

Literature in ELT Setting: Paving the Way for Critical Students

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Why teaching literature in Indonesian EFL (English as Foreign Language) classrooms? Not only does literature need a particular approach to study, but also it is in English. On the other hand, it is generally believed that Indonesian students have low reading interests, let alone reading literature. Moreover, English as the target language in which students may not be proficient can cause problems in understanding it. Consequently, the task of teacher of literature in ELT setting is multifold to overcome these challenges. In spite of the challenges, this paper argues that teaching literature enhances students' cultural understanding and facilitates critical thinking. Using results from a survey on students' interests in reading as well as practices and research on teaching literature, findings show that –as cliché as it is- the teacher, the students, and the appropriate materials are the interconnected elements defining success in literature classroom. Based on the findings, this paper also discusses the necessary skills to promote professionalism in teaching literature in ELT setting.

Key words: literature, approach to literature, reading interests, cultural understanding, critical thinking, professionalism

Introduction

Even though the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has contributed to considerable progress in English teaching in Indonesia in terms of spoken or oral skills, some issues need more considerations to address. Compare to ten or twenty years ago, in my observation, students of any level are more fluent and willing to talk in English, either in the classroom or in public. The students' English fluency is very likely the result of the lowering affective filter principle proposed by Krashen and Terrel (1983), Brown (2001) and many others which teachers apply in their classrooms as the approach suggests. In addition, exposure of English from the mass media helps students to be more confident in speaking skills or oral production. However, the six years –at least- that the students spend in formal school to learn English has not given the expected result yet. Many high school graduates can speak English to some degrees, but usually with lack attention to accuracy and acceptability, for instance. Worse still, when it comes to writing in English, the learners, even in college, cannot produce intelligible or systematic pieces of writing.

Many students, although able to produce the-so-called English utterance or text, cannot distinguish what idioms or conventions are acceptable in English language. They often translate word for word any expressions in their mother tongue, i.e. Bahasa Indonesia, into English. For example, instead of addressing an English female teacher 'Ma'am', they say 'Mom' as if it were 'Ibu' in Bahasa Indonesia. Another simple example is 'I love you full' or 'I very like you' instead of 'I love you very much'. Besides, many students cannot distance themselves from spoken discourse when they have to produce an English text. Moreover, they also are not familiar with English writing conventions, such as paragraph making, transitional markers, even capitalization and punctuations. It only shows that although English exposure is abundant, without awareness to English forms and functions, the students haven't been successful to learn English.

Dealing with this issue, practitioners in ELT are challenged to find ways to make English learning more meaningful and successful within Indonesian context. In an attempt to improve the quality of EFL teaching learning process, this paper argues that using literature in ELT setting not only can invoke students' awareness on acceptability in using English but also enhance students' cultural understanding and critical thinking.

Why Literature in ELT setting?

Using literature in Indonesian EFL classrooms is quite little, if not neglected. Even though present curriculum has given much proportion to functions, experience and observation as well as research shows that EFL classrooms in Indonesia still emphasizes on forms. If literature is presented, it is usually to model a generic structure for a narrative text. Credit should be given to a developing consideration to include local literature in EFL classroom. However, a survey to several SMP and SMA students (Muslim, et.al, 2009) reveals that the use of literature in English learning in school does not go further to discussions on language use or cross cultural understanding.

As a matter of fact, literature serves the principles of language acquisition and language learning. Hadaway, Vardell and Young (2002) propose at least three benefits of using literature in EFL classroom that contributed to language acquisition. First, as second language learning is similar to first language learning, literature provides 'more meaningful contextualized language than the skill-oriented material'. By reading a piece of literature, learners can see and feel how the language is used in context. Second, literature offers 'social and affective factors' as it comes with different formats – picture books, short stories, newspaper to name a few- which suit different students and ask for discussions in various sizes –individual, pair work, or group work. Third, through illustration and descriptive language, literature gives input to model how the language is used naturally and meaningfully.

Krashen (1993) mentions the difference between acquiring and learning language. While learning is consciously undertaken, acquiring is subconsciously done. Reading literature encourages learners to adopt the language subconsciously because it doesn't focus on forms intentionally. In case of nursery rhymes and children literature, predictable and repetitive patterns allow children to feel and link the language to their own lives (Ghosn, 1997). As the authentic material, literature imparts the diverse forms and functions of written language (Hadaway, et.al., 2002). Without having to memorize it, skillful readers will be aware that telling a story requires the use of past tense, for instance, or that writing a letter follows certain formats and conventions. Literature presents the registered language for different contexts. It is in literature learners can find the natural communication between doctor and patient, or the king and his subjects.

In addition, Lazar (2005) asserts some more functions of literature in language classroom. One of them is helping students understand another culture. Although reading Shakespeare does not always guarantee students' understanding of British culture, at least it gives students ideas on how people live at certain period of time in England. Even when students read the Harry Potter series, they can have glimpse of the government system in England because the stories involve some incidents where the main characters need to contact their government.

Another aspect of literature which helps students learn the foreign language is the aspect of fun. Some research found that students enjoy having poetry, prose, and play in their language classroom. Enacting play encourages students to experience the language kinesthetically. On the other hand, with the right material and preparation, storytelling can be an joyful activity, especially for the lower age students.

Furthermore, both Lazar (2005) and Hadaway et.al. (2002) agree that literature enhance students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skill is the ability to make a careful and conscious judgment based on multiple perspective before accepting or rejecting a certain claim (Parker (1986),

Brookfield (1987), and Pirozzi (2000)). As literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meanings, the readers, in this case EFL learners, should be able to uncover the implied meanings of a particular text. For example, in a poem, a word may have figurative meanings that should be interpreted by the readers. The attempt to disclose the real meaning of the word gives the students the opportunity to see the meaning from different angles. This activity helps students to develop their critical thinking skills because they have to be able to produce sound argument on their choice of interpretation. Ultimately, unlike textbook readers, literature readers are able to choose and judge any 'reading materials to function them better, allow them vicarious experiences.' (May, 1995).

With these views in mind, there seems little doubt of using literature in English language teaching classroom. However, we need to consider some challenges to the application before being convinced of its benefits.

Challenges and Opportunities in Indonesian ELT Setting

The using of literature in Indonesian EFL setting may face two challenges: one is from the teacher's side and the other is from the students'. Teachers of EFL apparently familiar with the importance of meaningful, authentic principles suggested by Brown (2001), but in practice, many often forget about them (look Defianty & Nafisah (2008), and Wirza (2004)). Teachers –especially in formal schools, tend to focus more on language forms, but less on language functions and acceptability. For instance, they are inclined to teach grammar forms without emphasizing the functions. They also tend to translate Bahasa Indonesia into English regardless to the appropriateness of the translation. For example, the teachers do not correct the simple address of 'Mister' to replace 'Pak' in Bahasa Indonesia. Moreover, Defianty & Nafisah (2008) and Wirza (2004) found that teachers often fail to give the correct models on all those aspects. Some mispronunciations and inappropriate use of English occur during teaching learning process. These findings are contrary to requirements of capable English teacher such as mentioned by Harmer (2002) in which, among other things, teachers should be able to organize, model, and facilitate learning.

On the other hand, although most students seem to have considerable interests in learning English despite their struggles with the language, not many are eager to read, let alone in English. It is quite well known that Indonesian students are not avid readers. They are more into oral or aural mode of learning –so it is believed. Most respondents prefer to watch the visual representation of a book. Nevertheless, a survey conducted to the first year students of English Department in a university in Bandung shows that many EFL students do like to read fiction. Another survey (Muslim et.al, 2009) to several high schoolers also reveals that although reading is not the most favorite activity, these students read about a book of fiction or non-fiction twice a month in average. Both surveys show that the book the students mostly read is Japanese comics. However, most students in the surveys are familiar with the books popular among teenagers. For example, many of them have read *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, the tetra logy *Laskar Pelangi*, the series of *Kambing Jantan*, and the translations of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Stepheni Meyer's *Twilight's* series. Some even read more serious novels such as *Saman* and *Supernova*. Unfortunately, only 3 out of 38 students in the survey have ever read an English (simplified) novel.

Another interesting finding from the survey presents that all students are familiar with at least four Indonesian folktales and two international folktales. The most popular Indonesian folktales (or fables or fairy tales) are *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*, *Si Kabayan*, *Malin Kundang*, and *Sangkuriang*. Meanwhile the most popular international folktales are *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. As a matter of fact, they have heard those stories in Bahasa Indonesia since they were in kindergarten, and later on read them in English version in their English textbooks at school.

Apparently, there is much more to take literature to improve EFL teaching and learning. Since using literature involves reading, whether it is in Bahasa Indonesia or English, it is worthwhile to use literature in Indonesian ELT setting.

Implication on Using Literature in Indonesian ELT Setting

Despite the challenges, experiences show that using literature in my EFL classrooms has given desirable results. Let me illustrate you three cases from my EFL classrooms. The first one is when I gave them story of *Cinderella* as the motivating strategy to achieve the goal of using past tense correctly. Because *Cinderella* is a quite familiar story, secondary school students found it easy to understand the structure of the story. When they were asked to retell the story, most could tell it fluently using familiar structure of fairy tales. They started with 'Once upon a time, there was...' or 'Long, long time ago, there was...' and ended it with 'They lived happily ever after'. Since they are predictable and repeated expressions inherent in storytelling, most students were able to tell Indonesian fairy tales or folktales in similar way.

In addition, they were eagerly involved in enacting the story of *Cinderella*. Without too much interference from my part, they were able to produce script of the play. They audited the roles among themselves, rehearsed dutifully under my minimum supervision. They consulted me on the correct pronunciation and expressions. But other than that, they had their own time. And the result was beyond my expectation. None of the three groups I set up had copied the story per se. Every group had their own interpretation of *Cinderella*. One group stuck to the story but gave greater part to the Prince's role. Another had a strong and rebellious Cinderella, while the other had different ending in which Cinderella married the Prince's guard instead of the Prince himself.

The second case deals with the older students, who are in senior high school. Their level of English proficiency is advanced. We used the poem *Richard Cory* by Edward Allington to discuss. The poem uses rich vocabulary and inverted structure of grammar mostly unknown to students. At first, the students found it hard to understand the meaning of the poem at beginning. But after looking up the difficult words in the dictionary and discussing the poem in group, they could interpret the poem. They learnt how to use the vocabulary correctly and try to make inverted structure. Besides, discussions on the theme of the poem resulted in interesting talk about how to deal with wealth and happiness.

The other case is instead of doing all grammar exercises without context, the students identify and analyze English structure from literary texts, such as newspaper, fairy tale, and excerpts from novels. In doing so, not only are students aware of forms, but also of their functions in contexts. Besides, a following discussion on language use such as discourse and expressions is able to help them use the expressions correctly in their own text, whether narrative, recount or expository. Furthermore, a discussion on cultural aspect also enables the students to distinguish between English conventions and Indonesian ones. In consequence, they are expected to start to ask questions of what are taken for granted and make careful judgment on what is going on.

The findings strengthen the research on using literature in ELT setting. First, it shows that lower level learners are able to produce their own text based on the familiarity of the story. It supports Goshn's (1997) conclusion that repetition and predicted story relate children to their own life and enable them to produce the text and context naturally. Second, older learners are introduced to diverse language form and function as Hadaway (2002) suggests. Poems display various language structures, while stories provide so many samples on forms and discourse. Finally, discussions on theme and discourse also enrich their understanding on humanity and its problems. At least, it tickles their curiosity and probes their mind into expressing ideas more critically.

Therefore, the implications of using literature in English as Foreign Language classroom is just like any other lesson planning: the right combination of students' need analysis, appropriate materials and activities, and –a very important one, teacher's willingness to spend more time and energy. The students' analysis will give understanding of what the students need and expect from the learning process. Younger EFL learners have different needs from the older ones, of course. For example, English learners in elementary school levels need to be exposed to the language without

emphasizing too much on writing skills. However, they need be aware of phonetics differences and basic daily expressions. Consequently, the literature that can be exposed is poem to be memorized, or story reading and telling. Combined with suitable activities such as TPR (Total Physical Response) or fun drilling, students are expected to understand and gradually able to produce the expressions correctly and naturally. On the other hand, EYL teachers should prepare themselves more thoroughly. Oftentimes, teachers of EYL become the first model of English speaker. For that reason, the teachers must pay more attention to their own English production so that they are able to give the correct model of pronunciation. Besides, they need to carefully choose the appropriate poems or reading texts for their students' level of English mastery.

Choosing the suitable materials plays an important role in using literature in ELT setting. Familiar international fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* and *The Little Red Riding Hood*, provide good samples to start since most children know the story. As children learn by imitating, it is then a progress when they are able to use the narrative structure in retelling the same story. In the case of older EFL learners, things could be a bit challenging as the learners have probably exposed to literature, Indonesian or English, to some degree. They possibly have different background schemata and interests. Familiar stories might be used in the pre-activity stage to lead them to other purpose of English language use. For instance, use *Thumbelina* as a motivating strategy to lead a discussion on another story of *Timun Mas* which has a girl as the main character. However, we must bear in mind that using a story which is too familiar might result in boredom. In addition, many students think that reading is a part of school work (May, 1995) so they do not read much once they are out of school. Therefore, it is necessary to find out something authentic as well as challenging for the students. For example, instead of giving students fairy tale, take an excerpt from popular literature and lead discussion on its theme or characterization or just the language functions. In short, making available different stories, including the local ones, serves students to compare, discuss, and analyze the stories critically.

In consequence, choosing the right materials calls for teacher's competence and proficiency. Teachers should be familiar with many kinds of literary texts so that they can provide models and sources for learning. Teachers shouldn't take for granted any story. They should be able to use any story for different purpose of learning. They should not teach one point of view, instead, they have to ask questions which help students to questions and analyze. Moreover, May (1997) argues that a knowledge on critical analysis would assist teachers to choose and interpret books and films. Hence, teachers who are avid readers stand a good chance to develop a more literary EFL classrooms.

Conclusion

Using literature in ELT setting is beneficial in assisting students to learn English. Research as well as findings from experience and experiments confirms its advantages. First, it provides authentic material as models of correct and appropriate forms and functions. Second, it offers diverse use of the language. Students are able to distinguish variation, forms and discourse from the dialogs, characterization, and description of the text. Third, it evokes critical discussion since literature presents problems faced by human beings. In doing so, students are expected to be aware of not only how to use English correctly and appropriately, but also engage their mind critically. Finally, choosing the right material for students' need and teaching objective should be taken into consideration to enable using literature in ELT setting successful.

Nevertheless, the present lack attention to using literature in ELT Indonesian setting requires some points to ponder. One of findings indicates that Indonesian students in general love stories, whether through reading or hearing them. On the other hand, many English teachers are still far from competent and proficient in using English. These findings imply that there is a little chance that using literature in ELT setting is successful unless the teachers are competent. Therefore, preparing the teachers is a necessary step. Teachers whose motivation to self development is high will give a better result.

In other words, as most people love stories in any forms, why don't we use it to enable learning worthwhile?

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