

Englishes and Literatures-in- English in a Globalised World

*Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on
English in Southeast Asia (ESEA 2008)*

4–6 December 2008

National Institute of Education

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Editors

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Teaching Postcolonial Literature: The “Know – What”, the “Know – How” and the “Know-Why”

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Abstract

English Studies in Indonesia has undergone revision since the past decade with the inclusion of postcolonial literatures and popular culture in the curriculum. In addition to the teaching of Canon Literature, students are encouraged to become knowledgeable about literatures from the neighboring Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India and other countries in the region. At the same time, the students have to pay attention as well to the globalization and technologization of contemporary culture as in pulp fiction, TV and multimedia interfaces. Despite the developments, accountable evaluation and revision of the praxis is often ignored. This paper will discuss the necessity of balancing the *know-what* (contents, subjects, materials), the *know-how* (skills, approaches, methods, techniques), and the *know-why* (critical thinking, evaluation, reflection) in the English Studies when introducing literatures from the postcolonial countries. It is within this dynamic interplay of the above framework, this paper will argue, that the teaching and learning of English in Indonesia need to be reconstituted and situated.

Introduction

What are we really teaching when we are teaching postcolonial literature? Does it mean the removal of the Canon and Classic to give way to Caribbean literature? Is Canadian literature ‘black’ enough to be called postcolonial literature? These and many more are

questions posed to myself when attempting to include Postcolonial writing in EFL curriculum. While Postcolonial literatures have no doubt found a niche in English Studies over the past two decades, not much has been said about the ways in which Postcolonial writing is taught, since the wealth of research in Postcolonial literature so far rest mostly at the level of theory and criticism. Added to this lacuna is the rarity of textbooks or teaching manual on Postcolonial literature. Curriculum development is thus a logical point of departure after the teacher has had sufficient understanding of the nature of Postcolonial literature. The teaching of any subject matter is generally based on a thorough analysis of the nature of the very subject. This paper therefore attempts to do just that. But before I do so, there are at least two perceived challenges in the teaching of Postcolonial literature that have to be addressed: First is the necessity to define precisely the specific model of Postcoloniality to suit varied colonial experiences from time to time, and second, the inescapable interface of teaching literature of this kind with globalization and technology.

As I mentioned elsewhere, no theoretical concept arising from one culture can be transposed unproblematically to different cultures without considering the limits of its applicability. We need to examine first the intertwinement of history, theory and politics to grasp distinct cultures and power-relations between the colonizers and the colonized, bearing in mind that the postcoloniser—postcolonised oppositionality need not correspond to the binary of settler—native (Dewi, 2007). To illustrate, Postcolonialism according to the thesis of Ashcroft and others (1989: 2) begins at the point of colonization, whereas postcolonial Indonesia can be interpreted more precisely as the end of colonization.¹ While Singapore and Malaysia, to name but two, has literary tradition of writing in English (the language of the Colonizer), the same is not true with Postcolonial practice in Indonesia. This is to say that if the theory of Ashcroft and others is to use at all, the teaching of Postcolonial literature in Indonesia, for example, is to look out for what these critics call “powerfully subversive general accounts of textuality

¹ This model is further complicated by Indonesia’s feasible colonizing aims in several provinces of the country. The annexation of East Timor to the Republic of Indonesia in 1975, for example, is a case in point, until Indonesia finally agreed in 1999 to let the East Timorese voted between independence and local autonomy; and by 2002 this youngest province declared its independence as Timor Leste.

and concepts of 'literariness'" (Ashcroft et al., 1989: 194).

Secondly, globalization and technologization of contemporary culture have profound implications and consequences to the English Studies. The speed with which computer technology contributes to university teaching is undoubtedly promising. It empowers students to learn to suit the time and place of their own choosing. Present ICT can give us access to multitude of information in ways that we might otherwise have missed had we depended ourselves only on library or teacher as resources. Thanks to such advancements that we are now bestowed by endless list of films and TV adaptation of the Canon and the Classic, to say nothing of the wide-ranging multi-media interfaces. Who would bother going through the pages of the dusty 1973 Penguin edition of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* if students with little reading interest can enjoy the beautiful performance of Wynona Ryder as Abigail Williams, a troubled Puritan orphan raised by her wicked uncle and how she was madly infatuated with John Proctor, a married man superbly cast by Daniel Day-Lewis – and all is available from the comfort of their laptop or home theatre.

Technology has indeed extended human capacities. The World Wide Web provides inspiring ideas and fascinating models of literature courses where literature professors, teachers and even aficionados proudly publish their sites, syllabi, lecture notes, modules, assignments, etc. Electronic communications expedite and enhance teacher-student interactions. But, as one professor of English Literature reminds us, the aims of teaching literature “are not to explain facts, but to encourage students to question interpretations... to think for themselves.” (Dawson 2001:6) As it is, reliance on technology is not as crucial as capability of the teacher to make students autonomous in promoting independent learning. A non-enthusiast of technology myself, I share the wisdom of Professor Dawson, but will not reluctantly accept the appropriate integration of technology into our teaching-learning tasks and activities.

With the two main concerns in mind, I shall now try to elaborate further what teachers or curriculum planners need to consider in teaching Postcolonial literature.

1. The Know-What

Elleke Boehmer and John McLeod (2003) suggest two basic models for teaching Postcolonial literature namely regional model and theoretical model. The type of Postcolonial writing in the first model includes English literatures from independent Postcolonial countries like India, Malaysia, Singapore, etc. The second model is theoretically driven, that is, what determine Postcolonial writing are such issues as resistance, deconstructive energy, marginality, hybridity, etc. Although the two critics open up possibilities for separate Postcolonial modules, I personally see the two models fit suitably in fulfilling the know-what in teaching Postcolonial literatures.

Beginning with need analysis, teachers may consider geographical location as selection criteria. For Indonesian learners, for example, novels and short stories from other Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore may be suitable. Bearing in mind that proximity to learners' own experience will foster their learning, they will be fascinated to discuss issues to which they can easily relate. When it comes to Indian literature in English, I am not sufficiently persuaded to rush to the two signature novels – Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, for instance. I would use instead the relevant experience of the minority and marginalized in yet another South Asian country of Sri Lanka in the story of a Tom-tom beater whose dream is to have tom-tom beating at his funeral. Written by P. Thambirajah, "The Funeral Pyre" tells of an outcast Moopan Sinnavian who loves his job and wants his disciples fulfill his wish to the anger of the villagers as no slave is to have such a respect. When he died, the angry mob set fire to Moopan's hut and the raging fire burnt his corpse to ashes.

Moving closer still to the southern hemisphere, Australian writing about Asia or Indonesia is another choice which may give students opportunity to observe the ways in which socio-cultural and political relationships are portrayed in fiction. Works from African countries are later introduced to compare and contrast with their postcolonial experiences in the hope of enriching the students' understanding of their own culture.

For more advanced learners, the rewriting of the literary Canon is suitable for these texts call for intertextuality of a fairly high order. Note that most students at this level the students have encountered Canon novels through their graded reading in the

sophomore years. Under this selection mode, the students may need some assistance to make them see how counter-discursive practice operated in the new writing and how they depart from the older ones.

2. The Know-How

By the turn of the century, various approaches and methods in language teaching fell out of favour, given their paternalistic nature, i.e. Good teaching means correct use of methods and approaches and teachers as well students hardly play roles in the process (Richards and Rodgers 2003). The so-called “post-methods era”, by nature, implicates literary studies as well. To avoid fixation to approaches and methods that thwarts teachers and students’ participation, active learning is encouraged in literature teaching, for example by dramatization and narrativization of the text under study. It requires teacher’s ingenuity and creativity to make the texts alive for the students. While drama is the most often used technique, narrating the story from the students’ point of view will boost not only understanding and enjoyment, but also better judgment. The students, for example can relate the story of the tom-tom beater above to the plight and misery of the ostracized they often encounter in their everyday experience. If one is familiar with “Theatre of the Oppressed”, Augusto Boal’s method of Forum Theater can also be applied to enliven postcolonial fiction.

3. The Know-Why

When teaching fiction to her students, Elaine Showalter has the habit of asking them this: “Why is the person telling us this story?” (2003: 96) Making use the function of the narrator is the most self-reflective aspect of teaching fiction that entails critical thinking. Critical reading is a high reflective skill that requires us to become a detached observer and, at the same time, engaged reader. Readers thus have to stand back and distance themselves from the text under analysis. Here, one of the aims of the analysis is to make us aware of its cultural delineations and its ideological aspects. Teaching postcolonial literature is therefore meant to get not only a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of the works, but also to see how ideology operates through art. Unlike Arnoldian formula of the so-called Great Books --the best that has been thought and said in the world-- or Ezra Pound’s definition of literature being news that stays

news, the works of postcolonial writers, it can be argued, need to be located historically, culturally and politically under different conditions and different times. How cultural diversity is both contained and contested is central in postcolonial reading.

Next to critical thinking is evaluation. In teaching postcolonial literature, we need to encourage the students to situate the texts discussed in regional, cultural and historical contexts as well as their aesthetic qualities. It should enable students to go beyond like or dislike of the works. The students should be able to talk about what the text is, how it works through all elements thereof and what implications or good and bad effects it produces over time as it unfolds.

The final aspect of the know-why is reflection. Literature should allow us to grasp ideas, feel and imagine a slice of life as described or sampled in a piece of work and how to relate this to our own lives. Given the resistant characteristic of postcolonial writing, the old dictum that literature is a mirror of society needs to be further problematized. Postcolonial literature has its own role to play, i.e. reflection as well as refraction of events that may contribute to the transformation of society. By understanding the nature of the colonizer-colonized encounter and by identifying shared postcolonial experience of each other, genuine sense of empathy may likely grow. Toward that end, the teaching of postcolonial literature seeks to promote the growth of ethical responsibility and bond of larger human communities.

Conclusion

It has often been said that foreign language teachers are ambassadors of culture for which reason teachers may assume the role of peace-makers through what, how and why they pertinently teach their students. The teaching of literature subjects being part of the core curriculum in English Studies should therefore be adjusted accordingly. Assuming that education system of today comes across as more a monologue of the teacher rather than a dialogue with the students, more active roles are to be given to our students through experience and reflection. I must mention in passing that the triad of know-what, know-how and know-why can run parallel with Ignatian Pedagogy² in terms of its 3Cs, i.e. competence, conscience and compassion employed in Sanata

² Embodying five key teaching elements--Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation, Ignatian Pedagogy is one educational model based on critical thinking and discipline studies as taught by Saint Ignatius de Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus.

Dharma University – a Jesuit run university whereby the students are the epicentre of the teaching-learning activity. At the heart of the Jesuit education is a communal care for students in pursuit of wisdom, psychological maturity and spiritual depth, social solidarity and global awareness. The goal is to make individuals truly autonomous, self fulfilled and emancipated³, which indeed tally with the soul of Postcolonial writing. The teaching of Postcolonial literature should therefore generate and place the dignity of all individuals regardless of cultural, intellectual, or gender differences through active and cooperative learning.

To conclude, here is what one Postcolonial writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o says about education being the "means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us."

Author

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³ See Alvesson and Skoldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (London, Sage Publications, 2000)

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