An Investigation of the Student Teachers' Attitudes Towards Studying Literature as a Major Component of the EFL / ESL Programme

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Introduction

The role of literature seems to be problematic in the present context in the Sultanate of Oman, where the current language teaching practices aim primarily to impart functional communicative skills in English to students to meet their academic and occupational needs. In this context, "any attention to literature is viewed as irrelevant, or at best a luxury, failing to contribute to the more instrumental, purpose-specific needs of the learners." Ramani (1990). It is in this context that the study reported here was undertaken.

Review of Literature

The general arguments generally put up against using literature in an ESL/EFL curriculum have been summarised by Ramani (1990). Most students may, however, enjoy 'poetry' through songs but many of them resent and fear poems as irrelevant, boring, and difficult as a result of having to 'study' poetry as an academic subject, which involves background reading and close textual analysis. (Tomlinson 1986, p. 41)

Ramani (1992) distinguishes two primary purposes for using literature:

   a) The *study* of literature *as literature*, and
   b) The *use* of literature *as a resource* for language learning.

According to him, much of the confusion in the selection of literary texts in an ESL/EFL curriculum arises from a failure to keep these two purposes distinct.

If our purpose is the former, we should focus on enabling students to experience literature **as** literature and to account for the experience. This, however, presupposes a near-native competence in the language and familiarity with the relevant literary conventions. If the purpose, on the other hand, is the latter, our primary concern should be to ensure students' interactive engagement with literary texts as with any other authentic text, and with one another, in ways that would promote language deployment and further language learning. (Ramani 1992)

A conflation of these two purposes in an ESL/EFL curriculum will result in students merely receiving items of knowledge *about* literary texts and reproducing them in the examinations. Students may also feel daunted and threatened by the texts.

Krashen (1985) advocates the use of one extended text, such as a novel or a short story to help students develop familiarity with a particular literary style and later unconsciously promote their literary development and reading abilities. Lin (2004) also shows that through reading stories, students not only get involved when they are reading, but also link their personal experiences to the content, which has a positive impact on their reading development.

Writing about the use of literature with EFL students, Langer (1997, p. 607) states that, because it taps what they know and who they are, literature provides a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy skills. According to Langer, literature allows students to reflect on their lives, their own learning, and the target language. Literature can open "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore." According to Fitzgerald (1993), literature can be the vehicle to improve students' overall language skills. It can expose students to a wide variety of styles and genres. It is in literature that "the resources of the language are most fully and skillfully used." (Sage 1987, p. 6) Indeed, language and literature cannot be separated. Teaching language through literature will only assist students' acquisition of the four language skills.

Erkaya (2005) states that by integrating literature in the curricula, students can learn the four language skills integratively and more effectively because of the literary, cultural, higher-order thinking, and motivational benefits. To achieve these benefits, EFL instructors should design the collaborative content-based literature class carefully to meet the needs of their students.

There is extensive literature on the nature of reading and ways of developing reading skills to improve one's reading efficiency. More specifically, the interactive-compensatory model of reading (Stanovich 1980) provides useful insights for teachers of language for using literature. The model is "compensatory" in the sense "that a deficit in any knowledge source results in a heavier reliance on other knowledge

sources." (Stanovich 1980, p. 63) In other words, if a reader's linguistic knowledge is weak at any one point, such as in the case of an ESL/EFL reader, he will compensate by drawing on background knowledge, and vice versa. The model assumes that top-down and bottom-up processes are equally important. That is, what the reader brings to the text is just as important as what he finds there. The pedagogical implications relevant to the present study will be discussed later in this paper.

Aim and Scope of Study

Most of the literature on the use of literary texts in teaching English as a second or foreign language relates to teachers' attitudes, choice of suitable literary texts, methods of teaching literature, and assessment of students' literary competence or critical-analytical skills. Very few researchers (e.g., Hirvela and Boyle, 1988) have focussed their work on students' perceptions on the relevance, usefulness, and difficulties of studying literature in ESL / EFL courses. This paper describes an investigation of, and survey into, how students feel about studying English literature.

Research Method

Survey

The students involved in the survey were 210 EFL students of education who were training themselves to become teachers.

Instruments

To understand better how the students studying in this environment felt about studying the literary texts on their syllabuses, a simple questionnaire designed by Hirvela and Boyle (1988) was used and the students' responses were analysed.

The survey focused on two key areas:

A. Which literary genres were most favoured or feared by the students?

B. Which aspects of literature gave students most trouble?

To investigate these two key areas, three questions were asked:

1. Which of these genres – Poetry, Novel, Short Stories, Drama, Prose Essays – do you find most useful in improving your English?

2. Which of these genres do you find most enjoyable?

3. Which of these genres do you find most difficult or intimidating?

For each question and for each genre, the student teachers were asked to give their response on a five-point scale, as shown below:

1: Not useful, **Not enjoyable**, **Not difficult**

5: Most useful, **Most enjoyable**, **Most difficult**

The other values, 2, 3 and 4 represent their stand between these two extreme positions.

Findings & Discussion

The results of the survey are summarised below:

Table 1: Genres Most Useful for Improving Student Teachers' English

Genre	**1 (%) Not useful**	**2 (%)**	**3 (%)**	**4 (%)**	**5 (%) Most useful**
Poetry	40	35	15	5	5
Novel	5	25	25	40	5
Short Stories	5	0	10	25	60
Drama	30	10	40	20	0
Prose Essays	10	20	10	20	40

From Table 1 it is clear that short stories were found to be most useful or very useful (85%), while poetry was thought to be the least useful or not at all useful.

Table 2: Genres Most Enjoyable for Student Teachers

Genre	1 (%) Not enjoyable	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%) Most enjoyable
Poetry	20	15	10	30	25
Novel	15	25	40	10	10
Short Stories	0	5	10	20	65
Drama	20	25	25	15	15
Prose Essays	55	15	25	5	0

Table 2 shows that short stories were again found to be most enjoyable or very enjoyable (85%), followed by poetry (55%), whereas prose essays were felt to be least enjoyable.

Table 3: Genres Most Difficult or Intimidating for Student Teachers

Genre	1 (%) Not difficult	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%) Most difficult
Poetry	20	15	0	10	55
Novel	0	30	25	25	20
Short Stories	75	10	5	0	10
Drama	0	25	35	20	20
Prose Essays	15	15	20	20	30

Understandably, poetry was found to be most or very difficult or intimidating (65%), followed by the prose essays (50%), while short stories were least difficult or intimidating (10%).

It may be noted that a majority of students surveyed found poetry most difficult and least useful, but quite enjoyable, whereas they found short stories most useful and enjoyable, and least difficult or intimidating.   This perception perhaps exemplifies the general arguments against using literature in an ESL/EFL curriculum summarised by Ramani (1990) reported earlier.

Implications for using literature in an ESL/EFL context

The findings of the study reported here have significant implications for using literature in an ESL/EFL context. Students may generally feel daunted and threatened by literary texts.   Literary texts can, however, be used provided they are "justified by reference to the students and their purposes insofar as these are reflected in the syllabus." (Brumfit 1982, p. 79)   The fact that many students find poetry very difficult does not necessarily mean that we should banish poetry from the syllabus. On the other hand, it means that, if poems are selected carefully and used intelligently, the barriers can be broken down and the learners can be involved in thinking, feeling, and interacting in many ways which are conducive to language acquisition (Tomlinson 1986, p. 41).   Krashen and Terrell (1998) suggest that EFL teachers must choose reading texts at an appropriate level of complexity and the topic has to hold students' interest to increase their motivation for learning.

There have been many attempts at making literature a worthwhile experience for students learning English as a second or foreign language (e.g., Brumfit 1985; Rodger 1983; Gower & Pearson 1986). They offer us ways of integrating language and literary skills.   By selecting literary texts carefully, we can develop in students the basic interpretative strategy of coping with meaning.   The interaction that literary texts can generate will also promote students' implicit awareness of the formal elements of English; that is, metalingual communication can become a part of the interactions among students in the classroom.   Besides, by means of their rich conceptual and experiential basis, literary texts will widen students' knowledge of the

world, which needs to be enriched and activated for efficient processing of texts in general.

Based on the survey, some suggestions are given here for effective use of literary texts in an ESL/EFL programme. In particular, the following suggestions would prove helpful to teachers and beneficial to students when literary texts are used in a second or foreign language classroom.

1. Students' existing background knowledge ("content schemata") should be activated. This may be done by relating the content of the text to the students' own cultural experiences through a pre-reading task in which students reflect on and discuss what they already know about the theme that is of importance in the text to be studied. This encourages them to relate what they read to what is already familiar and known to them.

2. Prediction should be encouraged. Predicting (i. e., allowing students to formulate hypotheses about the text before reading commences) is a further way of encouraging students to utilize the background information they possess and arousing their interest in the development of the story, for example. It does not matter if their predictions are not correct according to the later part of the text; the important thing is that they will be alert to what follows to see whether it matches their expectations or not. Students may also be asked to provide alternative endings to a story and justify their endings.

3. Students should be helped to make explicit the inferences that are implicit in the text. Attention may be drawn to the hierarchical nature of actions, states, or events, for example, by requiring students to differentiate the main from secondary ideas, rank alternative interpretations, summarise or paraphrase.

4. Students should be encouraged as readers to summarize as they go along. Suggesting an alternative title to a poem or a short story would require students to understand and identify a single main point or theme. Drawing diagrams, flow charts, or tables may help students to organise the events in a story in a visual form that shows the relationship between and among events (chronological, cause and effect, etc.).

5. Teachers should not lose the wood for the trees. In relation to text coherence, ESL/EFL teachers would do well to remember to "put the text together again" once bits of it have been discussed and analyzed. Exercises, such as the construction of plot diagrams or graphs showing the protagonists' rise and fall, are ways of achieving this.

Conclusion

The purpose of teaching literary texts in an ESL/EFL context is not only to help students comprehend the meaning that the author tries to express, but also to enhance students' thinking and language abilities, as well as study skills. Students have to learn vocabulary, discover

questions, evaluate evidence individually and in group discussions, form judgments based on synthesis and analysis, and develop a coherent argument in support of a position. The approach, therefore, should be not to avoid literature altogether in an ESL/EFL curriculum, but to choose texts carefully and explore resourcefully ways of realising their potential for developing the communication skills of students. Literature indeed helps students to expand their linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge and sensitivity. Consequently, one can say that literature teaching can promote simultaneous learning of academic content, English language skills, and critical thinking abilities, besides awareness of and sensitivity to the target culture.

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Appendix
Student Teachers' Attitudes towards Studying Literature as a Major Component of the EFL / ESL Programme

Questionnaire

1. Which of these genres do you find most useful in improving your English?

Not Useful   **Most Useful**

1   2   3   4   5

1. Poetry
2. Novel
3. Short Stories
4. Drama
5. Prose Essays

2. Which of these genres do you find most enjoyable?

Not Enjoyable **Most Enjoyable**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

1. Poetry
2. Novel
3. Short Stories
4. Drama
5. Prose Essays

3. Which of these genres do you find most difficult or intimidating?

Not Difficult **Most Difficult**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Poetry
1. Novel
2. Short Stories
3. Drama
4. Prose Essays