historical, social, and cultural contexts. At the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the study

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11

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of literature is therefore expected not merely to transmit canonical knowledge or literary history, but to nurture intellectual independence, reflective judgement, and a sustained engagement with language and meaning.

In contemporary classrooms, however, the teaching of English literature has become increasingly challenging. Students enter higher education with varied linguistic abilities, educational backgrounds, and exposure to literary reading. In multilingual contexts such as India, disparities in English language proficiency often influence students' confidence and participation in literature classrooms. Additionally, changing reading habits shaped by digital media have altered how learners engage with texts, with many students favouring summaries and fragmented reading over close, sustained textual analysis. These shifts complicate the traditional assumptions of literature pedagogy and demand more responsive and inclusive teaching approaches.

At the same time, higher education systems are undergoing significant structural and pedagogical transformations. Recent educational reforms, particularly India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, advocate a decisive move away from rote-based learning toward experiential, interdisciplinary, and learner-centred pedagogies. The policy foregrounds critical thinking, creativity, flexibility, and holistic development as core educational goals, directly challenging teacher-centred and examination-driven models of instruction. For English literature educators, this shift necessitates a re-evaluation of long-established pedagogical practices, including lecture-dominated teaching and rigid syllabus coverage, in favour of approaches that actively involve students in interpretation, discussion, and meaning-making.

Parallel to these policy changes, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and artificial intelligence has reshaped the contemporary classroom. Online platforms, digital archives, and AI-assisted tools offer new possibilities for accessing texts, supporting language development, and facilitating feedback. At the same time, these technologies raise important concerns regarding superficial engagement, over-reliance on automated interpretations, and issues of academic integrity. Literature, as a discipline grounded in ambiguity, ethical reflection, and human experience, requires careful consideration of how such tools are integrated without diminishing deep reading and critical engagement.

Within this evolving educational landscape, teaching English literature demands adaptive and reflective pedagogical strategies. Educators must balance policy expectations, technological innovation, and diverse learner needs while preserving the humanistic foundations of literary study. Understanding these intersecting challenges is essential for reimagining literature pedagogy that remains intellectually rigorous, socially relevant, and responsive to the realities of the contemporary classroom.

2 | ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOM

The contemporary English literature classroom is shaped by significant diversity in students' linguistic abilities, cultural backgrounds, educational experiences, and learning expectations. In many higher education contexts, particularly in multilingual societies, students come to the classroom with unequal exposure to English and to literary reading. This diversity has the potential to enrich classroom dialogue by bringing multiple perspectives to the interpretation of texts. At the same time, it presents substantial pedagogical challenges, especially when students engage with linguistically dense, stylistically complex, or culturally distant literary works.

A notable feature of the contemporary classroom is the transformation of reading practices under the influence of digital media. Students increasingly rely on online summaries, critical notes, and fragmented reading, which often prioritise speed and convenience over sustained engagement with primary texts. While digital resources can support access to information, this tendency has led to surface-level reading and reduced attention to textual detail, narrative structure, and stylistic nuance. As a result, students may struggle to develop the deep interpretive skills that literary study demands.

Traditional lecture-based approaches to teaching English literature have historically ensured syllabus completion and the transmission of established interpretations. However, such methods often position students as passive recipients of knowledge, limiting opportunities for critical inquiry and independent interpretation. Contemporary pedagogical discourse challenges this model by emphasising active learning, student participation, and collaborative meaning-making. In literature classrooms, this shift is particularly important because literary interpretation is inherently subjective, dialogic, and open to multiple readings.

At the undergraduate level, English literature serves as a foundational discipline that develops reading comprehension, analytical thinking, and cultural literacy. Students are introduced to literary forms, genres, and critical vocabulary that enable them to engage more confidently with texts. At the postgraduate level, the focus expands to include theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives. Students are expected to move beyond understanding texts toward producing original, critically informed interpretations.

Addressing these varied academic expectations requires pedagogical flexibility and contextual sensitivity. Teachers must adapt their methods to accommodate diverse learner needs while maintaining academic rigour. By integrating discussion-based learning, contextual analysis, and reflective practices, literature classrooms can become more inclusive and intellectually engaging spaces that respond effectively to the realities of contemporary higher education.

3 | CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE

Teaching English literature in contemporary higher education involves a range of persistent and evolving challenges that directly influence student engagement and learning outcomes. One of the most frequently identified concerns in literature pedagogy is the decline in students' sustained engagement with extended literary texts. Many learners increasingly depend on summaries, guidebooks, and online explanatory material rather than undertaking close and attentive reading of primary texts. This practice limits interpretive depth, weakens analytical skills, and reduces students' ability to engage critically with language, structure, and literary technique.

Linguistic disparities further complicate literature teaching, particularly in multilingual contexts such as India. Students often enter undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with uneven levels of English language proficiency, shaped by varied schooling backgrounds and levels of exposure to English. While some learners demonstrate confidence in reading and interpretation, others struggle with vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic expression. These differences create pedagogical tension, as instructors must simultaneously support language development and advanced literary analysis without lowering academic standards.

Another significant challenge arises from the cultural and historical distance between students and many canonical literary texts. Works rooted in unfamiliar social, political, or historical contexts can appear remote or irrelevant to contemporary learners, especially when presented without sufficient contextual support. When students are unable to relate texts to their own experiences or current social realities, motivation and engagement tend to decline. Effective contextualisation thus becomes essential, yet time constraints and rigid syllabi often limit the extent to which this can be achieved.

Institutional and structural factors also restrict effective literature pedagogy. Large class sizes reduce opportunities for discussion and individual feedback, while fixed curricula and examination-oriented assessment systems encourage memorisation rather than critical interpretation. Such conditions discourage dialogic and student-centred approaches that are central to meaningful literary study. At the postgraduate level, an additional challenge emerges in the form of theoretical abstraction. Literary theories demand conceptual clarity and interdisciplinary understanding, yet students frequently struggle

to apply theoretical frameworks meaningfully to textual analysis, resulting in mechanical or superficial interpretations.

Collectively, these challenges highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that are inclusive, contextual, and adaptable. Addressing them requires a move beyond traditional lecture-based instruction toward teaching practices that actively involve students in reading, interpretation, and critical dialogue, while remaining sensitive to the linguistic, cultural, and institutional realities of contemporary classrooms.

4 | PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE LITERATURE TEACHING

Addressing the challenges of teaching English literature in contemporary classrooms requires a decisive shift toward interactive, learner-centred pedagogical strategies. Such approaches move away from teacher-dominated instruction and instead position students as active participants in the process of interpretation and meaning-making. Discussion-based teaching, seminars, and small-group work encourage learners to articulate their responses to texts, question assumptions, and engage with multiple perspectives. These practices not only enhance comprehension but also foster confidence, critical thinking, and collaborative learning.

Reader-response approaches play a particularly important role in effective literature pedagogy. By acknowledging students' personal, cultural, and emotional responses to literary texts, this method helps bridge the gap between canonical works and contemporary learner experiences. At the same time, reader-response pedagogy does not remain purely subjective; guided discussion and critical frameworks help students refine their responses, connect them to textual evidence, and situate them within broader literary and theoretical contexts. This balance supports both engagement and academic rigour.

Contextual and historical teaching methods further strengthen students' understanding of literature. Situating texts within their social, cultural, and ideological contexts enables learners to grasp underlying themes, power relations, and narrative strategies more clearly. Such contextualisation is especially valuable when teaching texts that are culturally or historically distant from students' lived experiences. By linking literature to relevant historical events, social movements, and philosophical ideas, teachers can make texts more accessible and meaningful.

Comparative and interdisciplinary approaches also contribute significantly to effective literature teaching. Comparing texts across genres, periods, or cultural traditions encourages analytical depth and highlights the interconnectedness of literature with disciplines such as history, philosophy, sociology, and politics. These approaches align well with contemporary educational goals that emphasise critical inquiry and holistic understanding, particularly at the postgraduate level, where advanced analysis and theoretical synthesis are expected.

Assessment practices must also be re-evaluated to support meaningful learning. Traditional examinations that prioritise memorisation often fail to capture students' interpretive abilities and critical thinking skills. Alternative assessment methods, including reflective writing, oral presentations, group projects, and analytical essays, provide more authentic measures of learning. Such assessments encourage sustained engagement with texts, continuous reflection, and the development of independent critical voices, thereby reinforcing the goals of effective literature pedagogy.

5 | LITERATURE TEACHING AND NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a strong and supportive framework for reimagining the teaching of English literature in higher education. By emphasising multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking, curricular flexibility, and holistic development, the policy aligns closely with the core objectives

of literary studies. Literature, by its very nature, encourages interpretation, ethical reflection, and engagement with diverse human experiences, making it particularly well suited to the learner-centred and inquiry-driven vision outlined in NEP 2020.

One of the most significant implications of NEP 2020 for literature teaching is its emphasis on multidisciplinary and integrative learning. The policy encourages the dissolution of rigid disciplinary boundaries, allowing literary texts to be studied in dialogue with history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. Such integration enables students to situate literary works within broader social, political, and ethical contexts, thereby deepening analytical understanding and enhancing cultural awareness. In literature classrooms, this approach transforms texts from isolated artefacts into dynamic sites of inquiry connected to contemporary concerns.

NEP 2020 also foregrounds critical thinking, creativity, and experiential learning as essential educational outcomes. This focus challenges traditional rote-based approaches to literature teaching and reinforces pedagogical practices that prioritise discussion, debate, interpretive analysis, and reflective writing. By encouraging students to question, compare, and evaluate multiple interpretations, literature pedagogy can more effectively cultivate higher-order cognitive skills and independent thinking, which are central to both academic and personal development.

Curricular flexibility is another key aspect of NEP 2020 with direct relevance to literature education. The policy supports modular course structures, elective choices, and the inclusion of diverse literary traditions and contemporary texts. This flexibility allows literature departments to design curricula that respond to student interests, social realities, and emerging literary forms, thereby increasing relevance and engagement. Such adaptability is particularly valuable in postgraduate programmes, where research-oriented and comparative study requires greater curricular freedom.

Despite these opportunities, the effective implementation of NEP 2020 in literature classrooms faces significant challenges. Institutional readiness, availability of resources, and teacher preparedness remain critical concerns. Without sustained professional development, educators may find it difficult to translate policy principles into classroom practice. Similarly, assessment systems must be reformed to align with learner-centred and interpretive pedagogies; otherwise, examination-driven evaluation may continue to undermine the policy's objectives.

Therefore, while NEP 2020 provides a promising policy framework for transforming literature teaching, its success depends on committed institutional support, continuous teacher training, and coherent curricular and assessment reforms. Only through such integrated efforts can the pedagogical vision of NEP 2020 be fully realised in English literature classrooms.

6 | ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Digital technologies have significantly transformed the landscape of higher education, including the teaching of English literature. Online learning platforms, digital libraries, multimedia resources, and virtual discussion forums have expanded access to literary texts and critical materials, enabling more flexible and interactive modes of instruction. Such technologies allow educators to diversify teaching practices by incorporating audio-visual adaptations, online discussions, and collaborative annotation, thereby enhancing student engagement and accessibility, particularly in large or blended classrooms.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful tool within this digital ecosystem, offering new possibilities for supporting literature learning. AI-based applications can assist students with vocabulary development, preliminary textual analysis, guided annotation, and formative feedback on writing. At the undergraduate level, these tools can provide valuable scaffolding, helping learners build confidence in

reading complex texts and developing analytical writing skills. When used thoughtfully, AI can free instructional time for deeper discussion and interpretive exploration.

However, literature pedagogy must approach the use of AI with caution and critical awareness. Literary studies are fundamentally concerned with ambiguity, multiple interpretations, ethical judgement, and emotional engagement—dimensions that cannot be fully replicated by automated systems. Over-reliance on AI-generated summaries or interpretations risks promoting surface-level understanding and discouraging independent critical thinking. Such practices may also weaken students' capacity for original analysis and diminish the reflective depth that literary education seeks to cultivate.

Ethical considerations further complicate the integration of AI into literature classrooms. Issues related to plagiarism, authorship, data privacy, and algorithmic bias require careful attention. Without clear guidelines, students may misuse AI tools in ways that compromise academic integrity and intellectual responsibility. Consequently, educators must establish transparent policies regarding acceptable AI use and actively guide students in developing ethical and reflective digital practices.

Within this framework, AI should be positioned not as a replacement for reading, interpretation, or classroom dialogue, but as a supplementary resource that supports learning. Preserving the centrality of human judgement, discussion, and critical engagement is essential to maintaining the humanistic foundations of literary study. A balanced and pedagogically informed integration of technology can enrich literature teaching while safeguarding its intellectual and ethical core.

7 | STUDENT-CENTRED AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES

Student-centred pedagogy places learners at the core of the educational process, emphasising active participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility for learning. In the context of English literature classrooms, this approach shifts the focus from authoritative transmission of interpretations to collaborative exploration of texts. Through discussions, seminars, debates, and peer-led activities, students are encouraged to articulate their responses, question dominant readings, and engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives. Such dialogic practices not only enhance interpretive skills but also foster critical thinking and intellectual independence.

Inclusive teaching practices are particularly important in contemporary literature classrooms, which often comprise students from varied linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Addressing this diversity requires pedagogical sensitivity and flexibility. Scaffolded instruction, including pre-reading activities, guided questions, glossaries, and structured discussions, helps bridge gaps in language proficiency and background knowledge. These strategies enable all students to participate meaningfully without compromising academic standards.

Contextual support further strengthens inclusivity by situating literary texts within relevant historical, cultural, and social frameworks. When students are able to connect texts to their own experiences or contemporary issues, literature becomes more accessible and engaging. Inclusive curricula that incorporate texts from diverse voices, regions, and traditions also broaden students' understanding of literature as a global and socially embedded practice.

Assessment practices play a crucial role in reinforcing student-centred and inclusive learning. Flexible and formative assessment methods, such as reflective journals, response papers, group projects, and oral presentations, allow students to demonstrate learning in varied ways. These approaches reduce reliance on high-stakes examinations and encourage sustained engagement, self-reflection, and confidence-building.

Together, student-centred and inclusive approaches align closely with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasises holistic, participatory, and learner-oriented education. By valuing diverse perspectives and fostering active engagement, literature classrooms can become inclusive spaces that support interpretive competence, empathy, and lifelong learning.

8 | CONCLUSION

Teaching English literature in the contemporary classroom requires educators to navigate a complex intersection of pedagogical challenges, educational policy reforms, and rapid technological change. Declining reading practices, linguistic and cultural diversity, institutional constraints, and increasing theoretical complexity have reshaped the realities of literature teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Within this evolving context, traditional, lecture-dominated approaches are no longer sufficient to address the intellectual and experiential needs of today's learners.

Effective literature pedagogy therefore depends on a balanced and reflective approach that integrates interactive teaching methods, contextual and historical grounding, and inclusive, student-centred practices. Discussion-based learning, interdisciplinary perspectives, and flexible assessment methods allow students to engage more deeply with texts and develop independent interpretive voices. Such strategies not only enhance analytical skills but also cultivate empathy, ethical awareness, and cultural understanding—qualities that lie at the heart of literary study.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a valuable framework for strengthening literature education through its emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy, critical thinking, curricular flexibility, and holistic development. When thoughtfully aligned with literature teaching, these policy principles can revitalise classroom practices and make literary study more relevant to contemporary social and intellectual concerns. At the same time, the integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence must be approached with ethical care, ensuring that technological tools support learning without undermining critical reading, originality, or academic integrity.

In conclusion, the continued relevance of English literature in higher education depends not on any single pedagogical model or technological innovation, but on educators' ability to adapt thoughtfully while preserving the discipline's humanistic foundations. By fostering critical inquiry, reflective engagement, and inclusive learning environments, English literature can remain a vital and transformative component of higher education, preparing students to engage thoughtfully with both texts and the wider world.

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