Chapter III

Oblique Method in the Teaching of Poetry

3.0 Introduction

In chapter II the constraints and problems faced by the teacher and learners in the English language classes were discussed. Lack of student-involvement was said to be a major problem.

3.1 An alternative Method

In recent times attempts have been made to find ways and means of promoting student-involvement in the language classes. Student-involvement is found to be automatic, genuine and maximum in peer groups. Instead of just depending upon the lecture method and allowing learners to be passive listeners, the language teacher tries to vary his approach and make them active participants in group activities. Here the text is not presented to the learners through lectures; but by creating a proper atmosphere, they are encouraged to approach the text obliquely; and the method is called the oblique method.

3.2 Oblique Method: an Explanation

Don Salter, an advocate of team work in language classes, explains,

The ‘oblique approach’ is a term coined, I think, by John Crompton, an ex-colleague at Newcastle University, and it has gained wider currency in the United Kingdom at least. The phrase suggests a range
of alternative strategies in negotiating, devising and setting students' assignments. (169)

3.2.1 Oblique Method and Traditional Approaches: the Differences

Don Salter observes:

The oblique approach is not asserted as a new orthodoxy replacing traditional academic models such as essay, seminar papers, etc. But I am arguing that the oblique approach (sometimes misheard as 'a bleak approach'!) offers both a greater opportunity of student involvement, and the possibility that the topic may be tailored to the needs of the individual student and her or his knowledge, level, and experience.

(169)

The oblique method does not do away with the traditional lecture method; but it declines reliance on the lecture method. Susan Oommen expertly explores the way a literary piece can be taught effectively, in the negative conditions prevalent in the Indian classroom. Using a sample workout, she emphasizes the need to adopt such strategies as would tease out the common humanity of the text, the teacher and the student-reader. Her teacher is involved with students on an equal footing in a dialogue. According to her,

a course like literature must necessarily involve a sense of enjoyment; it must be seen in the light of a common humanity, with specific social and political applications, leading up to liberalism, or humanism, or
whatever. If a subject cannot be meaningful, it is bound to become archaic and the course itself must become irrelevant” (163)

In the classroom the accent should not be on information transfer. The classroom only serves a learning process. The concept of teacher as source of knowledge must be rendered incongruous. This sense of equality and fellowship creates a mood in which dialogue is possible. “The teacher then has the freedom to make demands on the class. The teacher in turn may respond to these demands”(164). Moreover, “In the first place the teacher has to get the students interested -- in a way, wean them away from the syllabus and then take them back to it” (165).

As for the class strategy, she suggests,

Try and avoid formal lectures as far as possible; talk to the students
Ensure that they come to class with a working knowledge of the text,
that teacher-and- learner, and learner-and-learner talk about the text,
identify some preoccupations and pose questions, that the class takes time off (approximately 2-3 hours on the timetable) to think about these questions, discuss them and around them. (165)
The class tackles specific questions, working in groups, pairs or as individuals. Then the class comes together for feedback, discussion, and clarification, by the end of all of which it recognizes certain propositions about the text. Work is formalised through seminars and other kinds of assignments. The individual groups also undertake exercises in planning and organising related essays; the workout is done on the
blackboard. These exercises generate both interest and violent disagreement; and this is a good way of assessing student thinking and grasp.

3.2.2 Opposition to Oblique Method

Though there is no direct and open opposition to collaborative learning and language activities, the tendency to underrate these is found, generally, among administrators, syllabus makers, material writers and even among a set of teachers of poetry. The tendency to uphold the views that the teacher is the reservoir of knowledge, at whose feet the learners should sit and drink deep his wisdom, and that the lecture method is the best and proven way to success in teaching and learning, is prevalent still.

Highlighting the above tendency, Micheal Woods writes:

It is a sad error that manuals concentrate too often on the more ‘serious’ type of poem and ignore the others. The result is that far too many teachers do so too, and imagine there is only one way of getting a poem across. People often meet one’s attempts at informal choral verse with a wintry smile. They don’t want that. (81)

Bhim S. Dahiya analyses what gives rise to this tendency. Conservatism, teacher-dominance, and lack of training in the right direction are the main causes:

Perhaps, the philosophy behind having untrained teachers at the graduate level is that because the teacher at this level has to impart knowledge to adults, he does not have to learn the mechanics of involving the student in a subject [. . .] The presumption seems to be
that at this higher level, all that a teacher need to have is the knowledge of his subject. A corollary of this presumption is that knowledge will speak for itself, that knowledge does not require any tools of communication for capturing the student’s attention. (5-6)

He further says, “The practice with the college or university teacher, therefore, has been to do in Rome as the Romans do; that is to follow the teachers who taught him at the college or the university (6).

3.2.3 Defence of Oblique Method

A lot has been said in defence of this method as can be seen in the sections of his chapter. Its advantages over the traditional methods alone will speak for its relevance and effectiveness.

3.3 Its Advantage over Traditional Methods

3.3.1 Text Treated as a Living Organism

Commenting on these types of approaches, Alan Maley and Alan Duff say that the oblique approaches are not “a refurbished version of approaches which have traditionally treated the text as a corpse for dissection and post-mortem examination” (7). On the other hand this approach prefers to see it as a living/vital organism, which produces lively offspring in the form of other language activities.
3.3.2 Students Involvement

First and foremost it ensures student involvement by promoting group work, as described above. It makes a text appeal to learners because they are able to respond to the text in their own way; it ensures the development of a personalised reaction to the text, and this is very important in language learning; it enables the learners to enjoy reading poetry in a better way. “It often happens that students come to enjoy poetry when they are allowed to approach the poem not head-on, but obliquely” (Maley and Duff 15).

3.3.3 Collaborative Instruction

Martin Nystrand and Adam Gamoran (1991:261-285) have examined the kinds of instruction that foster student engagement in the classroom. They distinguish between two major kinds of student engagement: “Procedural” which concerns classroom rules and regulations and “substantive” which involves sustained commitment to the content and issues of academic study.

The results of their study provide support for three hypotheses:

(i) Disengagement adversely affects achievement.

(ii) Procedural engagement has an attenuated relationship to achievement. And

(iii) Substantive engagement has a strong, positive effect on achievement.
Features of substantively engaging instruction include authentic questions or questions which have no pre-specified answers; uptake, or the incorporation of previous answers into subsequent questions; and high-level teacher evaluation, or teacher certification and incorporation of student responses into the subsequent discussion. Each of these is noteworthy because they all involve reciprocal interaction and negotiations between students and teachers, which is said to be the hallmark of substantive engagement.

When teachers ask authentic questions, they open the floor to what students have to say; when they engage in uptake, they build on what students have said; and when their evaluation of student responses is high, they certify new turns in the discussion occasioned by student answers. (Nystrand and Gamoran 265)

Usually in the classroom, most questions are asked by the teacher; they get a response and a low-level evaluation; these are test questions involving no uptake and elicit the cognitive level of a report. By contrast in collaborative work among peers in small groups, all the questions are asked by students; they are authentic and they typically exhibit uptake similar to discussion and conversation. Here students have some input into and control over the discussion.

This study by Nystrand and Gamoran “provides empirical support for the notion that instruction which is collaborative and substantively engaging, involving give-and-take on both sides, effectively promotes learning” (270).

Like classroom discourse, writing and reading also can be substantively engaging:
3.3.4 Effective Writing

Don Salter makes interesting remarks on how the practical writing workshop can aid teaching. His method dispenses with the authoritarian demands of the monolingual/monologic essay and opts for pluralism in the workshop in which a variety of exercises take the place of the ‘teacher’. He says,

The traditional essay question can be an ineffective blunt instrument in finding out what – to use the current jargon – the student can ‘know, understand and do’… Of course some students write excellent essays but if we as teachers are interested in formative as well as summative assessment we should examine how essay performance can be enhanced by a variety of written tasks along with discursive answers.

(169)

The open-ended nature of task, while dealing with a literary work, gives the student access to a kind of personal recognition, which the inflexible essay may not offer. “Each response has to be justified and located in the text and cannot be used as an excuse for any bizarre flights of fancy” (170).

Those who object to the creative writing involved in the oblique method, “sometimes see the essay as its own kind of timeless monument, as a tried-and-proven form of argument which we abandon at our peril” (175). Language is always creative, and so “it is absurd for teachers to say that essays are permissible while ‘creative writing’ is not” (175). Creative writings “demonstrate qualities of originality and sensitivity, which a folder of work restricted to critical essays, would not provide” (175).
3.3.5 Effective Reading

In the oblique method, there are opportunities for effective reading.

Reading is authentic, and consequently substantively engaging, to the extent that it addresses questions that students deem are important, teaching them new things that they value, and also to the extent that teachers help students relate their readings to their own experiences. Contiguity of reading is high when students discuss and write about their readings – in other words, to the extent that reading relates to talk and writing. (Nystrand and Gamoran 268)

3.3.6 Effective Responding to Literary Texts

The oblique method gives many possible and effective ways of responding to a literary text apart from helping the learner to write scholarly essays. The scholarly-essay-characteristic of many examination question is only one way of responding to literary texts and of demonstrating appreciation and understanding of their structure, meaning and style.

Responding to literature is a process, which involve the reader in a dialogue with the text. The oblique method gives students the chance to engage in many different forms of dialogue with the text, and to demonstrate appreciation and understanding in a variety of ways, both through talk and writing.
3.4 Different Ways of Responding to Literary Texts:

The list of 'oblique approaches' given below indicates many possible ways of responding to a literary text, apart from the 'scholarly' essay. However this does not exhaust all alternatives. These are the ideas, which teachers have suggested for classroom implementation, as quoted (from Open University Manual GCSE 1986) and commented on by Don Salter (171).

1. Interviews, either enacted in speech or in written scripts (e.g., between biographer and character or between barrister and "villain"),

2. Diaries kept by characters, for example, by the Ancient Mariner,

3. 'Genre transformations', turning a scene from a novel into a play, poem, etc.,

4. 'Write-ons'—alternative endings or about what happened to characters ten years later, etc.,

5. Letters, for example, to or from character or from reader to character, etc.,

6. Facsimile newspaper or news articles, dealing with events in the text,

7. Group discussions exploring issues relating to plot, motivation, style, etc.,

8. Dramatic reconstructions of episodes or themes,
9. Making video films, for example 'documentaries' on issues or themes depicted in text,

10. Games, for example, board games based on plot,

11. Comparison of book and film versions of a text,

12. Reading 'logs' or journals recording students' personal comments and evaluations of texts studied,

13. Cassette-recorded accounts, in which students, when they feel ready, record their own responses to a text, choosing aspects that interest them personally,

14. Imaginative or personal writing in response to an 'atmosphere' created in the texts,

15. Reconstructions from the perspectives of minor characters,

16. Diagrams and charts, for example, family trees or maps of journeys or voyage-based texts/schematic representations of plots,

17. Visual displays, for example, book covers/advertising posters/paintings depicting scenes,

18. Text reconstructions (using word-processors, perhaps). They could include 'disrupting' a poem by changing words or linear order; discussing and/or writing about stylistic effects of different versions. (171)

Of course some of these are quite advanced and may not be adopted in the second Language learning-teaching process. Yet the teacher has the option to simplify or modify them to suit his class.
3.5 Principles of Recording Achievement

Don Salter again quotes the 'seven recognized principles' of recording student's achievement as set out by a Cumbria Working Party in 1988 (172).

1. I need to know what I can do well; what I need to improve and my progress.
2. I need to recognize my own achievements and have these recognised by others.
3. I need to know what is expected of me.
4. I need to have some short-term achievement targets.
5. I need to feel valued and respected.
6. I need to be offered strategies to help me learn more effectively.
7. I need to be able to evaluate my own learning and to develop my own strategies to improve it.


This seems to him 'a good summary of the available evidence of how students learn' (172). The personal pronoun in the Cumbria document reminds us of the personal nature of progress in learning, for 'teachers do not give much thought as to how students learn, or if they do, such thought rarely affects daily practice' (172). The same kind of 'academic survey' question is repeated and blindly set and students' failure to understand, even if serious, is rarely analysed (172).
The following lines quoted by Don Salter, from the Introduction to the Bullock Report (A Language for Life, HMSO, 1975) explain the personal and provisional nature of learning.

It is a confusion of everyday thought that we tend to regard 'knowledge' as something that exists independently of someone who knows. 'What is known' must in fact be brought to life afresh with each 'knower' by his own efforts. To bring knowledge into being is a formulating process, and language is its ordinary means, whether in speaking or writing or the inner monologue of thought. (173)

Commenting on this Don Salter writes this, urging the teacher to give sufficient thought to the progress made by his learners:

So knowledge does not exist 'out there' somewhere; it is inseparable from the knower. The logic of this requires the teacher to look at the process of that formulation, or inner monologue, as well as looking at the finished essay product. The writing workshop offers a flexible policy of helping the student understand the process of his/her own learning (Cumbria 'principle' number six). (173)

If teachers vary their approach in the classroom to create opportunities for informal collaborative writing, for each other, in pairs, or summarising for a group in the role of reporter, they will be moving towards the above said principles of recording achievement. The oblique approaches come in handy in this respect.
The dangers that we, as teachers, are inclined to cause in our profession are mainly because of the political act of not allowing the learners to achieve the status of experts. Don Salter observes that

as teachers we can act as police officers in a world where, as Edward Said has argued, we are all involved with questions of authority, ownership and domination. Because the writing workshop allows students to achieve the status of expert, in excelling at their own literary achievements, the ‘authority’ becomes shared. Teaching is a political act as well as a pedagogical one. (173)

We need not indulge in a larger political analysis to justify innovation and uphold oblique approaches. The well-established fact remains: success in learning ‘enhances motivation further and is a powerful factor in future achievement’ (173). Then it is an inescapable duty of the teachers ‘to make complex analysis of teaching strategies to ensure that we are offering the widest choice of routes to success, for the broadcast range of students’ (174). Let not our student face ‘the denial of integrity’ in their own development.

The job of the teacher is much tougher when it attempts to deal with the usually unsuccessful. It is easy to teach ‘clever ventriloquists’ tricks’ (Don Salter’s use of David Jackson’s phrase in Unmasking masculinity, 1990, Unwin Hymen) but harder to find opportunities for writing and group activities which will give the experience of success to all. In the classroom, “the text is what the student does with it, and the oblique approach offers more things to do” (174).
3.6 The Constituent Elements of the Oblique Method

3.6.1 Student Involvement

The first requirement in the framing of any course-structure is the interest and involvement of students in their course work, to find in it the contemporary, the living and the relevant. Secondly, teachers need to present those courses through innovative methods, to improve the effectiveness of language teaching and learning.

In poetry classes, response to poetry has always been through language. Interpretation of literature through other forms of expression, such as drama, music and visual acts, has been allotted only a secondary place. But in fact, these avenues of communication encourage student involvement and they are to be nurtured in the classroom.

Phyllis E. Whitin in his study describes his learners' experience in learning to make and share meaning about literature through the creation of visual representations especially through sketches: Expressing abstract ideas through sketching opened an avenue for generating new insight. Creating and discussing sketches highlighted the role of collaboration in making meaning. He concludes saying

The analysis of students' responses to literature through sketching showed that the use of tools from non-linguistic sign systems such as mathematics and art could help learners deepen their understanding of theme, conflict and character relationships. (138)
As noted already in 3.3.3, the oblique method fosters student engagement in the classroom in a collaborative learning atmosphere.

Choral speaking also involves lively participation of the learners. It is "one of the most effective ways both to help students understand the levels of meaning, and to convey that effect to an audience" (Maley, 1999:9).

Geoff Fox and Brian Merrick in their chapter titled "Thirty Six Things to Do with a Poem" (1982:223-228) also talk of classroom activities involving learners. "The enjoyment of a poem is often deepened by analysis, though such close study can be carried out obliquely through various classroom activities, not only through line-by-line study" (223). After enlisting thirty six ways of interaction in groups with the text, they go one step further and say that in the classroom the learners' "negative responses also need to be expressed and respected" (228).

3.6.2 Discussion

The aim of the activities in the poetry class is to enable students to work out from the poem by relating it to their own experiences. They are taking up from where the poet left off, adding what was not said, but might have been said. In doing so, they come back to the poem itself from time to time. They may have great difficulty in explaining the lines of the poem. "But instead if they are asked to react to them e.g. through role-play exercises, they will find that thoughts will be released and they will in fact have 'plenty to say" (Maley and Duff, 70).
Discussion is not the only method of presenting poetry, although it is a mistake to say that discussion would ruin a poem; a good poem is not easily 'ruined'. A poem persists in spite of all approaches. J.H Walsh (1973) observes that "the character of a great deal of poetry -- the concentration of its thought, the obliqueness of its method and the personal nature of its expression -- makes it the reverse of immediately accessible [. . .]" (1).

Worse than the pupil who offers a perverse interpretation (if at all he reacts), is the pupil who does not respond to the poem at all. It is for those students whose initial response to a poem is either perverse or negligible that discussion is particularly valuable.

Discussion arrests the process by which the words pass rapidly and unheeded across the attention; [. . .] and if the process appears to involve a dismemberment, such a dismemberment need not be final. It is the whole poem which is final, and an uninterrupted reading of it is the proper conclusion to all discussion. (Walsh 2)

It is commonly contended that the pleasure which poetry offers is something beyond the power of discussion to capture. It is true that poetry can communicate much which lies beyond the borders of discussion. But the success of such communication is almost always dependent on the reader's having formed at least a general idea of what the poem is about. Our discussions are mainly directed towards discovering what the poems are about.
A good discussion is characterized by looseness and informality, and the teacher’s manner is often indirect and tentative.

Jerzy Jarniewicz observes: “During the classes the students should be introduced to different ways of approaching the text, and encouraged to talk about particular effects the poem generates [. . .]” (73). And further says

It is fairly common that students tend to depart from the text and talk about their own experiences. I do not deny the value of such responses. If literature is only a means to teaching a foreign language, the teacher can only be happy that the text activated the students and made them talk. (74)

An educational system must provide opportunities for free expression, exploration and initiative.

3.6.3 Asking Questions

Discussion is initiated and made lively by asking questions. Wimsatt says that as teachers we are likely to put ourselves in a Socratic relation to our pupils – setting them exercises, asking them questions. So that our own first question, what to say almost a poem, is likely enough to assume the shape: What to ask about a poem. This I think is a very special, intrinsic and difficult aspect of our professional problem. (163)

If we assume that we do know the correct things to say about a poem, how can these be transposed into good questions? A good question about a poem should have
at least two qualities: (i) it should have in mind an answer that is better than arbitrary or prescriptive, and (ii) the question ought not to be so good that it betrays or implies its own answer or the terms of its answer. In general a good question should have a definite answer – different from the question and yet entailed by it. This is what we call an authentic question (to distinguish it from a test question); and these types of questions signal to students the teachers’ interest in what students think and not just whether they know what some one else thinks or has said.

Yet another way that teachers substantively engage their students (see 3.3.3) in question-and-answer is by following up on student answers by incorporating these answers into subsequent questions: this process is called uptake. High-quality instructional discourse frequently manifests uptake because, like authentic questions, it accommodates input from students.

Further, students are encouraged to ask questions in the classroom. As already pointed out in 3.3.3, substantively engaged students ask questions especially about the content of the text and they are authentic questions.

As a classroom activity, learners may be encouraged to frame questions involving the text in hand, and the instruction may run like this: Make a final list of five questions which you would genuinely like to ask your friends about the poem, to help you understand it.

Another activity involving questions is to ask each pair of students in the class to read the poem and to formulate one or two questions which they think essential,
and they would like to ask the poet if he was present. These questions help the teacher to know what stage of reading their students have reached – the first-impression stage or beyond it. These questions help the teachers to see whether they are trying too soon to shift students toward their own more experienced perceptions before they have had time to grapple with the poem at the frontiers of their consciousness and understanding. They also help the learners to sharpen their understanding of the poem.

The power of reading and comprehension is unpredictable and untidy, and students often undervalue their own rough and tentative impressions and thoughts and turn too soon to external and more authoritative interpretations. The individual search for meaning is not a straightforward, linear progression because the mind may choose to look back to check earlier impressions, may make sudden imaginative leaps and may behave in unforeseen ways. (Brown and Gifford 125)

3.6.4 The Teacher’s New Role

The poem is not the special property for teachers. What the teacher does with the poem is at any rate different from what most other people do with it. A poetry teacher’s behaviour and attitude, especially some specific traits like his questioning style and sympathy play a vital role. Studies have shown that certain teachers are more successful regardless of method or poem; what is essential is the influence they inflict on the learners; individual teachers produce different effects and it is a universally accepted fact that any teacher is better than no teacher.
Students have a conception of the bad poetry teacher as one who dominates discussion, who does not make personal contact, and who concentrates on formalities at the expense of human elements in a poem. The type of teacher they need can be characterized as ‘affective’ and ‘imaginative’ focussed on helping students enter and ‘live’ in the world of the poem.

As noted already in chapter II, a good teacher invokes a creative mood in a few well chosen words and then stand aside while the class works at its enjoyment. He is none other than the sponsor of free speech and enjoyment. This activity consist in shaping, rather than dictating, and his response in suggesting, rather than telling.

The teacher's personality and his knowledge play a major role in removing the learner’s fear, and making them feel at home in the poetry class. Alan Maley and Moulding say, “Indeed, one of the reasons that poetry provokes a shiver of awe or revulsion may be the dusty academic way in which it has so often been taught” (136)

The teacher must see poetry as something concrete, useful, relevant, and inculcate this feeling in the minds of his learners.

Teachers who influence negatively do more harm than good. Don Salter quoting Professor Marathe talks of the danger that we as teachers are inclined towards, namely “puffing ourselves up” (173). He even points out that Professor Paniker has warned that the teacher who dictates notes may also encourage dictatorship. And about the negative attitude of teachers, he says, “This ties in with Michael Foucett's ideas on ‘policing of knowledge’, and it is certainly true that
separating the product from the process and the person makes policing easier” (Salter 173).

The oblique method has little to do with these types of teachers

3.6.5 Group work

The oblique method depends heavily on group activities. Most of the work is done in pairs or in small groups. The ideas seem to flow best when they are exchanged. “Working alone, the student has no outlet for his or her thoughts, as part of the large group, no opportunity to express them. In small groups it is possible to talk and to listen” (Maley and Duff 3). In the activities, the students are often asked to change groups and exchange ideas. This helps to keep ideas on the move and prevent the group from getting stuck.

Like all learning activities, group work is more likely to go well if it is properly planned. The principle of group work is explained thus:

Several factors work together to result in group work where everyone involved is interested, active, and thoughtful. [ . . . ] The five factors are (1) the learning goals of group work, (2) the task, (3) the way information is distributed, (4) the seating arrangement of the members of the group, and (5) the social relationships between the members of the group. (Nation 20)
The goals of group work involve the spoken use of language: group work is most commonly used to get learners talking to each other. Paul Nation (1989) mentions the following as goals of group work (20):

**Negotiation of input:** Group work provides an opportunity for learner to get exposure to language that they can understand and which contains unknown items for them to learn.

**New language items:** Group work gives learners exposure to a range of language items and language functions. Group work provides more opportunities for use of the new items compared to the opportunities in teacher-led classes.

**Fluency:** Group work allows learners to develop fluency in the use of language features that they have already learned.

**Communication strategies:** These include negotiation strategies to control input (seeking clarification, seeking confirmation, checking comprehension, repetition), strategies to keep a conversation going, strategies to make up for a lack of language items or a lack of fluency in the use of such items, and strategies for managing long turns in speaking.

**Content:** Particularly when English is taught through the curriculum, the goal of group work may be mastery of the content of the curriculum subject the learners are studying.
Group activities are classified according to the distribution of information needed to do the activity (20).

**The cooperating:** Here the learners have equal access to the same material or information and cooperate to do the task.

**The superior-inferior:** One member of the group has information that all the others need.

**The combining:** Each learner has a different piece of information that all the others need.

**The individual:** Each learner has access to the same information but must perform or deal with a different part of it.

These four types of group activities, which achieve different types of goals, are best suited to different kinds of tasks; they require different seating arrangement, and draw on or encourage different kinds of social relationships. In order for group work to be successful each type must have its most suitable choice of other factors.

Thus effective group work demands (1) positive interdependence among the members, (2) face to face communication and talk, (3) working toward a common goal with equal distribution of responsibility, and (4) a positive affective climate in the classroom (Savova and Donato 13)
3.6.6 Problem-Solving and Goal-Setting

Most of the activities advocated by the oblique method are problem-solving in nature. They are different from mechanical and traditional exercises. They demand interaction and group work.

Recent discussions of second and foreign language learning in the classroom setting emphasize the importance of target-language interaction among the students. Along with the linguistic need for interaction is the important role of student cooperation and collaboration in learning and cognitive development.

But the majority of text books provide few interactive activities in which students use the target language in collaborative tasks.

Rather, commercially prepared materials (text books, course books, work book, etc.) generally equip the teacher with an array of form-focused exercises intended for teacher-fronted presentation. Even among the more “communicative textbooks”, group work is located at the end of the chapter after a series of mechanical exercises. Its position in the chapter subordinates group work to traditional exercises, creating the impression that mechanical exercises are necessary pre-requisites to interaction in the target language. (Savova and Donato)
In this inferior position, group work and group activities are often perceived as unnecessary to the language-learning process or as optional activities to be used if class time permits.

At this stage, what we need are 1) a close differentiation between language-learning activities and the traditional language exercises and 2) principled ways of changing traditional exercises into challenging activities.

Language learning activities differ from exercises in four ways according to Lilia Savova and Richard Donato (12) This can be summed up thus.

1) Activities are meaning-centred; the learner must attend to and choose among the meanings of the works he/she and others use. But in exercises, success is always determined by the accuracy of the student’s response rather than by its informational content.

2) Activities are open-ended and unpredictable; they encourage students in communicative acts of real-life discourse which enable individuals to make choices, express intentions and achieve goals; they recognize the need to provide the students with opportunities to use the language in any way they can to fulfil personal goals. But exercises attempt only to stabilize learner performance.

3) Activities are motivated and constructed on real-world aims. Exercises on the other hand, are fabricated on aims that have little or nothing to do with natural language use (constructing verbs, pluralizing nouns, asking or answering questions of no interest to the learners).
4) Activities are integrative in nature. Whereas exercises develop essentially one language skill as the primary purpose, activities ideally incorporate all these skills into their construction. They unite all skills by featuring conversation and discussion, comprehension of spoken and written text, and extended written composition.

Group work encourages goal-setting and planning activity among learners. Faced with a common task, they plan their own learning agenda, in the form of questions, or problems to be solved; they also adopt peer-teaching and problem-solving strategies.

The learners’ self-constructed goals also provide a window through which the teacher can assess progress and offer genuinely individualized instructions. The teacher’s instruction will be a response to student-initiated learning goals, and will always take place when the learners have a genuine “need to know” (Savova and Donato)

This type of teaching practice is unlike standard classroom practice, which impels learners to digest information whether or not they grasp it as valuable, constructive or germane.

3.7 Conclusion

The oblique method promotes substantive engagement of the learners in the classroom. It ensures student-involvement and group activities in the language classes. Learners are encouraged to ask questions and take part in discussions. The
teacher becomes the sponsor of free speech and enjoyment. Chapter IV seeks to teach a few poems to a group of learners through the oblique method and to record their reaction to this method.