

Literature in the ESL classroom is a much talked about subject. There is evidence that ESL teachers are looking for new ways and means (perhaps using old materials in the case of literature) to add a 'dimension of depth' (editorial ETF Vol. XXIII No. 1 January 1985) to ESL programmes in many parts of the world. No fewer than six articles published in the above mentioned issue of the ETF deal with the use of literature in the classroom. Three of them discuss the use of poetry, two talk about teaching literature to ESL students at the tertiary level, and one discusses using children's literature to teach ESL to young learners. This alone shows the great potential there is in literature. It is an inexhaustible resource which can be used in almost any ESL programme.

In Malaysia, the full potential of literature in ESL has not yet been realized. There are several reasons for this. First, the term literature is still very loosely understood. Most teachers take it to mean 'English Literature' in the traditional sense — that is, Shakespeare, Dickens or Hardy, and critical appreciation. Such teachers would frown at the idea of literature in an ESL programme. The term literature, therefore, has to be redefined in the ESL context, in terms of language proficiency and purpose.

Second, the syllabus for the secondary school, especially the one for the upper secondary is built on a basis that is suspect. The assumption is that there is a need to communicate in English — subsequently, the emphasis is on developing communicative skills through training in the speaking and listening skills. The majority of students leaving secondary school go into the local job market where communication is almost always in Bahasa Malaysia. If the language of communication for most of us is Bahasa Malaysia then the need to communicate in English is hardly existent, and the emphasis on developing the speaking and listening skills is false. So what do we do? Do we discard English? Certainly not! There is a definite need for English but not a 'communicative' need, at least not for the majority. I think there is a need to shift the emphasis to reading. And with such a

shift teachers can exploit the various avenues literature has to offer because literature implies a lot of reading.

Third, there is a tendency among ESL teachers to be governed by the syllabus and the text. Most texts are written to the requirements of the syllabus. In fact, texts are just expansions of the syllabus and therefore come in handy for the faithful 'syllabus teacher' who seldom attempts anything exciting outside the syllabus. Linked to this 'syllabus faith' is the 'inspectorate phobia'. For some reason, many teachers suffer from a combination of 'the faith' and 'the phobia' and think it sacrilege to deviate into regular sessions of play and poetry. Perhaps the school chief is on the morning prowl to trap some deviant pedagogue 'having fun' and 'not teaching'. Teachers should have self-respect and self-esteem, and as long as they are honest with themselves and their pupils they should not be shaken by syllabus, inspectorate or headmaster.

Having considered some reasons why literature is not being exploited in Malaysian ESL programmes, we can now look at what literature has to offer in the ESL classroom.

First literature is language in itself (although it must be realized that all language is not literature); thus, what better source of materials than language itself. The language of literature is authentic — not contrived as in texts tailored to the syllabus. In a strictly psycholinguistic sense, literature offers the complete grammar of the language — the syntax, the semantics and the phonology.

Secondly, literature provides more meaningful contexts than structures built around a particular point of grammar. If you think of literature in terms of 'story' then you will discover that it comes in complete semantic units. Children, or for that matter adults, enjoy a good story. You can explore literature for poetry, play and prose with interesting or motivating story-lines and use them to launch your lessons.

Thirdly, there is variety in literature. Generally you can categorize literature into poetry, play and prose. Prose can be further sub-categorized into say, fiction and non-fiction, or unabridged and abridged. Yet another way of looking at variety is the literature of different countries — thus you can have Malaysian literature, or Indian, Chinese and Japanese literature. Then you might look at traditional English literature and make some selections or choose from the great range of modern romance, detective or western literature. The fact is that literature is available in different types, forms and sizes — waiting to be tapped and put to good use.

Fourthly, literature can promote a very good habit — reading — a habit that is essential for effective language development. Here we come to terms with the reality of the transition from the ESL to the EFL situation in Malaysia. Moving closer to the EFL situation is taking us further away from the 'communication in English situation'. From the poor performance of school leavers, and from the concern expressed by the education authorities and the experts in language teaching, it is evident that an EFL situation is rapidly developing in the country. In such an environment you are fighting a losing battle hoping and trying to keep in touch with English in the 'communicative sense'. The best way to keep in contact with a foreign language is by reading in it. Literature, it appears, is the most appropriate device to help develop an interest in reading and eventually to develop the skill through programmes in 'extensive reading'.

Fifthly, a very important aspect of using litera-

ture in class is enjoyment. Why not, once in a while, forget about grammar, structures and vocabulary, and simply enjoy a good piece of literature in a story perhaps, or even a poem? Enjoyment does not necessarily mean that 'learning' is not taking place. If it is enjoyable, pleasure is what is spontaneously manifested, and there is no doubt that an unconscious embedding is taking place at the psychological level. It is similar to the way a child picks up language. You are not all the time aware that the innocent brain computes what it hears — a kind of silent learning takes place, and you are surprised when the child blurts out some good language sequence assimilated from an adult.

My final point is that much too much has been done over the past 25 years or so to take language and split it up into its so-called 'skills' or components. The English language for second or foreign language pedagogical reasons has been mashed up, murdered and mutilated — the flesh separated from the blood and the bone — even the corpuscles have not escaped the scrutiny of the language scientists. The hard fact is that language is a holistic system. I think it is high time that experts and more so teachers started looking at language as a unitary force rather than as bits and pieces. Real language is coherent and complete. It comes complete with dressing and all. And it is in its complexity and completeness that we ought to present it to our students.

Malaysia has long had a strong affinity to the English language. It appears appropriate therefore to include the teaching of 'literature' as an important component in any ESL programme.

