Scrutinising the Preferences in Literature Approaches and Activities: From the Lenses of ESL Teachers

ASHAIRI SULIMAN Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia P88850@siswa.ukm.edu.my

MELOR MD YUNUS Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

MOHAMED YUSOFF MOHD NOR Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Literature learning is associated with language and linguistics. It serves as a means to develop language proficiency and becomes the avenue to express appreciation for cultural knowledge. However, the teaching of literature may not succeed if unsuitable approaches are employed. Therefore, it requires suitable activities to be conducted in a lesson which this study aims to examine. By employing questionnaire and interviews as the research instruments, 271 English as Second Language (ESL) teachers were involved in this study. This study discovered that using simple terms in giving explanation approach was highly preferred by the respondents besides conducting a comprehension questions activity. Further results were discussed in the paper. The interview responses consolidated the findings. To summarise, teachers should design more creative and appealing activities that suit the approaches employed as a platform to inculcate students' interest in literature lessons.

Keyword: Literature learning; approaches; literature activities; English language; teachers

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a form of art used to express meaning and convey the beauty of language. It has a robust association with language and linguistics. In addition, it manifests a contextual form to abstract imagination via an intelligent choice of poetic devices. Chen (2012) argued that literature is an important component of humanities and a very popular subject that reflects human culture, knowledge, and wisdom. Literature enhances and nurtures the cultural knowledge of an individual as the interrelation among language, culture, and literature is prevalent and significant too. Carter and Long (1991) believed that literature enriches students' cultural knowledge which is integral for language learning. Thus, it is essential to fathom that language and literature correlate as they complement both disciplines in the learning process.

Literature learning is widely integrated into the teaching and learning process, specifically in the context of English language teaching. Situating in the context of English literature, many countries have embedded English literature in their education system. For instance, English teaching and literature teaching are taught simultaneously via an integrated approach in Kenya, implying that literature would be the means of teaching English and vice versa (Njagi, Muriungi & Peter 2014, Okwara, Shiundu & Indoshi 2009). In Indonesia, Novianti (2016) affirmed that English literature study in Indonesia is inseparable from English language studies and it resembles other countries where English is a foreign language too.

In China, Chen (2012) pointed out that there is a reform and opening-up in promoting English learning and literature teaching, though comparatively, it is still a weak area. Countries with English as a second or foreign language embedded English literature to enhance English language teaching and learning. This supports Saka's (2014) argument that literature should be included in foreign language teaching programmes. She even studied the contribution of short stories as a form of literature in assisting students in Turkey. Additionally, it is made evident by Farjana (2016) who studied learners' preference in literature-based materials in Bangladesh as well as Padurean (2015) who ascertained that literature is useful and necessary in the personal and professional growth of youth and all individuals. Hence, it is irrefutable that the spread of English literature teaching has encompassed the horizon, especially in countries adopting English as their second or foreign language.

This situation also occurs in Malaysia. After going through evolutions in the teaching and learning of English literature, it has been made a compulsory component in the teaching of English syllabus since 2000. It is believed that the implementation of literature component in the primary and secondary English language syllabus is seen as an effort to elevate the level of proficiency among Malaysian students (Yusof, Lazim & Salehuddin 2017). Malaysian literature teaching component involves poem, short stories, drama and novel. The component aims to engage learners with enjoyable literary texts suitable to their language proficiency besides developing their creativity in being expressive. Muthusamy, Salleh, Michael, Arumugam and Thayalan (2017) asserted that the teaching and learning of literature in Malaysia is fast becoming a recognised force in acquiring language proficiency. This indicates that the component is significantly connected in building and nurturing learners' English linguistic repertoire. Considering this, the English component has been revised to update the list of literary texts to be studied by students.

In relation to the teaching and learning of literature, one must fathom that it may pose some hindrances and obstacles to both the teachers and students. As argued by Hussein and Al-Emami (2016), teaching and learning foreign literature could be a daunting task for both the instructors and learners. From the teachers' view, hindrances may appear in the form of getting students to understand the lesson and arousing their interest in the lesson. This is supported by Yunus and Suliman (2014) who argued that teachers lack ideas in making literature lessons a meaningful one. On the other side, students might face difficulties in engaging with literary texts due to their language competency and proficiency as demonstrated by Novianti (2016) and Sunardi, Akil, Arafah and Salija (2018) who found that limited language proficiency impedes students in understanding literary texts, especially classical texts.

The connection between language and literature cannot be discarded. Teaching literature might seem easy as it is associated with language teaching as explained by Chalikendy (2015) and Violetta-Irene (2015). However, this view is opposed by Novianti (2016) who claimed that teaching canonical texts is challenging and should be taken very seriously. On top of that, literature teaching would still pose a big challenge to schools as faced by teachers and students (Ortells 2013, Tuncer & Kizildag 2014). Even though literature is linked to language learning, it may not be well-executed if unsuitable approaches are employed. As the teaching of literature deals with more poetic and literature. The methodologies and approaches might differ from what is practised in language lessons as claimed by Padurean (2015) who found that English literature should be approached differently because the language used is too complex. Having said that, teaching approaches, methods, and strategies employed by teachers in teaching literature should be suitable, varied, innovative and effective to maximise the teaching process (Chen 2012, Adelabu & Matthias

2013, Yunus & Suliman 2014, Hussein & Al-Emami 2016, Muthusamy et al. 2017). With the aforementioned issues and matters, this study postulates the following objectives:

- a. To identify ESL teachers' most preferred literature approach
- b. To determine ESL teachers' most favoured activity conducted in literature lessons

LITERATURE REVIEW

As literature is perceived as the means of expressing life via language, it is also acknowledged as the platform in learning the target language, especially in the context of ESL classroom (Sidhu, Chan & Kaur 2010). Supporting this claim, Chalikendy (2015) stated that literature in language teaching has long been a tradition and an academic subject in many countries. English literature aims to engage learners with the surrounding from diverse perspectives via the use of literary devices and languages. By expressing views and opinions in the form of poetry, short stories, novel and even drama, learners or readers can be enlightened on various issues and real-life situations. For instance, the poem 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost addresses the need to take up challenges and risks in life. On another instance, the short story entitled 'The Necklace' written by Guy de Maupassant is a brilliant masterpiece with a lot of moral values to be learnt. This makes learning literature interesting and educating as indicated by Ballentine and Hill (2000) who asserted that literature addresses real-life issues that enhance students' engagement with the texts. This kind of engagement builds learners' optimism and widens their horizon.

Carter and Long (1991) listed three models in teaching literature. All three models are interrelated and significantly relevant to the teaching of literature.

- a. The Cultural Model: a traditional approach in teaching literature. This model infers literature as the source of facts besides emphasising that teachers are the centre of the knowledge revelation.
- b. The Language Model: provides learners with the means to perceive a text systematically and methodically. This approach offers flexibility to teachers in making use of strategies that are commonly employed in language teaching.
- c. The Personal Growth Model: related to the development of learners' personal sides (emotions and personal traits). It is influenced by the other two models, with particular reliance on the language used in the text in a specific cultural context.

Apart from the listed models, teaching literature also encompasses four different approaches. Moody, as cited in Hwang and Embi (2007), explained the relevance of an approach as "to provide a framework, a sequence of operations to be used when we come to actualities". The approaches are deemed indispensable in literature teaching as they assist teachers in the delivery of their lessons. Similarly, these approaches provide teachers with the means of conducting activities that may boost students' interest in the learning process. If a teacher employs an unsuitable approach, it may indirectly affect students' enthusiasm and apprehension of the lesson taught. Therefore, the approaches will enable teachers to prepare and plan better lessons.

INFORMATION-BASED APPROACH

This approach focuses on the role played by teachers in providing students with input. According to Carter, as cited in Hwang and Embi (2007), this approach offers a source of information to the students and is viewed as a way of teaching knowledge about literature. Teachers will have to explain in detail about the text to pass input to students. Carter and Long (1991) believed that the approach involves critical concepts, literary conventions, and meta-language which allows students to use the terms and concepts in discussing and narrating literature. The input provided may vary in terms of the history, cultural, political and social aspects apart from the historical background of the text. This emphasises the fundamental role of the teacher. Among the activities related to this approach are lecturing, reading notes, giving critiques, and explaining.

LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACH

This approach replicates what Carter and Long (1991) described as the Language Model. Students' language proficiency and competency will be developed through this approach. For this purpose, students will have to be exposed to the target language, and teachers will need to introduce the language elements. That indirectly implies that literary texts will function in catering to language activities instead of becoming the source of knowledge and information. Also, Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman (2010) asserted that the focus is shifted to the learner and the reading process in this approach, creating language awareness among the learners. Furthermore, this approach enables learners to deal with language elements such as lexis, syntax, phonology, semantics, and graphology. As this approach is geared towards studentscenteredness, activities that can be conducted are poetry recital, debate, role play, prediction, ranking tasks, and forum.

PERSONAL-RESPONSE APPROACH

As opposed to the information-based approach, this approach focuses on the students' roles in learning literature. Hwang and Embi (2007) asserted that the emphasis of this approach is on the elicitation of students' response to a text. Through this approach, students' personal development will be nurtured as they will have to react on certain issues. The purpose of having students to respond to a text is to motivate and encourage them to read by making a connection between the themes of a text and the students' personal life and experiences (Talif, 1995). It should be noted that the students' responses are regarded to be personal as it involves the affective aspect. Brainstorming, group discussion, writing students' reactions, question-discussion, and journal writing are several activities that can be carried out under this approach.

PARAPHRASTIC APPROACH

According to Hwang and Embi (2007), this approach deals with the surface of a text. It involves paraphrasing or retelling the text in a simpler version to improve students' understanding apart from translating it into another language. Talif (1995) argued that this approach is suitable for beginners of the target language as it acts as a stepping stone in formulating original assumptions of the author's work. In the Malaysian context, some literary texts by foreign writers may impede students' comprehension due to the level of language used. This is where the approach can be applied. Suggested activities for this approach include retelling a text in a simpler language, translating using the mother tongue, and reading the paraphrased version of the text.

PAST STUDIES ON APPROACHES AND ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Numerous studies have been conducted pertaining to the approaches and activities employed in literature teaching. From a global aspect, in a study administered in Bangladesh, Yeasmin, Azad and Ferdoush (2011) found that activities such as role play, group discussions, and presentations reduced students' level of anxiety. It was also observed that group work often helped to manage the class and students enjoyed role play tremendously. With almost similar

findings, another study in China by Chen (2012) proved that among the activities conducted in the literature lessons are teachers' responding to the text read and reflecting on the responses. In addition, he remarked that discussion is the most effective way in languagecentred literature classes and claimed that role play would make the text come into life.

On another instance, Adelabu and Matthias (2013), who investigated 110 teachers teaching literature in Benue State, discovered that the majority of the respondents knew and utilised mostly textbook, discussion, demonstration, drama, problem-solving and integrated methods in the teaching process. Moreover, 51% claimed to have never employed lecture in their lessons. In Romania, Padurean (2015) found that literature teachers employed less student-centred approach whereby note-taking was the only student activity. In fact, 43% of respondents claimed that they never asked for an opinion on the text learnt. Other global studies include a study by Yimwilai (2015) which focused on the integrated approach of teaching and by Farjana (2016) which disclosed the reliance on teachers and the preference of simplified versions of literary texts.

In the Malaysian setting, Hwang and Embi (2007) revealed that the paraphrastic approach was a popular literature approach among the teachers in their study. Teaching approaches were heavily influenced by four factors, namely, students' language proficiency and attitudes, the literary materials, exam-oriented culture, and the students' enrolment in the class. Opposing the aforementioned study, Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman (2010) revealed that the information-based approach was the most popular approach in eighteen secondary schools in Kelantan state. Due to students' incompetency of the language, teachers had to resort to spoon-feeding the students during literature lessons.

Sidhu, Chan and Kaur (2010) revealed that teachers spent a lot of time on individual comprehension work, had minimal integration of literary elements, and lacked creativity in managing the learning tasks. In addition, Suliman and Yunus (2014) indicated that respondents preferred to use simpler terms in giving an explanation as well as probing questions in the teaching process. Other local studies including Yunus and Suliman (2014) and Muthusamy et al. (2017) explained the different preferred techniques and approaches in literature teaching which include notes copying, presentation, class discussions and autonomous learning. All these studies have affirmed that different settings may require different approaches in teaching literature.

METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative study meant to identify teachers' approaches and activities favoured in the teaching of English literature. This study employed a survey research design and utilised questionnaire and interview sessions to further verify the findings. The questionnaire was adapted from a past study (Hwang & Embi 2007). The final questionnaire consisted of twenty-four items based on a four-point Likert scale from two constructs which are approaches employed and activities conducted. The pilot study was conducted and the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.925.

The samples involved in this study were 271 ESL teachers based on cluster sampling. The respondents are secondary school teachers in one of the states in East Malaysia. The composition of respondents varied according to the localities (urban and rural area) and types of school (daily school and religious school). However, these two domains were not studied in this research. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics involving mean, frequency, and percentage were investigated. To further shed light on the quantitative findings, 14 teachers were interviewed. The interview session was conducted after the questionnaires were collected and analysed. The interview questions were derived from the quantitative findings generated earlier. The data were

analysed using the content analysis approach to support the questionnaire findings. The findings will be discussed in the following section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the findings of the study and starts with a discussion on the approaches employed and activities conducted.

No.	Approaches Employed	Mean Score	Percentage of Agreement	Percentage of Disagreement
1	Use simple terms to explain the text	3.38	99.3%	0.7%
2	Ask students questions to check their understanding	3.32	99.3%	0.7%
3	Encourage students to relate texts to their personal experiences	3.29	97.4%	2.6%
4	Explain the content of the text	3.28	98.5%	1.5%
5	Retell the text to help students' understanding	3.27	95.2%	4.8%
6	Encourage students to express feelings toward the issues in the text	3.25	95.2%	4.8%
7	Guide students to express opinions toward the text	3.23	95.9%	4.1%
8	Provide students with background information of the text	3.22	96.7%	3.3%
9	Elicit students' response to the text	3.22	98.9%	1.1%
10	Get students to tell the storyline of the text	3.16	95.2%	4.8%
11	Set language activities in the lesson	3.12	93.7%	6.3%
12	Generate language practice using the text	3.10	94.5%	5.5%
13	Elicit information from students about the text	3.07	94.8%	5.2%

TABLE 1. Approaches Employed in Teaching Literature

From Table 1, the teachers mostly preferred 'using simple terms in explaining the literary texts' in literature lessons. With 99.3% agreement similar to 'asking questions to students' approach, the mean score surpassed by 0.06. To further illustrate this, the respondents interviewed mentioned that "using simple terms helps students to understand better especially the weak learners", "I see this approach as a better way of teaching literature and it is more suitable for our students", and "students will understand better especially those who are quite weak in the language". In addition, when asked about employing the approach of asking students questions, the respondents claimed that "questions help students to think critically and speak with conviction based on their knowledge of the story they read", "questions make them think and reflect on what they have read", and "questions help students to comprehend the text, thus enabling them to tackle questions from different views".

The third preferred approach is 'encouraging students to relate texts to their personal experiences', with a mean score of 3.29 and collated 97.4% agreement. This is followed by 'explaining the content of the text', 'retelling the text to help students understanding', and 'encouraging students to express feelings toward the issues in the text'. All these three approaches recorded more than 95% agreement. Concerning the less preferred one, 'eliciting information from students about the text' scored the lowest mean score at 3.07. The other two less preferred approaches are 'generating language practice using the text' and 'setting language activities in the lesson' which scored 3.10 and 3.12, respectively. It is also interesting to note that another approach, 'getting students to tell the storyline of the text' recorded a mean score of below 3.20. Overall, all approaches scored more than 94% agreement except approach (11). This finding also suggests the respondents commonly employ all approaches in their teaching process.

Using simple terms in explaining literary texts supports the paraphrastic approach. As claimed by Talif (1995), this approach is suitable for beginners of the target language as it acts as a stepping stone in formulating original assumptions of the author's work. It should be noted that in learning literature, some poetic devices and words might not be commonly used in daily life. Therefore, this approach requires teachers who might be more knowledgeable and well-versed to simplify or rephrase it in a more familiar context. This supports Carter and Long's (1991) argument that literature is teacher-centred in which they pass knowledge and information to the students. This finding also seems to be in line with those by Hwang and Embi (2007) as well as Suliman and Yunus (2014).

The questioning approach is prevalent as it tests students' understanding of the texts learnt. Teachers believed that this information-based approach is the avenue for them to counter check the students' learning process as revealed in Rashid, Vethamani and Rahman's (2010) study. Hwang and Embi (2007) affirmed that the emphasis of this approach is on the elicitation of students' response to a text. In fact, it is not solely meant for literature learning as it can be employed in other subjects too. Questioning enables students to respond based on their understanding and should it differ from what is expected, the teacher can assist students in getting the right answer. Next, the third preferred approach is related to the personal-response approach. As suggested by Talif (1995), when students respond to a text, it motivates and encourages students to read by creating a connection between the text and their personal life. It also moulds students to be more expressive rather than being passive in their learning as it may stimulate their thinking of their past experiences. All in all, it provides flexibility for students to be in control of their learning.

Eliciting information from students seems to be least preferred by the respondents. This somehow implies that students are given less opportunity to be the information disseminator. Perhaps, the teachers are still geared toward teacher-centeredness as indicated by the high scoring approaches which are also found in Padurean (2015). This might also be due to students' language competency and literature understanding that impede their ability to elicit literary information.

No.	Activities Conducted	Mean	Percentage of	Percentage of
		Score	Agreement	Disagreement
1	Comprehension questions	3.26	98.5%	1.5%
2	Group work	3.25	95.9%	4.1%
3	Explaining texts	3.23	97.8%	2.2%
4	Brainstorming session	3.17	93.0%	7.0%
5	Language activities	3.14	93.4%	6.6%
6	Teacher retelling stories	3.14	91.1%	8.9%
7	Students retelling stories	3.12	94.1%	5.9%
8	Small group discussion	3.11	91.1%	8.9%
9	Performance activities	3.03	84.1%	15.9%
10	Reactions writing of an issue	3.02	84.9%	15.1%
11	Journal writing	2.55	53.1%	46.9%

TABLE 2. Activities Conducted in Teaching Literature

Reiterating the findings of the earlier construct, the highly preferred literature activities are 'comprehension questions', 'group work', and 'explaining text' with mean scores of 3.26, 3.25 and 3.23, respectively. In fact, only 1.5% of respondents disagreed about employing the 'comprehension questions' activity. In terms of agreement percentage, 'explaining text' activity surpassed 'group work' activity by 1.9%. The interview session further consolidated this finding as claimed by the respondents that "comprehension questions promote critical thinking and reasoning. From various WH questions, it helps students to think [and] identify and the most important thing is they learn to elaborate more"

and "comprehension questions help students to understand better what they had read or comprehended in reading and to reinstate understanding in written forms".

As for 'explaining the text', the respondents interviewed posed these responses: "for weak students, an explanation is necessary to enable them [to] interpret the text appropriately", "some students are not interested in literature. By explaining the text, they will understand more", and "explanation improves language skills as well as [helps] to comprehend and experience pleasure when reading [a] literary text". The fourth preferred activity is 'brainstorming' with a mean score of 3.17. It was also revealed that 'language activities', 'teachers retelling stories', 'students retelling stories', and 'small group discussion' were among the preferred literature activities.

On the contrary, the three less preferred approaches are 'performance activities', 'writing reactions of an issue', and 'journal writing'. More surprisingly, 'journal writing' only recorded a mean score of 2.55 and 53% agreement as compared to other literature activities which collated more than 80% agreement. To verify this, the respondents asserted that "students do not write journals anymore and it is not tested in exams", "journal writing is regarded to be personal and should be encouraged for individual keepsake", and "students find this activity monotonous as they need to record whatever they are reading".

'Comprehension questions' activity is prevalent in literature lessons. This is a renowned activity as indicated in studies by Sidhu, Chan and Kaur (2010), Suliman and Yunus (2014), and Yunus and Suliman (2014). Comprehension questions are intended to check students' progress, nurture students' thinking skill, and elaborate on their responses. This finding also replicated the result from the previous construct that 'asking questions' was the second most preferred literature approach. Teachers should consider the types of questions posed beside the relevance of the questions to the texts learnt. On top of that, 'group work' seems to be a favourite activity in literature lessons as Nambiar, Nor, Ismail and Adam (2017) opined that engaging in peer interaction and collaboration provides students with the opportunity to develop better English communication skills. Group work may entitle students to share their opinions and they would feel more comfortable in expressing their views with a smaller number of people. Interestingly, this opposes Farjana (2016) and supports Yeasmin, Azad and Ferdoush (2011) that group work helped to manage the class. Teachers should continuously remind students of the purpose of group work to control students.

'Performance activity' seems to be a less favoured activity in this study. This observation refutes Yeasmin, Azad and Ferdoush (2011) and Muthusamy et al. (2017). Supposedly, 'performance activities' such as role play, drama, and poetry recital may promote literary texts and the texts become more attached to students and is supported by Chen (2012) who noted that role play makes the text come into life. Priya and Jayasridevi (2018) stated that role play improves students' understanding of others' points of view, their individuality, and dramatic and theatre skills. This view is also shared by Adelabu and Matthias (2013) as they asserted that the majority utilised drama in the teaching process. Integrating this activity into the literature lesson allows students to express their creativity and polish their hidden talents by putting up a performance. However, it is manifested in this study that 'performance activity' is moderately favoured by the respondents. Perhaps, the respondents affirmed that language is the only mode of communicating and delivering information as literacy pedagogy has always focused on language texts in the traditional view (Yusof, Lazim & Salehuddin 2017).

Via this construct, the student-centeredness notion is evident in the last item. This is promising as the respondents favoured students retelling the texts instead of the teachers, which indirectly develops their speaking skill. Priya and Jayasridevi (2018) believed that activities aimed for communication in English motivate students to speak continuously in English and promote smooth and fluent communication. This is somehow concurrent to Muthusamy et al. (2017) who dubbed autonomous learning as the best way to learn literature. Hence, students should be given more flexibility in the teaching and learning process as education is now heading towards the student-centred learning process. As denoted in the interview responses, 'journal writing' is significantly less favoured by the respondents. Though this activity is a form of personal-response approach, the execution of this activity may seem to be irrelevant in literature. Though it resembles diary writing, one respondent brought up the issue of how students rarely write diaries now, which may answer to the less likelihood for this activity to be conducted. This finding was also evident in Hwang and Embi (2007) as well as Suliman and Yunus (2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has revealed the highly preferred approaches and activities conducted by the respondents in teaching literature. Similarly, the 'comprehension questions' is a popular activity in the literature lesson besides 'explaining the text'. This somehow replicates Nambiar et al. (2017), revealing that teachers' pedagogical approaches are similar in that they are a repetition of a sequence of explanation and exercise. It implies that getting students to comprehend the literary texts in easier and simpler versions is deemed crucial in learning literature. Due to students' language mastery, it can be a more effective means of getting students to comprehend the gist of the texts. This may further assist students in developing their enthusiasm for learning literature.

Consequently, this study has also divulged into how students learn English literature. It posits the idea that teachers perceived using simple terms and comprehension questions assists students better in learning literature. They ascertained that students' understanding should be acknowledged and eased via the use of simple terms in the lessons. Though Lim, as cited in Lim, Othman and Lo (2019), bemoaned students did not fare well in literature due to the lack of criticality, literature should be made enjoyable and well-received by the students. Emphasising too much on higher-order thinking may mitigate students' interest in literature, indirectly losing their engagement in the lesson. As Malaysian students are diverse in terms of their backgrounds and language proficiency, getting students to learn literature at their own pace should be encouraged. Preferably, students should immerse in simple activities before moving on to more challenging ones. To note, learners appreciate learning literature in ESL and prefer various activities and exercises in the lessons rather than being independent learners as corroborated by Muthusamy et al. (2017).

Teachers should also plan engaging and informative activities that suit the approaches employed, rather than highly emphasising comprehension questions. There are more active activities that can be conducted such as 'performance activity' which was found to be less favoured by the respondents. Students' interest and needs should also be taken into consideration in planning literature activities, instead of focusing solely on explaining and inquiring-based activities. With that, students' interest in literature can be boosted and it may positively affect their learning. In conclusion, literature teaching and learning is beneficial as it serves as a two-pronged approach in developing language proficiency and expressing appreciation towards literary texts. Hence, the teaching and learning process should be taken seriously by everyone involved, especially the teachers teaching the lessons.

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