The literature study programme trial: Challenging constructions of English in the Seychelles"

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ABSTRACT : This paper provides an outline of the development and trialling during 2004 of the Literature Study Programme (LSP), a literature programme designed for use in the junior secondary classes of Seychelles. The programme was developed as a teaching and learning component concerned with the study of literature within the English language programme in the Seychelles, which had been hitherto absent in both the enacted and intended English language curriculum of the country. This paper reports on the structure and organisation of the LSP, its design philosophy, the assessment procedures employed, the results of the evaluation, and the implications for teaching literature at the junior secondary level in Seychelles. The results of the evaluation show a high level of support for literature as an area of study by both students and teachers. The programme as an initial design for teaching literature has also received a high level of approval from participants. Recommendations for the programme are also highlighted in this paper. The writer concludes with a word of caution against relegating literature study to the background.

KEYWORDS : literature, Seychelles, English language, curriculum

The *English in the National Curriculum of Seychelles* (ESNC) (Ministry of Education, 2001) document released in 2001 can be viewed as an attempt to bring coherence and continuity to the teaching of the subject English from early childhood to secondary five. The document covers a variety of objectives that students should achieve under three domains : knowledge, skills and attitudes. What is noticeable, however, is that the document does not make any specific mention of the place of literature within the subject area. Examination of the ESNC document nevertheless reveals certain aims and objectives that may be successfully achieved within a literature umbrella.   These will be discussed later.

The first aim of the paper is to discuss the rationale, content, structure and 2004 trial of the Literature Study Programme which was, in its own way, an attempt to claim some ground for literature study within the English language curriculum. Its second aim is to summarise the result of the trial and to discuss its implications with respect to the future of literature as an area of study within the curriculum of Seychelles.

LITERATURE IN THE SEYCHELLOIS CURRICULUM

Background research about the status and teaching of literature in Seychelles in the last fifty years has revealed that literature as a subject existed in private schools prior to the seventies, after which it became integrated within the subject English programme. Despite that, students still studied literary texts from junior secondary level in preparation for Cambridge examinations. Within the public system, however,

literature study was always integrated within the English as a second language programme. It was, therefore, left at the teachers' initiative to teach literature in public schools. The National Youth Service (NYS), a secondary institution that functioned between 1982 and 1998, was the only public secondary educational institution that offered literature as a subject.

After the adoption by all public schools of the ESNC in January 2001, the literature objectives have been further consigned to the background in favour of a functional literacy approach to the teaching of English as a second language. For instance, in the rationale for the teaching of English, the ESNC states that English "encodes major cultural understandings and traditions". On the same page, it claims that learning English will "contribute to our learners becoming more tolerant towards other languages, cultures and ways of life outside Seychelles" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 5). Such statements appear to advocate the use of multicultural English texts for more than the mere comprehension level that is currently being enacted in language classrooms.

Literature provides students with an appreciation of different genres, styles and perspectives. The ESNC allows for the use of literary texts to provide students with "the model that will enable them to write in a variety of forms and for specified audiences" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 13). Linguistic comparisons of the three national languages is seen as essential by the ESNC in developing students' awareness of the similarities and differences that exist between the languages and in so doing improve their mastery of the English language (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 5). Objectives such as the ones mentioned above are not being fully catered for, partly because they are not examined. In such light, the comparative study of world literature written in English, French and Kreol can provide students with greater awareness, as well as develop an appreciation and respect for various cultures and more specifically a pride in their own language and culture.

A CASE FOR LITERATURE STUDY

Two major concerns for teachers of languages and parents in Seychelles are that students are not adequately involved in extensive reading and that they do not exhibit much creative imagination in their writing. Probable sources of these problems are that students are not supported to develop a love for reading and also they do not have many if any role models. It is widely recognised that reading plays a vital role in education, particularly in developing the range of literacy skills that children need for survival and self promotion.

My experiences as a student and a teacher in Seychelles' public schools led me to believe that our secondary students are being deprived of the full range of literary along with non-literary texts in the classroom. In the Seychelles, functional texts rather than literary texts are most often employed for reading comprehension practice and, when the latter are used, they mostly consist of story extracts and songs rather than poems, plays and complete short stories. Literary texts are not analysed as products in their own right but rather as reading comprehension aids. As a result, students are not gaining adequate exposure to literature in order to increase their vicarious experiences. This hinders their creative writing skills. They do not have

enough practice in giving sustained attention to texts and hence do not develop positive reading habits.

The cultural heritage model of English sees literature as the reservoir of all that is worth knowing about a culture. Studying literature should, therefore, bring about a growth of knowledge of one's and others' culture and practices. The cultural heritage model is very often linked with the study of the Western canon of literature. However, as minority cultures seek to create their own canons, a cultural heritage model of English does not need to be linked with Western hegemonies but rather, depending on the choice of texts to be studied, can be linked with the teaching of cultures represented by texts under study. In the case of a multilingual setting like the Seychelles, it is my opinion that international literature can be studied in French, English and Kreol (Seychellois, Mauritian versions).   Locke and May (2004) argue that in a multicultural setting where literature features as an area of study, literature (should be) "an entitlement for all students irrespective of their cultural or linguistic background" (p. 3). Therefore, the Seychellois students' language and culture should not be marginalised at the expense of English language and culture.

Research literature confirms that the study of literary texts plays a fundamental role in readers' personal envisionment, cultural awareness and pride. Athanases' findings (1998) showed that students used literary encounters to reflect on problematic emotions. Their literary experiences also provided opportunities for reflection on such concerns as gender and sexuality which occupy much of adolescents' thinking. Langer (1995) claimed that the study of literature provides experiences that allow students to develop the skills necessary to promote envisionment building. Envisionment refers to what a student understands about a text at any particular time (Langer, 1995). She argues that there is reciprocity between our fictive and real world: "the envisionment illuminates life, and life illuminates the envisionment" (p. 18).

In the language classroom of Seychelles, when texts of a literary nature are used, their sole purpose is for reading comprehension practice. Text analysis in the English classrooms of Seychelles generally centres on a teacher initiation/student response/teacher evaluation procedure which involves students in answering factual, inferential and vocabulary related questions. Students are not generally encouraged to support an evaluative interpretation and, when they do, they are not trained to analyse texts as discursive constructions in which authors make decisions about how to present certain versions of reality. As a result, students exhibit literacy weaknesses such as poor reading habits, fail to develop critical thinking and analytical skills, and show very little understanding of literary texts and literary styles.

THE LITERATURE STUDY PROGRAMME

The LSP (2003) was developed over a period of four months with the aim of trialling the incorporation of the teaching and learning of literature as a component of the English language programme in the Seychelles. Its design was based on the English Study Design, a senior secondary school English programme developed in New Zealand (Locke, 2004). The LSP built on a series of ESNC objectives, worked on

some general aims for teaching literature, and translated those into a set of course components.

What the LSP provided was:

- a rationale for teaching literature in the junior secondary level;
- guidance on literature programme design and classroom practice;
- an approach to assessment.

Central to its design structure was:

- a flexible yet comprehensive programme of study described in terms of a set of work requirements;
- a set of common assessment tasks;
- a combination of continuous assessment and an end-of-term examination;
- the use of standards-based assessment using grade-related band descriptors.

In line with the LSP, schools were free to design the specifics of their own programme and choose materials appropriate for their students. There were four common assessment tasks, each with its own weightings which would make up 40% of the total English course. These comprised: work folder (10%), writing folio (10%), critical awareness project (10%) and a response to text which would be a component of the English examination (10%). The work folder involved students in extensive personal reading; continuous reflections on texts read personally and as part of class activities; personal extensive writing, as well as class-related, structured writing. The writing folio involved students in writing extensively in the different genres studied in class and submitting the best two pieces for evaluation. The critical awareness project involved students in exploring the representations of themes and issues in a range of texts studied. They needed to reflect on and challenge authors' representations of reality in texts. The response to text, which was part of the English examination, required students to engage in close reading of a given text and to respond to questions set on the text in writing. The LSP booklet provided a detailed description for each work requirement to ensure commonality among all schools' assessments.

Assessment and reporting in LSP

Despite numerous criticisms of standards-based assessments as too general and vague (Elley, 1994), LSP adopted standards-based assessment in the form of grade-related band descriptors. This approach to assessment recognises the value of clearly stated achievement objectives to student learning, especially in the process of formative assessment, and in assisting students in setting literature and language related-goals for themselves.

In order to improve reliability, the programme:

- designed generic marking guides for use;
- developed exemplary rubrics, that is, interpretations of the generic marking guides which specified particular level indicators in relation to specific language events (e.g. writing prose narrative);

- used an examination as a formal check of students' achievement;
- used different aspects of literature to provide feedback on students' achievements;
- emphasised the importance of professional networking among teachers in a bid to achieve a common understanding of how to apply the marking guides and rubrics;
- Emphasised the importance of reporting on students' performance on the literature component of the English course on their report cards.

THE 2004 LITERATURE STUDY PROGRAMME TRIAL

In view of the fact that time was a constraint, owing to the trial being prepared in New Zealand to be administered in the Seychelles as part of the author's Master's research project, a decision was made to limit participation to one school only. Late in 2003, interest in Bowtown School[1] as a possible venue for conducting the trial of the programme was communicated to the school management and staff of the Department of English. This proposal was received with great enthusiasm from the group. Ethical approval from the University of Waikato and formal approval from the Ministry of Education in Seychelles and the school's headteacher was sought. The researcher travelled to the Seychelles in May 2004 to meet with prospective participants, their parents and teachers, in order to explain the aim and scope of the project before commencing data collection. Owing to a lack of time to train the class teacher to use the programme, the researcher took on the dual role of teacher-researcher.

Out of six streams in the school, the first stream was chosen for the trialing of the programme. This particular class (S11) was the most able class, made up of 35 students (12 boys and 23 girls) of an average age of twelve years. The trial was initially conducted in three out of the seven 40-minute sessions of English per week.

The evaluation was on-going and comprised of eight types of data collection:

- an initial questionnaire administered to participants before teaching of the programme started;
- a reflective journal kept by the teacher-researcher;
- three different post-intervention, evaluative questionnaires (one administered after each unit);
- a critical colleague who would provide critical comments on the research and its process;
- interviews with student participants;
- interview with teachers;
- observation of sample participants; and
- post-lesson evaluations.

The trial sought to answer four main questions:

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[1] This name is a psyeudonym.

1. How do participating students respond to the introduction of a Literature Study programme in terms of motivation and achievement of salient course objectives?
2. Which teaching strategies used in the proposed programme appear to have been successful with participating students?
3. Which aspects of the Literature Study design have contributed to the success or otherwise of the programme for participating students?
4. How do Seychelles' English-teaching colleagues view both the introduction of a Literature Study into the Seychelles curriculum as a separate study, and aspects of the Literature Study proper?

Student responses to the introduction of a Literature Study

This question was twofold. Firstly, the study sought to gauge students' responses to the LSP in terms of their motivation ; secondly, it wanted to gauge the extent to which students achieved the course objectives.

The findings showed that participants were positively motivated by the programme. They exhibited this motivation by their active participation in class, the readiness for lessons, time on task and promptness to complete activities. The participants' motivation was also increased by the appropriateness of the material to their needs, interest and level ; the fact that they felt validated by being allowed to express their opinions; and the possibility to experience success.

Despite the fact that more than half the class were girls, the boys were not perturbed. They participated as actively as the girls. Questions like, " Miss, are you staying for both sessions?", were followed by glowing smiles and "Yes!", when I replied affirmatively, showed me that they were enjoying themselves. I never received a blank stare when I asked for a response. Students had a lot to say, and I believe that the programme presented them with a legitimate forum to thrive as individuals and obtain positive feedback to boost their development. On numerous occasions, they reiterated their appreciation at having been given the opportunity to share their experiences, ideas, opinions with other members of the class.

The findings showed positive signs of students achieving the salient course objectives, though to different degrees. Students exhibited high levels of success in the achievement of "subjective" learning objectives, such as relating materials from a lesson to their own personal experiences. They eagerly compared characters' experiences to their own. The students' engagement with texts deepened as time went by and this was apparent in their responses to texts. These moved from a superficial level to a deeper level of understanding.

By the end of the term, the quality of responses made by students had shown marked improvements. They provided a variety of opinions about texts that went beyond the text to what they would have liked to see happen to the characters and what they wished the author had done instead of simply saying that they liked the story because it was interesting. As time went by, they also supported their opinions with evidence from text. For example, when they were asked to guess the title of a poem and to support their decision with evidence from the poem, students provided responses such

as: "I think the title is 'Rain' because the poem is describing rain"; "The poem says that the 'soil cakes'. This is true because when it rains the soil becomes mud, like a cake." This is true because when it rains the soil becomes mud, like a cake." Another response was, " It says that the 'skin opens' when it rains, and when we feel cold we get 'laserpool' (goosebumps)." I was ecstatic as I witnessed such changes and when I complemented them they were as proud as I was. With time, the students' written work also exhibited more coherence, and a greater sense of audience and purpose. Over the research period, participants showed signs of achieving most of the salient course objectives such as: knowledge of literary features; critical awareness of texts; reflections on themes discussed; understanding of and engagement with texts; and awareness of socio-cultural contexts of texts.

Students views of successful teaching strategies

A major part of the study was to identify teaching strategies that were successful in teaching literature for participating students. A selection of teaching strategies was used, with the same type of strategies often being used at different points in the study of texts. A number of strategies were trialled in order to create a conducive learning environment in which students would want to take risks. The following proved to be highly successful. Firstly, students' awareness of the teacher's expectations and constant feedback on their academic and behavioural performances acted as a gauge for their performance and boosted their confidence. Secondly, the appreciation of the open relationship that the teacher fostered with them where respect had a cental place and humour had a part was clear in comments such as, "You were a good, nice and understanding teacher."

Thirdly, changing the physical environment where the lesson took place also proved successful. Students felt more comfortable outside the classroom away from the hot and poorly lit classroom. They used their outside environment as a stimulus for creative writing such as poems about wind. Exhibiting students' work also gave them a sense of validation, that gave them pride in their work.

Another successful strategy was teacher involvement in activities. Through modelling of tasks and sharing responses to tasks set with them by the teacher, students were more willing to take up the challenge of handling tasks. Students were also motivated by the opportunities that were created for them to share their their ideas, feelings, opinions, experiences and concerns about themes and texts that were being studied. Such opportunities valued their initial responses, which developed their confidence in responding to literature. Such opportunities also allowed them to learn from others in the group. Giving students the freedom to choose their own texts and materials to work with, motivated students and gave them a sense of commitment to their learning, since they could choose to work with texts that matched their interests and ability.

Certain strategies proved successful in preparing students to encounter texts. Immersion and discussion were very successful strategies. The use of visual aids, realia and brainstorming activated students' prior knowledge, expanded their experiences and created schemata that allowed for successful engagement with texts. Research followed by teacher-initiated discussions involved students in whole-class

or small-group discussions, which led to further reflections on their findings. This also led to tolerance and appreciation of others' opinions.

Students encountered texts through silent reading, reading aloud and dramatisation. Students rated reading aloud and dramatisation very highly, claiming that they created the story atmosphere that improved their understanding of the text, gained practice in pronunciation and gained vicarious experiences of the character's predicaments that led to more confident opinions of that character.

Students felt more at ease to communicate their initial responses and to extend them through oral sharing and discussions. Such activities where students shared their feelings and opinions about texts read resembled more closely real reading practices where they can get immediate feedback from others as they worked collaboratively to extend their response. They found it challenging to respond to texts in log writing. Scaffolding strategies were fruitful in providing students with skills and knowledge that they needed to expand their analysis of texts. Teacher demonstrations helped students to better understand what was expected of them and teacher summarising aided their memory and understanding of topics.

Collaborative work strategies such as games, project work, group work had a high rate of success. Such strategies involved students in collaborative knowledge construction while encouraging divergent interpretations. They felt supported by each other, and hence gained confidence to take risks. Students also enjoyed the chance to conference with their peers during the writing process. They claimed that this allowed they to gauge whether others would like to read their text. They were also helped to spot mistakes in their work. They, however, still valued teacher conferencing, claiming that the teacher had more knowledge of the writing process.

To round off their encounters with texts, students were involved in such activities as writing responses to authors, characters and having a go at their own creative pieces. Allowing them to make diverse conclusions (choosing their own way to round off their encounter with a text) to texts proved really enriching, as they chose the activity that they most wanted to do.

Aspects of LSP that contributed to the success or otherwise of the programme to participants

Identifying aspects that contributed to the success or otherwise of the programme for participating students revealed that the eclectic reading practices supported by the programme provided a broad base of reading practices that successfully allowed readers to interpret texts. This resulted in students increasing their knowledge of the formal structures of texts, sharing their personal responses and gaining new awareness of themselves and others. This eclecticism broadened the way they could respond to texts. The LSP advocates the use of texts from different cultures, genres and times as appropriate for students. This freedom meant that students could collaborate with the teacher to choose texts appropriate to their level and interest, which led to an improved commitment to learning. It also led to their developing a new awareness of others' cultures through studying texts from various cultures, which created a sense of tolerance and respect for others.

Students particularly enjoyed studying a local text in the local language (Kreol). They claimed that it facilitated understanding, allowed them to create a point of comparison between English and Kreol and to learn more about their own culture. The possibility of code-switching and using Kreol to better express themselves gave them a sense of reassurance that their message meant more than the language at that time and hence they felt more confident to engage in discussions.

Participants claimed that the work requirements provided more variety in assessment compared to what they were used to. They quite liked the possibility of choosing their best work to hand in for assessment. It was noted, however, that the number of assessment tasks proved too many for the time period. Students needed more time to adapt to the pace of work that the LSP demanded. The standards-based marking schemes with the rubrics were popular with students, because they had an indication of what was needed of them in order to achieve better grades. However, the language used for some of the descriptors was too complex for students.

English teaching colleagues' views of the introduction of a literature study and the LSP

The teachers of English at the school were of the opinion that the study of literature in English should be integrated within the language programme, similar to current practices in New Zealand and Western Australia, so that teachers would not see it as an added burden. They also emphasised the need to make literature objectives part of the examinations, otherwise teachers would neglect to cater for them as they worked towards examination targets. Suggestions were also made that some teachers lacked the confidence to teach literature and that unless they were trained for that, literature study would remain in the background.

Teachers showed strong support for introducing Kreol literature and literature in Kreol as a separate area of study, claiming that students should have access to texts from their own culture and in their own language.

In reporting on their opinion of the LSP, teaching colleagues suggested that the programme should include a package with sample activities, resources and teaching approaches to guide teachers. They favoured the variety that the work requirements brought to assessment, but felt that they might be too demanding for students who still lacked the ability to take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers approved of the standards-based marking schemes and rubrics, but felt that the language used for the rubrics should be simplified for students' understanding. Finally, they supported the idea of using a range of multicultural texts in the teaching of literature. They believed that the programme shoould include a range of sample materials that teachers could choose from.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

There is a clear message from the research that literature as an area of study should be part of the curriculum of Seychelles. A review of the ENCS is necessary in order to clarify the status of Literature and to add literature-related objectives that will enable teachers to take up the teaching of literature within their language programme. Research must be conducted to evaluate the need for and possibility of introducing Kreol literature as a curriculum subject at the secondary level. Professional development sessions should aim to provide language teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform successfully as teachers of literature.

The LSP should maintain a broad approach to reading practices (reader-response, New Criticism, critical theories) as they provide students with different ways of interpreting texts. The programme should maintain its multicultural approach to the choice of texts to be studied in class, and student choice should remain a basic aspect of the approach to teaching.

A number of amendments need to be made to the programme. Firstly, samples of units should be designed for teachers to use as models for their own unit design. Secondly, the work requirements should be spread over a period of one year rather than one term. This would give students ample time to adjust to the new mode of work, and also allow enough time for proper support and monitoring by teachers. Finally the rubrics should be made more user-friendly.

IMPLICATIONS

Results of the research revealed a number of implications for teaching literature in the junior secondary classrooms of Seychelles. The main concern is the appropriacy and adequacy of materials for use with students. For literature to be successfully introduced in schools, there will be a need to refurbish resource rooms. Teachers' professional development is another issue that will need to be addressed. All teacher participants in the research felt that they were not adequately equipped to cater for literature-related objectives. Students are eager to learn. However, this excitement about this new area of study should be nurtured by using resources that meet with students' interest and ability level. The teaching strategies to be employed need to provide opportunities for students to share their personal responses to texts, and create positive learning environments where students are encouraged to take risks.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the development, philososphy, evaluation and recommendations of the LSP trial. The LSP was developed to provide a programme in English that would cater for literature objectives at the junior secondary level. The evaluation of the trial revealed a high level of student and teacher satisfaction with the programme. Both groups favoured the introduction of literature as an area of study, although the students would prefer literature to be an area of study on its own, while the teachers opted for an integrated approach.

Students positively identified several cooperative strategies such as group work and role plays. Students particularly enjoyed strategies that involved them in making

choices and sharing their opinions. While the teachers saw cooperative strategies as necessitating more management skills on their part, they also believed that such strategies validate students' contributions.

Certain recommendations were made about the programme. Both groups of participants felt that the marking schemes, though a good idea, should be amended to facilitate student understanding. It was suggested that sample activities and resources be appended to the LSP as guides to teachers.

In looking to the future, the LSP has several features that may be adapted and included within the language curriculum in order that literature gains status within the intended and enacted curriculum. These are : the literature-related objectives; work requirements; and the standards-based assessment model. However, further trials on a more extensive basis may reveal broadly and clearly participants' views, which should provide sound data for decision-making.

Literature is a vehicle for human culture, thoughts, aspirations, deceptions and ways of life. By relegating literature study to the background, we rob each Seychellois child of the opportunity to experience vicariously the life others' live; to enrich their knowledge of other cultures; to develop an understanding of themselves and others; and to develop a sense of respect for what is different.

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