

Literary Texts as the Material In Teaching Reading Comprehension

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Abstract. *In selecting the appropriate literary texts to be used as the material in teaching reading comprehension, we have to consider a number of criteria. The criteria for valid literary texts to be used in teaching reading comprehension are the types of the literary texts, the students' proficiency level, and the themes that will suit the students' interest. Still, the teacher's creativity in developing the material is still needed to support the achievement of the teaching-learning goals. This paper is intended for selecting the suitable literary material for teaching reading comprehension for the third year of SMU students. This paper begins with the discussion of the purposes of using literary texts in teaching reading comprehension. It is followed by the nature of literary texts and the nature of reading comprehension. Later in this paper the criteria of texts selection will also be discussed.*

Key terms: *material, Literary text, Language competence, Literary competence*

Introduction

Generally speaking, whenever we discuss about language teaching, there are always elements of literature for literature is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching. In fact, in language teaching, literature can help the students master the vocabulary and the grammar of the language as well as the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A number of activities that involve the students' application of these skills can be developed with the reading of literary works.

Up to now, in reading classes, the literary texts are still considered not in line with the reading comprehension objectives. Some teachers claimed that reading literary texts is a waste of time as they do not display the latest up-to-date information like scientific and popular texts. The others argue that literary texts bring confusion when it comes to understanding the contents or even in finding the subject matter of what the passage is all about. Actually, literary texts offer a lot of advantages in reading comprehension teaching compared to the other reading materials. Seeing that the current materials for reading comprehension based on the 1994 SMU syllabus are lacking of literary texts, in this paper, I suggest that we should give literary texts a bigger portion. The teachers can use written literary works, like short stories or even poems as the materials in reading comprehension.

Another problem in using the literary texts as the material in the reading comprehension teaching is setting the criteria for selecting the appropriate models of literary work to be used. Seeing that not every written literary work is appropriate for teaching reading comprehension, in this paper I will discuss about setting the criteria for selecting literary texts that will be used in teaching reading comprehension. These criteria include the text types, the students' proficiency levels, and the themes.

This paper is meant for the intermediate-level students, particularly the third year SMU students. The reason why I choose intermediate-level students is because in interpreting a literary text one is required to have enough language competence and literary competence.

The Advantages of Literary Texts

The first thing that we have to discuss is about the advantages of using literary texts as the material in reading comprehension. We maybe wonder and ask these questions: Why do we choose literary texts as the material? And what are the advantages of literary texts compared to the other materials?

Stern (1987:47) states that literary texts offer many advantages to be used as the material in reading comprehension. *Linguistically, literary texts can help the students to improve their reading comprehension besides helping them to acquire new vocabularies within the texts. Culturally, literary texts provide the knowledge and understanding of others' cultures within the content of the texts. And personally, literary texts help the students to gain better understanding with themselves as individuals as well as their relationships with the people around them, making them to be more mature and thoughtful readers.*

First of all, the main reason of choosing literary texts as the material in reading comprehension is for improvements. Iser (1978:147) claims that *all the elements of literature – plot, character, setting, and theme - can help the students to promote their reading comprehension by presenting special challenges to readers that demand their learning to put into practice specific reading strategies, and by helping carry students along in their reading.*

Another reason for choosing literary texts as the material is for students' enjoyments. This is based on the affective theory that claimed that the learning process would be easier if the learners enjoy what they learn. Literary texts are supposed to give pleasures to students because they mainly deal with interesting human issues. High School students will be more interested in love themes, for an instance, than scientific ones. When the students like what they read, reading comprehension will be easier to achieve because unconsciously they will develop their reading habit when they enjoy the materials.

Literary texts can also help the students understand the target language's culture as well as help them understand their own culture better by comparing them. The students will be able to understand how

different cultures perceive something differently and what values are considered to be universal. Carter (1991:2) states that *literature expresses the most significant ideas and sentiments of human beings and teaching literature represents a means by which students can be put in touch with a range of expression – often of universal value and validity – over historical periods*. Displaying a literary text within a cultural model enables the students to understand and appreciate the differences of cultures and ideologies.

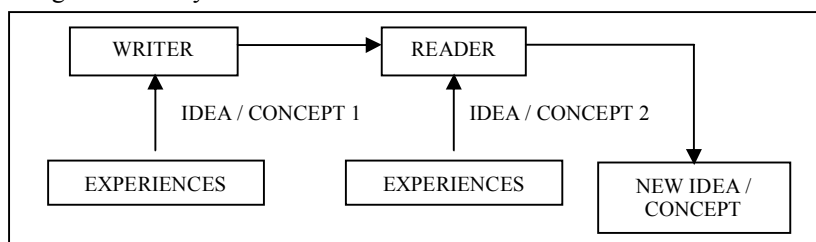
Finally, reading literary texts encourage the students' mental growths. When the students are able to appreciate and evaluate complex cultural and ideologies understanding, they will realize how they function within their society and culture. The students will be able to formulate their own philosophical concepts based from their experiences and from the collective experience of human beings lies in the literary texts. Brumfit (1979:119) says that *the process of reading is a process of meaning creation by integrating one's own needs, understanding, and expectations with a written text*.

The Nature of Literary Texts

Literary texts are written work of art. That is how if we discuss about the context of interpretation of literary texts, unlike an ordinary reading text where there is only one possible interpretation to be found, we have to realize that the nature of literary texts is polyinterpretable. It means that there simply is not a single meaning for the interpretation of a literary text. An interpretation of a literary text may differ from an individual to another. These differences in interpretation are because each individual student has different personal perception and experience that influence in his/her understanding about a particular context. Of course, there is only a single meaning in a literary text's plain sense or what is written literally, but there are plurality of meanings in its implications or what is beyond the text.

In judging these variety of interpretation, we have to keep in mind that there are no right or wrong terms in the interpretation of a literary work. It's just the matter of sensibility. It means that as the teacher we cannot judge the students' perspectives but we should try to analyze whether it is drawn based on logical or sensible ways of thinking or not.

The interpretation process of a literary text might be explained diagrammatically as follows:



From the diagram above we can see that in the literary interpretation process, the writer is trying to express his/her idea or concept which is based from his/her own experiences to the reader through the text. The reader also has his own idea or concept that is also based on his/her experiences. In interpreting the text, the reader compares his/her idea or concept to the writer's. The process results to a new idea or concept called the interpretation.

However, this process of interpretation requires the reader's creative imagination combined with his/her background knowledge in order to produce a sensible interpretation. Iser (1978:22) states that *the meaning of the literary work remains related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it together.*

The Nature of Reading Comprehension

Mary Finocchiaro (1974:77) says that *reading is an activity of getting meanings from printed or written materials.* Here, we can see that reading, as the activity of inferring meanings, is a thinking or a cognitive process for in getting meanings one is obliged to use his/her mind.

Comprehension, according to Kennedy (1981:41) *is the ability of students to find, analyze, understand, and interpret ideas.* In comprehending a written text the students have to connect their new knowledge with their existed knowledge and the facts.

There are certain factors that have essential roles in reading comprehension. They are the understanding of the vocabulary and the understanding of the main ideas. When these factors are fulfilled reading comprehension will progress smoothly as the students will not find any difficulties in relating their new acquired knowledge with their background knowledge.

Criteria for Texts Selection

In selecting the appropriate literary texts as the material in reading comprehension, we have to consider important factors: the types, the language proficiency levels and the themes of the texts that we are going to select.

The first step in selecting the most appropriate text for reading comprehension is deciding what genres to concentrate on. We have to decide what kind of literary text that suits best since not all types literary texts are suitable to be used as the material in reading comprehension teaching. There are novel, short story, poetry, song, and drama. In reading comprehension, short stories, songs, and poems are recommended because, unlike novels and dramas, they will not take a long time to read and provide variety in ideas and themes.

We also have to be sure whether the students are proficient enough to understand the language of the text. According to Carter *level of language difficulty has to be considered because the access will be*

restricted if the students cannot attain the basic level of comprehension. A difficulty in understanding the literal meaning of a literary text will also decrease the students' motivation in reading literary texts. It is recommended to select literary texts which are not too far beyond the students' proficiency levels.

Next, in selecting the suitable text we also have to be sure that the students will be able to know what message the writer of the text is trying to say. It is not recommended to select a literary text that has an unpopular topic for the students because the students would not be able to interpret the content of the text. Here, we should select the themes that suit the students' interests or suit the themes in the given syllabus context. For example we can select a short story about forest destruction in the context of environment.

Conclusion

Using the literary texts as the materials in reading comprehension brings many advantages to the students. First, it will make them improve their reading comprehension skills. Second, literary texts introduce foreign cultures' aspects and ideas to the students. Finally, literary texts can make the students to be thoughtful readers.

As the interpretation of literary texts stem from culture differences, it is imperative to the teacher that the students need additional guidance in getting the messages from the texts. However, the teacher should respect the individuality of the students' responses to a literary text. As the students build ease and confidence in their ability to read a literary text, they will gain useful knowledge that contain universal humanity values that can be applied in their lives.

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