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## USING LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY'S FIRST-YEAR COMMERCE STUDENTS

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There have been innumerable experts and scholars in the field of language teaching who have offered discrepant views concerning the use of literature in language teaching. Literature, however, has never been ignored; it has continued to be widely used in ESL teaching despite the result of various trends (Sage, 1987). With the modern technology of today, language teachers and learners alike are fully equipped with super electronic apparatus which helps students acquire the target language through different resources ranging from TV programs (via satellite), videos, and computers to, in the future perhaps, English language lessons on compact discs. Even so, literature, which is one of the oldest resources in language teaching, should never be overlooked especially for CU's first-year commerce students, who are no literature specialists and may not wish to read literature in English of their own initiative.

### **Benefits**

There are many good reasons why literature should be included in the language curriculum. Apart from it being a "valuable resource" with many uses for both teachers and students, the availability and variety of the texts should also be considered (Moody, 1983). Furthermore, literature will survive through time and changes, unlike many other super high-tech resources. One reason for its survival is "its undeniable capacity to produce pleasure and enjoyment for ordinary readers in many walks of life. "Also, the so called "ordinary reader" applies to a university student as well.

At present, all first-year commerce students at CU are assigned to read literature as part of their English language course requirement. By the use of literature here, we focus specifically on the reading of short literary texts to serve as reinforcement of the non-literary texts that students learn in class. Our students are required to read two to four stories in one semester and they will be tested twice--once before the midterm and the other during the final week--and these literary texts will not be taught nor discussed prior to the tests. Students are free to interpret and reread them on their own; they will be tested on their understanding and analytical skill. Part of each test is a question-answer type. This kind of question-answer test works very suitably since it gives students a chance to discuss their points extensively. One of the most encouraging questions to ask is about the characters in the story. Since these characters are round, they are human and real; therefore, they provide an excellent source of endless analysis. We deem this "external reading" very suitable since the students' private reading at home enables them to study at their own pace and develop their relationship with the text and when they come to the end of the story they will get a feeling of achievement at completing the whole task (Collie & Slater, 1987). Short stories are preferable than longer texts because they offer greater variety so that teachers will have a good chance of finding something that meets students' interests. Holding students' interest is very important. They will pay

good attention only when they find the story fun to read as Sage stated that a good story is a joy which gives both pleasure and knowledge to non-native students, and most stories, whether they deal with serious or comic matters, are simply fun to read and discuss (Sage, 1987). When we come to think about a good story, we usually consider its quality to entertain and the universality of its theme, plot and characters including the linguistic difficulty that meet our students' maturity and language level. So first of all, one of our main tasks here is to provide our students with fun and interesting stories, some of which are the *Chaser* by John Collier, *Art for Heart's Sake* by Rube Goldberg, *Midnight Visitor* by Robert Arthur, *Robbie* by Isaac Asimov, and many others. For our advanced students, we have more challenging stories such as *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and *The Open Window* by Saki, etc. After students finish their reading, they will have a certain input to discuss. Therefore, students will have a chance to improve both their reading and analytical skills, but as for the latter, students are required to take the tests before a text is discussed in class. Specifically, we use good short stories because they give joy and pleasure, which are key factors in the learning process. A good story is simply like a good movie, but language learners may, to a certain extent, benefit more from what they read in print than from what they hear on film. When they read, they will have more chance to study certain linguistic difficulties, more time to ponder over some particular aspects or to get acquainted with certain idioms or phrases. However, first of all, we must provide good literature to motivate students to pursue their reading. Once they are persuaded, students will achieve their reading and learning goals by themselves.

In addition, through using literature as a tool, students will have exposure to "the widest variety of syntax, the richest variation of vocabulary" and also the "illuminations" of human lives, apart from the pleasure and joy of reading. "In no other linguistic genre can non-native students discover so much writing and language skill at work" (Sage, 1987: 7). Literature provides "examples of language in use" and a "genuine context for communication" as long as the literary texts are carefully selected. For commerce students, the study of poetry, drama and Shakespearean plays is suitably excluded since it cannot serve these learners' immediate needs. This

group of students will be assigned to read texts that are up to date and concerned with contemporary situations--the situations which students can enjoy without the need of explanation about historical or cultural background. These will provide the communicative situations from which students can learn to use the language appropriately. Sage observes that through literature, sooner or later, students are exposed to nearly every kind of communicative technique speakers use. He says literature displays a wider range of communication methods than any other single ESL teaching element (Sage, 1987). Brumfit also shares the same notion on this particular point. He writes that literary texts often contain within them a number of different varieties of English; thus, they can be extremely useful in sensitizing learners of English to linguistic variation (Brumfit, 1985).

### Problems

Despite the extensive analysis of the benefits and uses of literature in English language courses, many objections are raised, as stated at the beginning. One of the very first objections mentioned by many critics about the invalidity of using literature concerns students' lack of motivation. Students may find reading literature boring and a waste of time since it does not meet their demands or interests. When students find the language of literature of no use to them, they tend to learn nothing from it, naturally. Moreover, in order to enjoy and understand the texts, readers must possess a certain command of the language. These two objections emphasize particularly the learners themselves, but as for the teacher, it is no easy task to find useful and appropriate texts (Hill, 1986). This problem does not apply to all English language teachers as long as they have access to resources--good libraries in their community.

Other problems which are, perhaps, most seriously and extensively discussed, are the linguistic difficulties and cultural differences that can mar the learners' understanding. Scott (1965), apart from many others, puts an emphasis on learners' language proficiency. He makes it clear that second language learners require a certain language ability to appreciate and fully understand literary texts. According to Scott, "the adequate realization of literary texts demands a linguistic competence which second language learners perceptibly lack"

(Scott, 1965). This is true when students may have to stop and look up words in a dictionary because they simply cannot understand the text. Being interrupted by lexical problems, students lack concentration and certainly, they cannot enjoy or appreciate, let alone understand, what they have to "struggle laboriously" through. Some students will learn very little, or next to nothing, from the task. Scott compares these students' approach to the literary selection to "the child's approach to the jig-saw puzzle" (Scott 1965:295). The problem of linguistic difficulties seem to go together with cultural perspectives for language and culture seem inseparable. The cultural differences can affect learners' understanding of the literary texts. As McKay says: "literature often reflects culture and this concerns the conceptual ability of students" (McKay, 1987: 193).

Though the above comments may sound valid, the problems are not unavoidable. As for linguistic complexities, we simply need, as stated earlier, an ample access to resources. There is a huge number of texts written by many famous authors to choose from. The availability of literary texts will provide a good solution. Just find the literature that suits our students' language ability and background knowledge. Texts which contain complicated cultural aspects should be avoided. Even though the texts may contain certain lexical items that students do not understand, they can manage, in some ways, to understand the total message. So far as they pursue the story with a realization about what is going on, they can guess the meaning from the context, which seems to be the way native speakers learn their words. Fowler indicates that native speakers explicitly learn the meaning of about 90% of the words they know from meeting them in context and not from the dictionary. He points out that when native speakers are confronted with an unknown word, they tend to make a guess at its meaning based perhaps on its linguistic context or what is going on around about them, rather than look it up (Fowler, 1971).

It seems inevitable that some students may find the texts difficult no matter how easy they are. As regards this problem, many critics agree that linguistic will be no great barrier provided that the story gives enough pleasure to engage the emotions of the reader. As Reeves says the reader will continue to read on in spite of language

difficulties so long as he or she wants to find out what will happen next (Reeves, 1986). On the same point, Hill comments that students sometimes need the stimulation of an exciting story to encourage them to read on (Hill, 1986). To find out what happened to the hero or heroine will motivate students to pursue their reading. We can say that students' curiosity plays an important role in their learning process. Readers, generally, will be curious to know the outcome of the story as long as the story is exciting and its ending is unpredictable. Some of the literary texts we have assigned students to read are *The Hasty Act* by Marc Brandel and *A Case of Suspicion* by Ed Wallace. Neither of the two stories' endings are predictable. Students are unlikely to guess the outcome unless they have completed the whole story. They will find the anticlimax of the stories only at the end. Being unable to predict what will happen next, students' attention will be fixed on the text while the story unfolds. Then, they not only enjoy the story, but also learn (the language) when they read.

Another problem that should not be overlooked when we come to using literature in language courses is the availability of the translated version of English literature in the native language (Marckwardt, 1978). Such is the case here in Thailand: students can find many well-known English literary texts translated into Thai.

Many times, we may find that a lot of famous stories, if not translated into the native language, are simplified. For second language learners, this simplification may help them to a certain extent, but for some proficient students, they may find it of little help in their language development since it seems to produce a monotonous product in which information becomes "diluted" (McKay, 1987). In other words, to some students, reading a simplified literary text is simply like tasting a dish of spicy food from which all the spices are removed.

Using extracts (for very long texts) also has some shortcomings. From the extracts, the students will not get the whole picture of the story. So the pleasure of completing the work and enjoying bits of detail will be missing. Collie and Slater point out that students will be deprived of the satisfaction of reading should they be exposed to only "bite-sized chunks." Moreover, there are some literary features that cannot be adequately portrayed by a short excerpt (Collie & Slater, 1987).

## Conclusion

More than half of the total students in one class (17 out of 30), according to personal interview, enjoyed reading the assigned literary texts. And about 90% of the students improved their language, to a greater or lesser extent, which is explicitly shown in their test scores. Though some (11 out of 30) found the texts a bit complicated and misinterpreted the texts, the students on the whole liked the stories well enough. Only 6 students (20%) felt they needed to put in a lot of effort to tackle the texts.

It can be concluded that students enjoy good literature even when they may not be able to understand the text perfectly (Short, 1983). As long as the chosen literature is contemporary and universal, students of majors other than English are not restricted to reading texts or articles in their field. Commerce students do not have to confine themselves to reading merely about the world's business and economics. We simply need literature with modern language, modern idioms and modern situations--a situation that is understandable to our students who share similar age, maturity and knowledge of the world. Our chosen stories contain very little (or no) cultural complexities and language

difficulties. They, obviously, accord with our students' language level for the criteria we use in selecting the texts, including the length and difficulty of the materials, the plots, the universality and cultural issues.

In sum, the benefits of using literature in English language teaching far outnumber the problems. Our first-year commerce students seem to have very little problem coping with the assigned tasks. This integration of literature and English language teaching contributes to the students' development of their reading, and consequently, broadens their knowledge and horizons. They can improve their language skills any time, anywhere at low cost and with no electronic equipment required. Learning a language can be done through various means--old-fashioned and modern, with or without super technology--to reach the same goal which is acquiring the target language, but one point that is worth quoting here is: "ESL teachers must determine the linguistic benefits of studying literature in an ESL context. The rewards are significant and numerous. Literature in English is English at its best" (Sage, 1987: 6).

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