



Teaching english literature in the contemporary classroom: challenges and pedagogical strategies

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Abstract

Teaching English literature in contemporary undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) classrooms requires renewed pedagogical strategies that respond to evolving educational policies and technological advancements. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates a learner-centred, integrated, and flexible approach to pedagogy across disciplines, including the humanities and literature, shifting away from traditional rote methods toward experiential and critical learning. In tandem, emerging digital technologies; particularly artificial intelligence (AI); present both opportunities and challenges for enhancing pedagogical practice. While AI tools can support interactive learning and personalized feedback in literature instruction, concerns remain about their ethical use and impact on deep critical engagement with texts. This paper examines major pedagogical challenges in teaching English literature at UG and PG levels, explores innovations aligned with NEP 2020, and assesses the potential role of AI as a pedagogical collaborator rather than a replacement for human instruction. By critically synthesizing policy directives and contemporary literature on technology integration, this study offers actionable strategies for educators committed to robust, reflective, and adaptive teaching in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: English literature pedagogy, NEP 2020, artificial intelligence in education, learner-centred learning, higher education

Introduction

English literature occupies a foundational place in higher education, especially at the undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels, where it cultivates linguistic competence, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and interpretive skills. However, the task of teaching literature has become increasingly complex due to changing learner expectations, diverse student proficiency levels, and the broader shifts occurring in global education systems.

Literature is uniquely positioned to enrich language acquisition and interpretive competence, yet the pedagogical challenges in delivering this potential effectively are widely acknowledged in academic scholarships. Systematic reviews of literature teaching indicate that student-related challenges, instructor preparedness, and contextual constraints are persistent issues across diverse educational settings (Silva *et al.*, 2021)^[42].

The Government of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 foregrounds a learner-centred, multidisciplinary, and flexible curriculum designed to shift away from rote learning toward deeper comprehension, creativity, and analytical engagement across disciplines including the humanities and social sciences (Government of India, 2020 and Ramchand *et al.*, 2025)^[37]. This policy framework offers a strategic impetus to rethink literature pedagogy — integrating literature with broader learning objectives rather than treating it as an isolated subject. NEP 2020's emphasis on critical thinking, experiential learning, and skill integration is particularly relevant to literature classrooms, where interpretive complexity and contextual nuance are pedagogical challenges. Incorporating such policy directives into literature education may enable more responsive classroom strategies that resonate with the needs of contemporary learners (Ajani, 2024)^[1].

Another prominent dimension in contemporary pedagogy is the influence of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI). AI's ascendancy across educational

settings is well-documented, with large-scale reviews showing its potential to support personalised learning, data-driven feedback, and varied instructional modalities (Zou *et al.*, 2025)^[50]. However, scholarship also notes practical and ethical concerns, including the risk of over-dependence on automated tools, technological readiness gaps, and the need for grounded pedagogical frameworks that foreground human-centred learning outcomes. Integrating AI thoughtfully into literature pedagogy thus requires balancing technological utility with the discipline's demands for critical interpretation, empathic engagement, and ethical reasoning (Biagini, 2025)^[8].

Given these considerations, this paper examines the key challenges in teaching English literature in contemporary UG and PG classrooms, explores pedagogical strategies that align with current educational policy priorities, and assesses the role of technology, particularly AI, as both a resource and a challenge in the literature classroom. By synthesising policy imperatives with contemporary research on literature pedagogy and technology, this study seeks to offer evidence-based insights for educators navigating a rapidly evolving academic landscape.

English Literature in the Contemporary Classroom

The term *contemporary classroom* reflects more than a shift in physical or digital learning spaces; it signifies a transformation in learner profiles, pedagogical expectations, and educational objectives (Saufi, 2025)^[39]. In undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) English literature classrooms today, students represent diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-educational backgrounds. This diversity enriches literary discussions but also presents pedagogical challenges related to comprehension, interpretation, and engagement. Studies in literature pedagogy consistently highlight that heterogeneity in language proficiency and reading habits significantly affects students' ability to respond meaningfully to literary texts (Wuntu *et al.*, 2024)^[48].

Traditionally, the teaching of English literature relied heavily on lecture-based methods, focusing on canonical texts, historical contexts, and prescribed interpretations (Crawford, J., & Parsell, 2025) ^[16]. While this approach ensured content coverage, it often positioned students as passive recipients of knowledge. Contemporary educational discourse, however, emphasises learner-centred pedagogy, where students actively construct meaning through discussion, interpretation, and critical reflection (Bremner, 2021) ^[12]. The shift from transmission-based teaching to participatory learning is particularly relevant to literature studies, which inherently demand subjective engagement and analytical depth (Alderton, 2020) ^[2].

At the UG level, English literature often functions as a foundational discipline that develops reading comprehension, interpretive skills, and cultural literacy. At the PG level, the emphasis expands to include theoretical frameworks, comparative analysis, and research-oriented inquiry. Despite this progression, research indicates that students at both levels frequently struggle with dense texts, unfamiliar cultural contexts, and abstract theoretical concepts (Bunch *et al.*, 2014) ^[13]. These difficulties are compounded by declining reading practices influenced by digital media consumption, which tends to favour fragmented and surface-level engagement over sustained textual analysis.

In the Indian higher education context, the contemporary classroom is further shaped by curriculum reforms and policy initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy advocates multidisciplinary learning, flexibility in course design, and the integration of critical thinking and creativity across disciplines (Government of India, 2020). For English literature classrooms, this implies a movement away from rigid syllabi toward adaptable content that connects literary texts with social, historical, and ethical concerns relevant to present-day learners. Such an approach aligns with educational research that underscores the value of contextualized literature teaching in enhancing student engagement and interpretive competence (Caliboso *et al.*, 2025) ^[14].

Thus, the contemporary English literature classroom is characterized by diversity, evolving learner expectations, and institutional reforms that call for pedagogical adaptability. Recognising these contextual realities is essential before addressing the specific challenges and strategies involved in teaching literature effectively at UG and PG levels.

Challenges in Teaching English Literature

Teaching English literature at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels presents a set of enduring and evolving challenges that directly affect student engagement and learning outcomes. One of the most frequently cited concerns in literature pedagogy is the declining interest in sustained reading among students. Empirical studies have shown that many learners struggle to engage deeply with lengthy or complex literary texts, often due to changing reading habits shaped by digital media and examination-oriented learning practices (Covarino, 2019) ^[15]. This shift has resulted in surface-level reading, where students prioritise summaries and critical notes over direct interaction with the primary text.

Another significant challenge lies in linguistic and proficiency disparities within the classroom. In multilingual contexts such as India, students often enter UG and PG programmes with varying degrees of English language competence (Datta & Pankaj, 2023) ^[19]. While some learners demonstrate advanced interpretive abilities, others face difficulties in vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic expression, which hinders their engagement with literary texts (Hossain, 2024) ^[26]. These disparities create pedagogical tension, as instructors must simultaneously address language development and literary analysis without diluting academic rigour.

The cultural and historical distance of many canonical texts also poses interpretive challenges. Literary works rooted in unfamiliar socio-historical contexts can appear inaccessible or irrelevant to contemporary learners, particularly when taught without adequate contextualization (Johnson & Harris, 2009) ^[29]. Research in literature education suggests that students are more likely to disengage when texts are presented as static cultural artefacts rather than as dynamic narratives connected to live experience (Showalter, 2003). This issue is especially prominent at the UG level, where students may lack the cultural capital or theoretical grounding necessary for nuanced interpretation.

Institutional and structural constraints further complicate literature teaching. Large class sizes, limited instructional time, and rigid syllabi restrict opportunities for discussion-based and interactive pedagogy (Maringe & Sing, 2014) ^[32]. Studies on higher education teaching consistently note that assessment systems focused on memorisation and examination performance discourage critical thinking and creative interpretation — skills central to literary studies (Bouckaert, 2023) ^[10]. As a result, students may approach literature as content to be reproduced rather than as a field inviting inquiry and debate.

At the postgraduate level, an additional challenge emerges in the form of theoretical complexity. Literary theories — such as structuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, and cultural studies — demand abstract reasoning and interdisciplinary understanding (Huggan, 2008) ^[27]. Without scaffolded instruction, students often experience theory as detached from textual analysis, leading to mechanical application rather than critical engagement (Barry, 2017) ^[7]. This gap between theory and practice remains a persistent concern in PG literature classrooms.

Collectively, these challenges highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that are inclusive, contextual, and responsive to contemporary learner realities. Addressing these issues requires moving beyond traditional lecture-based instruction toward methods that actively involve students in interpretation, discussion, and meaning-making.

Pedagogical Strategies for Effective Teaching of English Literature

Effective teaching of English literature in contemporary UG and PG classrooms requires pedagogical strategies that promote active engagement, interpretive depth, and critical inquiry. Research in literature education consistently emphasises that students learn literary concepts more meaningfully when they are encouraged to participate actively in the process of interpretation rather than merely receiving predetermined meanings (Hall, 2005) ^[24]. A shift from lecture-dominated instruction to interactive, discussion-based pedagogy allows learners to explore

multiple perspectives and develop confidence in articulating their interpretations.

One widely supported approach is the reader-response method, which foregrounds the interaction between the reader and the text. By validating students' personal and cultural responses to literature, this approach helps bridge the gap between canonical texts and contemporary learner experiences. Empirical studies demonstrate that reader-response pedagogy enhances student engagement and interpretive skills, particularly at the UG level, where learners are still developing literary confidence (Qamar, 2016) [36]. At the PG level, such responses can be critically refined through theoretical frameworks, encouraging students to negotiate meaning rather than passively accept authoritative interpretations.

Contextual and historical approaches also play a crucial role in effective literature teaching. Situating texts within their socio-historical and cultural contexts enables students to comprehend underlying themes, ideologies, and narrative strategies more clearly. Research indicates that contextual teaching reduces students' sense of alienation from texts, especially those originating from unfamiliar cultural or temporal settings (Johnson, 2002) [28]. This approach is particularly valuable in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, where students may otherwise struggle to connect with distant literary traditions.

The incorporation of comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives further strengthens literature pedagogy. Comparing texts across genres, periods, or cultures encourages analytical thinking and highlights literature's interconnectedness with history, philosophy, sociology, and politics (Kholodniak, 2023) [30]. Studies in higher education pedagogy suggest that interdisciplinary approaches foster deeper comprehension and critical reflection by allowing students to draw meaningful connections across knowledge domains (Repko *et al.*, 2017) [38]. Such strategies align well with PG-level instruction, where analytical depth and theoretical synthesis are expected.

Assessment practices also demand pedagogical reconsideration. Traditional examinations often privilege memorisation over interpretation, limiting opportunities for creative and critical engagement. Alternative assessment methods — including reflective journals, presentations, group discussions, and analytical essays — have been shown to better evaluate students' interpretive abilities and critical thinking skills (Shavelson *et al.*, 2019) [41]. These methods encourage sustained interaction with texts and support continuous learning rather than episodic exam preparation.

Overall, effective literature pedagogy is characterised by flexibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness to learner needs. By combining interactive teaching, contextual grounding, interdisciplinary exploration, and reflective assessment, educators can create literature classrooms that promote deep engagement and intellectual growth at both UG and PG levels.

Teaching English Literature in the Context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift in India's higher education framework, emphasising flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking, and holistic development. Although the policy does not prescribe subject-specific syllabi, its guiding

principles have direct implications for the teaching of English literature at both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels. NEP 2020 explicitly advocates a transition from rote-based learning to pedagogies that encourage analytical reasoning, creativity, and experiential engagement — competencies that are central to literary studies (Government of India, 2020).

One of the most relevant aspects of NEP 2020 for literature education is its emphasis on multidisciplinary. The policy encourages students to engage with multiple disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, thereby dissolving rigid academic boundaries. For English literature classrooms, this approach enables the integration of literary texts with history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies (Taye, 2025) [44]. Research in humanities education supports such integration, noting that interdisciplinary learning enhances interpretive depth and helps students situate literary texts within broader social and intellectual frameworks (Repko *et al.*, 2017) [38]. This approach is particularly beneficial at the PG level, where advanced literary analysis increasingly demands theoretical and contextual synthesis.

NEP 2020 also foregrounds critical thinking and analytical skills as core learning outcomes. The policy explicitly calls for teaching methods that promote discussion, debate, inquiry, and reflection rather than passive content delivery (Oros, 2007) [34]. In the context of English literature, this shift reinforces pedagogical practices that prioritize textual interpretation, multiple readings, and reasoned argumentation. Studies in literature pedagogy have long argued that such approaches deepen students' engagement with texts and cultivate higher-order cognitive skills. By aligning literature instruction with these objectives, educators can ensure that literary study remains academically rigorous and educationally relevant.

Another key dimension of NEP 2020 is its emphasis on flexible curricula and choice-based learning pathways. The policy supports the introduction of electives, value-added courses, and skill-oriented modules within degree programmes. For English literature departments, this flexibility allows the inclusion of diverse literary traditions, contemporary texts, and thematic courses that resonate with student interests and societal concerns (Bahadure, 2024) [3]. Research suggests that curricular flexibility increases student motivation and fosters a sense of ownership over learning, particularly in humanities disciplines where personal engagement is integral to academic success (Li, 2025).

NEP 2020 also underscores the importance of holistic and value-based education, highlighting ethics, empathy, and cultural understanding as essential educational goals (Biswas & Pandey, 2025) [9]. Literature, by its very nature, engages with human experience, moral dilemmas, and social realities, making it a powerful medium for achieving these objectives. Educational studies consistently recognise literature's role in fostering empathy, ethical reasoning, and intercultural awareness among students (Sun, 2023) [43]. Embedding these values within literature pedagogy aligns seamlessly with NEP 2020's vision of education as a means of nurturing socially responsible and reflective individuals. However, the implementation of NEP 2020 in literature classrooms also presents challenges. Institutional readiness, teacher training, and assessment reform remain critical concerns. Without adequate professional development and

curricular support, the policy's pedagogical aspirations may remain under-realised. Therefore, effective integration of NEP 2020 into English literature teaching requires not only curricular redesign but also sustained institutional commitment and pedagogical capacity-building.

Role of Technology and Artificial Intelligence in Literature Pedagogy

The integration of technology into higher education has significantly altered teaching and learning practices, including the pedagogy of English literature. Digital tools such as learning management systems, online discussion forums, digital archives, and multimedia resources have expanded access to literary texts and critical materials (Pinto & Leite, 2020) [35]. Research in higher education pedagogy indicates that technology, when used purposefully, can enhance student engagement, support collaborative learning, and facilitate diverse modes of textual interpretation (Serrano *et al.*, 2019) [40]. In literature classrooms, such tools allow instructors to move beyond print-centric approaches and incorporate audio-visual, performative, and interactive dimensions of literary study.

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as an influential technological development within education. Systematic reviews of AI in educational contexts demonstrate its capacity to support personalised learning, formative assessment, and feedback mechanisms (Farhood *et al.*, 2025) [21]. In the teaching of English literature, AI-based tools can assist students in activities such as vocabulary support, textual annotation, preliminary textual analysis, and structured feedback on writing (Gayed *et al.*, 2022) [23]. These applications may be particularly useful at the UG level, where students often require scaffolding to build confidence in reading and analytical writing.

However, the role of AI in literature pedagogy must be approached with caution. Literary studies are fundamentally concerned with ambiguity, interpretation, ethical reasoning, and emotional engagement — dimensions that cannot be fully automated (Yadav *et al.*, 2024) [49]. Educational researchers warn against over-reliance on AI-generated interpretations or summaries, as such practices risk reducing literature to fixed meanings and discouraging independent critical thought (da Silva, 2024) [17, 42]. At the PG level, where theoretical rigour and original interpretation are central, uncritical use of AI tools may undermine scholarly depth and academic integrity.

Another important consideration is ethical and pedagogical responsibility. Issues related to authorship, plagiarism, data privacy, and algorithmic bias have been widely discussed in contemporary educational research (Oduoye *et al.*, 2023) [33]. In literature classrooms, where originality of interpretation and academic honesty are core values, instructors must establish clear guidelines for acceptable AI use. Rather than positioning AI as a substitute for reading or interpretation, scholars argue that it should function as a supplementary tool that supports learning while preserving the primacy of human judgement and critical reflection.

From a policy perspective, NEP 2020 acknowledges the importance of leveraging technology to improve access and quality in education while simultaneously emphasising ethical use and teacher autonomy (Government of India, 2020). Aligning AI integration in literature pedagogy with these principles requires teacher training, digital literacy development, and institutional frameworks that prioritise pedagogical goals over technological novelty.

In sum, technology and AI offer valuable opportunities to enrich English literature pedagogy when employed judiciously. Their effectiveness depends not on the tools themselves but on how thoughtfully they are integrated into teaching practices that continue to foreground close reading, dialogue, and critical engagement. A balanced approach that combines technological support with humanistic pedagogy is essential for sustaining the intellectual and ethical foundations of literary education at both UG and PG levels.

Student-Centred and Inclusive Teaching Approaches

Student-centred and inclusive pedagogical approaches have gained increasing prominence in contemporary higher education, particularly within humanities disciplines such as English literature (Hoidn, 2016) [25]. These approaches emphasise active learner participation, respect for diversity, and responsiveness to individual learning needs. Research in higher education pedagogy indicates that student-centred learning environments foster deeper engagement, critical thinking, and sustained motivation, especially when learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their interpretive processes (Damşa & De Lange, 2019) [18].

In English literature classrooms, student-centred pedagogy involves shifting the focus from authoritative interpretations to dialogic engagement with texts. Classroom practices such as group discussions, seminars, debates, and peer-led presentations allow students to articulate and negotiate meanings collaboratively (Bajor, 2017) [4]. Studies show that dialogic teaching enhances interpretive competence by exposing learners to multiple perspectives and promoting reflective thinking (Boyd *et al.*, 2022) [11]. At the UG level, such practices support confidence-building and language development, while at the PG level they facilitate theoretical application and critical debate.

Inclusivity is another crucial dimension of contemporary literature pedagogy. Diverse classrooms encompass students from varied linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, each bringing distinct interpretive frameworks to literary texts. Inclusive teaching practices involve careful text selection, contextual support, and pedagogical flexibility to ensure equitable participation. Educational research underscores that inclusive curricula — incorporating texts from diverse voices, regions, and traditions — enhance students' sense of belonging and broaden their critical understanding of literature as a global and socially embedded phenomenon (Teo, 2019) [45].

Addressing linguistic diversity is particularly significant in multilingual contexts. Scaffolded instruction, including pre-reading activities, glossaries, and guided discussions, has been shown to support learners with differing levels of language proficiency without compromising academic standards (Van Staden, 2011) [46]. Such strategies enable students to engage meaningfully with texts while gradually developing literary and linguistic competence.

Student-centred assessment practices further reinforce inclusivity and engagement. Formative assessments such as reflective writing, response journals, and collaborative projects allow students to demonstrate learning through varied modes of expression (Weurlander *et al.*, 2012) [47]. Research in assessment pedagogy suggests that such approaches promote continuous learning and reduce anxiety associated with high-stakes examinations (French *et al.*, 2024) [22]. In literature classrooms, these methods also encourage sustained interaction with texts and reflective interpretation.

In alignment with NEP 2020's emphasis on learner autonomy and holistic development, student-centred and inclusive teaching approaches support the policy's vision of education as a participatory and transformative process (Government of India, 2020). By valuing diverse perspectives and fostering active engagement, literature classrooms can become spaces that nurture critical awareness, empathy, and intellectual independence.

Future Directions in Teaching English Literature

The future of English literature teaching in UG and PG classrooms lies in pedagogical adaptability, institutional support, and sustained professional development. As educational contexts continue to evolve, literature educators must respond to changing learner needs, technological advancements, and policy reforms without compromising the intellectual and ethical foundations of the discipline. Research in higher education pedagogy highlights that continuous innovation in teaching practices is essential for maintaining relevance and academic rigor in humanities education (Bakar, 2021) [5].

One significant future direction involves ongoing teacher training and professional development. Effective implementation of learner-centred, technology-assisted, and policy-aligned pedagogy requires instructors to develop both pedagogical and digital competencies. Studies indicate that educators who engage in reflective teaching practices and professional learning communities are better equipped to integrate new methods meaningfully into their classrooms (Dimmock, 2016) [20]. In the context of English literature, such training can support teachers in balancing traditional close reading with contemporary approaches such as interdisciplinary learning and guided use of digital tools.

Another critical direction is the balanced integration of technology. While digital platforms and AI tools are likely to remain part of higher education, their role in literature teaching should be carefully moderated. Scholarly consensus suggests that technology should serve as an aid to reading, discussion, and analysis rather than a replacement for human interpretation (Selwyn, 2019). Future pedagogical models must therefore prioritise critical literacy, ethical awareness, and interpretive independence alongside technological engagement.

Curriculum design also warrants continued attention. Flexible and modular curricula, as encouraged by NEP 2020, provide opportunities to incorporate contemporary texts, regional literatures, and global perspectives into English studies. Research in curriculum studies underscores that such diversity enhances students' cultural literacy and analytical skills, preparing them for academic research as well as broader societal engagement (Banks, 2015) [6]. At the PG level, this flexibility can facilitate advanced research-oriented learning and interdisciplinary scholarship.

Ultimately, the future of English literature education depends on sustaining dialogue between tradition and innovation. By preserving the discipline's core emphasis on critical reading and ethical reflection while embracing pedagogical reform, educators can ensure that literature remains a vital component of higher education in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Teaching English literature in the contemporary UG and PG classroom involves navigating a complex intersection of

pedagogical challenges, policy reforms, and technological developments. This paper has examined the key difficulties faced by literature educators — including declining reading practices, linguistic diversity, curricular constraints, and theoretical complexity — and has explored evidence-based pedagogical strategies to address these concerns. Interactive teaching methods, contextualised instruction, interdisciplinary learning, and reflective assessment have been identified as central to effective literature pedagogy.

The discussion of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights its significant implications for English literature education, particularly its emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy, multidisciplinary engagement, and holistic development. When aligned thoughtfully with literature teaching, these policy principles can strengthen critical thinking, creativity, and ethical awareness among students. Similarly, the careful integration of technology and artificial intelligence offers opportunities to enhance learning, provided that such tools are used ethically and pedagogically, without undermining the discipline's humanistic foundations.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of English literature teaching in contemporary classrooms depends not on any single method or technological innovation but on a balanced, reflective, and inclusive pedagogical approach. By grounding teaching practices in research, policy awareness, and a deep respect for literary inquiry, educators can foster meaningful engagement with texts and nurture intellectually independent learners. Such an approach ensures that English literature continues to play a vital role in higher education, contributing to both academic excellence and the broader development of students as thoughtful and empathetic individuals.

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