TEACHING APPROACHES EMPLOYED BY SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS WHEN TEACHING LITERATURE COMPONENT IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Reading literature is included as a component in the new English language curriculum for all secondary schools in Malaysia which aimed to engage students in reading literature for enjoyment and self-development. However, it is difficult to implement these during the teaching of literature component in the real English language classroom setting. Therefore, this study aims to identify the teaching approaches that English language teachers use when teaching literature in class and the reasons behind the selection of approaches used. Questionnaire was used in collecting the data from 149 secondary schools English teachers in Pontian and Johor Bahru districts. In this study, it was found that teacher-centered approach is used rather than student-centered approach when teaching literature component. The reason was mainly because the students did not have the competency in English, so it is difficult to approach literature through student-centered way as suggested in the English language curriculum.

Keywords: Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS) for English language syllabus; teaching approaches; literature component in English; teacher-centered approach; student-centered approach.

INTRODUCTION

The new Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS) for English language syllabus was designed to meet the recent language needs in the real world. It aims at extending students’ language proficiency level to ensure that they will be able to use the target language for their everyday life, knowledge acquisition and future workplace needs (Ministry of Education, 2000: 2) and one of it is the integration of literature in the syllabus.

The followings are the learning outcomes that teachers should accomplish when teaching literature component to their students (Ministry of Education, 2000):
3.1 *Listen to, read, view and respond to literary works by:*

a. understanding and retelling in one's own words the story, play, poem and song heard and read and the film viewed and giving one's opinion of the text;
b. recognising elements in a story such as characters, events;
c. explaining the message the writer is trying to convey and discussing how this relates to one's life;
d. understanding other peoples' cultures, traditions, customs and beliefs;
e. reciting poems with feeling and expression.

3.2 *Express themselves creatively and imaginatively by:*

a. dramatising texts and role-playing characters;
b. retelling a story from a different point of view and presenting it in another genre;
c. composing simple poems, stories and dialogues.

Even though the integration of literature in the ICSS English syllabus is deemed necessary for improving students' proficiency in English, some teachers take up the responsibility reluctantly. Students should be able to enjoy and appreciate literary texts (Ministry of Education, 2000) as stated in the syllabus, but teachers' teaching approaches may prevent students from achieving these. Teachers' knowledge and beliefs about their teaching and students' needs and abilities may influence the way the learning objectives are implemented in their teaching and classroom practice, which is arguably in contradiction with the stated ICSS aspirations (Habsah, 2006).

Furthermore, it seems natural to question on the competency that the students should have in order to comprehend the literary texts that they have to read. Linguistic difficulty often becomes the barrier in implementing literature to language teaching (O'Sullivan, 1991), and literary texts are often associated with complexity of content and meanings and the language used are usually of 'high style' with 'loftiness' and 'grandeur' in the arrangement, use of words, sentence structures, conversation, metaphor and so on (Miles, Bertonasco & Karns, 1991). Therefore, in some ESL and EFL countries where literature teaching is not compulsory, the teachers might have to think very hard when deciding to include literature into their language classroom. But in Malaysia, literature is included as important component to learn English language in secondary school.

The teaching of literature component in Malaysia is supposed to instil in students the enjoyment of reading literature and also the ability to express themselves in their own words regarding the literary texts that they have read. However, in reality, this may not be true with various restrictions that occur during the process of teaching. Therefore, this research is conducted to find out the teaching approach used when teaching the literature component and the reasons for employing such approach in literature lessons.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature is one of the vital components in a language classroom and is as important as other language components i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Various studies have proven that literature plays an important role in language teaching and learning (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Duff & Maley, 1990; Carter & Long, 1991; Chambers & Gregory, 2006).

In Malaysia, literature is integrated into the English language syllabus and is not a subject on its own. It is focusing on the study of literature with small ‘l’ and not the literature with big ‘L’ simply because no detailed analysis on figurative language is required since the focus is for students to understand the literary texts prescribed in the syllabus (Vethamani, 2004). It involves various literary texts from various genres (novel, short story and poem) and from various cultures (African, American, Malaysian, et cetera). The component is taught during English language classes to all forms in secondary schools and it is compulsory.

Literature can be taught with different approaches; teacher-centered approach or student-centered approach. However, in Malaysia, the teachers are required to teach literature component via student-centered approach as it is the only way to achieve the learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2000). However, it is difficult to see these goals being translated in the real English language classroom setting and this is evident from various research conducted to investigate this matter (Subramanian, Shahizah & Koo, 2003; Narasuman, 2006; Sidhu, 2003; Siti Norliana, 2008; Hyang & Mohamed Amin, 2007).

The teaching approaches used when teaching literature component may give different impact towards the teaching and learning process. Teachers who employ similar and conventional teaching practices such as chalk and talk, reading aloud, comprehension question, author biography and note taking while teaching literature makes the learning experience not encouraging and ineffective to the students and it somehow ‘underestimates the students’ capacity to read, think, and react to the text’ (Narasuman, 2006). However, when teachers employ different styles in teaching literature component such as class discussions, role playing and other fun activities, students will be having fun, gain opportunity to actively engage themselves with the texts, develop their critical and creative thinking skills, become motivated to learn literature in class and they could learn something out of those activities which actually reflect the aspirations and the demands of the literature component learning outcomes (Sidhu, 2003; Narasuman, 2006).

There are various reasons as to why this phenomenon is happening in Malaysian classroom. Public examination, for example, can directly affect teaching and learning of literature component in class. Since literature component is tested in the examination, teachers are more concerned in preparing students for exam. Therefore, sometimes the activities in class revolve around the examination format which leads to the ‘rejection’ of the initial objectives for integrating literature into a language classroom (Carter & Long, 1991). When the objective for teaching and learning of literature for
enjoyment changes its direction to examination, various considerations in teaching and learning literature will also change.

Sometimes, learners’ expectation can affect how a literature lesson is conducted. In China, for example, the learners are expecting that facts are informed to them instead of them being the one who participate actively in the learning process by analyzing and interpreting the literary texts (Short & Candlin, 1989). This event might occur as result of over dependent on teachers in gaining information and knowledge even when learning literature in class. This situation is not new especially in Asian context in which students are usually preferred to be spoon-fed by their teacher rather than searching for the information by exploring the text themselves.

Teacher’s traditional belief and practice may also give impact towards teaching and learning of literature component. Cain, De Cicco and Rossi (1993) mentioned that traditionally a conversation or interaction in class is not encouraged during literature lesson. Teachers will eventually provide students with ‘accumulating body of info’ from literary critics and ‘force’ students to absorb the information without thinking on the importance of having the experience on getting the meaning from the literature itself using a method called ‘healthy argument’. Students are exposed to similar sequence of activities regardless of their language proficiency. Lower proficiency students are usually taught via reading aloud, chain reading, teacher explanation and note taking in literature lessons (Siti Norliana, 2008). However, students may not like learning literature with dull and boring activities which merely consist of worksheets and workbook exercises, and they consider those as unchallenging, boring and simple, and a ‘nightmare’ (Sidhu, 2003; Siti Norliana, 2008).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants / Subjects of Study**

This study was conducted at secondary schools in Pontian and Johor Baharu districts in Johore. Cluster sampling procedure was used in selecting the sample to randomly selected groups and not the individuals who were participating (Singh, Chan & Sidhu, 2006). The researcher randomly selected twenty secondary schools from the list to accommodate for the purposes of this study, and 149 English teachers teaching Form One until Form Five in those chosen secondary schools participated in this study.

**Research Instrument**

A questionnaire was fully utilized in this study to collect necessary data on the approaches used when teaching literature component and the reasons for employing such approaches in class. English language was used in the questionnaire assuming that all the respondents were competent users of the language. The questionnaire was divided into three sections namely Section A (demographic or background information), Section B (the approaches used when teaching literature in class) and Section C (the reasons behind the
selection of teaching approach). Each item in Section B was labeled as b1 until b31, while items in Section C were labeled as c1 until c22.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The data collection procedure began after approval was given by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri Johor to distribute the questionnaire. In collecting the data, the researcher went to the selected schools. Permission was obtained from the school administrators before distributing the questionnaire to the potential respondents. The researcher also explained to the school administrators on the purposes of the study and on how the study was conducted in details. A total of 170 copies of questionnaire were distributed to all 20 selected secondary schools. The researcher managed to get back 149 copies of completed questionnaire, resulting to 87.65% of questionnaire return rate.

**Data Analysis**

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 15.0. Descriptive statistics analysis was conducted to describe the variables in this research in a more meaningful and logical way. The mean value and the standard deviation were analyzed to give a clear picture on the data that had been collected. Furthermore, inferential statistics analysis was also done to define the connection between the data collected. Besides that, responses for each item were presented using the descriptive statistic including percentage, frequency, mean, and standard deviation. Inferential analysis namely t-Test and One Way ANOVA were also used to analyze the data especially in determining whether the data were at $\alpha = 0.05$.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Demographic / Background Information**

The majority of the respondents were female English language teachers with 129 respondents, while 20 respondents were male teachers. Furthermore, majority of the respondents had 4 years or less of teaching experience (54 respondents), followed by 15 years or more of teaching experience (35 respondents), 5 to 9 years of teaching experience (31 respondents) and lastly 10 to 14 years of teaching experience (29 respondents). From the total of 149 respondents, 100 respondents had received formal training in literature teaching methodology and the remaining 49 respondents had never received any formal training in literature teaching methodology.

**Teaching Approaches Used when Teaching Literature Component in English**

From the findings, it is evident that English language teachers employ teacher-centered approach more than student-centered approach when teaching literature component. With the mean value of 2.85, teacher-centered approach
was used more often in literature classroom as compared to student-centered approach with mean value of only 2.65. This result is supported by the responses given in Item b1 as most of the respondents agreed that their literature lessons are teacher-centered (Agree = 42 respondents, Strongly Agree = 44 respondents), and in Item b17 where majority of the respondents responded negatively to the statement that their literature lessons is student-centered (Strongly Disagree = 21 respondents, Disagree = 66 respondents); indicating that their literature lessons are not learner-centered. Conventional teaching practices or teacher-centered activities are used when teaching literature while student-centered activities such as role playing are ignored by the respondents.

In learning literature, students learn best when they explore the ‘world’ represented in the literary texts independently. Students are expected to be given the opportunities to come up with their own interpretation of the texts that they are reading (Probst, 1987). Therefore, student-centered approach is deemed more beneficial for students to share their views and ideas with regards to the literary texts that they read, and be responsible towards their own learning by being independent and not be overly depending on their teachers especially when it comes to the process of interpreting the texts (Probst, 1987; Goforth, 1998).

However, from the findings, majority of the respondents mentioned that they provide students with interpretation of the texts (Agree = 109 respondents, Strongly Agree = 14 respondents), and they are the one who feed their students with the required information about the literary texts (Strongly Agree = 13 respondents, Agree = 76 respondents). The respondents also responded negatively to the statements that their students are the main contributors during the literature lesson (Disagree = 67 respondents, Strongly Disagree = 27 respondents), and they require their students to work independently during the literature lesson (Disagree = 70 respondents, Strongly Disagree = 10 respondents). These findings were supported by a study done by Hwang and Mohamed Amin (2007) who found that teacher is usually the main figure in class who disseminates knowledge to students, thus employing more teacher-centered activities such as lectures, explanation, reading notes and critique from workbook or by teacher, and neglect the use of student-centered activities even though that is what they should be doing in class as documented in the ICSS English syllabus.

Therefore, it is not surprising to know that majority of the respondents played a very dominant role in the literature classroom as knowledge transmitters who did most of the talking in class instead of making their students take control of the lessons (Item b3 and b7). They also taught literature by explaining to their students the messages that should be found in the texts that the students are studying (Agree = 98 respondents, Strongly Agree = 26 respondents). This way of teaching literature is rejected by Widdowson (1975) who argued that if teachers tend to tell their students on the messages that should be found in the literary works that they are studying, students are discouraged from observing and seeking out the messages themselves. The students would have the tendency to depend on other people interpretations of
the texts, thus disable them from learning how to develop their critical and creative thinking skills (Widdowson, 1975).

Furthermore, it is surprising to know that the respondents are using teacher-centered approach when they teach literature to low proficiency students (Agree = 90 respondents, Strongly Agree = 47 students), while using student-centered approach when they teach good students (Agree = 98 respondents, Strongly Agree = 33 respondents). From the findings, it can be deducted that the approach in teaching literature component is greatly affected by students’ language proficiency level. Teachers may find it easier to teach literature via student-centered approach with good students or students with higher language proficiency but not with the weaker one or students with low language proficiency. To lessen the burden, they resort to teach students with lower level of proficiency using teacher-centered approach. This is supported by a study done by Siti Norliana (2008) who found that teachers tend to use similar sequence of activities in class especially for students with lower language proficiency as they are usually taught by means of reading aloud, chain reading, teacher explanation and note taking in literature lesson. This somehow denied the right for low proficiency students to experience literature through fun way similar to higher proficiency students.

Reasons for Selection of Teaching Approaches Used when Teaching Literature Component in English

The findings of this study show a contradiction between what is required and what is practiced in real situation. Even though it is clearly stated that the teaching and learning of literature component should engage students for enjoyment of reading and appreciating literature through student-centered activities (Ministry of Education, 2000), teachers still have a high tendency of using teacher-centered approach in their literature lessons instead of student-centered approach. However, it is wrong to leave out the fact that there are reasons for them to actually apply teacher-centered approach instead of the student-centered approach in their literature teaching.

The findings indicate that majority of the teachers agreed that their students’ language proficiency will determine the way they conduct their literature lesson. This is supported by their responses in Item c1 (Agree = 91 respondents, Strongly Agree = 51 respondents) where majority of the teachers agreed that they use teacher-centered approach when they teach literature to low proficiency students and they use student-centered approach when they teach literature to high proficiency students. Perhaps, for the teachers, teaching good classes create more spaces for variation on the practices that they used while the poor classes do not provide many chances for them to vary their teaching techniques and activities.

It is also assumed that good students could easily be taught in various ways especially through student-centered approach but the weaker students are such a challenge for them. Their reason for this is probably because weak students do not have the language which leads to failure in understanding the text or even read the literature as indicated by Item c5 (Agree = 74 respondents,
Strongly Agree = 33 respondents). According to the teachers, practices such as classroom discussion, role play, presentation and group works worked well in good classes because the students have the language needed to respond and discuss about the literary texts. Furthermore, the good students are more prepared for the lesson compared to the poor one and they are also more willing to participate in any activities that are prepared for them.

Moreover, their aims also differ for each type of students. For good classes, the teachers might want their students to experience the differences between the ordinary language classrooms with literature classrooms as indicated in Item c8 (Agree = 123 respondents, Strongly Agree = 20 respondents). They might want their students to enjoy the lesson more, and they want the students to participate and to give opinions. Furthermore, they put a lot of expectations towards their good students to gain good result in the examination since they are not having any difficulties with language. But for poor students, the teachers felt that as long as their students are able to understand the story, it is sufficient enough to avoid students from being bored in class and also for them to at least enjoy the lesson.

Even though the curriculum goals clearly stated that the teaching and learning of literature component should engage students to enjoy reading and appreciating literature, the practices that the teachers used somehow did not reflect it. Carter and Long (1991) mentioned that in order to engage students, the practices used must encourage them to communicate and give their opinions on the piece of literature. However, in this situation, the teachers find it hard because of their students’ poor command of English. This result is supported by Saraceni (2003) who found that one of the reasons for students to not enjoying the literature lesson is because of their language which hinders them from understanding the text. Therefore, the respondents have to resort to other means or practices in order to make sure that the students enjoy the literature lessons more.

The second reason is the exam constraint that the teachers would have to face at the end of the day. Majority of the respondents agreed that they are more concerned with teaching literature to enable their students to answer well in their examination rather than to engage their students with fun activities in class as indicated in Item c19 (Agree = 86 respondents, Strongly Agree = 16 respondents). The results would become the determiner on whether they are teaching the students in a proper way. Therefore, they would have to teach with the aims of producing students with good examination results and often they had to ‘leave’ the aspirations behind for the sake of the examination. In their opinions, the result is more important at the end of the day compared to the aspirations. Even though the respondents use student-centered or teacher-centered practices when teaching literature in class, their main concern is still the examination which the students have to face.

The differences might be with the way in which the teachers teach and prepare their students for the examination for different level of students. For good class, the examination papers may be used as exercises or as enrichment, with the intention to expose them with the format of the examination of the
literature component. However, for the poor students, majority of the teachers would have to agree that they have to drill them with the format even from the very beginning of the year. The teachers would probably be analyzing the past years questions for literature and then might focused on the topics that would usually came out during the examination. This practice may not only confine to the examination students but also to the non-examination students.

CONCLUSION

This study is conducted to find out the teaching approaches that English language teachers usually employed when they teach literature component in class and also the reasons behind the selection of the teaching approaches. This study was conducted to English language teachers in 20 secondary schools available in Pontian and Johor Baharu districts. There were a total of 149 participants involved in this study and they were teachers who have been teaching English subject to Form One until Form Five students. Quantitative research design was used in this study and a questionnaire was utilized to collect the data.

The findings of this study show that the teachers used more teacher-centered approach when they teach literature component rather than student-centered approach. They were the dominant figure in class and students were not the main contributor in the class. The selection of teaching approaches was mainly determined by the kind of students; higher proficiency students or lower proficiency students. The reason for applying teacher-centered approach was mainly because the students did not have sufficient language ability, as it was difficult to employ student-centered activities such as role playing in class.

In conclusion, the teacher-centered approach is widely used by teachers when they teach their students. Student-centered approach is still not in favour for some of the teachers due to various reasons. One of the reasons is the students’ level of proficiency. Teaching good students require different kind of practices than the poor students. The reason is mainly because the poor students do not have the language, so it is quite hard to teach via student-centered approach. Even though the teachers know that the literature lesson should incorporate fun and explorative practices, but they find it hard due to the students’ proficiency level. Another reason is the examination which the students would have to face and the syllabus that they have to finish every year. The ideal way of teaching literature seems difficult to apply, thus they resort to teach according to what is easier for them to achieve and to conduct. However, they still try to instill the aspirations stated in the ICSS so that their students can experience the ‘fun’ aspects of learning literature and to at least let their students experience the difference between an ordinary language lessons with an actual literature lesson.
REFERENCES


