

# LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE: A CREATIVE ACTIVITY MODULE

**Kiran Kaur Dhillon and Surita Mogan**

*Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman*

(Email: [kiran@utar.edu.my](mailto:kiran@utar.edu.my), [surita@utar.edu.my](mailto:surita@utar.edu.my))

## ABSTRACT

Literature is often viewed as an uninteresting subject due to its structural complexity and unique use of language. Thus it may not attract students in developing their interest towards it. This article discusses the teaching of literature using language-based approaches to help students to explore the literary text and enhance their language skills. The purpose of this article is to provide creative suggestions on teaching literature to motivate and facilitate students in learning and appreciating literature. Creative activities are used to explore the short story entitled *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant. Students are engaged in exploring the text in a fun and creative way. The creative activities allow them to discover how the language of the text works and the intended message. A framework for language-based approaches for teaching literature to ESL learners is also provided. The activities are categorised based on the four main skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and focus on areas such as general understanding, theme, setting, characterization, language, and point of view. The activities can be adapted by teachers according to the students' level of proficiency and other literary texts brought into the classroom.

Keywords: creative module, language-based approaches, literature, literary text

## Introduction

Literature has always been a subject of study in many countries, however the teaching of literature in Malaysia has not been given much importance since English is taught as a second language in Malaysian schools. Recently this area seems to have gained interest by many groups of people. This renewed interest in literature was reported in *The New Straits Times* (2011, p.4) where literature was said to add "human touch to focus on science, maths." This statement calls for the government to give literature a central position in the English syllabus. Parents and teachers feel that literary admiration and respect will make students value the importance of cultural awareness and societal wellbeing.

According to Ganakumaran and Subarna (2008), the Ministry of Education of Malaysia does acknowledge the importance of literature in Malaysian ELT. However, the students do not take a keen interest in literature because they are unable to understand it due to its structural complexity. Another legitimate reason for not having the interest in literature is that English is only a second language taught in Malaysia.

### **Problem Statement**

Literature is often viewed as a boring subject due to its structural difficulty and its exclusive use of language. The students' lack of interest in literature is perhaps due to the inappropriate teaching methods. Literature is also often said to be unpopular because the teachers are not exposed to or use various methods of teaching literature in a fun way. One of the major setbacks in learning literature is caused by the text itself that carries language and content that can be deemed to be beyond students' language ability. It is suggested that activities constructed from the literary text should be the type that promotes intellectual development, independent thinking and interest towards learning literature (Agee, 1998).

Given the change in the situation of the teaching of literature in Malaysia, it is vital to give some consideration to the learning and teaching approaches used in Malaysian classrooms. It is necessary to plan and create new approaches which take into consideration the limited English language proficiency level of the majority of Malaysian students, at the same time maintaining the goals and aspiration of the curriculum. It is crucial to have teaching materials to teach literature in a creative manner.

### **Purpose of the Creative Project**

The purpose of carrying out this project is mainly to identify the kind of activities that would motivate and facilitate students in learning literature. The end product is a complete module of literature activities that are creative, challenging and fun. Through these activities students can also develop their four language skills. The project is guided by the following questions:

- How can teachers use the four language skills to teach literature in a creative manner?
- How can language-based approaches be utilised to facilitate the teaching and learning of English Literature in Malaysian Schools?

## Literature Review

The need to have a creative approach in teaching literature is crucial in Malaysia. In today's classrooms, literature teaching can be made creative through the help of creative activities which have language-based and stylistic and discourse approaches (Ganakumaran, 2003). In addition, students' behaviour towards literature learning will determine their success in language learning. Attitudes towards literature, its text and the context of teaching may all play an integral part in determining the success or failure of learning literature (Candlin & Mercer, 2001).

Before we talk about any classroom methodology we should ask, "What is Literature?" The Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary defines literature as "writings that are valued as works of art especially fiction drama and poetry in contrast with technical books and newspapers, magazines" (Hornby & Crowther, 1995, p.687). There are many good reasons for using literature in the classroom. Among them are:

- Literature is a very rich source of genuine subject matter. It is good to expose the students to this authentic original language usage in the class because the language proficiency and skills they acquire can be used outside the class.
- Literature encourages communication. Literary texts are often used for critical discussion as they are rich in meaning.
- Literature also expands language awareness. Making students examine sophisticated or non-standard examples of language will also make them more aware of the rules of language use.
- Literature is appealing to many cultures and it is seen to be highly regarded in many communities. Students may feel proud of their achievements in understanding their readings and applying critical thinking skills.
- Povey (1967) states that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, a complex and exact syntax" (p.40).
- Literature also develops "a sharper awareness of the communicative resources of the language being learned" (Widdowson, 1975, p.80).
- Literature promotes learner-centred activities which are useful in their own right (Brumfit & Carter, 1986).

According to Nina and Violeta (2012) other benefits as given below can be achieved in teaching literature:

- pleasure

- instil good reading practice
- develop awareness and skills to analyse
- offer better results in a competitive setting
- provide original communication ideas
- balance receptive and also productive skills
- language exposure
- improve the vocabulary, syntax and structure of the English language
- ability to appreciate values

## Language-based Approaches

Many scholars who have done various studies in the context of language-based approaches (LBA) believe that the teaching of literature emphasizes the integration between language and literature in classroom teaching (McRae & Boardman, 1998; Carter & Long, 1991; McRae, 1991; Lazar, 1993). This approach is based on the principle that LBA can provide teaching literature with both literature and language, working in a symbiotic relationship.

Carter and Long (1991) argue that LBA is not a conventional method used in teaching literature in the classroom. By incorporating LBA into literature classes the text becomes an interesting piece of work to be analysed as the approach allows students to go one step further in analysing its content which includes manipulation, transformation, experimentation and dissection.

McRae (1991) illustrates below the features of LBA for teaching literature to ESL learners. This framework below serves as the basis in designing the activities.

Lexis	Choice of words in the text and their meaning potential
Syntax	Word order - the way words are organized
Cohesion	System of links throughout the text: temporal, verbal, pronominal
Phonology	Sounds of and within the text
Graphology	The form, the shape and the script in the text
Semantics	The study of the meaning and how the meaning is achieved through negotiation of textual and contextual elements
Dialect	Variation in language
Register	Degree of formality associated to who is speaking to whom
Period	When the text was written, for whom, tone, style used
Function	How the text affects the reader, how it works, the message and the author's intentions

The features of the above framework are used to analyse the literary text. This means that the teacher carries out the activity that directs the students' attention to these features separately or in combination so that the students may discover how language of the text is interrelated and the meaning that it tries to disclose.

The paramount aim of language-based approaches is to be learner-centred, activity-based and to advance with particular attention to the style of the language in use. The approach focuses on standard, widely used and widely known procedures for enhancing the development of language, competence and sensitivity. This approach leads to productive use of the language. One of the major grounds for bringing out such a useful practical framework for literature teaching in ESL is to expose teachers of language and literature in Malaysian schools to the principles involved in selecting, adapting and designing appropriate activities and exercises. The activities proposed here are of significant value to language and literature teachers who need more guidance and assistance in utilizing the available teaching strategies. Surely the teachers would be motivated towards developing their talent in the teaching of literature.

The language-based approach is used to incorporate literature and language skills. LBA framework is used to create these activities to provide meaningful interpretation and evaluation of the text. In the classroom, teachers guide students on the specific literature piece based on their proficiency level, lexical and discourse knowledge (Lazar, 1993). These creative activities will also allow teachers to adapt the activities in accordance to the text used in the classroom and also based on students' proficiency levels.

Basically, Malaysian texts are a collection of localized literature, which consist of familiar fables and poem. Brock (1990) maintains that localized literature is "literature that contains content, setting, cultural assumptions, situations, characters, language and historical reference that are familiar to the second language reader" (p.23). It is more appealing than a culturally foreign text as it relates to the reader's background knowledge and experiences. The language-based teaching strategies are student-centred and activity-oriented. These activities should help students with intensive and extensive reading, and understanding, as well as to enjoy the language and content of the literary text.

### **Teaching and Learning Activities**

The text used is a short story entitled *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant. This text can be made activity-based to focus on reading, writing, listening, speaking, and vocabulary and grammar. The activities focus on areas such as, general understanding, theme, setting, characterization, language, and point of view. The

activities suggested are for Malaysian students in general and can be adapted by teachers according to students' level of proficiency. These activities can also be adapted to suit other literary texts used by the teachers.

### ***Speaking Activities***

#### *Activity 1*

#### *The Book Talk*

Book talk should take place informally on a regular basis in the classroom. Teachers should introduce book talks with his or her own demonstrations from the different genres. The book talk may consist of:

1. Retelling of some of the main events in the story, being sure not to include the ending.
2. An account of the students' favourite part of the book
3. An account of the students' favourite character in the book, reasons for choosing that character.
4. How the book may have changed the students' thinking of life. Here students can talk about the connection between events, characters and ideas in the text and their own lives.

The rationale for this book talk is that it will give students the opportunity to analyze what the story is all about and the characters that are involved. It also enhances the students' speaking skill as it allows them to express and discuss personal reactions after reading the text.

#### Retelling of the story

##### First Part

.....  
.....

##### Second Part

.....  
.....

##### Third Part

.....  
.....

Write down your favourite part of the book.

.....  
.....  
Who is your favourite character in the book?  
.....  
.....

*Activity 2*  
*Identifying With*

In groups, students are given a list of pictures and are asked to select the pictures that are linked to *The Necklace*.

List of pictures of:

- Flower
- Car
- Bungalow
- Mirror
- Jewellerys
- Food
- Handphone
- Books
- Money
- Friends
- Gown
- Party
- Servants



The representative of each group will be called out to explain how the pictures are related to the story. Each group should choose different pictures when explaining how the picture is related to the story. This activity will help students develop their speaking skill and also make them understand how the pictures that they select are related to the story.

***Listening Activities***

*Activity 1*  
*Listen and Rearrange*

Below is a list of events that occurred in the story *The Necklace*. Put them in the correct order in the spaces provided after listening to the recorded summary.

- With great difficulty, they managed to borrow a large sum of money to buy a replacement for the lost necklace.
- The Loiseles received an invitation to an official reception.
- Mr. and Mrs. Loisel spent the next decade doing exhausting work to pay off the enormous debt.
- Mrs. Loisel happened to learn that the borrowed necklace was only imitation.
- Mrs. Loisel was very upset that she did not have a proper gown and jewellery to wear for the important occasion.
- When they reached home, Mrs. Loisel realized the necklace was lost.
- Mrs. Loisel borrowed a diamond necklace from a wealthy friend.

The rationale of this activity is to check the students' comprehension of the main details of the story and also to develop their listening skill.

### *Activity 2*

#### *Extreme Situation*

Students are divided into groups of 3. They are asked to listen to the "Extreme Situation" that is recorded. After listening to the situation, students from each group will be asked to share their answers with the rest of the class. This activity is related to the short story *The Necklace*. The situation given is likely the same event that occurs in the short story. The rationale for this activity is that the listening activity will require students to listen carefully to the situation given and then think critically to provide a good answer.

### **Reading Activities**

#### *Activity 1 Pre-Reading*

##### *Guessing with Six Words/Phrases*

Teacher pairs the students up by naming who is A and who is B.

Each pair will consist of A and B.

Teacher chooses 6 sentences/phrases that are related to the text, which will help students to guess the storyline.

Teacher asks A's to open their eyes and B's to close their eyes.

Teacher shows 3 sentences/phrases to all the A's and ask them to remember their words.

The same is repeated for B's.

Now each pair has seen six sentences/phrases in total.

Each person tells his/her sentences/phrases to his/her partner.



Pairs make up a story with those 6 sentences/phrases and tell the story to the class. Then, the text is read by everyone and is compared with their stories.

6 sentences/phrases

1. Mrs. Loisel is poor.
2. Borrow diamond necklace from friend
3. No jewellery for party
4. Necklace was imitation.
5. Necklace lost
6. Work hard to replace the necklace

The rationale for this activity is to challenge the students' memory power and make them think critically. This activity is fun and exciting because students have to close their eyes.

### *Activity 2*

#### *While Reading*

In groups of two, read the summary of the story below, and answer the questions given in task 1 and task 2.

Mathilde belonged to the middle class. Her clothes were shabby and her home was small. All this made her unhappy. She desired the finest things in life, like the material possessions of the upper class, luxury items and a splendid home with lots of servants.

One day her husband Mr. Loisel received an invitation to an official reception. Mrs. Loisel was very upset as she had no proper gown and jewellery for the important occasion. She then borrowed a diamond necklace from a wealthy friend named Madame Frostier.

She had a lot of fun in the ball, however when she reached home, Mrs. Loisel realized the necklace was lost. With great difficulty, she and her husband managed to borrow a large sum of money to buy a replacement. Mr. and Mrs. Loisel spent the next decade doing exhausting work to pay off the enormous debt. In the end, Mrs. Loisel happened to learn that the borrowed necklace was only imitation.

#### Task 1

Give another title for this story.

Why was Mrs. Loisel unhappy?

Whom was the necklace borrowed from?

What happened to the necklace?

### Task 2

Is the story meaningful to you in a personal way?

In what way has the character of Mrs. Loisel changed from the beginning to the end of the story? Explain why the changes took place.

What comments or generalization does this story make on the way “materialism influences human behaviour and attitude”? Give evidence from the story to support your answer.

Put yourself in Mrs. Loisel's shoes, will you do the same thing?

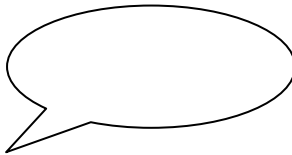
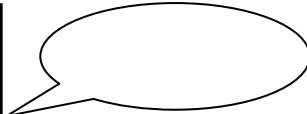
Task 1 has explicit questions whereas Task 2 requires more critical thinking. In Task 2 students have to give answers based on their own opinion and the answers may differ from one individual/group to another.

### Activity 3

#### Post Reading

#### Comics

Make a comic strip out of the extract given from the story. In your own words, write a dialogue between Mr. Loisel and Mrs. Loisel.



*Activity 4 Post-Reading*  
*Analysing Character*

Read the excerpt taken from the story and answer the questions about a character in the story.

He possessed eighteen thousand franc, which his father had left him. He would borrow the rest. He did borrow, asking a thousand franc from one, five hundred from another, five Louis here, three Louis there. He gave notes, took up ruinous obligations, dealt with usurers and all the race of lenders. He compromised all the rest of his life, risked signing a note without even knowing whether he could meet it; and frightened by the trouble yet to come, by the black misery that was about to fall on him, by the prospect of all the physical privation and moral tortures that he was to suffer, he went to get the new necklace, laying upon the jeweler's counter

- Who is the character?
- Describe the character's feelings.
- What situation is he in?
- What event leads to this present situation?

The rationale of this activity is to determine the students' understanding of the literary text.

***Writing Activities***

*Activity 1*  
*Unscramble Words*

Unscramble the words below that can be found in the story.

1. ECALKCENEHT
2. NSWOG
3. LSEWEJ
4. LIOESL
5. ALLB
6. REITFORES
7. DONDIAM
8. ANDCE
9. ACB
10. NITSA XOB

11. LAISPA LAYOR

12. OLTS

*Activity 2*

*Supposing that*

Let's say that you are poor and are invited to a party. You borrowed a diamond necklace from your rich friend, however when you arrived home at midnight after the party, you found that you had lost the diamond necklace. What will you do? Write down your options below.

*Activity 3*

*Making a Bookmark*

Making a bookmark is a strategy that encourages the students to write their responses on a small piece of paper as they read the story. Students can use bookmarks to write down difficulties that they have while reading the text and keep on reading knowing that they will have the opportunity to talk about them in class later. Students can also write their own responses on the bookmark regarding what they have understood. For example,

What is the moral of the story? i) ii) Theme ii) ii) Characters i) ii)
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This activity encourages students to express and discuss the values and key concepts that can be seen in the text. Students can also practise their writing skill as they write brief interpretations of the text.

*Activity4*

*Writing an Invitation*

Read the invitation below and give your comments in the three spaces provided.

*PLUS* is for the advantages of this invitation, *MINUS* is for the disadvantages and *INTERESTING* is for your own comments.

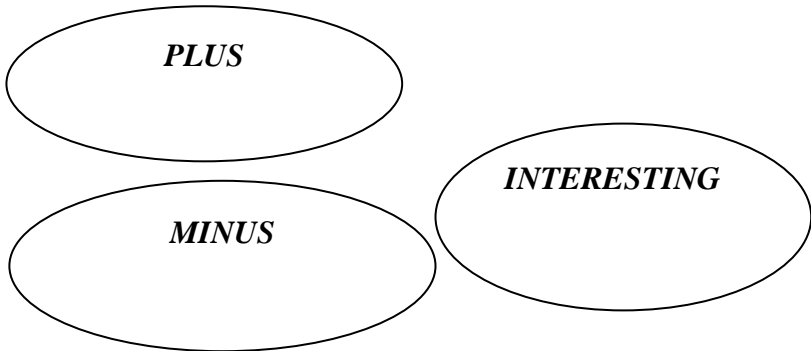
**All Government Servants must attend at least one party a month. The purpose for this is to foster closer ties among various ethnic groups in the government sector. You are welcome to bring along your spouse.**

**The dress code is: Batik for Men and Traditional attire for women.**

**As for the food you will be spoiled by the choices of the international buffet that will be served.**

**So don't miss the opportunity and at the same time have a great time amongst your friends together with your spouse.**

**Don't MISS OUT ON THE EVENT OF THE MONTH!!!!**



***Vocabulary/Grammar Activities***

***Activity 1***

In the extract from the story given below, fill in the blanks with 5 nouns in blue ink and 5 adjectives in green ink. Students can refer to the book to find the answers.

She looked at him with an irritated glance and said impatiently, “And what do you wish me to put on my back?”

He had not thought of that. He stammered. “Why, the gown you go to the theatre in. It looks very well to me.”

He stopped, distracted, seeing that his ..... was weeping. Two ..... tears ran

..... from the corners of her eyes towards the ..... of her .....  
“What’s the matter? What’s the matter?” he asked.  
By a ..... effort she conquered her grief and replied in a..... .., while she wiped away her tears, “Nothing: Only I have no ..... and, therefore, I can’t go to this ball. Give your card to some ..... whose wife is better equipped than I am.”

### *Activity 2*

Identify the Adjectives that can be found in the sentences given.

1. Her heart throbbed with an immoderate desire.
2. Mrs. Loisel looked old now.
3. She was one of those pretty and charming young girls.
4. One evening her husband came home with a triumphant air and holding a large envelope in his hand.
5. Mrs. Loisel had long frowsy hair.

## **Conclusion**

There are seven skill types that can be identified in the activities created. The first three skill types are literal level skills, which require identification of information directly from the text. The next four skill types, known as inferential level skills, require making generalization about relationships which is not explicit in the text.

### ***Literal level skills***

In this skill type the students are to find the basic stated information. For example, What happened to the necklace that was borrowed from Madame Frostier? In this level the key details such as what the husband brought home from work one evening also plays a very crucial role to make interconnection to the basic information posed as a question to the students in classroom.

### ***Inferential level skills***

In this level there are 4 types of language and stylistic analyses that can provide meaningful interpretations to the text.

### **Simple implied relationship**

Here, students have to think out of the text but retain the connection of the story line. For example, Mathilde did not like going to see her former friend because...?

### **Complex implied relationship**

Here, students need to pay more attention to the story line and refresh their memory about the sequence of the story and the characters' roles throughout the text. For example, In what way/s and why has the character of Mrs. Loisel changed from the beginning of the story till the end?

#### Author's generalization

Here, students need to explain the significant connotation and come up with meaningful interpretations that can be related to the reality. For example, What comments or generalization does this story make on the way "materialism" influences human behavior and attitudes? Give evidence from the story to support your answer.

#### Structural Generalization

Here, students are to explain how the main theme or genre of the text plays an important role in developing the story and how this short story can have significant effect on the reader directly or indirectly. For example, explain the ways in which the author uses the necklace in developing the story? Students might also be asked to write a short summary of what they have read and give a simple moral for the story. Some examples are: accept the blame for your own miscalculation, greed leads to loss and repentance, and learn to appreciate what you have.

In conclusion, it is important to create meaningful activities for students when teaching literature. To increase interest, students should be allowed to engage in the text in a creative way. Therefore, language-based approaches would be an appropriate choice in teaching literature. Based on the short story *The Necklace* the activities provided in this article, are aimed at promoting interactive engagement among students in order to understand the text at both the literal and inferential levels.

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