

TEACHING LITERATURE IN THE CLASS

Oleh: Syahrini Junaid

(Dosen pada Fakultas Adab dan Humaniora UINegeri Alauddin Makassar)

Abstrak

Teaching literature in the classroom emphasis on improving students ability through the presentation of extracts of novels and short stories through their literary development. In addition, the potential of literary texts carry for the students' critical ability development and personal growth. There are some forms of exercises that can be applied in the classroom by using all forms of literature.

Kata Kunci: *Literature, Student's Ability, Novel and short stories.*

A. Introduction

First of all, any method or approach towards using literature in the classroom must take as a starting point the question: What is literature? Many people have puzzled over what literature is. One broader explanation of literature says that literary texts are products that reflect different aspects of society. They are cultural documents which offer a deeper understanding of a country or countries (Stanford 2003:2). Other linguists say that there is no inherent quality that makes a literary text, rather it is the interpretation that the reader gives to the text (Eagleton in Gill, 1995:10). This brings us back to the above definition in the sense that literature is only literature if it is considered as art.

The issue of teaching English literature in a non-native context dates back from the early years of this century when literature was considered of high prestige in language study and access to literary works was assumed part of the purpose of language learning (Widdowson in Stanford: 2003,30). The approach was characterized by a concentration on the classics assuming that if the students were continually exposed to the best uses of the English language, it would in some sense 'rub off' on their own performance in the language.

However, on the one hand the difficulty and the inaccessibility of many literary texts to non-native English speaking students and on the other, the lack of a consistent and suitable methodology for the teaching of literature brought about rather the opposite effect than the expected one. The literature class consisted often of an enthusiastic teacher-orator and passive students being '*too busy writing in translations of unfamiliar words to respond to the text*' (Long in Gill, 1995:10).

Based on the background, the problem statements of this paper can be formulated as follows:

1. What are the reasons for using literature in the classroom?
2. How are the strategies of teaching literature in the classroom?

B. Discussion

A. Reasons for using literature in the classroom.

There are many good reasons for using literature in the classroom. Here are a few:

1. Literature is authentic material. It is good to expose learners to this source of unmodified language in the classroom because the skills they acquire in dealing with difficult or unknown language can be used outside the class.
2. Literature encourages interaction. Literary texts are often rich in multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively mined for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions.
3. Literature expands language awareness. Asking learners to examine sophisticated or non standard examples of language (which can occur in literary texts) makes them more aware of the norms of language use (Widdowson, 1975 in Stanford, 2003:40).
4. Literature educates the whole person. By examining values in literary texts, teachers encourage learners to develop attitudes towards them. These values and attitudes relate to the world outside the classroom.
5. Literature is motivating. Literature holds high status in many cultures and countries. For this reason, students can feel a real sense of achievement at understanding a piece of highly respected literature. Also, literature is often more interesting than the texts found in course books.

There have been different models suggested on the teaching of literature to ESL/EFL students (Carter & Long, Lazar in Gill, 2003:45). How the teacher will use a literary text depends on the model they choose.

The cultural model views a literary text as a product. This means that it is treated as a source of information about the target culture. It is the most traditional approach, often used in university courses on literature. The cultural model will examine the social, political and historical background to a text, literary movements and genres. There is no specific language work done on a text. This approach tends to be quite teacher-centered.

The language model aims to be more learner-centered. As learners proceed through a text, they pay attention to the way language is used. They come to grips with the meaning and increase their general awareness of English. Within this model of studying literature, the teacher can choose to focus on general grammar and vocabulary (in the same way that these are presented in course books for example) or use stylistic analysis. Stylistic analysis involves the close study of the linguistic

features of the text to enable students to make meaningful interpretations of the text – it aims to help learners read and study literature more competently.

The personal growth model is a process-based approach and tries to be more learner-centered. This model encourages learners to draw on their own opinions, feelings and personal experiences. It aims for interaction between the text and the reader in English, helping make the language more memorable. Learners are encouraged to “make the text their own”. This model recognizes the immense power that literature can have to move people and attempts to use that in the classroom. Attached below are two lessons, which draw on a combination of the language approach and the personal growth approach. However, there are very good reasons for encouraging learners to read books. Extensive reading is an excellent way of improving English, and it can be very motivating to finish an entire book in another language. In addition, many international exams have certain optional questions on them that pertain to set novels each year. One option that is now available to language teachers is the wide range of simplified and inexpensive versions of literary texts, called readers. Setting up a class library of novels and readers, if the teachers have the resources, is an excellent idea. Tim Bowen and Jonathan Marks, in their book *Inside Teaching* (2010), recommend the following ideas for extensive reading of literature:

- J Hold brief classroom discussions on what learners have been reading (progress reports).
- J Ask learners to describe a book they like in such a way to make others want to read it.
- J Select a short novel which has been recently made into a film or TV series with which the teachers and learners are familiar.

Strategies in Teaching Literature in the Classroom.

To be able to make the process of teaching and learning could run well, of course we need strategy that suit to the material and the objective of the study. These are sort of strategies that work well for extracts from stories, poems or extracts from plays.

Stage 1: warmer

There are two different possible routes the teachers can take for this stage:

- J Devise a warmer that gets students thinking about the topic of the extract or poem. This could take several forms: a short discussion that students do in pairs, a whole class discussion, a guessing game between the teachers and the class or a brainstorming of vocabulary around that topic.
- J Devise a warmer that looks at the source of the literature that will be studied. Find out what the students already know about the author or the times he/she was writing in. Give the students some background information to read (be careful not to make this too long or it will detract from the rest of the lesson;

avoid text overload!). Explain in what way this piece of literature is well-known (maybe it is often quoted in modern films or by politicians). This sort of warmer fits more into the cultural model of teaching literature

Stage 2: before reading

This stage could be optional, or it may be a part of the warmer. Preparing to read activities include:

- J Pre-teaching very difficult words (note: pre-teaching vocabulary should be approached with caution. Often teachers “kill” a text by spending too much time on the pre-teaching stage. Limit the amount of words the teachers cover in this stage. If the teachers have to teach more than seven or eight there is a good chance the text will be too difficult.)
- J Predicting. Give students some words from the extract and ask them to predict what happens next. If it is a play, give them a couple of lines of dialogue and ask them to make predictions about the play.
- J Giving students a “taste”. Read the first bit of the extract (with their books closed, or papers turned over) at normal speed, even quickly. Ask students to compare what they have understood in pairs. Then ask them to report back. Repeat the first bit again. Then ask them to open the book (or turn over the page) and read it for themselves.

Stage 3: understanding the text, general comprehension

Often with extracts or poems, the teachers like to read the whole thing to the students so that they can get more of a “feel” for the text. With very evocative pieces of literature or poetry this can be quite powerful. Then let students to read it to themselves. It is important to let students approach a piece of literature the first time without giving them any specific task other than to simply read it. One of the aims of teaching literature is to evoke interest and pleasure from the language. If students have to do a task at every stage of a literature lesson, the pleasure can be lost.

Once students have read it once, the teachers can set comprehension questions or ask them to explain the significance of certain key words of the text. Another way of checking comprehension is to ask students to explain to each other (in pairs) what they have understood. This could be followed up by more subjective questions (e.g.. Why do the teachers think X said this? How do the teachers think the woman feels? What made him do this?)

Stage 4: understanding the language

At this stage, get to grips with the more difficult words in the text. See how many of the unfamiliar words students can get from context. Give them clues.

The teachers could also look at certain elements of style that the author has used. Remember that there is some use in looking at non-standard forms of language to understand the standard.

If appropriate to the text, look at the connotation of words which the author has chosen. For example, if the text says “She had long skinny arms,” what does that say about the author’s impression of the woman? Would it be different if the author had written “She had long slender arms”?

Stage 5: follow up activities.

Once the teachers have read and worked with the piece of literature, it might naturally lead on to one or more follow up activities. Here are some ideas:

Using poems

- J have students read each other the poem aloud at the same time, checking for each other’s pronunciation and rhythm. Do a whole class choral reading at the end.
- J Ask students to rewrite the poem, changing the meaning but not the structure.
- J Ask students to write or discuss the possible story behind the poem. Who was it for? What led to the writing of this poem?
- J Have a discussion on issues the poem raised and how they relate to the students’ lives.

Using extracts from stories or short stories

- J Ask students to write what they think will happen next, or what they think happened just before.
- J Ask students to write a background character description of one of the characters which explains why they are the way they are.
- J Ask students to imagine they are working for a big Hollywood studio who wants to make a movie from the book. They must decide the location and casting of the movie.
- J Ask students to personalize the text by talking about if anything similar has happened to them.
- J Ask students to improvise a role play between two characters in the book.

Using extracts from plays.

Most of the ideas from stories (above) could be applied here, but obviously, this medium gives plenty of opportunity for students to do some drama in the classroom. Here are some possibilities:

- J Ask students to act out a part of the scene in groups.
- J Ask students to make a radio play recording of the scene. They must record this onto cassette. Listen to the different recordings in the last five minutes of future classes. Who’s was the best?
- J Ask students to read out the dialogue but to give the characters special accents (very “foreign” or very “American” or “British”). This works on different aspects of pronunciation (individual sounds and sentence rhythm).

- J Ask students to write stage directions, including how to deliver lines (e.g. angrily, breathlessly etc) next to each character's line of dialogue. Then they read it out loud.
- J Ask students to re-write the scene. They could either modernize it, or imagine that it is set in a completely different location (in space for example). Then they read out the new version.

However, we can not deny that there will be difficulties in teaching literature. The possible problems that can appear are as follows:

Problem 1: Where to find material?

Of course the teachers may have a novel or book of poetry that the teachers have been using with the students for a long time. But where can the teachers get more material? Easy! The internet brings the teachers instant access to many works of literature. Use a search engine. Usually it is enough to key in the name of the author or the book the teachers are looking for. Older books and plays can sometimes be found entirely on-line.

The following sites are excellent for book excerpts and stories:

- J www.bookbrowse.com - a really great site which allows the teachers to read an excerpt from a multitude of recently published books. The teachers can search by author, book title or genre!
- J www.readersread.com - brings the teachers the first chapter of many recently published books.

Try the following two sites for poetry:

- J www.favoritepoem.org - a site collecting America's favourite poems. The teachers can also read comments about why people like them and hear them being read aloud.
- J www.emule.com/poetry - an archive of classical poetry, easy to browse through by poet. Has a top ten list of favorite poems (chosen by visitors to the site) which makes an interesting starting point.

Problem 2: How to choose material?

These are factors the teachers choose should consider when they are thinking about a piece of literature to use with learners:

- J Do the teachers understand enough about the text to feel comfortable using it?
- J Is there enough time to work on the text in class?
- J Does it fit with the rest of the teachers' syllabus?
- J Is it something that could be relevant to the learners?
- J Will it be motivating for them?
- J How much cultural or literary background do the learners need to be able to deal with the tasks?
- J Is the level of language in the text too difficult?

Problem 3: Is the text too difficult?

Obviously, a teacher would not want to use a text that is completely beyond their learners. This would ultimately be frustrating for everyone involved. However, the immediate difficulty with vocabulary in a text might not be an obstacle to its comprehension. Learners can be trained to infer meaning of difficult words from context. The selection of a text must be given careful thought, but also the treatment of the text by the teacher (this means think about the tasks the teachers set for a reading of a piece of literature, not just the text).

C. Conclusion

Teaching literature in the classroom emphasis on improving students ability through the presentation of extracts of novels and short stories through their literary development. In addition, the potential of literary texts carry for the students' critical ability development and personal growth. There are some forms of exercises that can be applied in the classroom by using all forms of literature, as follows

- a. sentence structure and substitution exercises
- b. vocabulary exercises,
- c. text completion exercises,
- d. word use rephrasing exercises,
- e. grammar use or sound stress and punctuation exercises,
- f. plot exercises, character exercises, detail, style and technique exercises.

There are some reasons for using literature in teaching literature as it is an authentic material, encouraging interaction, expanding language awareness, educating the whole person, and motivating.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, M. H. (1981) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Holt-Saunders International Editions: New York.
- Bowen & Jonathan Marks. 2010. *Inside Teaching*. www.teachingliterature.org (retrieved on 27th June 2010)
- Carter, R. and M. Long (1991) *Teaching Literature*. London: Longman. www.teachingliterature.org (retrieved 27th June 2010)
- Collie, J. and S. Slater (1987) *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. www.teachingliterature.org (retrieved 27th June 2010).
- Gill, Richard. 1995. *Mastering English Literature*. Macmillan Ltd: England.
- Stanford, Judith. 2003. *Responding to Literature: Stories, Poems, Plays, Essays*. McGraw Hill: America.