TEACHING INDONESIAN LITERATURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A LOST ART

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Abstract

The lack of students’ interest in reading literature, including Indonesian literature written in English, poses greater implications as literature is a gate to understanding culture. When students learn about Indonesia’s social, historical, and linguistic settings in literary texts, they innately learn details of Indonesian culture; they do not merely learn English as a foreign or international language. This paper focuses on presenting the issues and challenges in teaching Indonesian literature in TEFL classroom, especially in higher education setting, and highlights its methodology as well as cultural significance. Also, it suggests that Indonesian literature can be introduced and taught via different teaching and learning methods, and the experience of learning itself brings new perspective as well as knowledge on a culture to the students. Furthermore, the paper offers some practical ideas on how to promote Indonesian literature teaching and learning at university level.

Introduction

Reading has always been on the weaker side of the four skills for Indonesian students. Besides reading for pleasure still needs to be encouraged, the habit of reading in general has not been embraced as a culture. Although earlier studies suggest that reading for pleasure is essential for both educational purposes and personal development, fostering the culture of reading in higher education, particularly, is not an easy task, as most universities in Indonesia strongly emphasize on grammar and examination-oriented language focus. Additional challenges occur when the learners are asked to read literature, a type of writing they are not accustomed to. Also, the presence of a shared belief that literature is incomprehensible and inaccessible for foreign or second language learners adds to the complexity and can be detrimental to the process of language learning (Or, 1995). It is, indeed, quite difficult for teachers to teach the features of literary discourse and stimulate the interest of learners who may not acquire the basic mechanics of English language.

Literature Review

The teaching of literature to non-native learners is largely related to the nature of literature and the skills of the language learners. While reading literature offers exposure to the best uses of English, there have been concerns that the creative use of language in poetry and prose frequently deviates from the conventions applied in non-literary discourse; and hence hinders the acquisition of language skills. The situation leads to a general decline in using literature as a component in EFL classroom, particularly in higher education, as most universities in Indonesia focus in EAP courses with a great emphasis in grammar and typical English structures.
Nonetheless, rather than perceiving literature as separate from non-literary discourse, Carter and Nash (Carter R. &., 1990) suggest that variety of text types should be placed along a continuum with some being more literary than others. They believe that the separation of literature from language is a false dualism since literature is language and language can indeed be literary.

With regard to the cultural load of literature, Chastain (Chastain, 1988) describes the teaching of culture as an integral, organized component of the course content of a language program due to the disentangled interconnection between language and culture and the significance of intercultural differences. Thus, literature is the best ground to genuinely explore the target culture (Gajdusek, 1988).

Furthermore, learning language through literary discourse is a means of experiential learning that allows learners to receive inputs, contextualize context and integrate skills. It also provides real purposes and opportunities for the learners to interact with others and obtain feedback on their language learning process (Eyring, 1991).

**Discussion**

**Issues and challenges**

Integrating literature into the EFL syllabus is difficult, albeit valuable, to implement. First and foremost is to find the sources as there are not many Indonesian literary texts published in English. If they are available, most of them are not available for free and most likely are limited or outdated. Another challenge is to select the approach that can best serve the needs of EFL learners and at the same time provide adequate stimulus for the learners.

Here, the activities used to incorporate literature in the course are built around Carter and Long’s (Carter R. a., 1991) main approaches to the teaching of literature, i.e. the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model. These three models are closely linked to each other, and on most occasions are overlapping, as a result of the actual selection of class activities.

The cultural model, which represents the traditional approach to teaching literature, requires the learners to explore and interpret the historical, social, political and literary context of a specific text. Prose and poems reflect the culture of their authors, thus, allows for opportunities to present cultural information and cross-cultural comparison. Nevertheless, this model can easily turn the activities into teacher-centred activities with little opportunity for extended language work.

The language model is the most common approach to literature in EFL classrooms. It enables learners to use literature as a tool to learn particular linguistic features. It allows the use of typical strategies applied in language teaching: cloze procedure, jumbled sentences, prediction exercises, summary writing, creative writing and role play. However, this approach is considered to reduce the actual sense of literature and is disconnected from the literary goals of the text as it merely serves the purpose of specific linguistic goals. The third model, the personal growth model, bridges the cultural model and the language model by focusing on the specific use of language in a text, while placing it in a unique
cultural context. In this model, learners are encouraged to build engagement with the text, express their views and feelings, and make connections between their own cultural experience and those stated in the text. In addition, it helps learners develop knowledge of ideas and language via different settings, themes and topics.

**Integrated approach to teaching literature**

A combined integrated approach makes literature accessible to learners and highly beneficial for the learners’ linguistic development while inducing personal pleasure and active involvement in reading the texts. It explores texts from the perspective of style and the relationship to content and form. The approach is geared towards student-centered activities through personal response and involvement.

Exploring and interpreting the historical, social and cultural aspects of a text, for example, can be done through a group or pair discussion and followed by a group presentation. Involving the whole class in the activity encourage active participation and direct involvement.

Classic novels such as *Sitti Nurbaya, Never the Twain*, and *Shackles*, can easily be used to introduce cultural aspects and historical background to the learners. It can also be utilized to overcome negative attitudes and prejudice, if any, toward the target culture. If it is considered essential to highlight specific linguistic features, more language-based activities can be applied using different methods, including vocabulary analysis, jigsaw reading, group discussion, role play and the use of realia. Furthermore, literature can be applied to build context and promote critical thinking in academic writing activities, including cause and effect essays, comparison and contrast essays, and argumentative essays.

While more modern literature like *Supernova* and *The Dancer* can also be selected for the above activities, the fact that the authors of both novels are still productive provides an opportunity for the learners to link their personal classroom experience with the authors’ real experience. Inviting novelists or poets to class is an alternate activity to facilitate authentic communication and active involvement. It also provides opportunities for broader student-centered activities and more diverse collaborative group work.

Establishing a literature club or a book club is another option that can be explored. This club focuses heavily on student contribution and active involvement. Students are engaged in various literature-based activities, including projects and presentations that may require external participation.

**Conclusion**

The benefits of using literature in the EFL classroom especially in higher education overpower the hesitation and scepticism. Apart from offering an opportunity to widen learners’ understanding of their own and other cultures, it has the potential to combine the four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening – and reinforce learners’ knowledge of lexical and grammatical structure. Moreover, an integrated approach to the use of literature offers learners the opportunity to develop their communicative skills and
strategies to analyze and interpret language in context. However, the most appropriate combination of approaches, design activities and tasks must be carefully selected so that literary texts can serve as a powerful pedagogic tool to enhance language learning and teaching.

References


