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Retaining Literature in the Indonesian ELT Curriculum

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Abstract

This article presents serious independent arguments why literature needs to be retained in the Indonesian ELT (English Language Teaching) curriculum. In general, ELT curriculum nowadays seems to neglect the importance of literature since the introduction of the communicative approach. Three aspects are presented in connection with why the notion may need immediate application: (1) literature brings many advantages to Indonesian ELT learners; (2) literature can be used to teach critical thinking skills; and (3) critical thinking can be used to promote tolerance. This article is developed based on mainly the ideas of literature teaching proposed by Collie and Slater (1987), Lazar (1993), and Ghosn (2002). Hence, critical thinking and tolerance are values not getting serious attention in educational processes in this country even though these values have been included in the National educational objectives for Indonesia.

Keywords: Literature, critical thinking, ELT, tolerance.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the widely neglected issues in ELT (the term ELT herein refers to EFL, ESL, TEFL and TESOL) is literature. This may be due to the popularity of communicative approaches. Literature, however, is believed to be beneficial for ELT learners, and ELT students can benefit from the role of literature in promoting, among other things, language acquisition and language proficiency. The potential benefits of introducing literature in ELT classrooms seem to have been forgotten in recent ELT curriculum. The examination of ELT textbooks from the 2006 and 2013 curriculum used for teaching ESL to Indonesian senior secondary school students is in favour of this proposition; only books aimed for students majoring in language programmes contained literary works.

This article therefore attempts to present various benefits of including literature in the context of teaching ELT in Indonesia. Apart from such benefits as exposing learners

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to authentic materials and introducing them to different cultures, retaining literature in the Indonesian ELT curriculum can also be used to promote critical thinking skills amongst learners. It is also argued that the teaching of critical thinking is needed to make learners aware of tolerance, which is a value that is very important for a pluralist society such as Indonesia, but it seems to be ignored in education now.

2. LITERATURE IN ELT

2.1 The Benefits of Teaching Literature in the ELT Classroom

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the importance of teaching literature in both first and second/foreign language settings (e.g. Akyel & Yalcin, 1990; Brumfit, 1981; Campbell, 1987; Elliot, 1990; Shelton-Strong, 2012; Talib, 1992). Regarding promoting a student-centred approach in ELT methodology, using literature may facilitate this method. Students, for instance, can be assigned to work in groups, discussing then presenting the motivation of the protagonist in a fictional work or how the story could end differently if the protagonist did not succeed in pursuing his/her goal. Such activity is supported by Van (2009) who argues that “the study of literature is amenable to student-centred activities that offer opportunities for collaborative group work such as reader-theatre, drama, and other projects where English is the common medium of authentic communication” (p. 8).

The promotion of a student-centred approach is not the only advantage of using literature in ELT. Due to the richness of characters in literature which represent, among others, the writer’s imagination, portraits of social life, and the suffering of humans living their lives, the use of literature can have many benefits for learners of English. There are at least four serious noticeable advantages why literature needs to be retained in Indonesian ELT. Collie and Slater (1987) and Lazar (1993) argue that literature can help learners understand another culture (cultural enrichment) and provide stimulus for language acquisition (language enrichment). Besides this, as most literary works are not written for special use in the classroom, literature can expose learners to authentic materials. Finally, another advantage of introducing literature in the ELT class is encouraging learners to talk about their opinions on and feelings about the characters in the literary works they study.

A fictional work is a representation of a culture as it has a setting. Values considered normal or even noble in a particular setting may be different from those in a setting where the reader resides, hence people’s perception of values need not be the same. Sexual orientation, for example, is still a big issue in most Eastern and predominantly Muslim countries, like Indonesia. Similarly, female circumcision - often referred to as genital mutilation - is considered to be against humanity in Western countries while it is a common practice in a country like Nigeria and even in Indonesia until recently. Social interaction among community members is also different from culture to culture. These aspects, which to a large degree are represented in works of fiction, may enrich the cultural exposure of students. Such exposure to different cultures can broaden the horizons of students and importantly make them appreciate different values from different cultures.

Regarding language enrichment, using literature in ELT is believed to be able to enrich language acquisition by students. This has been proved by several authors (e.g.

Janopoulos, 1986; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Mason & Krashen, 1997). A study by Lao and Krashen (2000), for example, showed that the experimental group, first year students majoring in translation in a university in Hong Kong, who were assigned to read six fiction books in one semester gained more significantly in vocabulary growth and reading rate than the comparison group, who were not assigned to read novels. They also reported that “experimental subjects also indicated that they were more interested in pleasure reading as a means of improving their English than they were before taking the class, and felt that the literature class would help them in future study” (pp. 267-268).

What differed significantly between the experimental and the comparison group from the study by Lao and Krashen (2000) may be due to the experimental group’s exposure to ‘interesting’ authentic materials, supporting the third advantage of using literature in ELT. Reading novels could be more interesting than reading non-fiction, so this increases students’ motivation to improve their English. That students’ motivation increases when exposed to fiction as authentic materials is also proved by Peacock (1997) who conducted a study at a South Korean university EFL institute. Among authentic materials he chose were poems and American pop songs, which can be categorised as literature. He reports that using authentic materials significantly increased students’ motivation. The results might be different if the authentic materials used in the studies above were not as interesting as novels, poems, or pop songs.

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether literature is suitable for low level EFL learners. An issue arising in the light of this proposition is: *Is the language used in literary texts easy to understand, especially for low levels?* This is because literary works can contain unusual vocabulary. ‘Unusual’ in this context means that the words or language expressions in the literature are seldom found in other genres of writing such as in newspaper articles or college textbooks for international students. These unusual expressions are sometimes deliberately used by the authors to create metaphorical effects. Besides this, material that is difficult may lower the motivation of the learners so that learning objectives are not achieved. Novels, short stories and poems can contain language that is complex in structure, also. These are all factors that could possibly inhibit the introduction of literature to ELT beginners.

Responding to the abovementioned issues, Lazar (1994) argues that “despite their very limited proficiency in the language, students need the challenge and stimulation of addressing themes and topics which have adult appeal, and which encourage them to draw on their personal opinions and experiences” (p. 116). The idea of encouraging ELT learners to draw on their personal opinions and experiences seems interesting, and it is in agreement with the fourth advantage of using literature in ELT and with the notion of promoting critical thinking amongst learners through literature. This is supported by Ghosn (2002) who argues that teaching literature in ELT contributes to developing critical thinking amongst learners and to developing character aspects that are favourable for academic achievement and for success in life. She states:

...Third, literature can promote academic literacy and thinking skills, and prepare children for the English-medium instruction. Fourth, literature can function as a change-agent: good literature deals with some aspects of the human condition, and can thus contribute to the emotional development of the child, and foster positive interpersonal and intercultural attitudes. (Ghosn, 2002, p. 173)

However, even though literature can be introduced to lower levels, the argument about the gap between their language proficiency and difficult language expressions, structure and vocabulary in literature needs to be taken into account. Therefore, the reading materials chosen for study need to be selected to match the English proficiency of the learners. Hence teachers may need to introduce graded readers. Hill (2008) writes that “graded readers are books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax, the former determined by frequency and usefulness and the latter by simplicity” (p. 185).

Apart from avoiding the possibly inhibiting factors mentioned above, adjusting the literature to the language proficiency will help learners have a smooth transition, hence preventing frustration and facilitating a gradual process of language acquisition and critical thinking. At the same time, the students can still enjoy the beauty of the story. When exploited well in the ELT class, this may bring many similar benefits as previously mentioned. Besides this, studies on promoting critical thinking through critical reading by using literary works - as can be seen in the sub-section that follows - have proved that gradual progress needs to be facilitated. Graded readers certainly may be the answer to this issue.

Assigning ELT students to start to read literary works and engage in thought-provoking activities based on those works may be one of the answers as to how Indonesian ELT can be improved. Literature was once the focus of foreign language teaching in Indonesia during the Dutch colonial era. World literature was taught to MULO (Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs) students in language classes. MULO was comparable to junior secondary school at present. The teachers asked their students to read literary works and give responses (Agung, 1993). Agung, who was educated at MULO during the Dutch colonial era, wrote in his biography:

Di kelas empat pelajaran bahasa Belanda, Inggris, Perancis dan Jerman tidak lagi menyangkut soal gramatika atau penterjemahan dari bahasa Belanda ke bahasa asing lainnya atau sebaliknya. Kurikulum dalam bidang ini mencakup pelajaran mengenai perkembangan sastra (literature) dalam keempat bahasa tersebut yang sangat menarik bagi saya. Dengan cara inilah saya mengenal sejarah sastra Eropa Barat (Belanda, Jerman, Perancis) dan mengetahui sekedarnya wakil masing-masing periode perkembangan sastra itu dengan karya-karya mereka, misalnya saya mengenal nama penyair Belanda Vondel dari abad ke-16 sampai nama Douwes Dekker (Multatuli) dan Couperus dan lain-lain. [Translation: In grade four, the language courses such as Dutch, English, French and German were no longer about grammar or translation from Dutch to other foreign languages or vice versa. The curriculum, which covered the development of literature in those four languages, was very interesting for me. This taught me about the history of literature in Western Europe (The Netherlands, Germany, and France) and I learnt about representatives of each development period of literature through their works. For example, I learnt from the 16th century Dutch poet Vondel up until Douwes Dekker (Multatuli) and Couperus and others. (Agung, 1993, p. 56)]

Exposure to world literature was also experienced by Lien, the wife of a former Indonesian vice president, who attended Dutch education at VHO (Voorbereidend

Hoger Onderwijs). This was a two-year school after junior secondary school. In her biography, written by Janarto (2000), it noted that:

Untuk pelajaran bahasa Inggris, misalnya, Lien tidak hanya diajar oleh Mrs. Bowdies mendalami grammar atau structure semata, tapi juga diminta mengapresiasi buku-buku sastra klasik dunia. Untuk itu, diantaranya Lien diharuskan membaca karya-karya pujangga William Shakespeare dan berbagai sastrawan besar lain. Sekaligus ia diminta membuat semacam book report, yakni risalah yang berisi ringkasan berikut ihwal karya sastra klasik tertentu. Lakon Hamlet karya Shakespeare, misalnya, telah ia bahas dan kupas habis. Masih pula ia diminta untuk menceritakan kembali isi lakon terkenal itu di depan kelas. Tak mengherankan, para murid VHO dikenal jago berbahasa Inggris dan Belanda. [Translation: For English lessons, for example, Mrs Bowdies not only taught Lien grammar or structure but also classical literature from the world. Therefore, she had to read the works of William Shakespeare and other great writers. She was also asked to make book reports, to summarize what she had read. She, for instance, deeply analysed Shakespeare's Hamlet. As well as this, she was asked to retell that famous play in front of the class. It is no wonder that VHO's students had a very good command of English and Dutch. (Janarto, 2000, p. 18)]

Compared to Indonesian junior high school students nowadays, I doubt that they are being asked to read world literature and discuss its contents. They may not even be asked to read recent popular literature like Harry Potter. That is why many people claim that junior high school students during the Dutch colonial era already had a good command of the English language compared to recent junior, even senior secondary school students. Also, the EFL curriculum in the teacher training and pedagogy courses does not seem to optimise the potential role of literature to improve the teaching programs for English. That is one reason why when they become secondary school teachers, they do not optimise the potential for using literary works for teaching related activities nor promote the reading of literary works in their classrooms, they just do not know about it.

2.2 Using Literature to Promote ELT Students' Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking is unique since almost all academics, especially in the Western countries, know what it is and know when their students' works are not critical, but there is no agreement on its definition. A study by Moore (2011) looked at the elusive concept of critical thinking. Among 17 academics from different fields of study in an Australian university in his research, no one proposed the same or a similar definition of critical thinking. Books on critical thinking also propose different definitions. Two scholars who are actively involved in thinking about critical thinking are Paul and Elder (2006). Their conception of critical thinking is interesting since it touches the issues of egocentrism and socio-centrism, thus relating critical thinking beyond the school/university subjects. Paul and Elder (2006) wrote:

Critical thinking is defined as self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and

problem-solving abilities, as well as a commitment to overcome one's native egocentrism and socio-centrism. (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. xxiii)

Their definition argues that critical thinking enables one to see something from a wider perspective and avoid seeing something only from one's own perspective. This seems important in academic and social life because decision making is not solely based on personal assumptions. Their definition also suggests that one can correct one's own thinking, hence arguing that critical thinkers are not rigid in their own beliefs as old beliefs may be misleading.

As mentioned above, literature has been believed to be beneficial in ELT since one of its benefits is purported to be the development of critical thinking. Promoting critical thinking needs to be learnt in stages as it seems impossible for learners to be critical without being taught how to do so, and some studies have proved this proposition (Commeyras, 1990; McDonald, 2004; Urlaub, 2012). These empirical studies showed that promoting students' critical thinking skills could be successful if it was conducted in stages. One of the most interesting aspects of the studies is that they used literary works to promote critical thinking. Such studies may fill in gaps in the literature because, so far, very few studies have investigated the role of literary works in promoting critical thinking skills amongst ELT learners. These studies are therefore selected and reviewed in this article.

Urlaub (2012), for example, conducted experimental research in an L2 (second language) setting where American students were learning German. Her study attempted to find out whether training in reading comprehension strategy, generating questions, benefited ESL (English as a Second Language) students to improve their critical reading/thinking. As the source of discussion, she used German short stories titled *Das Brot* and *Nachts Schlafen die Ratten doch* by Wolfgang Borchert. The study, which was conducted at the Language Centre at Stanford University, focused on the reading comprehension strategy for acquisition of self-generating questions for an experimental group (n=14) and on the strategy similar to teaching traditional L2 literature for the control group (n=7). Pre-test, treatment and post-test measured the participants' ability to give a short critical response essay. She created a rating rubric ranging from 0 to 3 in which number 3 showed that the learners were capable of critical analysis. Her results showed that the experimental group's training was more effective than the control group's traditional training. In doing her study, Urlaub showed the students in the experimental group how to use a scaffold.

The study by Urlaub (2012) used a scaffold with 4 stages: (i) teaching learners to evaluate components in the literary text such as characters, settings, actions and objects, (ii) teaching the learners strategy to self-generate questions, (iii) giving examples of how the strategy was used, and (iv) teaching the learners the strategy to present critical responses to the text. Even though the study involved only a small number of participants, it showed that facilitating students' critical thinking skills needed stages. Thus it can be assumed that the success in encouraging critical thinking by the students was partly due to the scaffold, apart from using literary works in the study.

Using literature to promote critical thinking skills amongst students also seems to work well for young learners. McDonald (2004) conducted a case study with 10-11 year-old primary school students in Sydney, Australia. The students came from different countries, many of whose native language was not English, and the study was balanced in terms of gender. The study used a novel titled *I am Susannah* by the award-

winning Australian novelist, Libby Gleeson. In doing the study, McDonald introduced critical pedagogy approaches such as appraising characterization from a ‘different’ perspective, contrasting gender characterization and presenting an alternative (feminist) discourse. However, before the students were exposed with critical thinking activities, they were exposed to a non-critical pedagogy in order that they could “develop classroom talk which could be seen to construct moves towards critical reading” (p. 19). Non-critical pedagogy adopted was similar to the reader-response approaches of literature teaching in which the students were, for instance, encouraged to give personal responses to the text, asked to relate their understanding of the main character of the story and encouraged to share empathy with the characters.

In the study by McDonald (2004), the classroom talk was recorded. The transcript presented in the research report shows how uncritical thinking pedagogy was encouraged and how this led to the pedagogy of critical thinking. Even though the study did not show how the researcher measured the students’ development of critical thinking skills, it, nevertheless, indicates that the use of literature can promote critical thinking, and also how non-critical thinking activities can be used as a transition to critical thinking activities. Again, this indicates that literary works could have a beneficial influence on the promotion of (young) learners’ critical thinking skills if the scaffold is adequately facilitated.

Another study that supports the role of literary works in promoting students’ critical thinking skills and argues for providing a scaffold to encourage the development of skills was done by Commeyras (1990). The study aimed to “provide a convincing example to illustrate the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension and to show that critical thinking can be promoted in everyday classroom instruction using regular classroom materials” (p. 201) and adopted an analysis of a critical thinking reading lesson. It involved eight elementary school students in Boston and the lesson was videotaped. The reading lesson was taken from a book titled *The Death of Evening Star*. Three instructions were given: (1) asked the students to read the story for comprehension, (2) asked them to complete a written assignment by preparing evidence for a hypothesis and (3) asked them to discuss the story. The scripts presented in the research report showed the students’ progress in critical thinking.

Other literature has also reported that using literary works to promote critical thinking can be successful with children. Pioneering work was done by Matthew Lipman, who created Philosophy for Children (P4C) in the 1970s. Lipman’s P4C program uses stories (children’s novels) to promote critical inquiry by children. Other authors (e.g. Aubrey, Ghent, & Kanira, 2012; Costello, 2000; Fisher, 2008; Lam, 2012) have proved that P4C is effective to promote children’s critical thinking. For example, a study by Lam (2012) reports those children in the experimental group in Hong Kong who were taught using P4C performed better than the control group in reasoning skills, which is an integral part of critical thinking.

Inspired by the effectiveness of literary works in promoting critical thinking, Fisher (2008), who argues that stories contain the elements of narrative constructions being potential for interpretation, reflection and discussion, proposes activities related to fictional works. According to Fisher (ibid), the elements of narrative construction that could promote critical thinking are contexts, temporal order, particular events, intentions, choices, meanings and the telling. The questions related to contexts refer to the historical, narrative and social contexts of the story, for instance, *What is the*

relationship between the characters? (social context). While temporal order questions ask about what happened in the beginning, middle, or end of the story, questions about particular events focussing on events or episodes in the story. Intentions involves questions asking what the characters in the story think, want or believe, and meanings is concerned with the meanings in the story (e.g. *What kind of story is it?*). Questions probing choices and the telling involve the choice of actions taken by the characters in the story and whether the story is told well.

Apart from stories (short stories and novels), Fisher (2008) also argues that poetry is another literary product that can be used to encourage children's critical thinking skills. He suggests some simple poetry-based activities that a teacher can apply in the classroom. The activities start from reading the poetry aloud, followed by asking students to think and reflect on it. Then students are asked to mention interesting findings from it as ideas for discussion. The teacher can then invite or ask one of the students to comment, and then invite others to give responses. The process can be repeated and also the discussion can be expanded by asking more questions.

The strategies of Fisher (2008) seem ideal to promote children's critical thinking skills as they explore various elements of critical thinking such as questions asking for viewpoints or perspectives (*What kind of story is it?*), alternatives (*What choices or decisions had to be made?*) and clarifications (e.g. *What does 'once upon a time' mean?*). These three elements belong to the category of critical thinking questions (Paul, 1990). The strategies, however, are likely to work, not only for children but also for teenagers and adults. Indonesian students of junior and senior secondary school may get advantages from questions like these because at least they can start to think and express their opinions, apart from practising their speaking skills. With slight modifications, these strategies could be used for advanced ELT learners as well.

2.3 Literature, Critical Thinking and Tolerance

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the importance of literature in ELT. As mentioned, apart from giving manifold benefits for language learners such as culture and authentic materials, literature can also be used to teach critical thinking. When ELT is infused with critical thinking pedagogy, there would be two advantages. Firstly, students may improve their language proficiency. Secondly, their critical thinking skills may be enhanced. However, as has been mentioned literary criticism is getting unpopular in ELT curriculum due to possibly the influence of the communicative approach. As regards this, Ghosn (2002) states that using literature in the ELT classroom has potential for promoting empathy and tolerance, which could decrease prejudice; unfortunately, recent ELT programmes have very little attention to this aspect.

Connected to the Indonesian context, the academic judgment by Ghosn (2002) seems very suitable to Indonesian conditions nowadays in which there are still many people who are not very tolerant of differences. Living in a very pluralistic society like Indonesia, people need to respect and appreciate differences, including differences in ideology, opinions and/or viewpoints. As reported by Indonesian media, conflicts concerning racial problems and violence respecting religious beliefs sometimes happen in the country. For example, a liberal Canadian Muslim activist Irshad Manji was attacked by Islamic hardliners/read fanatics during her book discussion in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (www.thejakartapost.com). For those being against the book, it was believed

to be far away from mainstream Islamic teachings. This is absolutely based on the attackers' assumption as they had never read Manji's book. The incident appears to be uncivilized, and it is very far from 'tolerant' which is one of our educational objectives. Dialogue is not appreciated by these militants. These fanatics are not taught to counter argument with argument. Differences of opinion usually end up with a physical attack.

Introducing critical thinking may help to bring about tolerant attitudes amongst students since in critical thinking students are taught how to see a problem from different viewpoints as noted in Paul and Elder's (2006) conception of critical thinking above. Different viewpoints can then be examined, evaluated and criticised in order to make sound academic judgments. One form of critical thinking activities is dialogical critical thinking. During dialogical critical thinking, students are asked to comment on somebody else's comment (this is also part of a poetry-based activity proposed by Fisher (2008) above). The students get involved in a dialogue to find out what others think and feel, consider various perspectives, share ideas, and reflect on their own thinking. This is done with a spirit of respect, so that the students will learn that there are actually many perspectives of seeing a problem, and having a different opinion is not problematic at all. This may help to create tolerance at the end and certainly supports the objectives of education in Indonesia. Besides this, the students are expected to learn not to be easily manipulated by hardliners with extremist political propaganda.

With regard to Ghosn's (2002) ideas, promoting tolerance can be done through the teaching of literature. Through human suffering and the experiences of its characters, literature teaches people to be more humane, promoting empathy and respect. Besides this, in the context of ELT, literature brings many very positive effects in such aspects as language proficiency and critical thinking. As mentioned, studies have proven that promoting critical thinking can be done through literature. Conditions in Indonesia need people who can appreciate different points of view, thus promoting tolerance. Therefore, retaining literature in the Indonesian ELT curriculum may help bring about three very important positive effects: (1) better language proficiency, (2) improved ability in critical thinking, and (3) increased tolerance.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Conclusions

The literature has reported that there is a strong relationship between the teaching of literature and the development of critical thinking and enhanced tolerance. Literature can give a lot of benefits to ELT learners such as language enrichment, culture enrichment and authentic materials. The teaching of literature can also improve learners' critical thinking skills as stories can be used to explore students' viewpoints or perspectives; thus encouraging them to voice their opinions and to build up their self-confidence. Besides this, critical thinking can promote tolerance; this can be done through dialogical critical thinking activities. In a dialogical critical thinking activity, students are given a (controversial) topic and asked to comment; a teacher needs to further explore their comments and make sure that their beliefs are not actually only based on wrong assumptions and fears. All of this has important implication for retaining literature in the Indonesia ELT curriculum because both critical thinking and

tolerance are two qualities included as educational objectives in the Regulations of the Republic of Indonesia Number 17, Year 2010 Regarding Educational Management and Administration.

3.2 Recommendations

The big issue emerging from the conclusion above relates specifically to Indonesian ELT textbooks and teachers. Textbooks need to include activities or tasks promoting critical thinking skills, while Indonesian school teachers need to understand how to teach literature and promote critical thinking through literary-based activities. It can thus be suggested that English textbook writers (and/or publishers) need to include activities or tasks that will facilitate the development of critical thinking skills amongst students, and Indonesian schoolteachers need further training in this field. The teachers also need to be reminded that one of the educational objectives in Indonesia is producing graduates who are, among other things, critical and tolerant. Criticality is a skill needed in this globally changing world, and tolerance is needed to sustain democracy in the country and to curb violence as a result of differences in our very pluralistic country. Retaining literature in the Indonesian ELT curriculum therefore may be one of the ways to implement this objective of education and to improve the quality of our human resources in order to be able to compete with other people in the world.

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