



Aligning the Teaching of English Literature in Malaysian Context: A Narrative Review

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Authors' contributions

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the review of existing scholarships and research articles on the teaching of English literature. A critical inquiry emerges within the canvass of the English Literature Teaching (ELT), a wide corpus of existing issues, from the prescribed texts to the pedagogical approaches employed. In the attempt to map the bewildering inquiry with its riposte, this study is aimed at conceptualizing the status quo by synthesizing pertinent literature. Overall, the findings yielded implication that would offer theoretical, novel and empirical means for the future teaching of English literature which evidently is still beset with numerous challenges. Thus, the review concludes with recommendations by advocating fundamental tenets; intercultural and selection of texts variables to be pragmatically employed for future researches.

Keywords: Culture; language teaching and learning; English literature; intercultural competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature, as imaginative writing, and comprising fiction and non-literary texts, employs a unique set of discourses [1]. At the onset, avid art and language devotees read and appreciated literature; however, literature has surfaced as an increased vigorous and dynamic resource, especially in language education. Initially, the teaching of literature constituted English education, prior to the World War 2, at which time it was perceived as an outstanding model of language use and as a source of high ethical values, consequent to the study of the literary canon of the target language [2]. To reiterate this, according to Carroli, study of literature emerged as the main component of the learning, and not as an ingrained facet of language development [3]. Conversely, learning changed when the espousers of the Functional Approach debated to abolish literature from language education, influenced by the dispute that the study of literature did not match the essentials language skills of the students [4]. To exemplify the circumstance, student conceptions indicate that they have limited opportunities to employ developed language competence, as lexicon employed was not able to be contextualized to social practice. Literature education in Malaysia aims to augment student comprehension of the English language, as it does offer enjoyment. Hence, literature can offer both a tool to enhance literacy and accuracy in the language as well as a means of pleasure. Finding a balance of the two becomes possible, despite the inhibitions [5].

In the year 2000, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia opted to integrate literature as a tested component in the secondary school English language education syllabus [6]. In the year 2005, the ministry included literature into the English language extended reading program for Primary 4 to 6. The change towards the incorporation of literature as a tested component in English education for the local context indicates that Malaysia not only intently adheres to current global trends in language education, but has also revealed the value of literature for English language education for Malaysian students. Influenced by the fact that literature in English language education comprises part of the traditional language teaching approaches, literature decreased in popularity when language education embarked on a focus on the functional uses of language. However, the role of literature in the English language classroom has received renewed attention, and many now view literary

texts as providing rich linguistic input, effective stimuli for students to express themselves in multiple non-primary discourses, and a potential source of student motivation [7,8]. Formal English language education has existed globally due to the global application of English in media and popular textual modes, commerce, and the transactions of cultural commodities. It follows that developing competence in the English language presents increased opportunities for employment. However, to compete globally, persons must be equipped with intercultural communication competence in particular. The inevitability of cultural diversity in the market place demands it, thus making intercultural communication competence an extremely important skill to develop and to cultivate. As a measure, literature in English language education can narrow the cultural gap.

Institutions have employed differing approaches in language and literature-based education to constitute one of the teaching approaches used in language education [9]. By increased familiarity with literature, students can extrapolate their conceptions, a sense of what becomes possible, and their ability to empathize with others. In addition, literature education can also improve an ability to read critically and interpret texts, while gaining appreciation for literary genres and theories of interpretation (Writing Commons). Consequently, we can argue for greater appreciation of the role of literature as a basic component and a source of authentic text of the language curriculum, rather than as an inserted component, an ideology which has recently emerged [10]. In the Malaysian English syllabus, exposure and familiarity to literature contribute to developing conceptions of other cultures, societies, values and traditions, and ones that can contribute to emotional and spiritual growth [11]. Therefore, the objectives of the literature component taught in schools include to boost student proficiency in the English language by exposing the students to prescribed literary texts, to assist in development and character building, and to appreciate cultures portrayed in the texts. Unfortunately, these aims materialize with difficulty if students do not have reading skills and the strategies with which to comprehend texts [12]. Such ramification may emerge from selected texts, which contain words and images unversed by students; hence, students have an impeded competence associating with existing knowledge, or engaging in active learning processes. The situation suggests that reduced affordances

among students in Malaysia have warranted concerns within the Ministry of Education even prior to the introduction of the literature component. Henceforth, various issues related to literature education should take account of the stakeholders, so as to effect improvement in and to confute student's negative perceptions of literature.

2. REVIEW OF PERTINENT STUDIES

To explore the role of prescribed literary work and culture in the teaching of literature, a review of several empirical studies was done. The review divulged inconsistencies of corpus which was subsequently developed into research gaps or issues which were employed closely to scrutinize relevant studies, evaluates the quality of the studies, and thus the findings are summarized below; categorized into two major findings.

2.1 The Array of Prescribed Literary Work

The Ministry of Education boarded on a policy change in the year 2000, at which time policy acted so to integrate a greater exposure to literature into English education, whereby one of the five English periods required a greater component of literature. Subsequently, literary texts of a plethora of genres emerged in schools, where designated texts have English and Asian writers. Through exposure to these literary texts, student proficiency increases, contributes to student growth of character, as it does widen student viewpoints through exposure to an increased number of cultural varieties [8]. These selections of texts emerge from numerous genres. These Malaysian, British, European, Australian, American and African texts, consisting of short stories, novels, drama and poems, have become secondary school curriculum as school systems anticipate that students develop competences to effectively conceptualize and mentally delineate plots, to comprehend the poems, and to provide personal retort to texts. Exposure and increased familiarity with these texts intend to instill values and widen student perception and attitudes towards the world.

Differing to the beliefs and expectations, students often experience fear when considering the exposure to and acquaintance with these texts added with influence and perceptions that literature encompasses challenging and perplexing lexicons [13]. This becomes

influenced by that literature is equated as similar to Shakespeare and his deemed archaic and antiquated language as well as works of poets which employ that language of poetry still unfamiliar to students. According to Deblase, students often encounter difficulties with Shakespearean language [14]. This context applies to Malaysian students, who experience difficulty with comprehension of the selected texts for the literature component, and with experiencing enjoyment with these texts, largely influenced by a not yet developed competence in identifying with the cultural and social contexts of these texts. Ganakumaran discusses a study aimed at incorporating literature into a classroom context and the study revealed challenges and repercussions on the selection of texts, where the texts selected must have both manageable and readable qualities for students [8]. Moreover, maintenance of the uniformity of themes of development of language affordances, as well as themes in the literature constituent, becomes crucial [15]. According to Ganakumaran, the readability trait should also appear from the perspective of culture [8]. For example, some of the materials employed in lower secondary syllabi have somewhat little relevance to Malaysian students. To echo this statement, a study by Ganakumaran, Ismail and Koo expose that cultural information in texts has indicated a reduced chronological relevance, despite its proximity to countries from which authorship emerges [15]. In addition, the literature component implemented in schools indicates an inclination and bias for texts from the western countries, and predominantly from the British and American literary traditions [16]. These two countries have produced a canon of literary works; however, there should be an immediate attention given to the evolving trend of local literary work where they should be considered for the materials used in schools. Integrating Malaysian literature in English may well increase familiarity with context and cultural facets for students, thus increasing satisfaction, as students may better identify with the characters and themes more implicit in the texts [16]. Consequently, students will develop competences to identify not only with the cultural contexts, but also the vocabulary employed, greatly influenced by their already established accustomed strengths.

According to Brown, for many English students, the term English Literature would connote difficult books predominant in libraries that have scarce readership [17]. In Malaysia, students at

secondary and tertiary levels developing knowledge of English literature employing traditional method, require sequential methods when reading texts, a process which can increase the monotonous nature of learning. In addition to having to develop conceptions of literary texts, students must search for definitions of lexical items, at which point the students frequently experience difficulties in comprehending the archaic literary texts [18]. Such complications could ultimately incur an absence of interest among the students, and may unground pedagogies that include exposure to literature. Relationships between students and their readings of texts contribute to determining suitable texts, including in contexts where English language education occurs in the primary discourse [19], as interaction in the primary discourse can contribute to reducing anxiety in the classroom [20]. Blocksidge exposes the impediments in selecting text that correlate with student mental, cultural, and affective affordances texts [21]. In addition, texts should contain public themes and must sit within the grasp of students who can extend their moral, social, and affective competences [22]. Moreover, literary appreciation can result greatly from reading texts that have a candid and significant impact on the individual [23,24]. Consequently, students and teachers must deliberate on the choice of texts in the literature classroom, which would reflexively motivate student learning.

Work by Isa and Mahmud on rural secondary school students indicates that to be able to attain the intended learning outcomes, texts require due consideration, and in the context of Malaysian rural classrooms, for the reader-text interactive process to emerge between students and teachers, thus prompting student schemata [25]. Consequently, respective courses should favour localized literature, though syllabi should prioritize specific significantly related and connected themes. Results of the research also reveal that texts should relate to student life worlds, should activate prior knowledge, and should convey a message. Themes should trigger and maintain students' interest, and should effectively provide avenues for spontaneous responses and involvement. Cole reiterates the cruciality of offering students a classroom environment rich in literature [26]. It is imperative to include an array of books that represent a variety of topics, levels, and genres of literature which can capture student interest. Ballentine and Hill, in a study with elementary

school students, found that authentic literature which addresses real-life issues enhance student engagement with texts [24]. Students deeply interacted and indicated a strong competence to respond to themes highlighted in the texts. Another study conducted by Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Jusoff revealed that text selection correlates with student motivation to engage in literature reading [27]. Text selection appears to offer the most important construct for meaningful engagement with literary texts as interest factors amongst students must precede the text selection.

2.2 Impediments to Cultural and Language Teaching

With the inception of language teaching, the concept of culture should be embedded as being a set of learned behaviours shared among society. At its core, the unique relationship and inhibition between learning and culture are ubiquitous, and undoubtedly, culture exists in all learned behaviour. An indispensable facet of culture is that language perpetuates in shaping and expressing cultures from one society to another, and from one cohort to another. Literary style and structure can pose difficulties and challenges for students, particularly when writers comprise various ethnic enculturation. In this case, students must make sense of the writers' background. Therefore, to increase knowledge of the text, students must identify the language deviances and their significance.

According to Wan Kamariah, students commonly develop a negative conception of poems, influenced by the abundance of figurative language and images employed, which students fail to comprehend [28]. In addition, linguistic structure in poetry can increase confusion, influenced by irregular punctuation, as well as organization. Despite that literary texts can assist students to develop competence in a secondary discourse, and respective set of cultures [29], inappropriate texts may engender gaps between the texts and the reader's perception, particularly in the cultural context [30]. For example, the words or notion of autumn in Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, can present itself as alien to students who lack knowledge to equate words employed in the aspect of cultural reference. As another example, students experience a familiar concept which can have representation as something else in a different cultural context, such as death, which receives representations in the colour black in western

societies yet in Malaysia, death is associated and symbolized with the colour white in the Muslim society. In this context, a student's reduced competence to conceptualize could result from not only the teacher's lack of cultural awareness and lack of support material, which could otherwise address the cultural issues but more significantly, the teacher's lack of intercultural competence [15,31].

However, to be able to think interculturally, to know the products of a culture such as music, history and language, or having an intercultural experience is not enough for a person to develop intercultural competence [32]. Since it does not occur naturally, it can be argued that it is crucial to intentionally develop and cultivate intercultural competence. Research has shown that teachers intend to include a cultural dimension, but do so only intermittently and in unplanned ways due to lack of attention to the cultural dimension in teacher training [33]. "The expectations in the intercultural domain currently voiced towards foreign language teachers require them to acquire a different and more substantial body of cultural knowledge and develop a range of new skills that will allow them to promote their learners' acquisition of intercultural competence" [34, p. 6]. Further, she presumes that foreign language teachers are already moving in the direction of multicultural and intercultural teaching. Intercultural competences need to be taught and works by Byram and Sercu et al. attest to this approach [35,36]. To this end, Byram's landmark five *savoirs* was created to help foreign language teachers to plan more deliberately to include intercultural competence in their pedagogical aims. The *savoirs* are *savoir être* (attitudes), *savoir faire* (knowledge), *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting, relating), *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery, attitudes), and *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness).

Commonly, literature classes require students to read and comprehend pre-scribed texts, thus antagonizing students as they encounter unfamiliar yet intimidating words. However, the fascinating cultural variation in the texts which consist of various characters, themes, and styles, may interest students to explore literature [37]. According to Hinton-Johnson, multicultural literature texts can integrate into classroom practices from kindergarten through to college [38]. This extended practice can assist students to explore, understand, and appreciate literature, as they cannot adequately read literature without

developing knowledge of cultural and historical circumstances. In addition to effectiveness in the development of language affordances, literature can motivate, and can assist students to build emotional affordances, and literature can foster positive interpersonal and intercultural attitudes among children [39]. Therefore, if students have reduced awareness of culture, history, values, modes of thinking, customs, religious rituals, and lifestyles, they may fail to effectively conceptualize the texts, and to exemplify such circumstances.

Students in rural areas experience difficulties in literature education, due to language and cultural barriers. Littlewood asserts the exposure to such texts becomes crucial for development of reading skills and evidently, literature learning presents the "key source" if cultural constraints do not impeded learning [40]. Awang, Kasuma and Akma studied student motivation towards English literature components in a primary school in Malaysia, designing the investigation by creating and distributing a questionnaire instrument to sixty female form-four students [41]. The result indicates student positive attitudes towards the literature component, however most students aspire more than simple exposure to literature texts through reading. The linguistic and cultural barriers separating knowledge and literature components contribute to such perceptions. However, the suitability of the component for Malaysian students also contributes to educational effectiveness. Various groups of students in Malaysia have displayed a diverse knowledge of literary work, whereas some students have never had exposure to foreign literary works, while others have developed familiarity with foreign literary pieces [42]. To echo the statement, a study to place literature as a subject in Singaporean secondary schools considered the role of literature in the current political, economic, social, and educational factors [43]. Increasing familiarity with these factors emerges as important as it influences the teaching and learning of literature in secondary schools. In addition, as a multi-racial country, the cultivation of shared cultural identity presents a formidable challenge. Consequently, the teaching of literature in schools should see revision, so to encourage younger generations to enrich their creativity as well as endorse vigorous thinking amongst the society [44].

It becomes crucial to view literature as a form or means by which to reserve cultural facets, where consequently universities and art faculties

frequently prioritize. Furthermore, at the tertiary level, literature becomes embedded in English courses [45,46]. According to Sivapalan, it is important to integrate multicultural literature to young adult education, in order to instil increased understandings of different cultures [47]. However, the debate on the role of literature in English language education contexts has presented an issue of continuous debate and recently, it has regained importance as researchers have exposed the plausibility of integrating literary works into current communicative frameworks of language education [46,48,49,50,51,52]. The notion of incorporating literature into the English language educative contexts would enlighten perceived issues, which can be categorized into two main aspects; was in which literature becomes perceived as a subject matter and the conventional teaching approach employed. As a subject matter, literature can point to linguistic complexity, historical, geographical and social remoteness from students, text length, and the lack of functional authenticity [50,52]. Regarding teaching approaches, conventional means employed focuses on the interpretation of meaning, assigning credit to neither student nor teacher opinion [46,48,49]. With the recent communicative approaches employed to teach, the techniques employed do not cohere with common approaches in the teaching and learning of literature, and which include inculcated memorization, verbalization, and translation [50]. On the contrary, in the context of English language education, employing literary texts as materials has become common and popular practice as well as tolerance among students when developing familiarity with new cultures [52].

Some Saudi Arabian universities teach English language literature meagrely, due to the doctrinaire religious considerations. Research on culture and literature teaching in English language courses has explored perceptions and attitudes of faculty and students, as well as motives for facilitating and inhibiting literature teaching in Saudi Arabian English language educative contexts, and more so as this education includes implications for pedagogy and curriculum development [53]. Teaching English literature does not necessarily adhere to a specific nation, but reflects multicultural educational messages that can provide multicultural representations of the English language. In this case, the exposure of multicultural literary texts can encourage

students to develop competence in literacy, so to compare and analyse the cultural viewpoints and values of the East and West. Furthermore, a significant link between language and culture exists as a key role in communication and learning [54]. This emerges from that language reflects the culture of a society as well as the social interaction. Thus, reduced understanding of various respective cultural contexts can motivate miscommunication and confusion of these cultural differences, where cultural values influence teaching and learning through many communicative activities in classroom, which becomes an imperative relationship between culture and communication.

Brumfit and Carter, Littlewood, as well as Chambers and Gregory have explicated the benefits of literature in language development and have developed a model with means to employ literature in language development [40, 49,55]. Furthermore, developed countries such as the U.K, the U.S.A, and Singapore, have increasingly realized the importance of teaching literature in the school curriculum, and hence, when the Ministry of Education in Malaysia announced the incorporation of literature into the national English language curriculum, advocates of literature in English language teaching have viewed and welcomed its introduction in the Malaysian context as timely, and the most prevailing advancement following the adoption of the communicative approach [56]. However, the newly introduced literature component has raised some issues, and has invoked a variety of views and feedback from stakeholders. Consequently, numerous studies have risen to observe and describe the efficacy of this implementation. The results of a study conducted by Ganakumaran, Ismail and Koo pointed to the still lingering large number of school teachers not prepared to teach, as many have inadequate preparation [57]. Sidhu found that teachers do not know how to incorporate literature into English language education; some teachers depend solely on supplementary materials [58].

3. CONCLUSION

Emanating from renewed attention assigned to literature in language education, we can well see the importance of issues such as intercultural competence, diversity in the range of text, and the use of antiquated language in relation to literature in the Malaysian context, where there exists significant need to further investigate the matter to expose information on ways in which

teachers, and students cope with the literature component. This becomes crucial as continuous research may assist in not only identifying perceptions and problems encountered in the implementation of literature in the English language classroom, but also to suggest specific ways in which teachers and students may negotiate to effectively include the literature component into syllabi. Existing studies can offer recommendations to institutions responsible for the preparation of future English language teachers for the challenges corresponding to their teaching profession. Issues underlying the implementation of the literature component may include the viability of the component for Malaysian students, as texts written by foreign authors constitute a considerable number of the manuscripts selected. College students who have had little exposure or contact with foreign settings and cultural background presented in texts may face difficulty in visualizing and imagining intended descriptions, thus hampering understanding of the literary works. Students and classrooms are becoming more diverse and multicultural each day, and therefore, mastering intercultural competence is a desirable option for a start. The variety of language learning situations has resulted in a growing demand for flexible and well-tailored approaches to intercultural communication in order to fill the gap. The challenge now is for language educators to respond to this demand by enriching language learning and by integrating into an informed awareness of intercultural issues. Educators are well placed to respond to this challenge, but they will need to adapt their professional profile to meet the new needs.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The sole purpose of this study was to better understand issues and concerns involving the teaching of literature. The empirical review was done to synthesize and integrate the substance of those studies that were impacting the circumstance. This study does not review all research on the teaching of literature however, but it does give us a sense of what is being discussed in those publications. A fair amount of attention in literature teaching research is being held about topics of intercultural variable and selection of text—gaps which may be of a great concern and vital in the teaching of literature's ecosystem. It is deemed fair to claim that culture is an indispensable constituent of language teaching and learning. As discussed, studies show learning literature aids understanding is

beneficial to critical thinking and analytical skills; a budding interest in paradigm shift of culture in classrooms. Culture aids in understanding of other societies, values and traditions to contribute to students' growth; thus, the incorporation of culture-specific learning and relevance is to be acknowledged.

In light of the foregoing circumstance, selection of texts should relate to student life worlds, should activate prior knowledge, and should convey a message. At the same time, themes should trigger and maintain students' interest, and should effectively provide avenues for spontaneous responses and involvement. Rural secondary school students indicate that to attain objectives of literature components of courses, texts require due consideration, and in the context of Malaysian rural classrooms, for the reader-text interactive process to emerge between students and teachers, thus prompting student schemata. In addition, relationships between students and their readings of texts contribute to determining suitable texts, including in contexts where English language education occurs in the primary discourse. Students at secondary and tertiary levels develop knowledge of English literature by employing traditional method, require sequential methods when reading texts, a process which can increase the monotonous nature of learning. As deliberated Malaysian students who experience difficulty with comprehension of the selected texts for the literature component, largely influenced by lacking of competence in identifying with the cultural and social contexts of these texts. Through exposure to literary texts, student proficiency increases, contributes to student growth of character, as it does widen student viewpoints through exposure to an increased number of cultural varieties.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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