

ISSN: 1412-3320

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A Journal of  
**Culture, English Language  
Teaching & Literature**

Accredited by DIKTI 040/P/2014

**Celt**, Vol. 14, No.2, pp. 133-258, Semarang, December 2014 (index)

# Celt

## A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching and Literature

A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching and Literature (**Celt**) is published biannually in the months of July and December (ISSN: 1412-3320) presenting articles on culture, English language teaching and learning, linguistics, and literature. Contents include analysis, studies, application of theories, research reports, material development, and book reviews. **Celt** was firstly published in December 2001. Based on the decree from *Hasil Akreditasi Jurnal Ilmiah, SK Direktur Penelitian dan Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat, Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi*, No. 040/P/2014 dated on 18 February 2014, **Celt** is nationally accredited until 2019.

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Printed by Santosa Print Offset, Yogyakarta

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# IN SEARCH OF CONTEXTUAL AND HUMANISTIC SOUTHEAST ASIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** English literature studies in Indonesia has to undergo a paradigm shift, given the demographic change of users and providers of English, to say nothing of the growing interests in Asian literature written in and/or translated into English. Mindful of our postcolonial experiences in today's cultural and political context, the use of more literary pieces from Southeast Asian countries in English Literature studies is all the more important. This paper locates Southeast Asian literature within the development of English as a Lingua Franca. Characteristic of our postmodern age is the recognition of people as human; and, in this case, Asian people as individuals, multilingual and multicultural subjects. As such, reading and evaluating works from the region may help develop a deeper understanding when defining our own place in relation to other people. It is through engaging in contextual and humanistic literary experiences that we measure and value the connection between literature and life.

**Key words:** Southeast Asian Literature, Ignatian Pedagogy, contextual and humanistic values

*Abstrak:* Kajian Sastra Inggris di Indonesia harus mengikuti perubahan paradigma mengingat berubahnya peta pengguna Bahasa Inggris, lebih-lebih dengan makin banyaknya karya sastra Asia yang ditulis dan/atau diterjemahkan kedalam Bahasa Inggris. Pengalaman

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper appeared as "Contextual and Humanistic Literature: Southeast Asian Turn" *Proceeding of the First Literary Studies Conference*, Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, October 2013, pp.53-60. This study is part of a larger research on Southeast Asian Literature in English, the seed of which is my paper disseminated at HISKI International Conference XXII at UNY, Yogyakarta, 7-9 November 2012.

*pasca-kolonial bangsa-bangsa di Asia Tenggara serta konteks budaya dan politiknya menjadikan karya sastra yang lahir di negara kawasan ini menjadi berperan penting dan patut diperhitungkan dalam kajian Sastra Inggris. Artikel ini memetakan Sastra Asia Tenggara dalam perkembangan Bahasa Inggris sebagai Lingua Franca, yang dalam terang budaya posmoderen memandang setiap individu, dalam hal ini bangsa Asia, sebagai komunitas yang tidak berbahasa dan berbudaya tunggal. Mengkaji sastra yang dihasilkan oleh bangsa yang memiliki pluralitas bahasa dan budaya semacam ini akan menambah pemahaman kita akan diri sendiri dan orang lain. Dengan cara melibatkan diri dalam pengalaman sastra yang humanis dan kontekstual inilah, kita menakar pentingnya hubungan antara sastra dan kehidupan.*

**Kata kunci:** Sastra Asia Tenggara, Pedagogi Ignasian, kontekstual dan humanis

## INTRODUCTION

The role of English as a lingua franca has increased with the broader spread of English users as explored extensively by Crystal (2003), and Graddol (2006), to mention but two. More appropriately called “World Englishes” to follow Graddol (2006), English is now the language used in the expanding circle countries like Indonesia, including other Asian countries never colonised by the British. This recognition of World English has brought about increasing interest in studying English as a lingua franca (ELF) vis-à-vis English as a Foreign Language (EFL) although the former is not yet to replace officially the latter (Sowden, 2012). Most studies on ELF span from theoretical concepts as in ELF users’ attitude and identity (Jenkin, 2007) or ELF development and its variants (Pennycook, 2007) to the praxis of EFL in countries like Thailand (Baker, 2009) and Japan (Suzuki, 2010). In both theory and practice of ELF, most studies highlight the importance of multiculturalism and awareness (linguistic or otherwise) of the culture and society where ELF is used, hence the identity formation seen in localised Englishes like Singaporean English, Malaysian English, Filipino English, Indonesian English, and many more.

However, research on the methodological and pedagogical implications of ELF on the study of English Literature is scarce despite the increasing attention to Asian Literature in English over the past two decades (See, for example, the works of Hashim, 2007; Chin, 2007; D’Angelo, 2007). The

growing body of studies on Asian literature has thus far been done in isolation and tended to be less holistic, mostly on the use of Asian English Literature by teachers of English to speakers of other languages, especially Asian (see, among others, Mahoney, 1991; Chin, 2007; Dewi, 2009). At the turn of the century, conferences on language and literature with “Asian Voices” as the main theme were aplenty, starting with one in Hong Kong in 2001. “Reading Asia, Forging Identities in Literature (RAFIL) Conference” was held in the Philippines in 2007, and subsequently every two years (RAFIL 2 in Indonesia 2009, RAFIL 3 in Singapore 2011, and forthcoming RAFIL 4 in Japan 2015); each was validated with the presence of worldwide Asian writers. In addition to the conference, the appearance of international journals such as *Asian Englishes* (Aoyama Gaukin University, Japan), the publication of *Asean Short Stories Serials* by Heinemann, and the mushrooming of translation of Asian novels into English have all strengthened and secured the place and space of Asian literature in the constellation of World Literature.

It is shown from the above examples that the existing studies on Asian Literature in English have been mostly done in relation to English teaching, while others usually look only at one or two literary masterpieces in one or two particular countries. A more detailed study is done by Grace Chin (2006), to mention one, on the authorship of Singapore and Malaysian writers in postcolonial context which she later develops into another study by adding discussion on Brunei Darussalam authors (Chin, 2007).

It is therefore important to map out specifically Southeast Asian Literature, for example, along with the development of English as a global lingua franca. In the *Multilingual Subject*, Kramersch (2009) argues that our world is increasingly multilingual and multicultural with which traditional method of (English) language teaching (i.e. native-speaker oriented, dominant British/American culture) is now out dated. Following Kramersch, this paper would argue that English Literature Studies has to be context-specific, involving global-local dialogue, and in recognition of cultural differences and of people as human persons, in this case, Asian people as multilingual and multicultural subjects. It is through this postmodernist vision, which is contextual and humanistic, that we feel empowered by values and traditions from our own heritage and those of others when grappling with literary texts. By postmodern, it means that neither person nor group is to claim absolute truth, as each of us shapes or own reality (Derrida, 1991; Foucault, 1984). This paper therefore is to discuss the need of studying Southeast Asian Literature in English along with its multiple voices to help

fill in the lacuna in the discussion of literature and/or culture in EFL context in particular, and literary studies, in general. The section that follows is a brief discussion on how (Southeast) Asia has entered the literary scene to show that some works, although set in the region, shall not be included in Southeast Asian Literature in English as defined later in this article.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA IN LITERARY IMAGINATION

Asia has become the setting of (Australian) English novels since colonial times. Adrian Vickers (no date) presents a list of about 30 (thirty) fiction works by colonial writers set in the East Indies and/or Indonesia. Like Vickers, Leinbach (2014) shows the world authors' familiarity with Asia in their works. The list includes one novel from Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia (2), Indonesia (9), Malaysia (10), the Philippines (3), Thailand (1), and Vietnam (1). Both Vicker's and Leinbach's lists have no analysis of the works, unlike Ronald D. Renard's, for example, which adds some commentary on his list "Fiction in Southeast Asia: A Novel Top Ten" (Renard, 2001).

With regard to Australian colonial fiction, these works hardly talk about Asian people but Australian adventures abroad. As observed much earlier (see Bennet, 1982; Vickers, 1988; Koh, 1993), the colonial fabrication of native characters is to enhance the dominance of Western civilization – a seemingly die-hard habit to continue in postcolonial writing as well. The general storyline very often concerns an Australian adventurer, usually male, whose journey is interfered with by the cruel or deceptive natives; after several complications, the final solution is that the former, having defeated the latter, returns to his own country (Dewi, 1998). To name a few, *Five-Skull Island and Other Tales of the Malay Archipelago* by Montgomery (1897) set in Borneo, *Castro's Last Sacrament* by Albert Dorrington (1900) about corrupted Castro after meeting a Dyak tribal chief, or the clichéd, romantic fiction *Flight into Paradise* (1953) about a Western couple's doomed relationship because of a Balinese dancer ( See Dewi, 1998). This present article, however, makes no attempt to discuss 'Australians-in-Asia' novel, but to show that lack of understanding about Asia is an issue raised by Harry Aveling which has important bearing on our attempt to define what Southeast Asian Literature in English is. According to Aveling (2008), Asia has arrived, but too late in the world of literature (2008). This belated arrival results from the assumption that for a novel to be successful is for it to be published in English by the native speaker of the language. Such culturally

biased judgment has, by default, pushed aside Asian writers from the literary map and put them back later when their works appear in English translation.

Scholars of Asian literature have shared Aveling's concerns as shown in their research, albeit rarely. A number of studies on Asian literature are published as special journal articles, for example, *Asian Englishes* 10 (2), winter issue of 2007. Text and context of Asian writers and their significance in teaching varieties of English becomes the main topic of this issue of the journal. Another evidence of the presence of Asian writers is in the form of conference papers. This can be seen when RAFIL was held in 2011 in Singapore featuring three major novelists from three countries – Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Indonesia), Shannon Ahmad (Malaysia), and Jose Rizal (the Philippines). Asian writers, as found out in the conference, have played important roles as world thinkers/theoreticians whose ideas are postulated invariably in their works/masterpieces. Benedict Anderson (1983) mentions Pramoedya Ananta Toer in his seminal work about nationalism and imagination. Postcolonial theory owes much to the style of Singaporean and Malaysian writers, according to Ashcroft and others (1986) in *The Empire Writes Back*.

Having said that, it is hard to ignore the breadth and variety of Southeast Asian Literature in English as defined above. Thus, it is important to further limit the criteria of using it in ELF class, to which discussion we now turn.

## WORKING DEFINITION AND READING METHOD

The term “Southeast Asian Literature in English” is admittedly multi-interpretable, if not to say riddled with gaps and complications. To mention first, not all countries in the region have produced nor published literature in English. Second, writers from the Southeast Asian diaspora have often published their works in the settled English-speaking countries, yet many of them do not tell of their Asian experiences in their works. What can we make of non-Asian writers whose enchanting Asian stories make us believe they are Asians? To complicate further, scholastic projects on Asian writers have assiduously translated the works of Asian writers with fluid grace and accuracy too hard to ignore. No example is given within the scope of this paper to illustrate the complexity above, but mindful of the limitation of any attempted definition, it is important to mention some criteria at the outset.



This present study considers the literary quality and specific criteria characteristic of or unique to Southeast Asian Literature in English as being:

- (a) To portray Southeast Asian people, places and experiences
- (b) To depict values, traditions, principles associated with (Southeast) Asian society in the past to the present
- (c) Intended to meet Southeast Asian readership
- (d) Written by writers of Southeast Asian origin or with Southeast Asian background.

Moreover, the works under consideration are written in or translated into English. It should be noted however that the set criteria may change along the way in view of the nature of this study as being a “work in progress”. At this stage, the discussion will limit itself to examining the contextual and humanistic aspects of the literary pieces and how to use them in the classroom, as discussed below.

## DISCUSSION

### A. Literature for Human Dignity: Contextual and Humanistic

To begin with, how important is such a thing as “Asian Voice” when talking about literature that is Asian and humanistic? Does this imply that non-Asian literature has no capacity to humanise? Speaking of voice is speaking of identity or personal meaning; and people can read literary texts with conviction, commitment and motivation when they find personal meaning therein. Evocation of personal meaning, in this case as people from the Southeast Asian region, is important in the reader’s transaction with the texts. As stated elsewhere, according to Bismoko, English studies in non-English-speaking countries today should be no other than comparative and expressive of local culture (see Dewi, 2012, p. 59). Bismoko develops his perspective in ELF studies as follows, “[The English of postmodern English education] is not only the English as a communication tool which needs localizing, but also its education contents. The grand theory may remain similar, but the local interest (regional, national, personal) also needs focusing” (Bismoko, 2011, p. 8). As such, English literature studies in ELF context should be comparative, contextualized, and reader-oriented instead of Eurocentric or modelling on American or British Literature only.

With this Asian Voice in mind, the field of English studies (i.e. teaching and researching) is to promote humanistic values in order that people become independent and capable of self-actualization, or what Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000, p. 3) called “autonomous, self-fulfilled and emancipated”. Literary works written in nativised local Englishes (e.g. Southeast Asian variants) should be taught together with British and American Literature to sharpen the students comparative sense. Evoking the Asian experience (or that of any other nations for that matter) through studying English literature helps us (1) to make a meaningful connection of author-world-text and what this connection means to us and (2) to show empathic understanding that each literary work is built on different aspects of human condition, at different times and at different places. Here, one measure of the literary benefit for EFL learners is that the acts of knowing ourselves and knowing others happen concurrently with the inclusion of Asian voice.

Comparatively, as shown earlier in the studies of American culture in Indonesian context, it can be said that contextualisation and humanistic values are two of the important aspects (Dewi, 2012). Given the persuasive power of American culture, to say nothing of forces of globalization, technologization and US political economy, American Studies in Indonesia should be essentially contextualized. Any research in, for instance, American passion for consumption and commodification should be situated against the glaring economic diversity and local problem-ridden life of the Indonesians who are, likewise, astonishingly consumeristic as in the mindless use of gadgets or any other symbols of modernity among young people, for example. Next, promotion of ethical responsibility and bonds of larger human communities should be central to American Studies in Indonesia. Any teaching or researching in this field of study should bring together American culture and its implications in Indonesia, hence the two-way-traffic of knowledge productions and its dissemination.

Here we see that English literature studies in Indonesia where global English is used, should consider various cultural contexts. Inclusion of Southeast Asian Literature in English will enrich English literature studies thus far dominated by American and British literatures. Likewise, the teaching of American or British literature and culture need to be contextualised with the local culture to be fruitful and emancipating. In other words, literature studies should open up space to understand both the “self” and “others” and thus become a safe playing field to nurture multicultural understandings. The final part of this paper isto give a sample

of how Southeast Asian Literature in English can be taught using, among other methods, the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm.

### **B. Critical and Reflective Learning of Southeast Asian Literature**

Embodying the five key teaching elements, i.e. Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation, Ignatian Pedagogy is applied in Sanata Dharma University, focusing as it does on the 3C aspects, namely competence, conscience and compassion as bases of evaluation as proven in the university's strategic plan (See Renstra Universitas Sanata Dharma Tahun 2013–2017 [Sanata Dharma University Strategic Plan 2013-2017]. Yogyakarta: Universitas Sanata Dharma). This reflective 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. 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 (See Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach, no date).

Each student receives a syllabus for Prose detailing the course description, learning goals, standard competence, course outline, etc. The syllabus specifically mentions the three Cs assessment. On the first C, COMPETENCE, studying literature is to help students develop a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of the literary works assigned to them (a total of five short stories/ novels from Southeast Asia and five short stories/novels from British/American literature). They are expected to read and write about different literary works with added pleasure and understanding. They are to analyse, interpret and evaluate these works in order that they grasp what the texts mean, how they shape meaning and why such meaning-making takes place. Competence is thus an entry point into which they later develop their skills and habit of critical and reflective reading as outlined in the university's guide book on Ignatian Pedagogy-based learning model (See Pedoman Model Pembelajaran Berbasis Pedagogi Ignasian [Guide to Ignatian Pedagogy-Based Learning Model]. Yogyakarta: P3MP - USD, 2013).

Next is CONSCIENCE. By reading and subsequently writing about the literary works, their authors, and the culture and society that produce them, the students are to develop their habits of reading as well as to increase their creativity and innovation, not only for their own joy of learning, but also to cultivate personal reflexivity and societal sensitivity. Here, reading about Southeast Asian people allow students to draw parallel with their own humane life owing to the similar or shared experiences.

The last C, COMPASSION is admittedly easier said than done. Having learned about different literature from Southeast Asia and different parts of the world, in the end the students may manifest in their life greater concerns for others and respect for human dignity, with which they strive for the greater glory of God.

Critical and Reflective Learning in Ignatian Pedagogy operates through a five-cycle process comprising of Context - Experience - Reflection - Action - Evaluation - (returning to new Context), and the cycle continues.

Each learning session begins with finding a variety of students' CONTEXT, i.e. their lecturers, classmates, family, environment, school climate, learning style, curriculum, and other pertinent issues. This can be time consuming but rewarding in the end. Context is important in this process with which students can grasp more easily the meaning of what, how and why they learn. As stated in the Ignatian Annotation 18, "Learning should always be adapted to the condition of the student engaged in it" (Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach, no date, p. 58). Context of learning is thus useful in growing students' personal and societal awareness because from the very beginning students are put into genuine and trustworthy relationships with the teacher. The term used herein is *alumnorum cura personalis* that is central to the Ignatian Pedagogy paradigm.

The next step is EXPERIENCE. Here, while reading the assigned text, the students are to compare and contrast, analyse and evaluate their mental as well as psychomotoric activities. Experience is a stage that the students undergo to comprehend better the reality (read: what are real, true, or imaginative in the story) and to draw a conclusion out of it. Students are engaged into cognitive as well as affective activities when asking such questions as "Is what happened in the story like what I already know?" or "I'll never do such a mean thing", etc. Being exposed to new facts, perspectives, concepts, etc, students can take up challenges that are different from their prior understanding. That the activity is conducted in English is even more beneficial in spite of the difficulties they sometimes encounter in expressing themselves.

REFLECTION is the third cycle and most important one in Ignatian Pedagogy. Central to this spiritual exercise is discretion, i.e. learners are to decide what is good/bad, useful/wasteful, right/wrong, and so on and to act accordingly. After making thoughtful consideration, students can grasp

better the significance of what they learn and its implication and how to respond to it. Thus, in addition to meaning-making of experience, reflection is also metacognitive in that students are able to understand what they understand more clearly. Debates and role playing are useful exercises that help sharpen students' conscience. Students can firstly discern that the translated version of a short story, for example, sounds gender-biased when compared to the source text. Next, they can explain why before making suggestions on the improvement.

The fourth cycle is the most difficult part in this reflective learning paradigm: ACTION. Action integrates "interiorised choices" and "choices externally manifested". The first choice is the result of reflected experience, and the second is implementation in real action which is consistent to the first. To illustrate, having made an analysis of a Laotian novel, students can identify the unjust treatment toward women and children. The students then increase their respect to others and show empathy to the weak and the marginalised by doing real action. When encountering injustice in everyday life, they are ready to voice out their opinions by, for instance, writing "Letter to the Editor", creative writing, news reports, etc.

The last cycle in Ignatian Pedagogy is EVALUATION. The students' growth as human persons is valued in addition to academic mastery. As such, the model is learner-oriented that seeks for educational values with moral and intellectual framework rather than "objective, scientific truth. Indeed, it is no small challenge. "Curricula today justifiably reflect local cultures and local needs that vary considerably" (Ignatian Pedagogy, no date: 50), although government's stricture sometimes impedes. Student's Self-Evaluation, Portfolio, Journals are often used to record students' attitude and personal growth. What follows is an example of a critical and reflective learning through one short story from the Philippines: "Wedding Dance" by Amador Daguio.

### **C. Reading Asian Short Stories to Acquire Competence, Conscience and Compassion**

Written during the Japanese military occupation, "Wedding Dance" is set in a traditional Philippine society where a husband is entitled to divorce his wife and to take another woman if the marriage bears no child. Awiyao leaves the wedding dance to visit his just-divorced wife Lumnay to make sure if she is all right. She is surely not, for Awiyao and Lumnay still love each other. Lumnay refuses to join the dance and to meet any man whom she

possibly likes to be her next husband. She decides to seek justice to the village head for taking away Awi Yao from her, but in the end the woman hesitates for fear that people may laugh at her instead. The five-cycle-learning is sampled below.

**CONTEXT.** Prior to the class students are assigned to find and to credit its source some information on the different marriage customs and values. The teacher can help by adding and giving correct information. The teacher's introduction to the writer and setting of the story is also helpful. The objectives of this activity is first, to look closely at students' environment, background, and community, in order that teacher becomes familiar with the context or life experience of the students. Second, it is important for the learners to know another country and its culture and customs to see how they relate to ours.

**EXPERIENCE.** After receiving conducive environment for learning and growing, the students are ready to experience the next cycle in Ignatian Pedagogy. This phase is to engage students as whole persons in the learning process. It is also the time to find out the students' process of learning; how they come to learn about, for example, another culture and habits, discretion of good and bad, responsibilities and consequences, etc. Here, to illustrate, the students read the short story "Wedding Dance". They are asked to write down questions on what is going on and what the story means, for example: (a) Why does Awi Yao say sorry to Lumnay?, (b) What make them separate while they still love one another?, (c) Is the separation fair for Lumnay? For Awi Yao? Why/Why not?, etc. Later, the students use the questions for class discussion.

**REFLECTION.** We now come to the key to the Ignatian Pedagogy paradigm. Reflection phase is to help students obtain lessons learned and to become more reflective learners so that they may appreciate the story's implications in their search for truth? (E.g. What's the purpose of our life? We are created in the image of God in order to glorify God, to love the Creator of Life and all creation). For this, the students have to discuss the appropriateness of the story to use in class as teaching materials. The teacher can give some questions as guidelines, for example: (a) Is the story relevant to today's context? Is it controversial? (b) Is marriage and separation an issue worth discussing by young people at present? (c) What can you say about divorcing a wife who can't give children to the family? About a husband who wants to take another wife? About a family who really wants a child? (c) Do

you know a couple with the same situation? What advice can you give to the wife? To the husband?

If time run shorts, however, the students may write on their journals individual thoughts on some of these questions. Reflection is important for the students to grasp the essential meaning and value of what is being studied and to apply it to real-life cases.

**ACTION.** The term “action” here does not only refer to activity, but also the state of students’ attitude, habits, commitments, and so forth. Here, student sare to move beyond knowledge in order to make action. The objective is to lead students to new experiences, further reflections, and consequent actions through, in this case, reading (Southeast) Asian literatures. It can be manifested by thestudents when they are willing to read a longer piece of work on similar issues. In relation to the short story discussed, some titles worth trying include the Malaysian novels by Shahnnon Ahmad’s Tok Guru (1988) and Ummi & Abang Syeikhul (1992). Some students may write their personal notes or diary on their affirmation. Alternatively, the teacher can inquire some students to which extend they are willing to love and sacrifice for others.

**EVALUATION.** At the heart of Ignatian Pedagogy is ongoing formation, hence evaluation that goes beyond academic mastery. The evaluation here includes not onlyassessment of knowledge, but also their full growth as “man and woman for and with others.” Thus, the evaluation can be in the form of peer discussion about the short stories or novels read. Students can also report their thoughts on the character, theme, setting of time and place, and ways the story concludes to the class. Essay to be written individually on some questions appear is yet an alternative. This last phase is therefore to assess students’s development in mind, heart, and spirit seen from their portfolios, journals, diaries, etc. As it is, standards, assessment rubric, grading policies, expectations, and other pertinent issues have to be discussed beforehand.

## **CONCLUSION**

Shifting the ground to use Southeast Asian Literature in teaching English literature means to contextualise it with learners and their needs in ELF-speaking countries. Bearing in mind that foreign language teachers are also ambassadors of culture, teachers may assume the role of peace-makers

through what, how and why they teach their students (Dewi, 2009). Completion of the five-cycle-learning paradigm called Ignatian Pedagogy that comprises of three main elements –experience-reflection-action– preceded first by the search for context and finalized by the progressive, well-rounded type of evaluation can provide contextual and humanistic values in teaching English literature. Indeed, today's education is to give more space and active roles to the students through experience and reflection. Such reflective learning can be better achieved when the students learn literature close to their heart.

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