

Syofyan, Donny Teaching English
Through Literature

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH LITERATURE

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Abstract

Teaching English in Indonesia, particularly for students, remains a great challenge owing to the fact that English is a foreign language in this country. The challenge could be tackled through teaching literature. Literature has been a subject of study in many countries at a secondary or tertiary level, but until recently has not been given much emphasis in the EFL/ESL classroom. It is considered a very versatile subject and is generally considered one of the most difficult subjects to teach. Central to teaching literature in the classroom is to let students be involved in the experience and let them observe life more closely.

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TEACHING LITERATURE

Every time we notice of word ‘literature’, we are apt to bring classic pieces to our mind that have astonished generations, but the categorization of literature does not need to be so obscure. Many forms of written pieces can either be regarded literature in and of themselves or can be used to guide our students into more full-grown and well-respected literature. Hence, many teachers think the use of literature in language teaching as an exciting and precious matter (Sage, 1987, p. 1). In this paper, I would like to show that teaching literature in the classroom is efficacious in educating students.

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Literature can be deemed as a rich source of ‘authentic material’ since it promotes two characteristics in its written text: one is ‘language in use,’ that is, the application of linguistics by those who have excelled it into a fashion intended for native speakers; the second is an aesthetic representation

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of the spoken language which is intended to represent language within a certain cultural context.

'Language in use' penetrates the fixed nature that is set up by the artificial grammar of a classroom provided by textbooks. There is an ordinary question that a student sooner or later will ask: "Where does the English we are learning stem from?" A lot of teachers are inclined to give an answer. Though the textbook may have structures, vocabulary and formulas that could conduce a reader to think it is an American or British English (resting on the case), class instructors know better. It is often that the object of study is a mixture of American and British English. That is why it is better to answer that it is a "nowhere English", unnaturally standardized, and this is exactly the origin of the conflict; this nowhere English is as neutral as it is elementary. It assists students in establishing communication with a native speaker but only at a 'survival' level. 'Language in use' offers students with an approach to the language established by different linguistic and rhetorical uses of the language as well as "forms and conventions of the written mode: [...] irony, exposition, argument, narration and so on" (Collie and Slater, 1990, p. 4), and settles the students within a certain geopolitical context, the one the author of the text is referring to through its aesthetic representation.

What authors like Irving Welsh, Joseph Conrad or Mark Twain have in common is that their literary works recreate the way language is spoken in particular geopolitical context. These reconstructions offer students with a better idea of how language is applied by a recent low class youth in Edinburgh, by a native Costaguanan sailor in the early twentieth century, or by Mississippi shore indwellers in the late nineteenth century. It is significant to put English learners in mind that these reconstructions are no more than aesthetic recreations that in some cases incorporate a momentous reflection about the use of language, and not direct samples of language from those contexts.

Ironically, literature as aesthetic recreation can be regarded a much more "authentic" source and can stimulate more authority in the use and fortification of language than English textbooks or even than direct samples of language, more so if students develop an "aesthetic reading" of the text (Langer, 1989). Through this individual and social experience students can foster a closer relationship with language, since they are reconstructing the target language on their own for their own learning process. Nonetheless, the improvement of language enrichment is not restricted to what this kind of dynamic offers.

Language enrichment, if it is through an aesthetic reading or an "efferent reading" of a literary work, sets down a "rich context in which individual or lexical items are made more memorable" (Collie and Slater, 1990, p. 5). A literary text gives students a much clearer notion about the

syntactic structure of a written text and to what degree written language differs from spoken language. By getting accustomed to the formation and function of sentences, to the structure of a paragraph, a section or a chapter, their writing skill develops and their speech skill can gain powerful expression. It is certain that students remarkably enlarge their vocabulary by being subjected to a literary text. Looking up words, however, is quickly followed by looking up cultural references and this process leads to cultural enrichment.

In an efferent reading the text can provide ample information concerning the cultural context of the geographical location that it describes. As they read, students fathom the modern or historical way of life where the story is ensuing and thus grow insight into the country that speaks the language they are learning. An efferent reading bears down on portrays of landscape, weather, architecture, decoration, dress, customs and traditions, among other things, which increase vocabulary, language, and a cultural insight. This approach, however, suggests two major disadvantages. On the one hand, an efferent reading makes the students alienated from the text and language, as it avoids an active environment of creative experimentation at a personal and collective level. On the other hand, cultural insight is very shallow owing to the nature of the efferent reading, since readers only follow the leads provided by the text itself, thus missing the intertextual references the literary work may offer. In order to prevent these insufficiencies in the classroom, the efferent reading must be bolstered by the virtues an aesthetic reading provides.

In an efferent reading the text is considered as a closed and perfected object that a student can only ponder in a passive manner from the perspective given by the teacher (which in many cases is an institutional perspective). An aesthetic reading assists students in making connections between the text and the target language having on their own identity. Regarding cultural insight, an aesthetic reading gives the notion of transaction (Colie and Slater, 1990, p. 17). Intertextual references not only make reference to another literary text, but also to an overall cultural experience influenced by the socio-historical context. Casting around these relations and reflecting on them conduce tudents to establish a major understanding of the way of life of the context the target language stems from, and furthermore, these references open the door for students to make visible how the literary text overflows to other cultural disciplines, forming a symbiotic, nourishing relationship. By exploring these other paths offered by the target culture, a universe of possibilities is opened for the study of a foreign language where students can weave their own experience and life

with these disciplines (arts, politics, sports), accomplishing a close empathy between language and their way of life.

LITERATURE AND VALUE INCULCATION

In commemorating Sanctity Day of Pancasila, students may wonder whether the state's foundational ideology remains relevant to day-to-day actual life in this country. That public curiosity makes sense since it is no longer considered by many as a rallying ideology, both in theory and practice. Pancasila seems to have lagged behind students' minds and hearts as the government takes a half-hearted approach to mainstreaming the state ideology. Many view it as being incapable of getting over this country's diverse problems.

Failed ventures on Pancasila mainstreaming measures are inseparably linked to the government's preference to political over cultural approach. Judging from that matter, I regard that literature, say literary pieces, and could play a pivotal role in inculcating Pancasila values into public mind and heart.

Reading literature encourages students to be more prudent. Every time readers read literary pieces, they would find moral and aesthetic aspects. Despite their distinct emphasis on the aspects, writers strive to balance their moral messages so as to cause no judgmental effect on the readers and control their aesthetic features so that their pieces will not be void of strong messages.

Efforts to convey moral messages of Pancasila, for instance, are applicable through exposure of intrinsic elements of novels or short stories to readers. Understanding plot—cause and effect-based series of events—persuade readers to get patient. Good readers attempt to catch the idea and narrative structure of the story through their understanding on the plot. They will never deduce while they are yet to arrive at climax. Their perseverance in following the plot sequentially make them not jump to conclusion and get better inference instead.

Enjoying literary works is pretty much the same as going through life. One often suspects that a concubine is cursed following her ongoing extramarital sexual relationship with lots of men. Through Y.B. Mangunwijaya's novel, *Burung-Burung Manyar*, published in 1981, one will learn that being a concubine is not so much about cohabiting with men to whom she is not married. Rather it is to do with imperial complexity and a matter of survival. It turns students to be reflective than judgmental.

Conflict taking place in the Mangunwijaya's novel forbids many from pointing the finger at female intricacy on the one side and pushes sense of compromise among students on the other. This nation is always in dire need

of compromise and accommodation, which basically enforces fourth sila (principle) of Pancasila on democracy.

Examining Umar Kayam's *Para Priyayi* (The Javanese Elite), students will get enlightened on how to put pluralism on a pedestal in Indonesian context. In his work, Kayam wrote about the aristocratic values that were not identical to feudalism. Aristocracy is described as a patron of humanity. A person can become a legitimate aristocrat if he or she has a social awareness and not because of a feudalist system. This novel revolutionized students's mindsets on aristocracy.

Respecting pluralism brings students to the point where they esteem truth relativism. For writers, literary pieces produced indicate voices of multiple truths inasmuch as they deem truth as personal thing. A truth for Hamka, for example, is not necessarily compatible with what is considered truth for Y.B. Mangunwijaya. While the former believes that truth is buttressed by religious tenets, the latter ascribes it to the dictates of conscience. Plural religion and religiousness deal with justice, which are manifestation of fifth sila of Pancasila.

Equally important is that literature is efficacious in prompting students to love history. Appreciating Pancasila means to recognize the significance of history. Various events or incidents to change Pancasila as the state's foundational ideology in the past should be now responded by driving students to love the country's history. This is particularly true as Pancasila is the product of history as well.

Teaching and reading literature are instrumental in making history more vivid owing to the writers' creativity and imagination. The two tools serve to energize the storyline which in turn result in more dramatic messages to the readers. Take *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, written by Ahmad Tohari as example. While Soeharto's New Order regime applied strict measures to political detainees alleged to be members of the now banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* managed to raise students's awareness about the suffering of ordinary civilians in the aftermath of Indonesia's political turmoil in the 1960s.

Political approach taken by the government to the PKI members in its attempt to preserve Pancasila will only create historical revenge and hostility as it does away with humanitarian values. In contrast, through its fictional characters, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* inspires students to have more balanced view on those who were suspected of being PKI members. Principle messages of Pancasila fall free as justice is taken away even from those who aspire to deconstruct the state ideology like the PKI.

It stands to reason that a literary work is capable of rendering students more dynamic due to its cathartic effect on the readers. Those whose mind is reeling and whose heart is touched after reading novels, short stories or poems are ready to change and accept a new truth rather than those who have been indoctrinated politically to defend Pancasila. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that literature can contribute to set the record straight or straighten out history, particularly to review the very meaning of Sanctity Day of Pancasila nowadays.

LITERATURE PROMOTES INTERACTIVE READING

Many teachers stay away from using poetry in class because they believe that poems have many hard words and odd phrases in them. Cultural references also make some poems seem difficult for our students. The use of poems is recommendable in spite of these likely difficulties because poems are short. It requires the students to think about what they are reading and require an interpretation. They are an excellent way to improve students' skills at making inferences.

Some students do not like poetry and they will switch off before you even start the lesson. Starting with something that students are used to is worth trying, something from their own experience and making them draw or sing or act out or describe in an imaginative way. It is something connected with the topic of the poem.

While expecting the class to read a poem about a volcano, I started with something more general, namely mountains. It is believed that many students have visited a mountain. Therefore using their previous experience to get them think about mountains in an innovative fashion is a good one. Students were asked to remember the last time they went to a mountain, why they went there, what they did. They were asked to remember the small of the mountain, the sounds, the colors, and the weather. Also they were expected draw a scene and tell a partner or the class about it, something to stimulate the senses and creative juices of the people who will read the poem.

Considering poetry is a creative and the students are required to be in a creative mind set before they see the text, I can ask them to tell me what the mountain is saying. If this is new idea for the class, I can tell them that the mountain is speaking and saying, "Do not come up here with your stupid mangals." And I can ask them why the mountain says this. Then I can shift their attention to the poem and to the title. I can ask them to guess what the poem will be about. In class I would write it on the board. I do not want the students to have the poem yet because they will start reading and will not follow the lesson.

Another activity I could use is a picture dictation. The teacher dictates a picture and the students draw it. The first time I do this the students usually want to spend a long time on it. When they get the idea that a sketch is enough, they will get faster. The second time and the third time I use this activity the class will get better and faster. I found that it took a long time at the beginning.

Picture dictation:

Draw the mountain I'm describing to students -

There is a big mountain with snow on top.

There are many pine trees on the mountain.

There is a small lake half-way up the mountain.

There are some small streams running down the mountain.

At the foot of the mountain there is a village.

There is smoke coming out of the houses because it's winter.

Students are required to compare their pictures with their friends.

Imaginary dialogue:

Imagine the mountain can talk. Read what it says - explain why it says these things.

Don't come up here and smoke your stupid cigarettes on me!

Don't cut down trees up here! What else can the mountain say? Who are the mountain's friends? Who are the mountain's enemies?

Each class needs a different amount of preparation time before getting to the poem.

In terms of teaching English through poems, it is necessary to show students the title and let them make inferences. Here is a poem - Look at the title. What kind of mountain is it?

Loo-Wit, which means "Lady of Fire", by Wendy Rose

Now students should be ready for the idea of a poem or story where a non-living thing is described like a living thing.

I ask the students to read the title and tell me what they think the poem is about. You can ask questions like: Is it going to be about a Turkish mountain? No, because the name “Lou-Wit” is not Indonesian. I elicit or tell the students that the poem is about a volcano after listening to their guesses.

We can ask students what vocabulary they might find about volcanoes and teach some vocabulary: ash, smoke, lava, erupt, etc. As the teacher in front of a real class I would probably quickly give the meanings of these words: Spit, tobacco, before they see the first section of the poem.

Then I write give the first part on the board and ask the students to read it and tell me what kind of old woman it is. Where is she? What is she doing? What do you think will happen next?

*...this old woman no longer cares
what others think
but spits her black tobacco
any which way
stretching full length
from her bumpy bed*

*Finally up
she sprinkles ashes
on the snow,
cold buttes
promise nothing
but the walk
of winter*

Ask the students to share their ideas with you about the meaning. What is starting to happen? One of my favorite things about using literature in class is that there are so many correct answers! Students can say almost anything as long as they can tell you which words in the poem support their interpretation.

We can practice making inferences very nicely with poems. Here are some questions I might ask.

Why does the volcano erupt? Does the poem give any explanation?
How does Lou-Wit feel about people and their actions? How do you know?
Why do volcanoes erupt according to scientists?

What is the relationship between humans and nature according to the poem?

We ask students to do research into real life issues - go on the web and look for information about volcanoes. The research can be Indonesian or in English. It does not really matter as long as they do some extra reading.

With the intention of planning then we should deem why a piece of literature is hard for students. Please consider culture. Is it too far-flung from the reader's experience? Teacher's role is significant in selecting type of introductory exercise to give. Only the teacher can know where the students will get baffled. Try to give students some element of choice - let them choose the topic of the next poem or let them choose between reading a poem or a short story.

Reading comprehension is very heavily influenced by (lack of) background knowledge. However, the way that children socialize and the peer pressure on them affects their responses and may limit creative or original responses. It's not cool to like school. Students enter into a world more easily if it is similar to the readers' world, i.e. if the cultural world of the text supports the students' cultural assumptions and beliefs.

So teachers should be careful about cultural issues - design tasks which will help the students with cultural aspects. If you are interested in the theoretical side of this subject: Vygotsky considers the "Zone of Proximal Development" (2003) provides a scaffold for learners to construct meaning if teachers build bridges or links of meaning. Teacher knowledge of the students' background knowledge is crucial to making the links. We may need to give students an idea about how a literary text may be different from a more ordinary text, like a letter or conversation. They may not have any positive experience of reading literature in their mother tongue.

After reading, students listen to the text and make a note of (how characters look, etc.). Students can practice inferring meaning from the context. Teacher can help students select most useful or important words for future study. Students can choose their favorite words to learn as a class. They can rewrite a text and put it into different formats. Write a summary in Standard English.

In addition, after reading students can compare style and dialect with Indonesian - what kind of Indonesian is similar? They should recognize vocabulary grids such as colloquial, neutral and formal ways of saying something, spider grams with vocabulary about the theme. They might identify the narrator and discuss the parts they add to the text. How do these comments affect the reader's opinions? We can introduce the idea of "bias" to our students.

Having taught poems to students, I conclude that teaching with literature is enjoyable since reading authentic texts can be very motivating, literature promotes interactive reading – reader must interpret the text, literature can easily lead to a lot of productive work and classroom activities can involve any or all skills. I am not trying to teach students about famous writers from the past, like we learned at school. I am trying to make them use their creativity and use their English to write and speak. They need practice and they need to be motivated. As we all know, doing lots tests or studying grammar for years and years isn't enough to be able to use the language.

CONCLUSION

Literature plays an important role in the English programs, particularly for many non-English speaking countries. As Obediat (1997, p.32) states, literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, see how idiomatic expressions are used, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners. Literature is not only a tool for developing the written and oral skills of the students in the target language but also is a window opening into the culture of the target language, building up a cultural competence in students.

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