

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The success of any curriculum initiative lies ultimately in how it is played out in the classroom. Underpinning this study on the teaching and learning of literature in two form 1 classes was the attempt to explore the nature of the input by teachers and the uptake by students of typical Literature in English lessons involving the new Literature Component of the English Language Syllabus. Hence, I sought to examine the teaching and learning of literature in actual classroom situations to obtain feedback on the hands-on implementation of the component so as to inform future effective practice. Specifically, I sought to identify the approaches used to teach selected literary texts in the two Form 1 classes as well as to explore students' responses to those texts. Finally, I attempted to uncover the teachers' and students' perceptions of the literature-based activities in the two classes as they were the primary participants in the curriculum initiative.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

Teachers and students are the key players in the classroom situation. This section will highlight key findings pertaining to the teaching process in the section teacher-related findings. It will also present significant aspects of the learning half of the equation in the section on student-related findings.

5.1.1 Teacher-Related Findings

The teachers in the study were clearly aware of literature's 'priceless' contribution to

their students' language and personal development and thus they were greatly supportive of the component's introduction. However, they were very unclear of how it was to be implemented at classroom level. This discussion draws from Anis's and Jane's perceptions. They felt valuable information was lost as a result of the cascade strategy used to disseminate information to teachers, which appeared to both teachers to have been conducted in an ad hoc manner.

Furthermore, there was an absence of standardised and monitored training sessions for teachers by the relevant authorities. To make matters worse, they also felt there was no support in any form for teachers whose responsibility was to implement the component. As a result of not knowing which direction to head in, the teaching of literature in the two classes can be described as eclectic. The teachers made comparisons across the texts and connections with the students' experiences. However, the central focus of the lessons was mainly on students' comprehension and vocabulary expansion. Thus, a typical "literature lesson" consisted of reading aloud and explication of texts by teachers. The sole reason given was they were being constrained by time in the teachers' attempt to prepare their students for the end of year examination.

5.1.2 Student-Related Findings

Generally, very distinct patterns in student responses to the literary texts resulted from varying proficiency levels. While the high proficiency students found most selected texts generally unchallenging linguistically, the low proficiency ones found them impossible to comprehend without their teacher's explanations. More interestingly, on a cultural plane, not all that was foreign was alien and not all that was local was familiar.

While local literary texts seemed to greatly appeal to low proficiency students as it helped their comprehension, the high proficiency students seemed more familiar with native English literary texts with foreign settings. They also utilised those texts as a springboard for their own poetic expression. The high proficiency students were also advanced readers and evidently could not tolerate texts, especially local ones, with storylines that they found too simplistic and stereotypical. Hence, the use of a single standardised text to cater for the entire range of linguistic needs and interests of students from contrasting backgrounds seems to work against the aim of the component to get students interested in reading literature. However, the differences between the students of contrasting proficiencies stops here. All young adolescents voiced the same interest in adventure stories and folk tales which they found appealing. They stated the same preferences for short stories in comparison to poetry which they found more demanding.

While the teachers and students in the study recognised the importance of literature, the findings suggest in its day to day implementation, it would appear that certain aspects require refining. Teachers need to be provided with adequate support so they are confident about actively carrying out a valuable strategy in enhancing ESL students' proficiency. Individual student factors must be considered too so that their needs are met.

5.2 Implications of the Study

For ESL practice to improve, insights into classroom realities are necessary. The findings therefore also have significant implications for several groups of ESL educators. More specifically, the insights drawn should prove useful to curriculum developers, teachers of English as well as teacher educators.

5.2.1 Implications for Curriculum Developers

The implications for curriculum designers can be categorised into three aspects : planning, teacher-support as well as assessment. As far as the planning stage is concerned, the findings seem to imply that the use of one standardised text is among the biggest obstacles to the achievement of the component's main objectives as it fails to cater to the diversity of students' language needs and interests. The curriculum designers should perhaps consider having texts of different linguistic levels to cater for students' varying linguistic proficiencies.

Issues of text selection must be one of the curriculum designers' major concerns and their the key considerations should be linguistic levels, text appeal as well as cultural familiarity. These factors are important in determining the quality of students' interaction with the text which thus determine the success or failure of the component. The selected text must act as a "window to the world" in developing a 'world view' amongst Malaysian learners, particularly among those from low to middle income homes who may not have been as exposed as their peers from higher income homes.

The number of texts to be taught in a year must also be reconsidered in view of the time constraints. The quantity of texts ought to be reduced so that there is quality reading and interaction based on texts.

Curriculum developers also need to foreground teacher support which could be categorised under two dimensions : information and training. Findings regarding the component's implementation reveal that the process of information dissemination has not been very successful in conveying valuable information to the programme's frontliners, the teachers. For the sake of future programmes, this needs to be examined and

alternatives that can give teachers first-hand information should seriously be considered. Without clear directions, it is difficult for teachers to strive towards achieving the objectives of new programme.

Hence, there is a dire need for standardised and monitored in-service teacher training across the districts. During such sessions, teachers must be exposed to creative techniques and the latest methods of literary teaching both in theory and in practice. They must be trained how the literature component should be implemented through simulated teaching sessions and they could be shown models of good teaching through video clips.

In the examination-oriented Malaysian secondary school system, assessment is a key concern. Hence, information on how the component should be examined is important. As continuously voiced by teachers in the study, exam pressure and excessive workload create an excessively tight time constraint. Not knowing what to expect of the exams, teachers mainly focus on basic comprehension and 'right' interpretations. Thus, teachers must be informed of the nature and format of assessment so that the pleasures of reading are not detracted as a result of examination anxiety.

5.2.2 Implications for English Language Teachers

At school level, students could be streamed according to their proficiency through the use of sets for their English lessons as is done in many established residential schools. Organising students into sets may initially be difficult, ultimately it is worth the effort in the long run as the varying linguistic needs of students could be taken into account.

Teachers have no control over the choice of reading texts prescribed to them by the Ministry, but they certainly have full control over the reading experiences that each

lesson provides. Hence, should the set texts proved linguistically and intellectually unchallenging to high proficiency students as was the case with *The Pencil* for example, teachers could use the text as a stepping stone to other readings of similar themes which could meet with their students needs, such as *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. Quoted in the novel is the poem *Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Robert Frost, which could be linked to the reading of Shakespeare's *Life's Brief Candle*. Intertextuality can be used effectively to help students access texts through the use of other more familiar and appealing texts.

Hence, in order to facilitate students' exploration of literary texts, teachers should firstly take steps to equip themselves with knowledge of the texts that are to be 'covered' in class; as well as the selected writers' other works. Familiarity with a wide range of literary works will enhance the teaching skills necessary to help teachers mediate texts. In other words, teachers must first of all inculcate healthy reading habits in themselves by taking the initiative to read and discover for themselves the joys of literature.

Furthermore, instead of depending on the relevant authorities to provide the much needed training, teachers should independently find out what is demanded for successful teaching and learning of literature through consultation with their peers, as well as drawing from resource books or the Internet. As professionals, teachers can also conduct their own action research on a small scale basis to improve their pedagogical practice and meet with the changing needs and demands of their classes.

To overcome the lack of supplementary teaching materials, professional sharing must be encouraged where teachers can make and share relevant materials with each other. Resource banks could thus be set up in schools. Apart from encouraging creativity amongst teachers, such investment is also economical in cost and time in the

long run. The variety of resource materials can certainly help to break the dull routine of the typical literature lesson and make the lessons more enjoyable and motivating for both teachers and students.

As commented by the students in the study, teachers must include activities, especially interactive groupwork or pairwork, which encourage active engagement and meaningful explorations of the texts being read. Such activities must be carried at every reading stage to stimulate, maintain and reinforce students' curiosity and interests throughout the literary encounter. Only through such meaningful activities can the transaction and interaction between the students and the texts can be fully exploited.

Teachers should also consider conducting their own class reading programme, either to go hand-in-hand with or as a follow-up to the Literature in English component, to encourage independent reading among learners. A mini class library, for example, could be set up as an initial exposure where students, during their free time in class, can take their time to explore the many wonders the printed lines in a book have to offer.

Finally, the students' examination-oriented perceptions of and dependency on the 'right' and 'wrong' text interpretation could be greatly reduced by focussing more on the readers' personal responses to the text and the text's significance to the people, places and events in their personal worlds.

5.2.3 Implications for Teacher Educators

It is crucial for teacher educators to get ongoing feedback from teachers with regards to the component's implementation so as to identify common or new problems encountered in the teaching of literature. Teacher feedback could further be obtained

through large-scale study similar to this, which includes interviews with teachers and students as well as observations of literature lessons. This feedback could be used by teacher educators to develop a case-file to serve as a resource for teacher education. This will equip future teachers with strategies to be taken to deal with the identified problems.

As teacher educators play a crucial role in training future classroom frontliners and implementers, literature education must be given as much emphasis and focus as the training for effective language teaching. Apart from the exposure to literature and literature education, inculcating a positive attitude amongst teacher trainees is also vital.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

The findings and conclusions of this study are based only on one case : an urban co-ed school with multi-ethnic students. Hence, the study does not present conclusive results which will enable generalisations about the Literature in English component to be drawn. As such, a similar study could be carried out in a totally different setting, such as in a school in the rural area, in an all boys or all girls school, or in a residential school in other parts of the country, to seek for patterns of similarities or differences in the practice of teaching and learning of literature.

The component, which was supposed to start early this year, was only implemented in May after the texts were circulated. Hence, what was supposed to be read in one academic year was read in five months and this may have to an extent influenced some of the findings in this study. Another study could be conducted as a follow up in the second year of the component's implementation, whereby the initial 'teething problems' in the implementation of the programme have been overcome.

This study was limited to only eight weeks and it was carried out towards the end of the academic year 2000, whereby all except one of the texts had been read by the high proficiency class and the pressure of the final exam was strongly felt by teachers and students alike. Perhaps a long-term study with longer 'researcher residency' which follows the component through the entire school year could be conducted, to see the gradual unfolding impact of literature on the Malaysian ESL learner.

5.4 Conclusion

The full potential of the Literature in English Component in developing students' English Language proficiencies as well as personal and intellectual growth was not exploited in the two Literature in English classes in the study. The findings seem to suggest that the needs of the two key players in the literature classes, namely the teachers and the students, had been neglected. Since the success of any curriculum innovation lies ultimately in their hands, these needs must be met to ensure that the component's aims and objectives are achieved.

As frontliners to the component's implementation, teachers must be comfortable with the literary texts itself so as to be confident in teaching them. Such confidence could only be built through in-service training where they are exposed to the 'why's' and 'how's' of the teaching of literature. Teachers must overcome their anxiety towards the thoughts of the looming examination so the nature and the quality of their students' literary encounter and exploration are not dictated by examination preparations.

Students must be looked at as individuals with different needs, abilities and life experiences. The linguistic and the intellectual needs of these individuals must be met by

both the prescribed literary texts as well as by the teaching and learning experiences. The use of one standard text, however, seem work against this.

While novice ESL students may require teacher guidance and support so the literary encounter is meaningful, they also need to be given enough space to exercise and express their own imagination and creativity. Things were aptly conveyed by Sia Vern who whispered to me, “It’s like your *baju kebaya*-la, [tea]cher, if [it’s] too tight, you cannot move or breathe properly ... but if too loose means, your shape will go to waste !”, as she grinned.

Ultimately, the success of any literature programme is when students begin to read literary texts on their own, not for the sake of any examination, but for their own personal pleasures and fulfillment.