

MELTA NATIONAL CONVENTION ON LITERATURE
16TH APRIL 2005
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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It is my pleasure this morning to speak before such an eclectic and informed group of people – representatives from the various departments of the MOE, teachers, the valuable practitioners from all levels of the education structure, members of the press, publishers, relevant NGOs, teacher trainers and university personnel.

I would also like to thank MELTA for inviting me to deliver the keynote address at this one-day convention, The MELTA National Convention on Teaching Literature. I also congratulate MELTA for investing time and energy to bring together language practitioners, researchers, policy-makers and others, to discuss a matter of great and grave concern to all of us present here today – The Teaching of Literature in an ESL context.

This Convention is timely, considering the new developments that are shaping the sphere of language learning. Current trends in language instruction, all over the world, show that there is a surge of interest in using literature texts to simulate language learning, a practice motivated by the fact that literature texts contribute to the cognitive, social, affective and moral development of the learner. Proponents of literature are equally thrilled by recent research findings that the integration of literature texts in science and mathematics has a significant effect on student achievement in these two subjects.

The pedagogical benefits are largely responsible for the renewed interest in literature and worldwide developments in the teaching and learning of literature have resulted in the re-inspection of perspectives, methodologist and course reforms. The world of literature is alive and vibrant with buzz words such as reader response, transactional theories, literature-based instruction and multicultural texts taking center stage. Die-hard proponents

of the classics may see this as a threat to the works of Shakespeare, Milton or Dryden.

Instead, with the growing corpus of literature texts, we can integrate the old and the new, and make the classics more appealing and cognitively accessible to our present generations of readers who prefer the simplicity and clarity of present day works. We also need to initiate a paradigm shift to change the mind set of practitioners who oppose the inclusion of literature texts especially in Malaysia, where there is a very noticeable difference in linguistic proficiency among our students, with English ranging from a second language to a foreign language in some contexts. And this is clearly the agenda of this convention. The aims of this convention will take us a big step forward in making the teaching and learning of literature a fruitful endeavour:

- Create awareness among Malaysians of the value inherent in the study of literature;
- Pre-empt and suggest possible solutions to these challenges teachers of literature are likely to face;
- Address future directions to the teaching and learning of literature in Malaysia;
- Provide a forum for networking opportunities among stakeholders to share knowledge and resources in the teaching of literature in Malaysia.

Let me trace briefly the chronological development of literature study in Malaysia.

Literature, unlike any other subject, has been subject to many challengers. The issue of teaching English Literature in a non-native context dates back to the previous century when studying or teaching literature was considered prestigious and access to literary works was assumed an important component of language learning. The approach was characterized by a concentration on the classics, based on the assumption that if 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, the difficulty and the inaccessibility of many literary texts to non-native English speaking students and the lack of 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 who were *'too busy writing in translations of unfamiliar words to respond to the text'*

The gradual disappearance of literature from the language classroom was an expected consequence. Surrogate literature replaced authentic texts in the form of situational textbook dialogues and short tales which did not encourage students to develop a *'feeling for language, of response to texts'*

The Communicative Approach, of the 70's and early 80's emphasized the study of language for practical purposes. Literature was seen as having no obvious practical use because it contributed nothing to the utilitarian objectives of language teaching.

The 80s, however, saw a strong reawakening of interesting literature and language teaching, thanks to the efforts of linguists and ELT scholars who argued not only for the value of teaching literature in the language classroom but for the necessity as well of re-inventing a different pedagogical approach for non-native speakers of English.

The 1990s saw a surge of interest in using literature to stimulate language learning because of its contribution to the linguistic, cultural and personal growth of the learner.

As in many ESL and EFL learning contexts, in Malaysia, too, the use of literary materials as an important feature of language learning has been significant over the last two decades. The appearance of literature-based reading programmes, such as the Class Reader Programme in the 1990s, was aimed at developing reading skills and to introduce elements of literature into language teaching. This programme, however, failed to produce the desired impact due to several reasons among which was that it was not a compulsory component in the English Language Curriculum, hence it was conveniently sidelined by both teachers and students.

In 2000, literature was formally integrated into the English Language Syllabus as a taught and tested component and this significant move marked the formal acknowledgement and appreciation of the role of literature in ELT in Malaysia. The decision to use literature as a resource in the language classroom was prompted by several reasons which are outlined in 'Surat

Pekeliling' Ikhtisas Bil. 4/2000 dated 18 February 2000 issued by the Ministry of Education. The overall aim of the Literature Component is to:

- i. inculcate the reading habit among students;
- ii. enhance students' proficiency in the English Language through the study of a set of prescribed literary texts;
- iii. contribute to personal development and character building; and
- iv. broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views

The Education Ministry of Malaysia has also made provisions for the study of English Literature as a subject on its own, in what is commonly referred to as the big 'L'. Like English, this subject too, has seen changes in line with worldwide changes, especially in the shift from the classics to contemporary works by both native and non-native writers from all over the world; thus resulting in a change of labeling from English Literature to Literature in English. Another significant change is the inclusion of more genres at the SPM level, where instruction is not restricted to the study of novels and plays alone, and a practice which was prevalent before the late 1990's. Students of Literature in English today are exposed to short stories, poems, novels and plays.

Why is the teaching and learning of literature necessary? My personal belief is that a society without literature or one where literature is relegated to the outermost margins of social and personal life is a deprived society. It is one of the most basic and essential undertakings of the mind, an indispensable activity for the formation of critical and creative individuals so vital for a modern and democratic society

The onus is on us as educators. Whatever, facet of education you are in to dispel the myths and misconceptions surrounding the learning and teaching of literature.

There are some with a narrow-minded conception who believe that literature is a dispensable activity, useful for cultivating sensitivity and good manners, but essentially unnecessary merely an entertainment that people with time in their hands can afford – an activity to fill the gap between other

activities, one that can be sacrificed without scruples when one “prioritizes” tasks and duties that are indispensable in the struggle of life.

Literature has always been and will continue to be an equalizer, one of the common denominators of human experience through which human beings may recognize themselves and communicate with each other, no matter how different their professions, their cultural and geographical locations and personal circumstances. It has enabled individuals to transcend differences and understand each other as members of the same species, with a shared human experience.

Nothing teaches us better than literature to see in ethnic and cultural differences, the richness of the human spirit and to appreciate the differences as testimony of humanity’s multi-faceted activity. Reading good literature is a pleasurable experience but more than that it is an experience of learning what and who we are, our human integrity and imperfections. In this complex world of contradictions and complexities, literature is a unifying and integrating factor. Ponder on this quote:

A person who does not read or reads little or reads only trash, is a person with an impediment: he can speak much but he will say little, because his vocabulary is deficient in the means of self-experience.

An important if not the most important reason to give priority to literature is because without it, the critical mind, the real engine of historical change and the best protector of liberty is denied. All good literature is challenging, it poses questions, it tickles and provokes – in short it makes one think!

However, many problems confront the learning of literature in Malaysia, especially in the learning of the big ‘L’. First, there is a dwindling “clientele” made worse by the declining standards in linguistic proficiency. Today, many students including those who are linguistically competent shy away from Literature – believing it to be inaccessible and remote. The Literature Component was introduced in 2000, yet the numbers taking up Literature in English at the SPM level, keep falling. The figures are equally dismal at the STPM level. The problem is further compounded by a generation of students’ obsessed with wanting to score only an A in every subject they sign up for,

thus making Literature the choice of high-achievers. We need to address this issue before literature becomes obsolete/unfashionable.

Before we think of ways to rekindle interest in literature, we need to think of ways to arrest the decline in linguistic proficiency among students.

Another critical issue is the dwindling numbers of teachers keen in teaching the subject. Many university undergraduates in the teacher-training programmes, like students, refrain from taking up Literature for the same reasons. Some who are trained do not have the confidence to handle the subject, thus depriving students who are keen to learn literature of an opportunity to do so.

A related problem is a mismatch between study demand and teacher supply – those who can teach and are willing to teach are placed in schools where there is no clientele; or where there is no support from the administration. If we do not capitalize on the expertise of these teachers, their enthusiasm for literature will slowly diminish. Likewise, there are schools which have linguistically proficient students waiting to be converted into literature enthusiasts, but alas there is a shortage of teachers trained to teach the subject. So, the problem of teacher availability and accessibility has to be addressed.

Teacher incompetence is an area of growing concern – we are churning out language teachers in large numbers to satisfy the national agenda of supply and demand, resulting in the sacrifice of quantity at the expense of quality. We need teachers – good teachers- linguistically proficient and competent teachers. In satisfying current needs, we have either failed or ignored to see future ramifications.

Curriculum Content is another debatable issue. Some argue that books students choose to read and enjoy with little help from teachers are of little value in the literature programme. Other stipulate that such books have a vital transitional function in preparing students for more mature literary experiences. Other areas fraught with issues include: What criteria should be brought to bear on decisions about what to teach? And, once that is decided, how should literature be taught? The former address issues of text selection:

What should be the basis of text selection? What varieties of English should we include? Are texts by native speaker superior to that written by

non-native speakers? Is this text culturally suitable?

We are here to address these issues among many others, by listening to a variety of voices –remember each of you plays as important a role as the other; we will be enriched and better informed by your personal experiences. You are the vital ingredients for the success of today’s convention. You are the people with the questions and answers – your views, your problems and your suggestions matter. Take this opportunity to build and cross bridges – for the benefit of all.

Our presence here this morning indicates our concerns about the teaching and learning of Literature. All four papers to be presented later today deal with pedagogical issues. Let us take back with us what we can so that, together, we can exploit the full potential of literature in the classroom.

I would like to end this keynote address with a quotation which is as vital to us today as it was in the past and will be in the future, if we want to enhance our efforts at promoting the learning of literature texts. Oliver Wendell Holmes said:

‘To reach a port we must sail,
Sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against it,
But we must not drift or lie at anchor’

You are the helm. So, steer on!!
Thank you.