

Lessons *of* Literature and the Lessons *in* Literature

J. Leo

Associate Lecturer
Ngee Ann Polytechnic
Singapore

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify the reasons for the declining number of literature students in Singapore schools. Mirroring *The Straights Times* report which highlights that fewer students choose literature, this article questions the methodology of teaching literature in schools. Adapting language-teaching methodology to teach literature happens to be the major cause for this downfall. This article also attempts to show the reality of how English literature is taught in Singapore schools and why it is irrelevant to students today. Distinguishing the English language teaching from the English literature teaching, this article recommends some techniques as a corrective measure for holistic teaching of literature in schools.

Key Words

English language teaching, English literature teaching, techniques, corrective measures, appreciation of literature, etc.

Introduction

The method of teaching literature in Singapore secondary schools has changed dramatically over the years, from engaging the students with dramatic aspects of plays and dramas to making them learn the language through literary works. The treatment of literature has also differed from school to school. Some, like the secondary schools, have treated literature much like General English, while others, like the universities and Junior colleges, have allowed critical analysis of literature to have great joy and learning experience. This article will illustrate the present scenario of literature and explore their changing trends through time. While drawing parallel to English language and English literature teaching, it also proposes many different methods to teach literature to the young minds.

Literature that flourished in Shakespeare's England centuries ago might still enjoy its glory at least in some commonwealth countries today, but not in Singapore, a tiny city-state that finds its place in the list of countries that offer the best education in the world.

An article entitled "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" in *The Straights Times* on August 24th 2015 detailed the pathetic state of English literature in Singapore schools.

First of all, one would argue how the subject English literature is taught in Singapore schools. Secondly, there is a question behind the reason why English literature is irrelevant to many students on this tiny island of five million people. One would wonder if there could be any ways to overcome this issue at all.

Today, the primary school English curriculum is fundamentally grammar based, and it prepares pupils to do well in their Second language exams, which is not an unacceptable practice. The focus is very much on LRSW - Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing skills, the usual norms and conventions in General English classes. But, what is really lacking here is creativity and innovation.

Because of the absence of a substantial focus on the appreciation of literature in the current English curriculum, the students are handicapped with the lack of appreciation of art, which results in a diminished view of the world and everyday life.

Shakespeare, as you know well, wrote his plays to be performed on stage so that the common people of that age would enjoy the theatre. No one, even Shakespeare himself, would have dreamt that his plays would be taught in classrooms as they are today in Singaporean schools. So, my concern is whether the teachers of English language or English literature at secondary schools treat his masterpieces, like *The Merchant of Venice*, as mere English textbooks rather than plays meant for theatrical performance.

On the other hand, I am sure that in universities, the works of Shakespeare are well accepted and understood, as the learners are matured enough and that the lecturers rather 'critically analyze' them in class, than just 'teach' them. Therefore, the cause of less interest among secondary schools students could be the way in which literary works are handled in a classroom environment at secondary school level (Ng 2013).

The question to ask here is, 'should we teach English literature in the same way as we teach the English language – looking for vocabulary and grammar? Why does the student in the article groan by saying, "I had to translate each page into modern English?"' (Lee 2015). I wonder if that was what the student was expected to do with the play! Is paraphrasing the text into modern English the objective of teaching Shakespeare in class?

The Merchant of Venice, being a comedy, should have interested this student and made her enjoy the comic elements more. Why hasn't the romantic or comic or tragic aspect of the play amused her? Why has Antonio's willingness to sacrifice his life for Bassanio or the witty Portia's encounter with Bassanio, or the cruel Shylock's demand of a pound of Antonio's flesh – and the disguised Balthasar's defense have all been eaten up by language or exam - oriented pedagogy?

The best possible way to overcome this hitch is to 'teach the teachers at this level to deal with it with literary flavour.' For example, periodical symposiums for literature teachers from commonwealth countries or more forums that facilitate

literary activities are a few of many possible ways that might help rescue these teachers.

The other plausible but long-term solution is to start inculcating the love for literature much earlier than – as early as the primary school level, when the pupils should be provided with short stories, dramas, and numerous creative activities of simple literature as part of their English lessons. Will they not enable pupils to think out of the box—on their own? Will they not help young ones fall in love with English literature—not merely for an exam, but for life? (Leow 2016).

Instead, right from the primary school, we focus on vocabulary, we drill on synthesizing, emphasize synonyms and antonyms, reading comprehension, essay writing, etc. – all of which will lead only to students doing well on their language exams. And that is precisely what both students and teachers aim for. Work sheet after work sheet is given to students right from Primary 1 to Primary 6 and beyond only to make them skilled in the language (Shipley 2015).

Such practice, undoubtedly, helps them pass the English language tests/exams, which is not all that bad, but it is so obvious that the purpose behind teaching English literature is lost to the overemphasis on English language, structure, grammar and vocabulary. If the same lesson, on the other hand, makes use of literature and exposes the grandeur of the English language (through literature), it will have a much better impact. Perhaps literature lessons should be the most enjoyable lessons, above all other lessons.

Once we introduce the young ones with this whole new world of literature, the children will start enjoying it. Besides, they will learn to appreciate nature—trees, animals, humans and all that coexists as part of their living experience. Have we not started our own lives with our grandmas’ faery tales and folklore? Will children ever forget the faeries and comic elements that are part and parcel of literary works? Will they not love them, instead of hating literature, even after they grow up? This love of theirs, I vouch, will surely be transformed into happiness, self-satisfaction and continue throughout their life.

Once children learn to appreciate things, they will learn to love them. Once they are tuned to do things they love, no one will feel stressed about whatever unfortunate events that may happen to them in their lifetime. Instead, they will only learn to accept them. Therefore, there should be utmost emphasis on literature at an early age! English, to them, must not mean just the English language or grammar, but English literature—so is it with the Tamil language, the Chinese language or the Malay language in Singapore or any other language in the world.

Through such works of art, the teachers can teach vocabulary, grammar, LRSW skills and much more. To quote Shakespeare, “Brevity is the soul of wit,” numerous political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln (“Gettysburg address”), Martin Luther King Jr (“I have a dream”), and Barrack Obama (“Change we need”) have made their speeches brief and they did serve their purpose – a simple

advice they adopted from Shakespeare. Many others like this mastermind, numerous dramatists, playwrights, novelists, poets, and other literary artists have been teaching the world from time to time through enchanting literary works.

The transformation that we are aiming at in Singapore may take a few years, but surely, they will yield better fruits in time to come. Our teachers may not be ready yet for such a literature-oriented teaching. They themselves would have been taught in the same grammar-focused way when they were young, as how they are teaching now, as professionals.

So, if we put more emphasis on simplified literature, (English Literature, Tamil Literature, Malay and Chinese Literatures) at primary level, students in the future will be both creative and innovative for sure. “But Singapore continues to lag behind its peers in innovation. Progress there will require schools that develop initiative and teamwork” (Bloomberg August 6, 2015).

Furthermore, the government should take steps to make literature relevant even after the pupils leave their schools by helping them access art programmes such as the plays and operas, which, at the moment, are available only to the elite. Any plays or art works or literary shows are unaffordable for a common man to watch.

So, on one hand, due to its alienation, the public has no clue about what literature is, or its use in society. On the other hand, one wonders why one should invest his or her time and money when they know well that they will only be dancing to the tunes of the elite minority.

Therefore, our society should be able to access shows of literary value, like plays, and the public should be able to afford them. In other words, everyone should be invited to taste literature in some way or another so that the public understands the value of it.

No stalwart in literature can define what literature is nor will they be able to give a clear definition for it. Perhaps that indeed is the nature of literature - it cannot be defined like mathematics or science, but it can be felt, cherished, enjoyed and carried along throughout life if it is fed rightly at the right time. If the Ministry of Education takes these suggestions seriously, not only will the future students alone enjoy literature, but also the whole of Singapore will be creative, innovative, imaginative, and the people will live happily ever after, as they say (Ng 2013).

Conclusion

Firstly, the method of teaching the subject of English literature in Singapore schools must change. Secondly, the students should find English literature relevant as the focus shifts from language to literature in class. The other solutions include inculcating love for literature at a young age by providing pupils with simple literature as part of their English lessons. Such practice not only helps them improve the English language, but also enables to be both creative and innovative. The government too has a role to play by making arts affordable to common man so that he understands the need and the value of literature.

References

1. Lee, P. (2015, August 24). Fewer Lit students a worrying trend. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from straitstimes.com, www.straitstimes.com
2. Ng, J. (2013, March 4). If only Singaporeans Stopped to Think. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from ifonlaysiaingaporeans.blogspot.sg, www.ifonlaysiaingaporeans.blogspot.sg
3. Leow, D. (2016, July 2). Turning Literature into a best-selling subject. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from Channel News Asia, www.channelnewsasia.com
4. Shipley, D. (2015, August 6). Singapore at 50 Needs to Relax a Little. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from bloombergview.com, www.bloombergview.com