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Literature Teaching in EFL Context: Some Issues and Dilemmas

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Abstract

Using literature instruction practices in different "literature programs" as a point of departure, this article discusses some knotty issues and dilemmas confronting English literature instructors and researchers in Indonesia, especially those working in the context of English as A Foreign Language (EFL). First some commonly adopted approaches to literature teaching are outlined and specific issues and dilemmas located. Next, using the Indonesian current situation as a case in point, these perceived issues and dilemmas are fleshed out and possible solutions from diverse fronts are then sketched out.

Keywords: Literature, EFL, using literature to teach language

Introduction

Like other purposeful activities we choose to engage in, literature teaching is a political act. This instructional practice results from a complex interaction among varied forces, including instructors' conception of what literature is, how it might contribute to human development, what learners are capable of learning and how literature should be learned and what resources—both internal and external—are at the instructors' disposal. To make things even more complicated, these determinant factors are themselves fluid, making it virtually impossible to make fixed generalizations across contexts.

The purpose of this article is to bring to our conscious attention the situated nature of literature teaching and learning by bringing to fore diverse conceptions of literature, various options of how to approach literature and its teaching together with their concomitant issues and problems. To situate discussion into a relatively concrete context of situation, some explicit reference will be made to observations of instructional practices and course offerings in various programs accessible online from the big ten former teacher-training institutes which have transformed themselves into state universities in Indonesia: Jakarta State University (UNJ), Indonesia University of Education (UPI), Yogyakarta State University (UNY), Semarang State University (UNES), Surabaya State University (UNESA), Malang State University (UM), State University of Makassar (UNM), State University of Medan (UNIMED), State University of Padang (UNP), and State University of Manado (UNIMA).   Building on these observations some common issues will be explored and possible ways for improvement charted.

A. What Literature is

Many different definitions of literature exist which point to different directions: some definitions are very exclusive and some others are more inclusive. For the purpose of this article, two representative definitions are used here. The first definition comes from Moody (1991:19) who defines "literature" as constructions (or artifacts) in language which may be designed for any of the whole range of human communication needs, private or public, oral or written, for which language is used. The second definition is from Purves *et al.* (1990) who refer to literature as a work of art that "seeks to please the person who made it and the person who attends to it" (p.11).
From the two definitions above we can infer that two criteria are important: the intention of the writers and the reception of the readers. It therefore makes sense if literature is perceived as an artifact of communication. And to ensure that communication works as expected, some kind of conventions binding both readers and writers are in order.

B. Why Teach Literature?

Literature teaching has a long history, and a relatively established body of knowledge has also developed in the discipline. This lengthy history has

contributed a relatively systematic understanding about why literature needs to be taught to students.

Carter & Long (1991) and Lazar (1993), for example, specify three main reasons for teaching literature, each of which has its own learning objectives: the cultural model, the language model, and personal growth model. Instructors working within *the cultural model* value literature because it contains accumulated wisdom—"the best that has been thought and felt within a culture" (Carter & Long, 1991:2). Literature in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in this case is then expected to promote students' understanding and appreciation of cultures and ideologies reflected in the literary texts the students read.

Believing in the idea that literature teaching is justifiable primarily because of its value for promoting students' language development, instructors who subscribe to t*he language model* take literary texts as an authentic locus from which to study vocabulary items and structural aspects of the language. From this engagement with literary texts, it is expected that students will later develop "ways into a text in a methodological way" (Carter & Long, 1991:2).

While proponents of the cultural model emphasize the cultural wisdom aspects of the literary texts, and the proponents of the language model stress linguistic realization contained in literary texts as the primary value of literature, instructors who subscribe to   *the personal growth model* believe that students need to be encouraged to engage aesthetically with literary texts so that some sense of enjoyment develops in them out of their engagement with literary texts. It is this aesthetic literary experience which is believed to be transferable beyond the boundary of school context. In other words, the proponents of the personal growth model expect that as result of students' engagement with literary texts lasting love for reading will develop; and this love for reading will fuel students' further personal growth as literate individuals.

How are these useful potentials of literature to be brought to literature class? This is a question of approach which is discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

C. Approaches to Literature Teaching

Four common approaches to literature teaching have been identified: language-based approach, literature as content, literature for personal enrichment (e.g., Carter & Long, 1991; Lazar, 1993), and literature as a resource for empowerment.

1. *Language-based approach*

Guided by a methodological assumption that studying the language of English literary text helps integrate the language and literature syllabuses more closely, literature programs subscribing to this approach will focus on stylistic analyses of literary works being used as learning materials. With a primary focus being placed as it is, this program will encourage learners to draw on their linguistic-based knowledge resources to appreciate and make judgment of the literary texts they are reading.

Proponents of this approach to literature might argue for the adoption of this approach for a diverse instructional purposes. For instance, some instructors might use literary texts pedagogically as a locus from which students can learn registers and writing styles.
Some other instructors might use literary texts as an object of study by encouraging students to learn the tools they need to interpret literary texts and to make critical judgments of the texts they are reading.

Either way the focus is on texts and students are being encouraged to treat literary texts as a source for learning English.

2. *Literature as a content*

As the title suggests, this approach treats literature as the primary materials for students' learning of English. Using English literature itself as the content of the course, instructors of English engage their students in reading set texts and literary criticism relating to them. The course contents might be organized in terms of literary genres, rhetorical devices, the history and characteristics of literary movements.

3. *Literature for personal enrichment*

Underpinning this approach is the assumption that literature is a useful tool for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings, and opinions. Materials for students' learning can be selected on the basis of their assumed relevance with students' interest and abilities and these materials can be organized

thematically together with other non-literary texts which deal with a similar theme.

4. *Literature as a resource for empowerment*

Using literature as a resource means treating literary texts as a locus to invite students' highest personal response and involvement. Unlike treating literature as a content which tends to focus on the acquisition of a body of knowledge *about* literature (i.e., accumulation of facts about literary contexts, dates, authors, titles of texts, literary terms, etc.), treating literature as a resource has the primary purpose of imparting personal pleasure and enjoyment in reading literary texts.

D. Literature Teaching in Practice: Some Issues and Dilemmas

Teaching is a very complex enterprise, involving a series of decision-making activities that occur across a range of ideas, issues, and events (Loughran, 2010). Teaching is a theoretical act, and theories—whether explicitly or implicitly held—have powerful effects on what teachers do, how they do it, and how they determine if they are successful (Beach *et al.*, 2006). As teaching comprises various demands—many of them are conflicting one another—teaching requires continual decision making: making judgments about what is considered to be appropriate actions in a given situation at a given time. At this juncture, when teachers are faced with choices, teachers' personal professional judgments become paramount in responding to problems at hand. And this in itself is subject to differing interpretations which can lead to dilemmas—that is, situations that need to be managed (Loughran, 2010:13). What dilemmas and issues are common in the teaching of literature in EFL/ESL context?
Bernhard (2002), Byrnes & Kord (2002), and Scott & Tucker (2002) have identified various issues and dilemmas facing many literature instructors in many collegiate foreign language departments. These include polar opposites, instructor's personal and professional preferences, task designs, and assessment methods.

1. *Polar opposites?*

It has been observed in foreign language departments outside Indonesia that some dichotomies have been made between literature and language; content and language, and between literary scholarship

and teaching of literature. Bernhard (2002), for instance, observes that some real sense of separation exists between instructors who teach literature courses and language courses. Similarly, Scott & Tucker (2002) have noticed that content courses and language courses pose strikingly different challenges at various levels to instructors.

A similar sense of separation has also surfaced in the Department of English Education, Indonesia University of Education. Probably driven by the fact that the literature program came much later than the English Language program, instructors in the former program feel less established than their fellow instructors in the English language (or linguistics) program. A more substantive reason for this uneasy feeling especially among junior literature instructors is very well reflected in what Scott & Tucker (2002) have observed:

> Unlike the language course, which is frequently dictated by explicit content (grammar structures, vocabulary units, short readings with guiding questions, culture capsules, current events, etc.), …literature course has little in the way of prescribed support system for the teacher (p.xi)

We have also observed that there is a noticeable pattern among literature instructors, especially those with a master's degree from foreign universities, that they tend to teach undergrad students materials the instructors themselves have learned from graduate programs overseas. This practice, while practical for the instructors, can create serious problems because the materials are not developmentally appropriate for undergraduate students.

2. *Instructors' personal and professional preferences*

Lecturers are recruited into an educational program at different times and under different contextual forces. Some lecturers were recruited into an academic program as a result of relatively competitive recruitment processes; while other lecturers have joined the teaching force in response to an invitation for letters of application which means being admitted to the academic post without a rigorous academic screening process.

Viewed from their academic qualifications and fields of expertise, lecturers are also diverse. In our institution, some lecturers came to the teaching force with training background in linguistics, some other lecturers brought into the literature programs educational background on language education, and still others came to the teaching of literature program with an extensive knowledge base on literature as an academic discipline.

This diverse educational background and professional experiences may also be accompanied by distinct personal preferences regarding various aspects of literature and its teaching. Consider the following list of course offerings in our department, when the department was chaired by a scholar of literary texts (see, for instance, Griffin, 2010:4). You will notice, no less than 24 credit hours are devoted to our eleven literature core courses as the following:

No	Title of the Course	Credit units
I	Foundation of Literature	2
2	Exploring Poetry	2
3	Exploring Prose	2
4	Exploring Drama	2
5	Critical Analysis of Poetry	2
6	Critical Analysis of Prose	2
7	Critical Analysis of Drama	2
8	Literature and Cultural Studies	2
9	Seminar on Literature	2
10	Literary Theories	2
II	Literary Research	4

If one sees credit units as a resource one would agree with us in expecting that the students who graduate from a program like this one must have a massive knowledge base about literature and its research. In reality, however, the graduating students leave a great deal to be desired.

3. *Task designs*

In general terms we can differentiate two orientations in teaching: to focus on coverage of the curriculum and to focus on facilitating student learning. When focusing on curriculum coverage, instructors tend accordingly to deliver the contents they have prepared. This is generally done by adopting a transmission model of teaching where instructors serve as a knowledge dispenser. In this kind of learning contexts, students' understanding might take a back seat and their skills development gets neglected.

When the teaching focus is placed on facilitating student learning, in contrast, the instructors' likely focus is placed on making serious efforts to find better ways of making topics under discussion meaningful to learners.

It has been a commonplace now to state that one very important determiner of student learning in the classroom context is what learners are asked to do with the texts they are reading (Frantzen, 2002). This is what is commonly called task design—which serves as a bridge between what is expected by the instructors and what is understood by the learners.

As participants in the teaching-learning process, students are very perceptive and they actively interpret what they experience in the classroom. As a matter of fact, decades of research in literature learning and teaching have led to a relatively conclusive set of generalizations, including "(1) Students generally learn what they are taught and do not learn what they are not taught; and (2) what students are taught is not always what teachers think is being taught" (Purves, Rogers, & Soter, 1990: 162)

Given this set of research findings, teachers should pay extra serious attention to what they teach and reflect on the results of students' engagement with the classroom-based learning experiences.

4. *Assessment methods*

It has become common knowledge within the teaching profession that tests as a form of learning assessment has great consequences beyond the mere purpose of giving a mark to relative achievement of student learning. First, test drives student learning— that is, what is

consistently asked in tests will gain attention from the part of the students. And what test format is being used will impact on how students will invest their energy and what approach the students will adopt in tackling the test.

Building on the idea that education should facilitate students' development as independent life-long learners, it is a good idea to involve students in preparing the assessment of learning results—a matter of importance to students. There are at least two places where students' involvement in this case is potentially productive: when determining the focus and coverage of assessment, and when formulating rubrics to describe grading specifications with explicit achievement benchmarks.

In an informal interview with 34 students in our English Literature Program, we gained a very clear evidence that virtually all the interviewed students forgot most of the contents of the courses they had taken including even the major topics covered in the courses. Our suspicion is that the students have been disengaged academically with the materials they learned probably because they did not find the courses relevant to their needs.

E. More on Issues

Three additional issues are important in shaping the literature teaching: programmatic missions, available resources, and academic leadership.

I. *Programmatic missions*

What exactly is the programmatic mission of the program you are working in?

Is it a department of literary studies? Or is it department of EFL teaching? To make this issue of program missions more concrete, it might be useful to frame it in terms of "role models" to turn to (Spiro, 1993:18)

Emphasizing the importance of clear directions of where a program should go, Jane Spiro (1993) proposes six role models for a program developer and/or teacher of literature to refer to: (a) the literary critic, (b) the literary scholar, (c) the poet, (d) the appreciative reader, (e) the humanist, and (f) the competent language users. Each of these target role models has a distinct view of literature teaching. For example, the literary critic is primarily associated with literature

as philosophy; the literary scholar is tied up with the notion of "literature as a sacred canon" (p.18); the poet is primarily connected with the concept of literature as a training in creativity; the appreciative reader is consistent with the view of literature as an incentive to independent reading; the humanist is associated with literature as a training in humanism; and the competent language user is tied up with literature as an example of language in use.

Which way to go? Which role model to take as a guide? Either way, students should be exposed to at least three kinds of knowledge: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and conditional knowledge. That is, students should be exposed to the best knowledge base and experiences they deserve to have. These knowledge base and experiences should be processed by the students in such a way that they develop confidence in holding on to these as a guide for future literary encounter. Aside from this declarative knowledge, students should also be equipped with procedural knowledge about ways with literature—that is, students should learn and acquire proven strategies so that—upon completion of the study program—the students become strategic and independent in their learning of literature and other similar field. In addition, students should also be accorded with opportunities to explore and do some experimentation with ways with literature so that they acquire not only the knowledge about which strategies work under what condition but also know why they work and others do not. This conditional knowledge is important for students to hold on to so that they develop a good capacity to assess the relative merit of ways with literature for their further, independent personal development as scholars with academic background in English literature.

2. *Available resources*

Good academic programs should equip themselves with a wealth of academic resources. EFL/ESL literature programs are no exception. The resources should at least cover the following categories: collections of literary works, references, theoretical readings, research-based reports, and on-going projects documenting research on instructional practices.

Our English literature program at UPI has in recent years been investing a great deal of budget to develop a self-access center where an abundance of academic resources is made available for students

and instructors alike. With long working hours, this center has assisted a great deal in facilitating the development of an academic community of literature readers and literary interpreters.

What remains to be enlarged is collections of research-based reports and published articles written by faculty members. These faculty-developed literacy artifacts is an important part of environmental support   for the development of an academic culture in the department.

3. *Academic leadership*

Development of academic programs (in Indonesia and elsewhere) is heavily determined by structural leaders (who themselves are determined by their educational background). Given the limited nature of their own personal experiences, leaders should be open to possibilities. To ensure that the department can capture the dynamic nature of scientific development, departments should make serious efforts to (a) research what is practiced, and (b) practice research-based models.

To this end, using funding supports from both external and internal sources, many of our faculty members have engaged in a long term, multi-year research scheme which enables them to produce research-based knowledge and proven instructional strategies. This new idea is worthy of special notes because using such a funding scheme it now becomes possible for faculty members in Indonesia to produce—to mention only one—a knowledge base uniquely Indonesian. That is to say that the development of "ethno pedagogy" is now underway in our institution.

F.   Where to Go from Here: Ways Forward

By way of situational analyses, previous parts of this article have highlighted problems and issues of various nature surfacing at different levels in EFL/ESL Literature programs. The remainder of the article will concentrate on a possible way out for better future development.

First, to address the issue of the split between language courses and literature courses, following ideas proposed by Bernhard (2002), students should be helped to see that, in actuality, the acts of language and literature teaching are far more alike than they are different. Given this thinking, it is proposed that more collaboration be developed between language and

literature programs beginning with a change in approach to training teachers of the future. That is, lecturers should also be prepared to teach both literature and language at the same time.

Second, concerted efforts should also be made to move from dichotomous (or polar opposite) perspectives to synergistic, empowerment perspectives. Rather than going in different directions and splitting resources, ESL/EFL Literature Programs are better off if collaborative efforts are made to promote mutual assistance so that everybody in the department is optimally supported in their both personal, professional development as individuals as well as a collective. To this end, a better strategy should be devised to ensure that programmatic missions are clear to everybody in the working unit, mutual learning among faculty members is encouraged and well supported, and productive, concerted efforts are made to promote literacy habits in which faculty members write what they practice in their class and practice in class what they write.

Third, a better orientation should be developed to facilitate movement from focusing on oral-based communicative competence to the notion of active multiple literacies. To this end, currently held conception about what it means to be communicatively competent should be carefully reviewed and improved by expanding modes of expressing ideas. This can be done by enriching task designs used by lecturers to guide students' learning engagement and their multiple ways of externalizing results of their learning. Faculty members should also make an effort to initiate collaborative writing with their students so that the development of a literate community of writers can be initiated.

The last—but not least— suggestion is that we need to shy away from mechanistic, transmission model of teaching practice, and move closer towards reflective teaching practice. This would require some adjustments on the part of faculty members including positioning themselves as learners, and doing classroom action research and documenting their professional experiences.

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