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LITERATURE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A REVISIT IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

When literature was first incorporated as a tested component in the English language syllabus at secondary school level in Malaysia, the local research community provided some insights into the challenges and issues in relation to the move. It has now been more than eight years since literature was introduced and this paper attempts to revisit the situation by describing the overall learning needs of current language learners and their perceptions of the use of literature in learning English. These needs are matched with the expectations and perceptions of teachers who have become accustomed to using literature as a resource to teach the language. A survey was carried out at various secondary schools in the area of Johor Bahru. Two sets of questionnaires were designed and distributed to two groups of respondents, who are secondary school students and the English language teachers from the same schools. Based on the data obtained, the findings from the two groups of respondents were matched to seek the current perception of the use of literature in the teaching and learning of English. The overall findings of the study indicated that both students and teachers were positive about the use of literature in English language instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on the role of literature in language instruction has obviously gone through significant revolutions (Premawardhena, 2006; Delanoy, 1997). At the beginning, under the influence of the Formalists and Structuralists, literature was given much attention in language teaching. According to Thakur (2003), the teaching of the English language was synonymous with the teaching of literature before the world war. It was treated as a model of excellent language use and a source of high moral value that emphasised the study of literary canon of the target language. In other words, literature was taught as the body of knowledge or subject matter that dominated the language syllabus (Carroli, 2002).

The situation nevertheless changed after the British colonisation period ended (Thakur, 2003). As a result of the change in English language status, literature, which was once treated as a source of high moral value, no longer held its special status. Meanwhile, literature was separated from language teaching when advocators of the Functional Approach argued to eliminate literature from language teaching (Delanoy, 1997). They contended that the use of literature in language teaching was a long way from meeting the needs of the language learners. The trend to disengage, and at the same time, unite literature with language teaching and learning continued when the Communicative Approach to language teaching was established in the 1970s. Through the Communicative language teaching method, authentic literary texts were initially regarded to supply learners with 'representational use of the language,' (Carter, 2007). However many materials and textbooks designed using the method focused only on specific language features and functions with minimal use of the authenticity of literary language in the teaching and learning of a language (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000; Newman & Pujol, 1996).

Nevertheless, literature gradually reestablished its grounds in language teaching from the 1980s through the new evolution of Applied Linguistics and Literary Theory (Thakur, 2003). From then on, literature has once again made its way into language instruction.

This time however, it does not dominate the language instruction, instead its function has changed to become a resource for language teaching and learning (Lazar, 2005), an authentic reservoir for linguistic exploration into stylistic and discourse analysis (Carter, 2007), semiotics and multimodalities as well as corpus studies.

The renewed interest in the use of literature in language teaching has attracted many language syllabus planners and practitioners to turn to literature as an alternative resource for the teaching of languages. In the year 2000, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia decided to integrate literature as a tested component in the English language secondary school syllabus (Subramaniam, 2003). Later in the year 2005, literature has been included as part of the English language extended reading program for learners in Primary 4 to 6. The change towards the incorporation of literature as a tested component in the teaching of English for the local context has shown that Malaysia is not only seriously following the current trend in language instruction but has also revealed the value of literature for the teaching of English as a Second Language for our language learners.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

When literature was initially incorporated into the school curriculum, local research enthusiasts began exploring the challenges and perceptions of different parties towards the use of literature in the teaching and learning of English. Meanwhile, numerous seminars and training sessions have been organised at different levels nationwide to create a platform for the sharing of effective and innovative teaching ideas for the teaching of the literature component.

It has been more than eight years since literature made its way into the Malaysian secondary school curriculum. Much has been expounded about the literature component in the English language syllabus ever since its introduction. In relation to that, this paper

attempts to revisit the situation in schools. It is vital to follow up to see how teachers and students are currently adapting to the literature component after its introduction.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this survey are as follows:-

- to determine the current perceptions of teachers and students towards the literature component in the English language syllabus
- to find out the overall perceptions of teachers and students towards the literary texts used for the teaching of literature in the English language syllabus
- to investigate the perceptions of teachers and students towards the activities for the teaching of literature

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned earlier, the place for literature in language teaching and learning has repeatedly been perceived differently. Different perspectives have exposed the advantages and the disadvantages of incorporating literature as a resource for teaching languages. However this would depend on different factors such as the function of literature in the language syllabus and how it is used in specific contexts. By examining the different views and through research efforts, many important challenges and new discoveries could be uncovered and understood. For that matter, this section will provide the general review of literature that would help explain the patterns discovered in the findings of this study.

There are a number of arguments against the use of literature in language teaching. McKay (1982) explained that one of the arguments is that it has minimal contribution towards the teaching

of grammar for the target language. This is due to the fact that the language of literature, that frequently explores the use of unique and complex language structures, presents language that deviates from the natural or common language use (Marwan, 1997). Apart from that, literature is thought to contribute nothing in helping students achieve academic and occupational goals (Mckay, 1982).

On the other hand, advocators of literature for language teaching have exposed various reasons why literature could be used for teaching a language. Among the many reasons claimed to be beneficial, Collie and Slater (2006) stated that language teachers should use literary texts in the classroom because they offer “a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is important in the sense that it addresses fundamental human issues and which is enduring rather than ephemeral” and foster personal involvement in the language learning process. Besides that, Lazar (2005) claimed that literature is a motivating material, a source that encourages language acquisition and awareness, an access into other cultures and an avenue for the development of critical, aesthetic and creative thinking. These according to him could holistically help educate a person as a whole. From Fakrul Alam’s (2002) point of view, literary texts enhance students’ reading skills and provide varied examples of vocabulary use. This is supported by Erkaya (2005) who stated that the use of short stories in a language classroom, for example, would help expand students’ vocabulary and inculcate the reading habit.

The claims made in support of the incorporation of literature in language teaching and learning have revealed that through literature, learners would not only gain experience that would enhance language learning but would also develop other vital skills that would facilitate overall achievement in education such as critical thinking and reading. To illustrate this, research has discovered that when readers read literary texts aesthetically, they would be able to be personally involved in the reading process (Dressel, 2005). This may not only assist in the development of personal response and higher-order thinking of the texts (Kelly and Farnan, 1989) but would also encourage the transaction between the reader and the text

(Rosenblatt, 1978). Moreover, according to McKool (2007), various studies conducted on reading habits have shown a strong relationship between the amount of out-of school reading a student engages in and his or her success in reading.

Yang (2007) said that “it is assumed that although teachers and students both believe reading is important for education, they hold very different attitudes as to how reading sessions should be conducted. Allowing students to select their own reading materials will enhance students’ motivation to read.” In other words, if literary texts are used to improve the learning of English through reading, careful selection of them is necessary (Thirumalai, 2002).

Sanacore (1990) suggested that when selecting materials for the classroom, teachers could work closely with library media specialists who are usually aware of a wide variety of materials that are well-matched with students’ interests and needs. The positive experience in reading literary texts that match students’ interests and needs would build independence and self-esteem which are important for creating lifelong readers.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger study that was carried out in various schools within the area of Johor Bahru. For the purpose of data collection, two groups of respondents, which were the 26 English language teachers who have taught the literature component to secondary school students and 420 students who have undergone literature lessons in school, were selected as participants of the study. Those students were in Form One to Form Five.

To obtain the needed data, two sets of questionnaires were designed and distributed to the respondents. The data obtained from both questionnaires were then descriptively reported in percentage form where pertinent results that show a match between the two groups of participants were presented and discussed. This is done to observe perceptions among teachers and students and find out how they are adapting after a period of eight years in the syllabus

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the overall findings obtained, the following are some evidence that show a match in the perception of the two groups of respondents namely the teachers and students who participated in the study. The corresponding results are depicted according to their general perceptions of the incorporation of the literature component in teaching English, the selection of literary texts for the literature component and the preferred activities conducted in the literature lessons.

Items	Yes	No	Items	Yes	No
Literature may provide motivating materials	92.1	7.9	Literature can motivate students' interest in learning the English language	82.2	17.8
Literature may expand students' vocabulary	83.0	17.0	I learn many new words when I read literary texts	92.8	7.2
Literature can enhance language proficiency	95.0	5.0	I can improve my proficiency in the language through literature	85.7	14.3
Literature can provide access to other cultures	76.4	23.6	I can learn about other culture and values through literature	86.3	13.7
Literature can inculcate reading habit among students	100	0	I like reading literary texts in English	63.5	36.5

Literature can develop critical thinking	95.0	5.0	I like it when the teacher asks for views in the class	77.5	22.5
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Table 1: Perception on the use of literature in English language teaching

Table 1 shows the results of the study on the perceptions of teachers and students towards the use of literature in English language teaching. Generally, majority of the teachers and students welcome the move of incorporating literature into the English language classroom. Both parties believe that literature has a role to play in motivating students' interests in learning English. They also feel that literature is a useful learning resource since it could enhance language proficiency and expand vocabulary of the target language. Besides, both parties appreciate the fact that literature can become a window to other cultures. Literature is also perceived to be able to inculcate the reading habit and develop critical thinking among students.

Items	Yes	No	Items	Yes	No
I like to teach contemporary literature	79.7	20.3	I like to read contemporary literature	84.2	15.8
I like to teach classics	37.9	62.1	I like to read classics	24.5	75.5
I like to teach poetry	66.3	33.7	I like to read poetry	39.2	60.8
I like to teach short stories	100	0	I like to read short stories	88.5	11.5

I like to teach novels	79.7	20.3	I like to read novels	77.7	23.3
I use a variety of literary texts other than the ones suggested for the syllabus	76.4	23.6	I like to read literary texts based on my own selection	90.1	9.0

Table 2: Perception towards the literary texts used in literature lessons

Table 2 shows the reality that is happening in the literature classroom surveyed. It presents the perceptions of both teachers and students towards literary texts used in literature lessons. Both teachers and students like to read contemporary literature and show strong dislike over the teaching and learning of classics. In relation to the choice of literature used, of the three types of literature used, namely poetry, short stories and novels, it could be observed that short stories are very much liked by both students and teachers. However, the study also reveals that poetry is the least popular literary resource among both teachers and students. In fact, more students and teachers prefer novels more compared to poetry. As for texts selection, majority of the students like to read text based on their own selection while many teachers have also claimed to use literary texts other than the ones suggested by the syllabus in teaching literature .

Items	Yes	No	Items	Yes	No
Reading in class	89.7	10.3	I like the teacher to follow the text closely during the lesson	75.4	24.6

Assign reading at home	59.7	40.3	I take the initiative to read literary texts before the lesson	51.0	49.0
Provide study guide/notes	93.3	6.7	I learn literature by using study guide/notes	65.4	34.6
I like to relate literature content to other types of reading materials	90.9	9.1	I can relate the content of literary texts to other types of reading materials that I read	69.3	30.7
Vocabulary building	74.4	25.6	I learn many new words when I read literary texts	92.7	7.3
Group discussion	97.2	2.8	I like to learn literature through discussions with friends	84.7	15.3
I like to teach literature using movies	88.8	1.2	I like to learn literature by watching movies/plays	87.2	12.8
I like to use multimedia to teach literature	77.5	22.5	I am interested to learn literature through multimedia application	73.8	26.2

Table 3: Perception towards the activities conducted in the teaching of literature

Table 3 shows the respondents' perceptions towards the kinds of activities that are preferred for literature lessons. In general both teachers and students have similar positive perceptions towards the use of movies and multimedia application in activities targeted for the teaching and learning of literature. Although both groups of respondents show positive perceptions towards activities such as in-class reading, relating literary texts to other types of texts, group discussions and

using study guides, the percentage of teachers who preferred these activities are higher than the percentage of students. On the contrary, the percentage of students who perceived vocabulary building activities are useful is higher than the percentage of teachers. Lastly, the results of the study also revealed that both teachers and students perceived assigning reading at home as the least favoured activity.

DISCUSSION

The general findings of our study show that although literature has been perceived to be the driving force that may develop students' interest in language learning through the habit of reading, the actual implementation done in the classroom do not cater for the development of personal aesthetic response to reading literary texts as inspired by the aims and objectives of the syllabus. This is because, 100% of the teachers believe that literature can inculcate the reading habit among students. However, 93.3% of the teachers are also found to have used study guides or notes emphasising on how exam questions can be answered. In doing so, much attention has been given to the content and preparing students for examination purposes rather than to create opportunities for students to explore their personal response through aesthetic reading which may assist students to develop a love for reading.

As a result, students will read literary texts assigned to them but may not choose to extend their reading experience once the literature lesson is over. However, if students are allowed to personally respond to the texts by relating it to their personal lives and experiences, they may find the texts more meaningful and close to them. In other words, allowing students to respond to the texts from their point of view will help them link their own experiences with what the text has to offer. This helps create a special bond between students and their reading texts, which will eventually lead them to explore other literary texts resulting in habit formation.

Texts selection is one of the prime indicators for the development of reading habit or pleasure which ultimately leads to the effectiveness of the use of literature in English language teaching. We feel that the teaching of literature for language learning should incorporate different types of literary texts. This will not only allow students to gain exposure to different types of literary genre but also cater for different expectation or preference of specific genres of literary texts. However, the study found that students and teachers are a little apprehensive over the use of classics and poetry as language learning resources. This may be due to the unique language conventions used in the texts which are not usually found in any typical English language texts. They may find the teaching and learning of literature a daunting task. To solve the problems, teachers should allow room for students to select and study literary texts that suit them (Yang, 2007). A similar view is expressed by Thirumalai (2002), who argued that careful selection of literary texts would assist in improving the learning of English through reading.

The study has also discovered that interactive activities are much preferred by both teachers and students as opposed to self-directed activities such as individual reading. The set of learners and teachers surveyed prefer activities that provide them immediate feedback in the literature classroom. For example, group discussion is very much favoured by both the teachers (97%) and students (85%). Teachers (78%) and students (73%) also prefer activities which make use of multimedia application for the teaching of literature. It is also noted that both teachers and students like the use of movies as a literature learning resource. We feel that the use of movies has great potential in helping students to visualize the text in a more meaningful manner. It may be because the sound and visual stimulation produced in by movies enhance their aesthetic value of the text.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that the study also uncovered that the use of study guides is significant among the respondents (93.3% of teachers and 65% of students) surveyed. Similarly, students do not favour reading texts at home as instructed by teachers. These findings suggest that there is a match between what the students need

and what the teachers provide them with in the literature lessons. The use of study guides ensured that the teaching and learning process becomes smoother and helps to reach a common goal. Perhaps one of the goals is in preparing students for examination purposes.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, we find that McKool's (2007) claim is very relevant to the findings of our study which points to the importance of engaging students in reading literary texts in a language class. This according to her would help to foster reading habits among learners. Such an engagement helps in sending students the message that lifetime literacy is a major instructional activity.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on what has been presented, the following are suggestions in support of the effort to incorporate the teaching of literature into the language classroom:-

- Special training on allowing students to become personally involved in the meaning making process of literary texts should be conducted among teachers to open opportunities for students to engage in personal response as they read.
- Text selection should be given much thought (contemporary vs. classics OR type of literary texts) which should ultimately cater to students' interest if the aim is to assist language teaching and learning and to inculcate the habit of reading for pleasure.
- Future researchers may want to uncover the reasons why interactive lessons are preferred in the teaching of literature

and also to explore avenues into making literature in English language teaching become more interactive and dynamic so as to meet the expectations of the teaching and learning needs in the local context

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