An Investigation On Approaches Used To Teach Literature In The ESL Classroom: A Case Study Of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Desa Skudai, Johor Bahru

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Abstract : Literature of English has become part of the KBSM syllabus in Malaysian education system. The mode of delivering the content can be done in various ways. However, not all teachers are aware of the possible best ways of teaching literature. This study was carried out to investigate the approaches used to teach literature in the ESL classroom in Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Desa Skudai, Johor Bahru. An investigation was conducted involving 60 form four students which were divided into two groups equally. They were taught literature using two different approaches and given sets of questionnaire to be answered at the end of the lesson. An interview was also done with the teacher to reinforce the findings. The overall findings of the study signify that most of the students prefer a language-based approach lesson more than the integrated approach. This study also reveals that there were weaknesses and strengths found in both approaches. In conclusion, it can be said that the language-based approach is the most preferred approach by the students in this group. However, it depends on how teacher manipulate the situation to suit students' needs. Finally, it is suggested that teachers need to improve their method and approach of teaching so as to promote an effective teaching environment in literature class.

Keywords : approaches, literature, ESL classroom

Background of the Study

In today's educational world, the development of curriculum has made it possible for us to teach literature in the teaching and learning of languages. At secondary level, literature in English has become one of the compulsory components in Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM). It has been included in the English language syllabus as part of the content that should be learned by students in form one to form five since the year 2001. In the English language curriculum specifications, the literature component is specifically put under the 'language for aesthetic use' learning outcome. The Ministry of Education has explains the reason of putting the literature component in the syllabus specification as follows:

> *"Language for aesthetic purposes enables learners to enjoy literary texts at a level suited to their language proficiency and develops in them the ability to express themselves creatively".*
>
> (KBSM English language Curriculum Specifications, 2003)

Hence, it is clear that placing literature component in the syllabus gives the chance to students to improve their language proficiency as well as develop their creative thinking in expressing thoughts and opinions.

Talking about literature, it can be said that literature works are not a new issue to be put into polemic. Long ago, *Kesusasteraan Melayu* was also learned by people regardless of the way they learn it; either formal or non-formal. In today's world, literature is learned in a more formal way and it is also included in the English language syllabus. Students have to learn literature

component in the ESL classrooms at school. It is taught formally as part of the teaching and learning content.

Literature components in English have been introduced to Malaysian curriculum since the year 2001. Since then, a lot of poems and short stories have become the item of learning literature especially in secondary schools. Stories such as *'Looking for the Rain God'* by Bessie Head, 'The *Pearl'* by John Steinback and Shakespeare's work such as the poem *'Sonnet 18'* have become well-known to students. The following table shows poems and short stories learned by secondary schools students in Malaysia.

In order to teach literature to students, there are several ways to deliver the content of literature and to ensure the students understand what literature is all about. Since literature is quite new to Malaysian educational system, not much techniques and approaches can be applied by teachers in classrooms to teach literature. From my opinion, this is because teachers lack of exposure to literature teaching techniques. As stated in the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA) discussion on the web, www.melta.org.com (2007), teachers are known to have applied their fundamental knowledge of teaching and sometimes improvise them in order to teach literature in ESL classroom. However, they only use the explanation and answering comprehension questions techniques which are rather boring for students. Similarly, some other teachers only manage to teach their students by using the traditional method, by giving focus only on the literary texts for it pronunciation and vocabulary when teaching literature.

The questions that arise here are how far does the approach used by the teacher help students in understanding literature and what is the best approach to be used to teach literature in ESL classrooms?

Statement of Problem

The literature component is now part of the KBSM English language syllabus. However, experience and observation show that students do not fully understand what they have learned and they do not know how to appreciate literature accordingly. Most of the students do not know how to appreciate the culture in the poem or short story and interpret the social, political, literary and historical perspective of a specific text. They only see literature as an ordinary reading text and do not really discover the underlying principle of learning literature.

The teachers' teaching might be one of the reasons why students do not have any interest in learning literature. Teachers only focus on the language part of the literature i.e. grammar, vocabulary and skills while neglecting the other aspect of it which is the appreciation of the literature works. Teachers should on the other hand treat literature differently. With the introduction of literature component in the English language syllabus, the literature component has created a new dimension for teachers to come up with new teaching styles. For example, using literature texts, teachers can involve students with lots of interesting and enjoyable activities such as role plays, dramas, quizzes and choral speaking. Moreover, since students nowadays have been exposed widely to science and computer technology, teachers can use the advantages in creating creative activities that link to students' interest.

Other than that, not all teachers are aware of the importance of literature in the teaching and learning process. Many of them teach literature for the purpose of examination, not understanding or appreciating. Their main concern is only to make sure the students know how to answer the exam questions. This is for the reason that Malaysian education system is more exam-oriented and everyone's concern is to pass the exam and move on to the next level. This is

so misleading because those teachers tend to speed their lessons causing them to become tedious, stereotype and confusing for the students.

Moreover, some teachers also are having problems with the approach to teach literature in ESL classrooms. They do not know what is the best approach to teach literature in order for students to gain both language and appreciation of the literature itself. A local newspaper once claimed that the newly graduated English teachers are using the national language (Malay) to teach English literature by translating or giving elaboration of the content of the text in the syllabus.(Utusan Malaysia, 2nd of July, 2001). Therefore, it seems that some of the English teachers lack ways to teach literature with the aim of making the students understand the lesson. By translating or explaining an English content using Malay language does not help the process of improving or developing English among students.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to investigate and examine the approaches used by teacher to teach literature in ESL classroom. It looked into two objectives as follows:
1. To investigate students' reaction to the different approaches used to teach literature in the ESL classroom.
2. To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches used by the teacher to teach literature in ESL classroom.

Significance of the study

Over the years, the development of curriculum has brought about a new dimension of education. With the change of the role of literature in language learning to a higher level, every party plays an important role to achieve the goals. In relation to this, the findings of this study benefits professionals who are in the education field especially to those who are seeking solution of the problems faced by the English teachers to teach literature in ESL classrooms. At the same time, curriculum designers can use the result of this study to improve the syllabus as well as prepare relevant reference for teachers to teach literature for future use.

The strengths and weaknesses of the approaches discussed can also be used by English teachers to help them to teach literature in a more effective manner. This can results in students gaining maximum benefit from the teaching and learning process.

Besides, the findings of this study also benefit the trainee teachers, especially the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) undergraduates. They can use the knowledge gained from this study to prepare themselves for teaching in the real world later.

Furthermore, the result of the study also helps the Faculty of Education in its attempt to modify the course specifications. This effort will help to produce teachers who are more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of approaches used to teach literature in the future.

Research Instruments

Before further discussion on the data collection method is made, it is important to emphasize that this research is a case research. Altman (1976) describes a case research as an "instance in action" where the researcher usually observes particular characteristics of an individual unit in the context in which it occurs (quoted in Nunan, 1992: 75). The main aim of this case research is to examine the suitability of the approaches used to teach literature in the ESL classroom and its effects to students' learning process. An experimental research was constructed so that variables can be controlled and manipulated.

In collecting data for this research, the research instruments were divided into two categories which are (i) qualitative data and (ii) quantitative data. The methods used to collect qualitative data were interview and experiments while the method in collecting data for quantitative data was a set of questionnaire.

Respondents of the Study

This research involved the participation of one English teacher and 60 form 4 students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Desa Skudai, Johor Bahru. This school was chosen because it is a school that contains various types of students' proficiency level.

One English teacher who teaches English in form 4 was chosen to be the main sample. The teacher selected was not from the education background but she was trained to teach English. She obtained her first degree in Business Administration and after that went to the Teacher Training College for her educational diploma. She has been teaching for twelve years.

Other than that, this research also involved the participation of 60 form 4 students from the school. Sixty students were selected to answer the questionnaire related to their feedback and opinion on the lesson given by the teacher. The students were divided into two groups; group A and group B. Both groups contain similar set of students and received similar content during the research. They were of various levels of proficiency and came from different background. Other than that, they have been exposed to different ways of learning literature.

Piloting and Improvement of Instruments

Before the actual research, a pilot study was conducted by the researcher. Pilot study is an informal exercise of trying out the instrument to see how they work and to get response out of the instruments. This is because different people will interpret it differently. In this research, the pilot study was conducted among a group of form 4 students with similar level of proficiency who were not the respondents themselves. The purposes of piloting the questionnaire are to:

i.   determine validity and reliability as the questions was created by the researcher herself
ii. make sure the wordings and item structure are clear so that it can be easily understood and interpreted as hoped by the researcher
iii. improve the questions so the results will be valid
iv. determine the length of time needed to answer the questionnaire

After the pilot study was done, the piloted instruments were collected and improvements were made to the questionnaire. Some adaptations were also made where possible provided that it was relevant with the objectives.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Percentage of strengths and weaknesses of Integrated and Language-Based Approach

	Group A (Application of integrated approach)	Group B (Application of language-based approach)	Difference
A. Helps students to understand the content	82 %	87 %	5 %
B. Awareness of the cultural background	41 %	56 %	15 %
C. Improve students' grammar and vocabulary	62 %	72 %	10 %
D. Helps students to relate lesson with own experience	42 %	36 %	6 %
E. Encourage students to express their own opinion	69 %	64 %	5 %
F. Increase awareness of values among students	45 %	38 %	7 %

Table 1 above shows the differences of percentage of both integrated and language-based approach. The percentage of differences as can be seen in the third column is the range of determining the strengths or weaknesses of each approach. In A (helps students to understand the content), there is not much difference between the two groups. The percentage is only 5 percent and this can be used to conclude that both approaches help students to understand the content. In B (awareness of the cultural background), the percentage of group A is 41 percent while percentage of group B is 56 percent and this has created a range of 15 percent. The large amount of difference indicates that this is the strength of a language-based approach but a weakness of the integrated approach. Other than that, there is not much difference found in C which is improving students' grammar and vocabulary. By only 10 percent of differences and more than 50 percent obtained from groups, it can be said that integrated approach and language-based approach help students to improve grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, 42 percent form group A and 36 percent from group B in (D) shows that both approach do not help students in relating the lesson with their own experience because the percentage is less than 50 percent which is rather low. The same goes with (F) with 45 percent from group A and 38 percent from group B which tell us that both integrated and language –based approach do not help these students to increase their awareness of the values. Lastly, E (encourage students to express their own opinion) shows a high percentage for both group with 69 percent from group A and 64 percent from group B and this can be used as a proof for the strength of both approach.

In conclusion, the table below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of both integrated and language-based approach derived from the bar chart before.

Table 2: Strengths and weaknesses of Integrated and Language-Based Approach

	Integrated approach	Language-based approach
Strengths	○ Help students to understand the content ○ Improve student' grammar and vocabulary ○ Encourage students to express their own opinion	○ Help students to understand the content ○ Improve students' grammar and vocabulary ○ Encourage students to express their own opinion ○ Students aware of the cultural background
Weaknesses	○ Students' do not aware of the cultural background ○ Do not help students to relate lesson with own experience ○ Do not help student to increase awareness of values	○ Do not help students to relate lesson with own experience ○ Do not help student to increase awareness of values

Discussions

From the findings of students' reaction to Language-Based and Integrated approach, a conclusion can be made where it is clear that students like the lesson using a language-based approach more compared to the integrated approach. Although the percentage of students' reaction does not have a big difference, it is still clear that positive reaction obtained from the group B is higher than the group A. A comparison of the two results reveals that students' reaction can be influenced by several factors.

First of all, it can be seen that students in the group A have a very positive perception towards English and literature class compared to students in the group B. However, an unexpected finding revealed that students in group B give a more positive feedback towards the lesson. Even though students in the group A said that they like to learn English more than the other group, their feedback was not as expected. Therefore, this study has shown that students' background especially their perception towards learning English and literature cannot be used as a milestone to determine student s' feedback to the approaches used. If students like learning English and literature, that does not mean they can accept any approaches teacher uses in the ESL classroom. The degree of students' interest towards the approaches used cannot be influenced by students' background based on the students in this population.

Nonetheless, there are several other factors could be taken into consideration in determining students' feedback in relation to the approaches used. The first factor which can influence students' reaction is the familiarity of the approach being exposed to students. Findings

of this research show that the percentage of students' positive feedback of the language-based approach is higher than the integrated approach. This result supports the interview data where teacher usually focuses on the literal meaning and vocabulary of the selected text. Therefore, it might be possible that students accept the language-based approach and enjoy the class because they have been exposed to it for a long time. The integrated approach is new for students and because of that, they have not been familiarize to the way teacher teach and this is the reason why students like the language-based approach more than the integrated approach.

The second factor influencing students' reaction is students' level of proficiency. Most of the students with low level of proficiency agree that a language-based approach help them in understanding the lesson more than the integrated approach. This is because students with low level of proficiency have limited access to language and this will be hard for them to express their opinion as suggested by integrated approach. If they cannot understand the content, it will be hard for them to relate it with their own experience. This argument has been supported by the teacher from the interview done. She claims that oral activity is not applicable for weak students.

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