

## Some Thoughts on the Teaching of English Literature to Malaysian Students

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### ABSTRACT

*The writer presents some ideas and techniques in the teaching of English Literature to Malaysian students so that the Literature class can be an interesting and worthwhile experience for the students. The ideas and techniques are based from her experience as a Literature teacher and her research into the area.*

### ABSTRAK

*Penulis mencadangkan dan membentangkan idea-idea dan teknik-teknik untuk pengajaran Sastera Inggeris di Malaysia. Adalah diharapkan dengan mempraktikkan setengah daripada idea-idea dan teknik-teknik ini pengajaran Sastera Inggeris akan menjadi lebih baik dan berkesan lagi. Idea-idea dan teknik-teknik ini adalah berdasarkan pengalaman penulis sebagai pensyarah Sastera Inggeris dan kajian-kajiannya mengenai pengajaran sastera.*

### INTRODUCTION

Imagine what it would be like if you had to teach Malay Literature to a group of American students in Bahasa Malaysia (assuming that Bahasa Malaysia is a second language to this particular group of students)! Your first reaction is probably, "Oh, no! What have I landed myself into?"; your second is probably, "How on earth do I teach a literature which has values so different from the students?". Perhaps your third is the most optimistic, "Surely, there must be a way or approach in teaching these American students ... surely there must be some ways we can make these American kids relate to the Malay Literature." We can give them a sense of purpose for studying Malay Literature by telling them it will enhance their knowledge of the culture of the second language or we can tell them to treat Malay Literature as part of the language-learning process. The point I am trying to make here is that teaching Literature in a second language is not the same as teaching Literature to native speakers; the former requires the teacher to take into account various aspects of the language-learning learning process and see how these factors can help students come to grips with

learning Literature in a second language. If the teacher is insensitive to these students' interest and levels of proficiency in the language, the Literature class can easily be a boring and meaningless activity. In the same token, teaching English Literature to Malaysian students should not be treated so lightly. For majority of the Malaysian students, learning English as a second language is already a major task, but learning the literature of the language seems like a long journey to doomsday. They are often frustrated with their inability to understand and analyse a literary piece and out of this frustration comes the lack of appreciation to the point of boredom for the literary works. Hence, in this paper, I would like to present some ideas in the teaching of English Literature in Malaysia so that the Literature class can be an interesting and worthwhile experience for the students. But before I do that, let's look briefly at the place and usage of English in Malaysia in order to understand the students' difficulty in studying Literature in a second language.

#### A BRIEF OUTLOOK OF THE USAGE OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a multi-racial country consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, and Kadazans with each race having a language of their own. Within the language of each race, there are varieties of dialects: e.g. Chinese can be broken down into the dialects of Mandarin, Hokkien, and Cantonese. This multi-lingualism in Malaysia complicates the communication between the different races. A need for a language to be the medium of communication between the varied races is strongly emphasized by the government.

During the British Colonialization of Malaysia (then called Malaya), this need was implemented in making the English Language the second language for Malaysians. The importance of studying English was emphatically stressed by the British people for promotion into high-ranking jobs and integration into upper-class society (Platt 1983:388). English was even made the medium of instruction in most schools (Platt 1983:387). After Malaysia gained its independence in 1957, English was still dominant ly used as a second language by the people and in schools. Over the years, the spirit of nationalism grew extensively, so that by 1982, the medium of instruction in schools was totally changed to Bahasa Malaysia (Platt 1983:389). Today English is still the second language to most Malaysians (except for those in rural areas; see below) but it is not as dominantly used and highly respected as it was during the British colonial times.

The level of usage of the English Language among Malaysians has declined over the years. The need to know English well is not as significant as the need to master Bahasa Malaysia. This is not to say that English has no importance anymore, but it is widely used only in big industrial cities

which have international contacts and upper-class society who send their children for further studies overseas (Platt 1983; Baudaulf 1983; Wong 1978). English is moderately used in average size towns (mostly "broken-English"), and in the more remote and rural areas of Malaysia such as Kelantan, Kedah or Sarawak, English is treated as a foreign language (Baudaulf 1983:1-2). People in rural areas seldom have international contacts and do not feel the need to master English really well. In fact, for all the races besides the Malays, English is probably the third language; their native tongue is the first and Bahasa Malaysia is second.

In speaking English there is a tendency among Malaysians to speak "Malaysian English" vs. "British English." A Singaporean representative to the United Nations once said. "When one is abroad in a bus or train or aeroplane, and when one overhears someone speaking, one can immediately say this is someone from Malaysia or Singapore" (Smith 1983:8). This concept of pride applies to the "Malaysian English"; Malaysians feel that it is no longer desirable or necessary for them to aim at a foreign standard of English. It is sufficient that what they speak is acceptable and intelligible to their hearers (Wong 1978:1; Smith 1983:8).

Within Malaysian English, there are two varieties: local dialect and wider-speech form (a more formal form) (Wong 1978:3). The local dialect is used among Malaysians for everyday conversation, and consists of unique features which are expressed in choice of words, voice quality, pace of utterance and gestures. Foreigners who have stayed in Malaysia for a while acquire this local dialect as "intimacy signals" (Wong 1978:4) in their communication with the Malaysian people. The wider-speech form is modeled on standard British or American English in terms of grammar, sentence structures and choice of words. It is spoken by Malaysians when they are at formal functions, and when they are speaking to foreigners. One interesting thing to note is the capability among Malaysians of an automatic switch from local dialect to wider-speech form or vice-versa, according to the demands of the situation (Wong 1978:4). This is analogous to the switch from a formal to an informal style of speaking among professors at a football game or at a faculty meeting.

### SOME IDEAS FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

I have given this brief historical background of the usage of English in Malaysia, to heighten the readers awareness of the problems faced by Malaysian students studying English Literature. Since English is not their native tongue, one cannot expect them to grasp easily the underlying meanings in a literary work. This problem is made worse with the existence of foreign cultural values present in those works. Taking all these factors

into account, together with my own experience as a Literature teacher, I hope to present some ideas and techniques for the effective teaching of English Literature in Malaysia. Related questions that are also raised: What is the teacher's role in teaching English Literature to Malaysian students? How can the teacher motivate these Malaysian students to appreciate the glory in literature? What are the problems a teacher faces in teaching English Literature to a Malaysian classroom?

In order to teach literature, the teacher himself has to learn to appreciate literature and this appreciation has to be conveyed to his students, regardless of whether they are native-speakers or ESL students. Margaret J. Early (1965:76) says in an article about the stages of growth in literary appreciation, "If we are to help readers find delight in literature, we must know something about the kinds of abilities, understandings and experiences that deepen enjoyment." The enjoyment of literature requires readiness to accept the pleasure and delight that can be attained from reading literature. Teachers would have to point out that the beauty in literature is that it is not an exact science which can be measured precisely, but is "an art, perhaps the most complex of all the arts, as complex as humanity itself" (Early 1965:76). If the teacher is convinced that the study of literature gives pleasure, this attitude will reflect on the students, more significantly if they are studying literature in a second language. This is because English Literature is only an elective course in the English secondary school curriculum, and the students who choose to pursue the course would not be interested or motivated to study the course if the teacher does not show any interest and enthusiasm about the course. Thus, in a Malaysian classroom, it is very important for the teacher to convey his deep appreciation of literature to his students so that the students too will be encouraged to have the same attitude towards literature.

In teaching English Literature, the common mistake among teachers is to "encourage students to ape his responses instead of helping them to acquire a true sense of appreciation of literature as such." (Early 1965:83); this approach can bore students because they do not feel a sense of discovery. In instilling this sense of discovery in students, Dwight L. Burton (1965:116-117) stresses the importance of relating the work in a literary piece to the students' own experience. He says that teachers should select materials that offer a chance for students to use their experiences in connection with the literary piece, and that in doing so, he can help the students appreciate the meanings in literature. This statement is especially significant for the Malaysian students whose language barrier in English makes the study of English Literature a difficult task. If they can identify the experiences in a literary work with their own personal experiences and culture, then the difficulty in studying the subject will be lessened; they will be motivated to study the subject because of similarities in experiences. Elsa Gelpi (1966:5) in her article "The Enjoyment of Literature" says that

“if the reader’s culture has values too different from the American values, many of those selections read in class will have no appeal, no meaning, or will be distasteful and perhaps shocking.” Thus, in teaching literature to Malaysian students, the teacher will be more effective if he chooses selections that have values which are parallel to the Malaysian culture; scenes of kings, queens, fairies, and spirits in Shakespeare’s works, can easily be related to the Malaysian culture which is familiar with these character concepts.

An extension of the acting idea discussed in the last paragraph is the idea of an in-class debate to determine how certain characters should be portrayed on the stage; e.g., did Hamlet really love Ophelia? The teacher could make this a fun activity by choosing speakers (teachers should choose the braver students), a master of ceremonies, and a time-keeper; the teacher himself serves as a judge. In order to get the whole class involved, the speakers from each team will represent one-half of the class. Before the debate, each half of the class and their representative speakers will have an informal meeting to discuss major points for the debate. This sense of friendly competition between the two teams will benefit the students in their perception of a certain issue in the play; searching out quotes to support their arguments will send students back for a second reading of important scenes. If the teacher notices that the students’ speech is not so fluent in English he may allow the debate to be in Bahasa Malaysia; the speakers argue in Bahasa Malaysia, but give their proofs in English (using the quotes from the play). The idea is not to teach them speaking ability, but their understanding of the play.

Another interesting way of teaching understanding of a literary piece, is by asking the students to write a summary of a chosen scene in Shakespeare, in English and Bahasa Malaysia. The summary in each language should not be more than two written pages because ESL students get bored easily with long and tedious tasks (Gelpi 1969:5). From my experience, I know the tendency is for Malaysian students to do better in capturing the main points and overview of the scene in Bahasa Malaysia. This is because they are able to express their perception of the scene better in their native language; they cannot summarize as well in English because they have difficulty in finding the right words to express their perception. Since the motive of this method is to teach understanding of a literary piece, the teacher should point out to the students the difference between his two summaries. This will enhance the student’s learning of the chosen scene in Shakespeare’s plays, and also serve as an ego booster for the student, who will then realize that his understanding and appreciation of literature is only hindered by his language capabilities. This factor in turn, will motivate the student to study the language more diligently so that he will be able to write better summaries and reports.

Despite the bilingual approach to teaching English Literature that was discussed in the last paragraph, a teacher still cannot ignore the fact that he is also teaching the language. One way a teacher can encourage a Malaysian student to speak English in a class, is by assigning each student in the class to give one recitation of a literary piece during the school year. The idea of assigning everyone to do a recitation is that the students in the class would feel that they are all sharing the burden of speaking in class. In helping the students to prepare for the class recitation, a teacher should be willing to spend some time to listen in private to the student's recitation; this will allow the teacher to deal with the student's fear of talking in class and also correct any pronunciation problems that the student might have. In this way, the student would not feel that he is being made a fool when he actually recites in front of the class; in fact, it is hoped that with this method, he will have more confidence of speaking in class in the future.

Another aspect of the English Language that a Literature teacher cannot ignore when he is teaching ESL students is grammar. One way of helping these students in grammar is to focus on the significance of Shakespeare's works to the history of the English Language (*Comments and Exercises on Historical Linguistics* 1967:1). Students are asked to examine Shakespeare's language in terms of the following exercises:

1. check certain words in the *OED* to find meanings and to trace the roots of the word.
2. explain idiom-like expressions like "speak by the card" (Ham. I.;17).
3. observe verb-order and unusual verb form: e.g. "tooke"; "Iyest";

This method will be helpful to the Malaysian students because it will give them a better perspective on the differences between Elizabethan English and modern English. In this way, they will also learn to appreciate modern grammar better.

To shift the focus a little, I would like to add that reading a novel or short story can be a very tedious task for the average Malaysian student. The teacher should use short selections whenever possible because, as stated earlier in this paper, "a long span of interest in a second language is difficult to maintain unless the selection is extremely interesting," (Gelpi 1969:5). Also, students do not really know what aspect of the plot or character is important in the story: to Malaysian students, every aspect in the story seems important and this attitude may discourage them from wanting to read. In this case, the literature teacher has to remember an important aspect of literature is for enjoyment, and it is not to be perceived as a tedious task. One thing teachers can do to help these students is to give them a guideline on certain aspects of the story: e.g. refer to specific scene or plot; refer to specific character; refer to the meaning of the difficult words. Other than these specific references, a teacher should emphasize to the students that they should just go ahead and indulge in the enjoyment of literature.

Another way of encouraging Malaysian students to read is by asking them to write a book report on a book that they read outside of class. To ensure that the students do the assignment, a book-report should consist of the most exciting scene in the book, the last important incident in the book, the characteristics of the hero or heroine, and the student's reasons for liking or disliking the book (Mirrieless 1952:320). The teacher should also encourage the Malaysian students to write about any observed similarity between the culture of the story and the student's own culture: e.g. the spirit "Puck" in Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" can be easily compared to the spirit "toyol" which is present in the Malaysian culture. In examining the book report, a teacher will also get the chance to correct the students' grammar mistakes and faults in sentence construction. Thus, the students will not only improve in their critical thinking, but also in their writing.

One aspect of literature that should not be ignored is poetry. How does one teach the unique language of poetry to students who are already having a difficult time understanding straightforward English prose? John C. Maher (1980-81:168-171), in his article about guided poetry composition to EFL students has come up with various techniques to encourage EFL students to write poetry. Two of the techniques, "free association" and "rhyming verse game," are very interesting indeed: "free association" refers to the method of having each student saying whatever word that comes to his mind and the teacher writes these words on the blackboard so that later on, the students can select and arrange these words in a poetic form; "rhyming verse game" refers to the method of playing with language in which one student writes a sentence, and the other student writes the second sentence, with the last word having the same sound as the last word in the first sentence. Once students realise how much fun it is to write poetry, they will be able to appreciate better-quality poems assigned by their teachers. However, teachers should be careful not to thrust forward the structural aspects of poetry too soon; the Malaysian students may be intimidated by the concept of poetry as a whole. Instead they should be led into thinking that English poetry is similar to Malay poetry in terms of categorization: *pantun* is the humorous poem; *syair* is the classical poem; *sajak* is the lyrical poem. In order to make the students feel more comfortable with English poetry, the teacher may also encourage the English poems to be read with Malaysian music as background, just the way Malay poems are read. The choice of the kind of Malaysian music will depend on the tone and mood of the poem: sad, soothing music for sad poems; fast, smooth music for happy poems; traditional Malaysian music for classical or Shakespeare's poems; The important factor here is that Malaysian students would feel motivated in studying English poetry, and as a result, they could revel in the aesthetic values of English poetry.

Another important factor in teaching literature to Malaysian students, is the personality of the teacher. Malaysian students are very much influenced by the British Education system, which instills the spirit of passive obedience among students, and as a result, they are generally quiet in class. Moreover, from my experience, I know Malaysian students are extremely self-conscious about their pronunciation. The fear of their interpretation being rejected by the teacher and their self-conscious pronunciation encourage them to be quiet students who rather take notes than speak in class. So, to motivate these students to participate in class, the teacher should be approachable and emphatic; he should never reject a student's answer harshly and abruptly (even if the answer is wrong), and should always praise a student for the effort of speaking in class. In order to encourage these Malaysian students to speak up, the teacher can divide the class into small groups and give each group the task of answering a question. In this way, the students will have to speak out their opinions without being intimidated by the small audience, and slowly, this method will build enough self-confidence in them to speak to a larger audience.

One of the greatest methods in teaching Shakespeare is the use of the commonplace book—a cross between a notebook and journal, and a place to keep common sense, new ideas, speculations, scribbles, questions and attempted answers. Professor Thomas Derrick' at Indiana State University introduces this concept to his Shakespeare class, but the idea actually goes as far back as the times of Milton, an epic poet after Shakespeare, who used a commonplace book to illustrate the gathering of knowledge for literary and political purposes (Milton 1953:405,368,424,502). The commonplace method involves paraphrasing of Shakespeare's lines and personal commentaries on those lines (see Appendix A). The teacher will then collect the books and evaluate the student's interpretation. This is a good method to use among Malaysian students because this method will not only give a chance for the students to give their own interpretation of the lines non-verbally, but will also enhance the students' perceptions of the lines. As it is, studying English as a second language is hard enough for the Malaysian students, but studying literature in Shakespeare's language is worse. The paraphrasing aspect of the commonplace book gives a chance for the Malaysian students to disentangle the complexities in Shakespeare's language, and to treat it almost like a third language. The commentary aspect of the commonplace book will sharpen the students' ability for critical thinking. Thus, in difficult cases when a teacher is confronted with a group of Malaysian students who do not wish to speak in class, it is hoped that the teacher will use the commonplace book method as an alternative for getting some kind of responses from the students.

As discussed earlier, it is always good to try to relate any literary piece to the students' culture because this will motivate the students' interest and encourages a better understanding of the literary piece. Parallel to this



idea is the idea of acting out a Shakespearian play by using an ethnic background. The use of a Malaysian setting and actors wearing traditional Malaysian costumes will spark the students' interest and make Shakespeare's plays more relevant to their everyday lives. The teacher should be there to supervise students' discussion of the staging methods in order to prevent inconsistency in the play. The teacher's supervision in the discussion also helps to guide students to Shakespeare's original intention in writing the play. The students can make this a class project and make the study of literature fun. They can also compare and contrast the setting they have created with the original setting of the play, and in doing so, their knowledge about the Elizabethan period is enhanced. The only caution in this method is not to change Shakespeare's language to Bahasa Malaysia, because changing the language would only result in the loss of the richness in the literary values of Shakespeare's language.

## CONCLUSION

In promoting the study of English Literature in Malaysia, one is faced with various obstacles that are in need of improvement. For example, the English curriculum in Malaysia is very much controlled by the Ministry of Education; the classroom teacher does not have any say in the choice of materials for teaching. Probably, the limited budget assigned to the education of English Literature (due to the role of English in Malaysia) does not allow for any freedom in the expansion of the English Literature curriculum. Thus, the unavailability of materials such as the OED and video-taping equipment, is a setback to the creativity of the English Literature teacher. Moreover, teachers are also pressured by the education system and parents to give more emphasis to exams; the role of the teacher is to teach students so that they will do well in exams. As a consequence of this attitude towards the teacher's role, the appreciation of the aesthetic values in literature is neglected by the teacher. Parents in general need to understand that to do well in a literature examination, a student must first learn to enjoy the literature. Only then can he understand the message that a literary piece is trying to convey.

In summary, this essay has attempted to examine some methods in the teaching of English Literature in the Malaysian classroom, but it is obvious that there are problems in implementing certain methods. Moreover, the methods described in this paper are time-consuming for both teachers and students, and they demand a certain kind of dedication from the teachers. Nevertheless, a dedicated and understanding teacher will be wise enough to distribute the class period, so that he can still practise some of the methods discussed in this paper. In this way, he will not feel so tied down by the traditional teaching methods, and his students too will be more motivated and interested in studying English Literature.

## Appendix A

## Commonplace book (example of an entry)

The lines:

MSND V.i. 18–22

“Such tricks hath strong imagination,	18
That if it would but apprehend some joy,	
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;	20
Or in the night, imagining some fear,	
How easy is a bush suppos’d a bear!	22
paraphrase of	

MSND, V.i. 18–22

So easily do our “imagination” lead us that we cannot think of some pleasure in the abstract; at the same time we contemplate the person who causes that pleasure. Similarly, in a dark forest, when we feel scared about attack by wild animals, how naturally do we see a shadowy bush and think, “Oh my God. It’s a bear.”

What would happen if I changed the focus of 11.21–22 to coincide with the notion that fear of errors is also imagined?

Or in the classroom, imagining some “F” How easy is a paraphrase suppos’d a flub.

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