

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH LITERATURE

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Abstract: In the area of language teaching, it is widely known that there is a de-facto segregation between literature and culture. Both literature and culture are taught separately. Rarely do the two meet in one classroom regardless the strong ties between them. It is without doubt that literature is the media where elements of culture blend and interact. Literature is the media in which people reflect and challenge either their own culture or others'. Unfortunately, literature rarely has a role as far as culture teaching and learning are concerned. This brings to the central thrust of this paper. In this paper, I would argue that literature is the best way to facilitate culture learning. It suggests how literary texts, if chosen selectively, would pave the way to cultural awareness and reflection. In addition, not only will students learn about culture but they will also experience personal enjoyment and emotional gain throughout the process. It will end with samples of activities where literature is used.

Key words: literature, culture, cultural awareness, literary texts

ON DEFINING CULTURE

Many scholars have attempted to conceptualize the term 'culture' (see Spradley 1980). The process is made complex since the term 'culture' is, in fact, an umbrella term that embraces many aspects and meanings.

For some people, culture refers to cultural products. As cited in Moran (2001:4), culture is "the great achievement of people as reflected in their history, social institutions, works of art, architecture, music and literature". Tomalin and Stempleski term this 'Big C' culture as opposed to 'little c'

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culture. 'Little c' culture refers to "culturally influenced beliefs and perceptions, especially as expressed through language, but also through cultural behaviors that affect acceptability in the host community" (1993:6). They further summarize the 'Big C' culture as achievement culture and the 'little c' as behaviour culture. Consequently, the 'Big C' culture tends to be more visible whereas the 'little c' less invisible.

If some people give more emphasis on the visible elements of culture, others give more focus on the invisible elements. Thompson (1990:132) defines culture as

...the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances and meaningful objects of various kinds, by virtue of which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences, conceptions and beliefs.

Alptekin (1996) views culture as 'a blueprint'. According to him, culture is defined as the knowledge acquired from the society where one lives. This knowledge is organized in such a way that frames people perception of reality.

Another way to conceptualize culture is by identifying the different factors compromising the term 'culture'. Adaskou et al (1989, quoted in McKay 2001:328) state that there are four meanings embodied in the term 'culture'. Those elements are:

- ~ *The aesthetic sense*: in which a language is associated with the literature, film and music of a particular country;
- ~ *The sociological sense*: in which language is linked to the customs and institutions of a country;
- ~ *The semantic sense*: in which a culture's conceptual system is embodied in the language; and
- ~ *The sociolinguistic sense*: in which cultural norms influence what language is appropriate for what context.

Another useful way of viewing culture is put forward by Robinson (1985, cited in Tomalin and Stempleski 1993:7), an American researcher in the area of cross-cultural education. He suggests three interrelated categories that constitute culture. Those elements are products, ideas and behaviors. 'Products' include aspects such as literature, folklore, art and music. In 'ideas',

we can find things related to beliefs, values and institutions and finally, 'behaviours' covers customs, habits, dresses, foods and leisure. Tomalin's and Stempleski's (1993) concept of 'culture' broadens the concept of 'little c' culture coined earlier by Robinson.

Another expert who attempts to define the concept 'culture' is Moran (2001). He suggests five elements that make up culture. Moran's framework is, thus, quite general to embrace all cultures. This model varies across cultures in the extent to the various aspects are practiced. People in every society, for example, might have similar practices concerning birth but the way they perform it and their attitudes toward birth might be different from one culture to another. These five elements of culture provide bases for Moran's (2001:24) definition of culture, which is:

...the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world and set within specific social contexts.

This view highlights the fact that every culture is dynamic and it changes according to the behaviour and thought process of the people in that culture.

Regardless of their differences, the discussion on culture in this section suggests that culture is not one entity: it is a body comprising different but interrelated elements. Proper understanding of one element of culture can only be achieved with the contribution of other elements within the same culture.

WHY LITERATURE?

Now it comes to the basic question, "why use literature for learning culture?" Collie and Slater (1992:4) said that they did not embark on this approach, in the naïve assumption that literature can be taken as a purely factual document of a specific society at a specific time, but certainly in the belief that literature has rich potential for learning processes geared to cultural understanding:

It is true of course that the 'world' of a novel, play, or short story is a created one, yet it offers a full and vivid

context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thoughts, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave behind closed doors. This vivid imagined world can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society. Reading the literature of a historical period is, after all, one of the ways we have to help us imagine what life was like in that other foreign territory: our own country's past.

The point made by Collie and Slater highlight the fact that literature IS the product of culture or 'culture in action' (Valdes 1986:117). It is where all the elements of culture interact and affect one another. By reading literature, readers can have the feelings of how to be in a culture. Thus, literature is also good for promoting emotional empathy (Thanasaulas 2003).

McKay (2001) points out that one of the major cross-cultural benefits in using literature is it will avoid cultural stereotyping that can occur when discussing cross-cultural differences. This is particularly because the discussion on culture will be grounded in specific aspects portrayed in a particular literary context.

To sum up, literature will provide a platform for (Valdes 1986, Collie and Slater 1992, McKay 2001 and Thanasaulas 2003):

- ➡ raising students' understanding about cultural elements and how they interact;
- ➡ helping students' to appreciate ideologies different from their own;
- ➡ developing students' awareness of the invisible parts of culture;
- ➡ reflecting on students' own culture; and
- ➡ avoiding cultural stereotyping.

PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS OF USING LITERARY TEXTS FOR LEARNING CULTURE

Apart from the benefits of using literature listed above, literature also brings other pedagogical benefits. Using current authorities on this topic (see Collie and Slater 1987, Maley and Duff 1990, Carter and Long 1991, McRae 1991 and Lazar 1993), I have compiled a list of those benefits as follows:

A. Literature integrates language skills

Literature provides a medium that integrates many skills. Teachers can design activities that reinforce students' oral fluency, such as debating about the cultural issues in the text, doing a role play about the text, and retelling the story from one character's point of view. Lazar (1993) adds that if recorded literary texts are available, then students can be asked to adapt the story into the local context. This provides practice for paraphrasing and synthesizing which are often found in academic writing. Furthermore, working with recorded literature will help develop students' listening skills.

B. Literature builds and develops students' motivation and interest

Maley and Duff (1990:6) point out that literary texts are "non trivial" because they deal with themes, including cultural themes, which concern the writers enough to make them write about them. In this sense, they claim that literary texts are not like any other teaching inputs which "frequently trivialize experience in the service of pedagogy". This is the reason why literature is a powerful motivator and interest builder.

C. Literature develops students' cognitive dimensions

On the cognitive dimensions, literature sharpens students' interpretative skills and critical thinking. This is due to the fact that literature is opened to many interpretations and thus, "only rarely will two readers' understanding of or reaction to a given text be identical" (Maley and Duff 1990:6). The opinion gap between one individual's interpretation and another's can offer motivating sources for learning culture. Students are given opportunities to explore their opinions, and most importantly, create their own representations of it.

The way literature discusses a topic or issue is so stimulating that it touches the heart and stimulates the thinking process of its readers. Although it discusses universal topics such as love, war, and equality, the intensity of how such topics are addressed varies. Thus, literature helps learners to be critical of the given topic in the text.

D. Literature develops students' affective dimensions

Literature could also be beneficial for the students' personal growth. Literature can help us to be empathy because it presents other people's

ways of seeing things that might be different from our own. Maley and Duff (1994:10) assert that literature can engage both students' intellect and emotions. Lazar (1993:19) argues that by responding to literary texts students "will feel empowered by their ability to grapple with the text and its language, and relate it to the values and traditions of their own society".

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN SELECTING LITERARY TEXTS

Now that the benefits of literature have been laid out, a key question in all of this is: 'What kinds of literature are appropriate to be used in learning culture?' Even though it is not the most important, the use of the appropriate text contributes to the effectiveness of the task at hand. The following are some factors to consider when selecting literary texts:

A. Accessibility

Teachers should select literary texts within students' competence. The language should be made accessible to the students. It is important to avoid the frustration and despair that arises from being required to tackle L2 literary texts that are far beyond students' competence. I am not suggesting that teachers must and only use texts from students' cultures. What is important is the need for teachers to be aware of the amount of background information demanded from the students to tackle the text. It is better not to use texts which require too much background information from the students. It is important to remember that difficult texts will make the reading and later on, the writing process, a chore rather than a pleasure.

B. Interest

Of course it is possible to use literary texts that bore the teachers or the students. However, interesting cultural themes makes the learner's task far more rewarding (Nuttall 1996). Students will be motivated in reading and contribute to the learning task if the issues raised are of interest to them.

C. Exploitability

Nuttall (1996:171) defines exploitability as "facilitation of learning". With regard to the teaching of culture, the element of exploitability involve:

- ➔ knowing what topics or issues (cultural themes) are addressed in the text;

- ➡ knowing what cultural competence that students can get from the text; and
- ➡ knowing how to approach the text to learn about culture.

It needs to be noted that effective use of materials requires careful planning by the teacher. Little benefit will result from merely displaying cultural documents or artefacts in class. More importantly, students need to be trained to extract appropriate information from the material.

SOME SUGGESTED APPROACHES IN USING LITERARY TEXTS

The following are some common activities found in the literature (see Tomalin and Stempleski 1993, Dunnett et. al.1986, and Singhal 1998) that in my opinion, are suitable for cultural learning:

A. Cultural problem solving

Presenting a problem for students to solve is a stimulating approach (Dunnett et. al. 1986 and Singhal 1998). Here, learners are presented with some information but they are on the horns of dilemma. The problem can be set out with a number of lead-in questions. Then, students are expected to offer alternated solutions to the literary text. This will encourage students to discuss which solution to adopt. The point of the activity is to encourage students to develop a kind of “culturally strategic competence”.

B. Contrasting and comparing cultures

It is widely known that one of the common functions of cultural learning is to develop intercultural competence. Jenkins (2000) contends that intercultural competence can be encouraged through contrasting cultural themes. This activity will help learners to develop receptive awareness of the different cultural norms, while at the same time gaining insight into the nature of the norms of their own L1 culture. Jenkins (2000) further explains that “this awareness, not only will increase their tolerance of difference but also enable learners to accommodate mutually, in small but significant ways, towards members of other groups, as they engage in EIL interaction” (Jenkins 2000:13). In addition, Jin and Cortazzi (1998) suggest two important bases for developing intercultural competence when learning English:

- ➡ An individual needs to consider his or her own culture in relation to another. Hence, the process of learning about another culture entails a reflection on one’s own culture as well as the target culture.

- ➡ Teaching culture as difference: this notion of culture highlights the fact that national identities are not monolithic. Within each culture exists a variety of national characteristics that are related to age, gender, regional origin, ethnic background, and social class.

These two can be facilitated when comparing and contrasting the cultural themes in the literature with those of the students'.

C. The role play

Students take on the parts of typical members of host and native cultures addressed in the literary texts. Then, they need to imagine what they would do if placed in a similar condition. Another way to do it is by asking students to adapt a script from other cultures to their culture and then, act it out.

D. Value hierarchies

Students put random lists of items into a preferred order in their culture. An interesting discussion can occur when the value hierarchy in one culture is compared to another. In using each one of these techniques, it is vital that a full and open discussion take place following the activity. Only by sharing ideas, students can reflect on their views of culture as well as appreciating other views different from their own. In this approach, it is important to note that teachers should guard against the real danger that the course will just present literature as an end in itself, rather than as a resource for learning culture.

IDEAS OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Implementation of culture learning within an English language program can be made explicit by setting up activities focusing on culture-related themes. In what follows are examples of literature approach in discussing two selected themes.

A. Parents/children relationship

This poem is a good tool to make students' aware of parental roles in families, especially on the topic of sex education. In Asian countries, this issue is rarely addressed explicitly. There are many activities that can be drawn from this poem.

First, the teacher can start by asking several lead-in questions such as:

- o How old is the character? From which social class she comes from? Lower class? Middle class?

- o What is the problem faced by the character?
- o How would you describe her relationship with her family?
- o Are there any parental roles expressed in the poem? If yes, what are they?
- o Why do you think she has decided to talk to her parents using memo instead of telephone and/or e-mail?

This can end by using the cultural problem-solving approach:

- o If you were the friend of the character, what advice will you give her?

Students can write their advice and published them. This is also good to develop their writing skills.

The questions accompanying the poem are crucial in two fold:

- ➔ they stimulate and channel the students so that students construct images which are related to their cultural knowledge.
- ➔ they initially helps students to become aware of their own perspective instead of showering students with the teacher knowledge and ideas.

Second, is by using the value hierarchies approach. In which students should list all the parental roles they are (they can start by the ones mentioned in the poem) and list them in order of importance.

Poem 1

MEMO

Angeline Yap

You babied me in 'baby Guess'
My diapers were in the very best.

At eight and 'Reebok'd', I received
Key to the house, braces for teeth.

At twelve, when I began to chafe
Got combination to the safe.

Then at eighteen
to me you gave
Gold Card, L-Plate,
Apologies for being late.

At twenty-one
I got a Jag
about whose size

I should not brag.
But Daddy, Mummy,
What to do?
My menses is now overdue.
We've never talked of certain facts.
Please reply by urgent fax.
Fondest Regards
Your daughter,
5 August 2011
Singapore

Finally, students can compare and contrast how sex education is addressed in other countries. This can be conducted by literature research or if possible, interviewing people from different cultures. The compare and contrast approach can also be used by comparing the value hierarchies on parental roles the students have made with other culture.

B. Gender stereotypes

The following activity is particularly effective technique for evoking discussion about the topic of stereotyping across gender. The approach that I suggest is role-play with the following teaching sequence:

1. Divide the class into groups. Each group should consist of all males or females.
2. Distribute the following text. The teacher can use Poem 2 or 3 depend on the learners. Poem 2 is easier since students only need to fill in with: 'she' or 'he' whereas Poem 3 is more difficult. In poem 3, students need to fill the gap with an utterance as a response to the previous sentence.

Poem 2

'Don't lie', said.
'I try', said.
'My eye', said.
'Don't cry',said.
'I'll die', said.
'Oh my!' said.
'.....' said.

Poem 3

Impressions from an Office

The family picture is on HIS desk.
 Ah, (woman)
 The family picture is on HER desk.
 Hmm, (man)
 HIS desk is cluttered.
 He's obviously a (woman)
 HER desk is cluttered.
 She's obviously a (man)
 HE is talking with his co-workers.
 He must be (woman)
 SHE is talking with her co-workers.
 She must be (man)
 HE's not at his desk.
 He must be at a (woman)
 SHE's not at her desk.
 She must be in the (man)
 HE's not in the office.He's meeting (woman)
 SHE's not in the office.She must be (man)
 HE's having lunch with the boss.
 He's (woman)
 SHE's not having lunch with the boss.
 They must be (man)
 The boss criticized HIM.
 He'll (woman)
 The boss criticized HER.
 She'll (man)
 HE got an unfair deal.
 Did he ? (woman)
 SHE got an unfair deal.Did she ? (man)
 HE's getting married.
 He'll (woman)
 SHE's getting married.
 She'll (man)
 HE's having a baby.
 He'll (woman)
 SHE's having a baby.
 She'll (man) Etc

3. The male group(s) should complete the blank with the word 'man' in brackets whereas the female group should complete the blank with the word 'woman' in brackets:
e.g. The family picture is on HIS desk.
Ah he must love his family so much (woman)
4. Then, the male and female group can read the poem accordingly.
5. At the end of the reading, the teacher can highlight some gender stereotypes for male and female.
6. Students, then, can compare and contrast their version of the poem with the original (see Appendix A). To what extent they are different and/or the same?

What I find important to note about this exercise is (a) By withholding information and just offering a (carefully selected) phrase taken from the poem, the teacher surprises and stimulates students' curiosity and interests. (b) Each group produces a 'personal image' of the poem. (c) By sharing this personal images in class (e.g. by reading the text out loud or put it on the transparency), an interesting 'image variety' is on display. The student's images instead of images from textbooks can be compared and discussed. This will make the students aware of cultural perceptions and stereotypes of gender.

CLOSING REMARKS

In this paper I have argued how literature is the best media to learn culture. Using literature to teach culture can indeed lead to a deeper understanding of culture because literature does not remain at the surface of abstraction as is so typical of academic teaching and learning. This approach explores the concrete case of students' individual reactions to cultural themes. The literature used and the way it is used, need to be clearly related to the kinds of cultural themes students are expected to learn. Most importantly, the task should have the goal of contributing to the students' attempts to be cultural learners.

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APPENDIX

Poem 2

Goodbye

By Alan Maley

'Don't lie', she said.

'I try', he said.

'My eye', she said.

'Don't cry', he said.

'I'll die', she said.

'Oh my!' he said.

'Goodbye!' she said.

Poem 3

Impressions from an Office

By Natasha Josefowitz (1983)

The family picture is on HIS desk.

Ah, a solid, responsible family man.

The family picture is on HER desk.

Hmmm, her family will come before her career.

HIS desk is cluttered.

He's obviously a hard worker and a busy man.

HER desk is cluttered.

She's obviously a disorganized scatterbrain.

HE is talking with his co-workers.

He must be discussing the latest deal.

SHE is talking with her co-workers.

She must be gossiping.

HE's not at his desk.
He must be at a meeting.
SHE's not at her desk.
She must be in the ladies' room.
HE's not in the office.
He's meeting customers.
SHE's not in the office.
She must be out shopping.
HE's having lunch with the boss.
He's on his way up.
SHE's not having lunch with the boss.
They must be having an affair.
The boss criticized HIM.
He'll improved his performance.
The boss criticized HER.
She'll be very upset.
HE got an unfair deal.
Did he get angry?
SHE got an unfair deal.
Did she cry?
HE's getting married.
He'll get more settled.
SHE's getting married.
She'll get pregnant and leave.
HE's having a baby.
He'll need a raise.
SHE's having a baby.
She'll cost the company money in maternity benefits.
HE's going on a business trip.
It's good for his career.
SHE's going on a business trip.
What does her husband say?
HE's leaving for a better job.
He knows how to recognize a good opportunity.
SHE's leaving for a better job.
Women are not dependable.