

In my previous article in 'The English Teacher' of August 1985, while presenting an argument for the inclusion of literature in the Malaysian ESL Programme, I pointed out that there was a need for a redefinition of the term 'literature' in the ESL context. In this article I will attempt to put together such a definition — a descriptive definition that will go beyond the constraints of an ESL programme.

In order to arrive at a definition of this nature, a general but limited survey of the meaning of literature is deemed appropriate and useful.

The Oxford English Dictionary (1973: Vol. VI, 342) defines literature as:

'The body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now, also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.'

The Random House Dictionary (1966: 836–837) of the English Language presents three distinct definitions:

- (a) Writings in which expression and form in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are characteristic or essential features, as poetry, romance, history, biography, essay, etc.
- (b) The entire body of writings of a specific language, period, people etc.
- (c) The writing dealing with a particular subject.

Turning away from dictionary meanings, Wellek (1942:3-11) strikes a distinction between literature and literary study, calling the former 'a creative art' and the latter 'a species of knowledge or learning', before he considers more specific definitions such as, 'Literature is everything in print', and 'Literature means great books notable for literary form or expression'.

Wellek contends that the term 'literature' is best limited to the art of literature, that is 'imaginative literature', but he feels that his terminology is clumsy and misleading because it leads to the suggestion of its limitation to written or printed literature. Wellek appears to emphasize that any coherent conception must include 'oral literature' and in this respect he points out that the German term *Wortkuns* and the Russian *Slovesnost* have the advantage over their English equivalent.

Sapir (1921:236) discussing the relationship of 'language and literature' states

'Languages are more to us than system of thought transference. They are invisible garments that drape themselves about our spirit and give a predetermined form to all its symbolic expression. When the expression is of unusual significance, we call it literature.'

Sapir adds a footnote attempting to qualify his description. He contends that he does not exactly know just what kind of expression is 'significant' enough to be called art or literature, and therefore states that literature is to be taken for granted.

Hall (1978) states that like any form of art, literature involves communication of some type of meaning through a particular medium in this instance language. Talking about definitions, he adds,

'Most definitions aimed at discriminating literature from other types of utterance have emphasized its content, especially the imaginative character of what is said. A more objective criterion, based on social attitudes has been proposed, defining literature of any society as the discourses, short or long, which the members of that society agree on evaluating positively and which they insist shall be repeated from time to time in essentially unchanged form.'

Moody (1971: 1-5) states that the word literature can be found in a number of different kinds of statements and suggests that literature is in fact not the name of a simple straightforward phenomenon but an umbrella term

which covers a number of different kinds of activity. In any case he stresses that although literature can simply be equated to language, it would be more precise to say that literature consists of certain rather specialized forms, selections and collections of language. Moody takes caution to demonstrate that all language is not literature, and simultaneously asserts that literature is something more than language regarding it as highly complex, elaborated statements about the world of the writer and his readers.

Thus, the term 'literature' if loosely used can refer to any spoken or written material in any field of knowledge or branch of human activity. It follows therefore that there is aerodynamics literature, medical literature, linguistics literature, Buddhist literature or music literature. Most definitions considered here, make some reference to the literary aspect of language, using descriptors such as 'beauty of form', 'creative art', 'imaginative literature', 'expression of unusual significance', 'poetry' and 'history' — all of which have some bearing of pertinence to the definition I am formulating. Hall's definition appears to be, to some extent, a satisfactory definition because it has the advantage of obliterating the frequent but unfortunate distinction between 'oral' and 'written' literature with the use of the term 'discourse'.

The term discourse is relevant to the purpose. Discourse demonstrates the literary value of the English Language because it is the aesthetic portion of the language that stores the experiences of a particular people, society, or community. Feelings, hopes, loves, aspirations, struggles, tragedies and attainments are some of the experiences — indeed life itself — preserved and presented again and again in many coherent and meaningful forms. Discourse of this nature is literature embellished with the good and the evil of man and nature. That is why there are so many tales, fables, stories, poems, myths and chants about man and his environment. Though they are presented in different forms, there is one aspect common to all this accumulated information that is they all tell stories.

Diaches's (1956: 4-5) definition fits incredibly

well into the definition of literature that I am formulating for ESL.

'Literature, as we are here using the term, refers to any kind of composition in prose or verse which has for its purpose not the communication of fact but the telling of a story (either wholly invented or giving of pleasure.'

Thus, literature in this sense can simply be called 'story'. Story as it is understood, is manifested in different forms — more specifically as poetry, prose and play.

With this sense of story in mind, we can define literature in a manner which suits our purpose. The following criteria are considered important and essential for a descriptive definition of literature for ESL.

- (a) It is a piece of discourse that has a story line. It has a beginning, a development and an outcome. In other words it satisfies as nearly as possible the conditions for the proposed 'story schema' much in the spirit of the Rumelhart-Mandler-Stein categories, as stated by Freedle and Hale in Freedle (1979: 131-132). The key elements of 'story schema' are:
 - (i) A setting.
 - (ii) A goal.
 - (iii) A beginning.
 - (iv) A simple reaction.
 - (v) An attempt.
 - (vi) An outcome.
 - (vii) An ending.
- (b) It is discourse in the English Language. This includes 'English Literature' in the traditional sense, for example the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, Hardy, Milton and Kingsley, but necessarily in their original form. It also includes the literature of non-English speaking cultures recorded in the English Language.
- (c) It is discourse that is a unified piece of work, meaningfully connected, coherent and complete. It has the capacity to generate inferences and is a unit by itself.
- (d) It may be 'oral' or 'written'.
- (e) It may be 'fiction' or 'non-fiction'.

It is not essential for a piece of literature to meet all the category requirements of the story schema. What is of fundamental importance is the basic story schema. The Rumelhart-Mandler-Stein categories can be used as a guide. I give emphasis to the story schema because it helps create interest and motivation in the ESL classroom.

References

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