

USING LITERATURE IN AN ADVANTAGED SITUATION: ISSUE AND PROSPECTS*

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ROSLI TALIF AND M. JAYAKARAN

Universiti Pertanian Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The sudden resurgence of English, which is largely due to the remarkable successes in industry, naturally brought about the emergence of literature. This paper will discuss the status of the teaching of literature in an advantaged situation, i.e. the fully residential schools such as those operated by the Ministry of Education and MARA, and suggest future directions. Students in these schools, the majority of whom are admitted after primary school education, are selected on the basis of their excellent academic achievement. The nature and composition of the student population in such schools would enable teachers to conduct more challenging activities in addition to the existing English language curriculum. The physical characteristics of these schools invite us to seek means of utilizing the advantaged learning situation to the fullest. When discussing future directions in approaches, a general review of both the present Class Reader Programme for the secondary school level and the elective Literature in English Programme at the upper secondary is necessary. This is done using Carter and Long's (1991) models in the teaching of literature. They suggested three models: (1) the cultural model, (2) the language model, and (3) the personal growth model. Several strategies for the advantaged situation that language and literature teachers can deploy in fully residential schools to make the teaching of literature more meaningful are offered.

Introduction

A few years ago, Malaysian educationists were still deciding whether there was really a need for every school going child to have a good level of proficiency in English. Today, thanks to the remarkable successes in industry, and the obvious need for English, educationists are convinced that there is more to lose if the second language is not given the emphasis it requires. Currently, educationists, bureaucrats and people in industry are in fact looking towards drastic conversions in the medium of instruction in subjects which have a science and technology bias.

The sudden resurgence of English naturally brought about spin-offs, one of which was the emergence of literature. The English language curriculum of secondary schools provided the avenue for the growth of what was to be little "l" or literature with a small "l", which found the form of the Class Reader Programme (CRP). The programme was initiated in 1989 and one class period was allocated

to the use of the reader. Unlike the English Language Reading Programme (ELRP) which was introduced only in selected schools, the CRP involved every school in the country. Proponents of the programme believe that the CRP would help consolidate skills taught in the ESL curriculum. This strategy was given due consideration after revelations by researchers like Krashen (1984) who stressed the importance of reading in second language acquisition.

Policy makers were also alarmed that the reading load of Malaysians was found to be very low. A survey (with a sample population of 15,054) conducted by academicians from a range of Malaysian universities found that Malaysians spend a mean monthly expenditure of RM10.00 or below on books and magazines (Atan Long, et. al. 1984: 129). As such, the best way for the CRP to succeed was to integrate the use of the reader in the ESL curriculum. Furthermore, the introduction of literature in the ESL curriculum in the form of the small "I" would not only initiate students' interest in literature but to also widen their perception of the world.

The Fully Residential School

This paper will discuss the status of the teaching of literature in an advantaged situation, i.e. the fully residential school, and suggest future directions. The Ministry of Education and MARA operate fully residential schools in every state in the country. Students in these schools, the majority of whom are admitted after primary school education, are selected on the basis of their excellent academic achievement. The entrance requirement is that they acquire distinctions for all their subjects in the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR). There are a few residential schools which also admit students who performed exceptionally well in the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR).

Fully residential schools are different from normal day schools in the following aspects:

1. They are self-contained complexes with modern facilities, far superior to those in day schools. There are ample classrooms, sophisticated resource centres, language and even computer laboratories which cater for English language teaching.
2. They are supplied with a sufficient number of experience English language teachers.
3. Almost all of the students are awarded scholarships. Generally, they are more motivated to study.
4. The number of students in each class is small, approximately 30 in a class, compared to 40-45 in day schools.
5. The classes are usually "set" so that students of different levels of proficiency are placed in separate classes. As such, there are fewer students (average of fifteen) in each class.

It is quite evident that an advantaged situation exists in fully residential schools. The nature of composition of its student population would enable teachers to conduct more challenging activities in addition to the existing English language curriculum. On the other hand, the physical characteristics of these schools invite us to seek means of utilizing the advantaged learning situation to the fullest.

The "select" composition of fully residential schools also makes it possible for the implementation of other approaches to complement those which already exist.

Approaches to Small "I" and Big "L"

When discussing future directions in approaches, a general appraisal of the present scenario would be necessary. Presently, the secondary school curriculum in Malaysian schools has the CRP (small "I") and the elective Literature in English Programme (LEP) (or the big "L"). A general review of both can be done using Carter and Long's (1991) models in the teaching of literature. They suggested three models: (1) the cultural model, (2) the language model, and (3) the personal growth model.

The Cultural Model

This particular model aims at providing the students' input in the form of "accumulated wisdom." Literature has been seen as the medium in which "the most significant ideas of human beings" are expressed. This model links students with a range of expressions which have universal values over a long period of time. Carter and Long profess that a literature curriculum based on the cultural model would transport the learner into the realm of another culture, and this would provide the learner the motivation to indulge in the study of humanities itself:

Teaching literature within a cultural model enables students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space and to come to perceive tradition of thought, feeling and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows. It is this particular 'human' sense that gives literature a central place in the study and teaching of the humanities in many parts of the world (Carter and Long, 1991:2).

The Language Model

This model basically uses literature to consolidate language skills taught in the classroom. Most educationists are of the opinion that the language of the ESL classroom is too rigid, too textbookish, too artificial, and too contrived and so the language model helps expose students to the more subtle and varied creative uses of the language. Although critics say that the manipulation of literature to serve the purposes of language teaching can make literature mechanistic, proponents of the model argue that literature and language should complement one another and that language should be treated as mother to this child called literature:

The proponents of this model argue that language is the literary medium, that literature is made from language and that the more students can read in and through language the better able they will be to come to terms with a literary text as literature (Carter and Long, 1991: 2).

The Personal Growth Model

This model bears some similarities to the language model in that it is student-centred and it helps students achieved "an engagement with the reading of literary texts." The teacher's role is to implant in his students a "lasting pleasure in reading and a deep satisfaction in a continuing growth of understanding."

The Present Curriculum

The CRP, although a very successful programme, has self-imposed limitations as well. Some teachers assume that the support materials (teaching files) are self-sufficient and that the worksheets will provide all the work for students. It is this danger of over-use and over-reliance which would

present obstacles in the achievement of the objectives of the programme. When worksheet exercises are over-used, there is the tendency of the reader class to become a normal ESL class with its focus on reading comprehension. Also, over emphasis on language skills can take away the interest that students might otherwise have in reading for pleasure. Teacher-centredness may also creep in. In this case, teachers would prescribe the exercises and students would then have to work out the answers. In the end, the teacher provides the correct answers.

If the advantaged situation is to be fully exploited, the use of the reader (small "I") in the CRP should be reviewed. It should move away from the rigid and set patterns that day schools follow. At the moment, all schools are required to allocate one out of the five English periods to the use of the reader. In a year, students should have read three books and each book is to be covered in 14 weeks. Teachers in fully residential schools should not regimentalize the system so as to just meet the general requirements.

The CRP with its comprehensive schemes of work and plans were designed for the general audience. Under the circumstances, teachers have to decide whether they can attempt a lot more than the general requirements especially in the presence of a sophisticated audience such as those in the fully residential schools. In Form One for instance, with regard to both the breadth as well as the depth approaches, there should be an attempt to do more books. Some of the books can be covered in the breadth approach so as to enable students to acquire wide experiences from different types of books. Teachers can thus use books like *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Great Expectations*, *Man of Everest* and *The Red Badge of Courage* to be read for breadth; and then use books like *King Solomon's Mines* and *Wuthering Heights* for depth.

While reading for breadth teachers can adopt aspects of both the cultural model and the language model. Teachers should however, provide students more time to dwell into the texts when reading for depth. This is when teachers should adopt aspects of the personal growth model.

Going by tradition, the LEP (big L) would be fashioned in the mould of the cultural model, while the CRP would mirror the language model. In such cases, it would be highly likely that the LEP is not going to be very popular among students if it is modeled along the "0" levels English literature paper with its very strong emphasis on the "learn by rote" style. Consequently, the main concern would not really be on how much the students have enjoyed and learnt but how effectively they can speculate and learn by rote so as to do well in their examinations. The LEP would also intimidate potential candidates who have not acquired a level of language competence which can be considered adequate to achieve literary competence.

One of the ways to foster a better understanding of the text is that the teacher should induce learner response in class. The current practice involves most teachers to "work through text." Invariably, students are bombarded with questions so as to check their comprehension or vocabulary.

Another point of contention here is whether or not the LEP be made compulsory for students (with distinctions in English for PMR) in fully residential schools. There are strong reasons for this proposal to be implemented. As most students would have acquired reasonably good levels of language competence, they would be in a better position to grasp literary competence. These students would also be highly motivated as they have around them a conducive environment which promotes healthy competition.

An underlying factor that could motivate policy makers to implement this is that the big "L" would require "reading in breadth as well as depth" (Carter and Long: 1991) and this would facilitate the

development of intellectual processes (Odell: 1977) in students which eventually would make them mature thinkers and better writers.

If it is introduced as a compulsory paper for distinction students, the LEP should promote personal growth and move away from the traditional over-emphasis on the teacher-oriented cultural model. In this respect, the teaching of literature would be more balanced and not just an act of preparing students for their examinations.

Strategies for the Advantaged Situation

There are several strategies that language and literature teachers can deploy in fully residential schools to make both big "L" and small "l" more meaningful:

1. They can take advantage of classes which are "set" to provide more group work activity. The problem of mixed ability classes seldom exist in fully residential schools.

Teachers using literature texts (big "L") or class readers (small "l") can bring in "reader's theatre" into group work. Texts, even if they are non-dramatic can be used to create dialogues. Students, after reading the text would have to decide on how to come up with dialogues. The advantage of having this kind of activity is that individuals have to work as a group to come up with a dialogue. After that, individuals have to "sink into" their roles when performing. While performing, they not only have to have a clearer understanding of the character they are playing but also there is a need for the individual to look at other roles and how these other roles affect their own.

2. The advantaged learning situation, with abundance of prep. (preparatory) hours can be utilized for literature.

Day school teachers moan that they never can do much for their one forty-minute class reader session per week. For the fully residential school teacher, however, prep. hours (which amounts to an average of twenty hours per week) can be utilized for the purpose of group work activities for literature. Class hours can be used for final group presentations.

3. Extra-curricular activities in fully residential schools can complement the ESL and LEP curriculum.

Instead of English teachers being dragged into clubs where they would be unproductive, the system should remove the one language one society image and spur the growth of a variety of clubs and societies which support ESL and literature in the extra-curricular. The English Language Society which is the multi-purpose English Society in schools should move away from this tradition and be more specialised. Smaller clubs, suiting individual interests should be formed. Clubs like Readers' Circle, Amateur movie-maker's Club and Drama Society should do well to exploit class texts and readers into hours of beneficial activity in the extracurricular hours.

4. Self-access.

Fully residential schools have resource centres with audio and video facilities. The move towards personal growth must facilitate the expansion of resource centres to also double up as self-access centres where students can view for example the Richard Chamberlain's version of *King Solomon's Mines* before or after reading the book itself.

Conclusion

The fear to opt for literature is real and as there is the link to summative assessment, it will be difficult to maintain its attraction. With the CRP moving into year 4 and 5, there is hope that the aspirations of an approach that is more student-centred and personal growth related is realised. While the LEP might remain examination oriented, the CRP with its "gentle persuasion" approach might just succeed in providing literary competence. In the long run, the success of the LEP would hinge on the realization of the continuity of efforts provided by the CRP. Desired qualities such as the reading habit could then be nurtured. Ultimately, "the holistic and integrated development of individuals in terms of their intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical growth" could be attained (Ministry of Education, 1990).

A discussion of approaches, however, cannot neglect classroom practice. The way teachers conduct themselves in class would eventually determine motivation levels of students in the reader class or the literature class.

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