

From Literacy to Literature: Accommodating Mixed-ability ESL  
Groups in the English Literature Classroom in Malaysia

Gitu Chakravarthy, Sarjit Kaur and A.Pandian

## INTRODUCTION

The rationale for this paper arises out of the concerns and needs of English language teachers in Penang, Malaysia. In the course of teaching both undergraduate and postgraduate teachers of English in the English Studies Programme in the School of Humanities, University of Science Malaysia, a number of recurrent themes have been observed as areas of concern and as being problematic.

Between 1999 and 2002, in-service teachers were asked to list their most common fears/ problems/ worries when confronted with having to teach a literature component in English. They were also asked to find out informally from their colleagues in schools answers to the same question. There were a number of problems identified, but for the purposes of this paper, the three most recurring themes will be examined, and suggestions will be made for overcoming these.

## PROBLEMS

The first of these problems is the confusion that seems to exist with regard to the purpose of teaching literature in the classroom. It is claimed that this component

“would found the base for an appreciation of literature in English with its concerns with humanity, values, beliefs and customs as well as its great intellectual tradition and heights of imagination and creativity” (Senan Ibrahim, 2000, p.1).

Thus the operational phrase would have to be “appreciation of literature”. At the same time, Senan Ibrahim also suggests that

“it is hoped that the study of the literature would enhance the learning of the language in providing interesting language in context for students” (p.1).

Thus, as far as these in-service teachers were concerned, one problem was the need to accommodate language learning needs as well as learner needs in appreciating literature, especially in the context of English as a second language.

The second problem relates to the question of a methodology for the interpretation of literature per se. The teachers consistently raised the lack of ‘any one method’ that could solve their problems with regard to the interpretation of texts. In situations where university graduates’ and teachers’ proficiency in English cannot be taken for granted (Cruetz, 2002), the whole approach to literary interpretation and analysis was considered a major difficulty. The teachers found some of the texts encountered in one of their university courses (such as the poetry of Milton and Spencer) ‘nightmarish’. One can only sympathise with these student teachers, many of whom had entered the degree programme for a number of diverse reasons such as wanting to take a break from teaching, bettering themselves, accepting a scholarship with its attendant emplacement in specified programmes and accepting the first concrete offer of acceptance from a university. In many of these cases, the student teachers did not realise what the programme entailed, and the level of language competence required in order to successfully complete studies.



The third problem follows on from the difficulties experienced in interpreting the texts. Where the interpretation of texts in itself becomes difficult, the teachers experienced difficulties in discovering and developing a teaching methodology that was consistent, and could be used to teach varieties of texts to learners in secondary schools. Each text was seen to present 'a new puzzle' to be solved, often requiring a different approach for interpretation. As one of the more eloquent teachers put it,

"each text seems to work differently. In one, the main point may be the contrast presented in feelings between two characters. In another, it might involve issues like the mortality of both king and man, or the arrogance of a mighty king who is no more present, or even the way a sculptor has tricked a king by carving cruelty into his features as in *Ozymandias*. Each work has to be 'entered' differently. We cannot teach the text as if we were teaching reading comprehension".

While experienced teachers have come to realise that the 'one-fix-for-all-problems' solution does not exist, for less experienced teachers, a method that works is still the desired goal in a what may be perceived as a disorganised and problematic context such as the world of teaching and learning.

## APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

While there have been varieties of approaches to teaching literature (Birch, 1989), Carter and Long (1991) describe three models that are associated with specific pedagogic practices: the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model.

### The cultural model

The cultural model looks upon works of literature as representing examples of the *culture* of users of any specific language. Literature is seen as "encapsulating the accumulated wisdom, the best that has been thought and felt within a culture" (Carter and Long, 1991:2). Thus, literature study would provide learners with opportunities to understand and appreciate different cultures and ideologies from their own. Carter and Long (1991) suggest that literature is a kind of artistic, as well as cultural heritage of human societies, and therefore worthy of preservation and study. Such an approach assumes that teaching a language must necessarily involve learning the culture of the target language, and literature provides ideal opportunities for exploration of such cultural and linguistic worlds. Ways of behaving, world views and patterns of socialising are encapsulated by the culture of the society. From a teaching perspective, the approach here would be teacher directed, and aimed at transmitting information about the worlds presented in the texts.

### The language model

As the name suggests, in the language model (Carter and Long 1991:2) the emphasis is on *language*, rather than the literary element per se. The argument goes that since literature is



created from language, systematic exposure of learners to works of literature will develop literary competence. Literary texts provide examples of good, subtle and creative uses of the language. The assumption is that the learners will enrich and develop their language as a result of the exposure to such varieties of good language use. Followers of the language model exploit texts for the teaching of vocabulary or structures or language manipulation.

### **The personal growth model**

The third approach outlined by Carter and Long (1991) is the *personal* growth model. The model focuses on the use of literature as a resource for learners' personal engagement with the reading of literary texts. Carter and Long's (1991) preference for this model is seen in the perception that the model dichotomises "the knowledge of and the knowledge about literature" (p. 3-4). The learner-centred approach (Tudor, 1996), aims for the development of language competence and literary competence of the students through pleasure and personal fulfillment that arise out of the reading of literature. The model aims to infuse a continuous love for literature and appreciation of literary texts, which would continue into life, based on selecting appealing works to which learners can respond both linguistically and emotionally and thus be empowered (Benson and Voller, 1997).

## **PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE APPROACH**

In view of the problems raised earlier, this paper attempts to triangulate a number of issues connected with education, English language teaching and the teaching of literature in English simultaneously. These issues are a:

pedagogic principle,  
philosophic concept, and  
methodology.

### **The pedagogic principle:**

It is suggested that we need to make a distinction between English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Literature Teaching (ELT) out of necessity. The necessity arises out of differences in English language proficiencies and abilities among our pupils and students. ELT, as the term suggests, deals with a greater focus on language, and developing learners' linguistic abilities. ELT, on the other hand, is concerned with teaching literature (as it has been understood) traditionally, and is concerned with the understanding, interpretation and appreciation of texts. It would also be concerned with the development of love of literature and growing emotionally and psychologically through opportunities for responses to literature.

The distinction is called for due to the fact that while ELT deals with language development, ELT traditionally assumes a degree of language proficiency and competence in learners in approaching literature. This distinction does not necessarily imply that language and literature are different or employ different materials. It may be best to make the point that texts for language studies and literature studies can be seen to represent different examples of language content and use (Widdowson, 1975). Literature and literary language



represent special uses of language, with different aims. As exemplification at a simplistic level, the general transparency of meaning in prose, and prose fiction, can be contrasted with what can be called the opaque quality of poetry, often calling for a re-reading of the poem in order to unravel meaning.

In view of the above, from a pedagogic perspective, we need to distinguish between teaching aspects of language and teaching for literary appreciation. This distinction pre-supposes the need for teachers to decide what it is that they are trying to do in the lesson. The teacher will have to be clearly aware of whether the aim is improving English language skills or English language reading comprehension, or is the teacher encouraging interest in (literary) texts? The pedagogic principle puts the onus on the teacher to be professional enough to make clear assessment of the aims of the lesson, and structure the methodology of the lesson to achieve this.

### **The philosophic principle**

The philosophic concept underpinning this paper is (romantic as it may sound) that anybody can be taught or given some understanding of any subject or topic. What this implies is that any topic or subject can be modified or simplified enough so that it can be used to provide an adequate, albeit simple, understanding. The teacher therefore has to determine how much the child or learner needs to know. For example, how much does a pupil in a primary four class need to know about electricity, and how much does a student in Form six need to know? The suggestion here is that every learner has differing capacities and needs, and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to keep this perspective in mind.

If this concept is applied to language and literary texts, we can ask similar questions. How much does each learner need to know? Or more important, how much can the learner learn? How much experience of the text can we give each learner? Such an approach assumes teacher awareness of learner abilities, limitations, previous experience and motivation for learning in the specific language or literature classroom. Widdowson suggests that

“in most cases, the individual can only respond to literature as result of guidance. The conjunction Reader Meets Text very often simply produces bafflement: one cannot just expose children to literary writing and hope that they will be apprised of its essential message by some kind of miraculous revelation” (1975, p. 75).

It is the contention of this paper that success breeds success, while failure breeds failure, especially in second and foreign language contexts. Where the learner's abilities are already limited by less than satisfactory proficiency levels, not only at secondary school levels, but also at graduate levels (Cruez 2002), the teachers have the added responsibility of ensuring that learners develop an interest in learning the language and literature through successful engagement. One possible measure in this direction is proper text selection, ensuring that the literary texts are within the linguistically comprehensible abilities of learners.

More important, where language proficiency is insufficient for successful engagement with literature, it stands to reason that the best that the teacher can do if a particular text has to be taught to



such a relatively weak student is to raise language proficiency through the text. Simple and varied language learning exercises based on that specific text can sensitise the learner to literary nuances and provide scaffolding for later engagements with literature per se. In other words, the philosophic principle suggests that where the learner is not ready for literature, the learner can at least get some experience of literary language as a prelude to the study of literature later on.

### **The methodology:**

The main thrust of this paper is that, given the usual mixture of differing language abilities in both the language and literature classes, the methodology should seek to find a path between the three models noted by Carter and Long (1991). In this proposed approach, learners will benefit from a number of perspectives, presumably in varying levels of focus. The rationale for the approach is that where learners come with differing backgrounds, and motivations to learning and experiences of both the English language and literature, it is best to begin by taking note of the learners' make-up and abilities. At the same time, it becomes important that the nature of the texts and their difficulties are taken into account for teaching purposes.

The term 'contextualisation' (Chakravarthy, 2003), is used for the approach, and it refers to the following: the context of the teaching / learning process, teacher knowledge and abilities, the knowledge and ability levels of the learners, as well as the nature of the texts dealt with. When contextualisation is utilised in this way, it attempts to take stock of the pertinent details of that specific context of engagement of learner and text, moderated by the teacher. In other words, it attempts to take stock of who the learner is, what the learner knows (through learning and experience), and what language ability the learner has. Similarly, we ask what the teacher knows (especially about literature), what language competence the teacher has, and what the teacher knows of methodology to facilitate the engagement between text and learner. More importantly, contextualisation seeks to focus on aspects of the writer and writing of the text, the cultural and historical milieu of the work, and the literary aspects of the work for analysis and interpretation. From a textual literary perspective, apart from the usual form-meaning-writer's intention aspects, contextualisation refers to taking note of the time, place, tradition, culture and personal values of the writer of the work, as valuable elements in the process of literary engagement.

With regard to the teacher's strengths and weaknesses in the areas of knowledge of literature and teaching methodology, as well as language proficiency and competence, it is sufficient to say that the teacher has the responsibility of being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of his or her abilities, and the impact that these can have on the learner's experience of literature. As such, the teacher is obligated to keep improving in these areas. Having made this observation, this paper will move onto other areas of relevance.

'Contextualisation' (Chakravarthy, 2003), as an approach in this paper, assumes that the 'wh-questions', 'WHAT, WHERE, WHO, WHEN, WHY AND HOW' are crucial. The approach sees judicious use of these questions as being the basis of an approach that seeks to find a solution to the problem of mixed-ability students in literature



classes. In the case of the learners, the questions help to find out what the learners already know of language and literature, where the class is being conducted (rural, semi-urban or urban, with its attendant assumptions of language and literature awareness), who exactly the learners are in terms of culture, gender and ethnicity where relevant, why they are either interested or not interested in learning, at what age they are learning (when) and finally, how the teacher can best teach the learners.

It is suggested that a text can be analysed in number of ways such as:

- a) the work itself, the ideas expressed and the language (WHAT, WHY, HOW)
- b) the social and political context in which it was written and the intended audience (WHEN, WHAT, WHO)
- c) the tradition that the work derives from (WHAT, WHEN, WHO) and
- d) world-view or philosophy presented, directly or indirectly (WHO, WHY, HOW)

For purposes of analysis, contextualisation seeks to place the work in specific contexts through asking questions. For example, we could ask when the work was created. Was it created in the 1600s, 1800s, pre-World War One, or post September 11<sup>th</sup> 2004? The approach recognises that the various historical time periods will be relevant and valuable in the understanding of works. We could also ask where the work was created? Was it created in Ireland, Australia, Malaysia, or India? The geographical dimension adds new features, probable linguistic variations, settings and varieties of philosophies, cultures and manners to the works, all contributing to the value of the work as well as becoming important for interpretations. Is there a tradition to the type of the work? Is it an example of war poetry, ghazals, sonnets or satires? What are the more important socio-political and cultural conditions relevant to the work? Is the society a maternal one, is it democratic, materialistic, feudalistic, or intensely conservative and religious? These, and many other similar questions could and should be considered for textual analysis.

At the same time, it is the suggestion of this paper that we need to find out about the author of the work. What sort of a person is the writer? What are the author's personal values, beliefs and activism? These details become relevant since it would be possible to study the writers' social class, gender, religion and race as important ingredients in understanding texts. Edwin Thumboo (1976) suggested that

"a poet, whatever his inclination and individual gifts, writes within a given historical context, is inescapably a child of his times. This explains why, despite speaking with the language of man from the heart of his vision, conscious of the private role he projects for himself, he cannot avoid involvement with open, public issues" (p. xii).

Thumboo (1976) is thus suggesting that one is bound by a historical context. Thus, the writer is framed by the period lived in, and forced to refer to and connect with public issues of the time.

Thus, contextualising is a process of placing in context both the work and the present audience. In the case of the literature class, the



process of contextualising will look at the abilities and needs of the learners, and attempt to give them appropriate contextual experience of the literary works.

It is suggested that we can make a distinction between those who have and those who have not got good language proficiency and that teaching can be on a gradation. In order to do this, 2 objectives will include language enrichment and literary experience of the text. The following section attempts to provide illustration of the approach through the use of an established and famous poem.

#### A. CONTEXTUALISING *DOVER BEACH* (MATHEW ARNOLD).

##### Language Learning

Numerous books that deal with introducing literature to the non-native speakers exist, and should be consulted for guidelines. These include Lott's (1986) *A Course in English Language and Literature*, R. Carter and M. Long's (1987) *The Web of Words*, Gower's (1990) *Past into Present*, Hill's (1989) *Using Literature in Language Teaching* and *Making Headway Literature* (1992) by J. and L. Soars. At a simplistic level, the methodology can involve graded language work, which should allow for at least 30 % success by weak students, and some guided understanding. Some examples of language work can include:

##### 1. Yes/No questions

Is the poem about a beach... ?

Is the beach in Dover... ?

Is the poet a man / woman... ?

Is Dover a place / city... ?

Is Dover in the north of England...

##### 2. Is it or not questions (which expect complete sentence responses)

Is the poet a man or a woman?

Is the beach in Dover or not?

Is the poet talking to himself or someone?

##### 3. Filling in the blanks (straight copying or involving some grammatical knowledge)

The sea is \_\_\_\_\_ tonight.

On that night, the sea was \_\_\_\_\_.

4. As a teaching device, one very useful exercise is matching the lines of the poem with teacher or the more proficient-learner generated simplified prose sentences which approximate the meaning of the poem. Simplified lines can only approximate the poetic meaning, and can only be justified here because it becomes a helpful bridging device for less language proficient learners. Thus,

"Sophocles also felt sad" or Sophocles also heard / felt the same sadness surrounding mankind" would intimate some of the sense of Sophocles long ago  
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought  
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
 Of human misery;

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5. Projects can be assigned as individual or group-work. For example,

Where is Dover?

What sea meets Dover?

Who was Mathew Arnold? (He was the son of ...; He worked as ...; He was interested in...; He wrote...) and so on.

When did Arnold live?

Who was queen of England then?

Where is the Aegean Sea?

Who was Sophocles?

What was special about the period known as the Victorian era?

5. Vocabulary work

Discussing the meanings of unknown words

Grouping together words that suggest peace, harmony and so on.

Grouping together words that suggest harshness, violence and so on.

Is this line positive or negative? "Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!"

Beside every line, put a score from 1 (unhappy / tense) to 5 (happy / peaceful) to indicate moods.

Add the scores for each stanza. What do you think is the overall mood of each stanza?

Note that these above are teaching approaches in the sense they scaffold as compared to testing approaches, which attempt to find out what learners know (or don't). The activities guide learners to salient points, provide support, and are not, usually, open ended.

### Teaching literary aspects

The literary aspect can be addressed by the 'Wh' questions: who, what, when, where, how, why.

The question of 'who' can address who the poet is, or who the personae or characters are. Mathew Arnold is the poet. The teacher then has to decide whether the dramatic voice is that of the poet himself, or better presented as a narrator, ostensibly speaking to his



loved one. For pedagogic purposes, it is easier to assume that the narrator is male, especially given the ESL context.

We can then ask what the poem is about, in terms of the general topic or subject. Answers to this question can range from Dover Beach, to seas, to the state of the world, to the poet's love, to Arnold's philosophy. The teacher will presumably be open to accepting these and any other reasonable suggestions, especially at the beginning, with a view to further examination later.

When was it written? 1867. How is this significant? The Victorian era is known for its mini-Renaissance... discoveries, new philosophies, and new doubts about religion. Arnold was a product of this era. Power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was changing from the rural areas to cities and middle classes. There were rapid technological advances and industrialisation and urbanisation. New technology and methodologies made faith and religion less convincing and more questionable... e.g. Darwin, Bible analysis etc. Thus the certainty of faith through religion in particular became less tenable. In asking and answering these questions, we deal with aspects of the cultural model.

The question of 'where' can deal with where the poem is located, to where it was written (if significant as in war poems), and where people are in the poem. Here, it becomes important to note that the physical location of the characters in the room is significant. The narrator is at the window looking out to the English Channel, at night, and is able to see the coast of France (lines 3, 4). His lover is probably in the room, as he asks her to join him at the window (line 6).

In the structural development of the poem, location becomes crucial because Arnold links the persona across distance and time through reference to the Aegean Sea and Sophocles (5<sup>th</sup> century). He suggests even Sophocles saw it there. So the problem existed even then. At the same time, the persona gets linked to the famous Greek poet, dramatist and philosopher, thus gaining stature. At the same time, learners should be able to see the possibility of Arnold himself being the narrator, and hence the link between the two poets.

Later, in stanza three, the sea in front of the narrator, and the one Sophocles saw, move to connect with the sea of faith (which furled around the world at some historical point of time in the past) which provided strength and security to the world.

'How' deals with the way the poem is crafted, or works. This is a dramatic monologue, and therefore provides an avenue to study the tradition that it comes from, represents, or changes.

Furthermore, it is important to deal with how the poem has been structured. Stanza one works by taking the reader from the land to the sea, and specifically, the point where land meets sea (line 8). At the same time, we are shown the violent movement of the waves, which at the same time is able to

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

In the second stanza, the sea moves back in time and location to the 5<sup>th</sup> century Aegean, yet it presents the same note of human misery to



Thus, the poem takes us from land back to land in 4 stanzas

The poem works predominantly through the image of the sea, and a number of contrasts. The sea in sight becomes linked to the sea in the east, and the past, and the tragedian and philosopher of Greece, Sophocles. It again transforms into a sea of faith, which has disappeared, and left mankind bereft of solace and comfort. We are not told faith in what.

The first stanza takes us from land to the sea, and the point at which the sea meets land (beach) bringing in the eternal note of sadness which is also experienced by Sophocles by the Aegean in the past. The withdrawal of the sea of faith again brings in the melancholy roar, and we come back to land in the final stanza where 'ignorant armies clash by night'. Thus Arnold establishes the contrast between land and sea.

The other contrast represents the clash of the visual and the auditory. The visual comfort and beauty of the first 8 lines give way to the violent grating roar from line 9, and again in stanzas three and four.

The most important contrast is between that which is and that which seems and that which is, as in line 1 and line 30. This is the contrast between appearance and reality. This is clearly outlined in the last stanza, where the sea no longer is. This is where the persona and his lover are, on land, a place bereft of peace, security and religious solace.

The persona suggests that the only solution to this eternal human condition of misery is in faithfulness in individual relationships. 'Ah, love, let us be true to one another'.

Thus, we come to the question of why the poem was written. Without going into psychological aspects, we can conclude that Arnold calls for faith in relationships, a return to faith in religion, and that the poem represents a meditation on the problems of mankind and one suggested solution.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide a way of bridging the gap that exists between more and less proficient second language learners in Malaysian schoolchildren who have to cope with learning English literature.

By examining Carter and Long's (1991) models in the teaching of literature, this paper has seen it fit to mediate between the separateness of each of their models. Instead, the paper suggests a methodology that finds middle ground, in order to accommodate differences in learners arising out of differing language and literary experience and abilities. Such accommodation, it is suggested, provides ways of scaffolding learners' growth from language learning to engaging with literature.



The term contextualisation has been proposed for the approach, which uses the 'wh' questions (what, when, where, who, why and how) as the tools for assessing language and literature learners' needs, as well as providing a standard guide in literature instruction methodology. Furthermore, in order to clarify how the methodology can be utilised, this paper has attempted to contextualise Arnold's *Dover Beach*. In doing so, the paper has attempted to provide selective examples of activities and issues for teacher deliberation and initial teaching devices. The approach has not been, nor can it be exhaustive. It is expected and hoped that the approach will be internalised initially by teachers facing the kinds of problems highlighted in the introduction to this paper. With experience, it is hoped that teachers will build on this process and add to their teaching repertoire.

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