



Literary Texts in the Language Classroom: a Study of Teachers' and Students' views at International schools in Bangkok

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to find out the teachers' and the students' views about using literary texts in the language classes at some international schools in Bangkok. How much compatible are the classroom activities with their views and what kind of materials do the teachers prefer to use in their English language classes- was also investigated in the study. The research questions were attempted to be answered through: questionnaires (for the students and the teachers), interviews (the teachers and the students) and some classroom observations.

Both the teachers (37%) and students (68%) believed that literature was an asset to be used as the language teaching resource. However, both the teachers and the students faced some problems with literature in the language classrooms; 88% of the teachers thought that, for the students the linguistic level of the text and sometimes the cultural unfamiliarity hindered their comprehension of the texts. They liked both literatures with small and big 'L' to be used in their language classrooms. In fact some of them added that in a number of cases literature with small 'l' was more functional, as it gave the students quicker glimpses of various styles and structures. Although the research was conducted only in certain international schools in Bangkok, hopefully the findings of the study can likewise give other language teachers in other contexts an impetus for a better understanding of how and why to use literary texts in language classrooms.

Key Words: Literature in Language classroom, ELT materials from own contexts, motivation, views, and international schools.

Introduction

This research focused on the teachers' and the students' views about the use of literature in the language classroom at selected international schools in Bangkok. The topic of using literature in the language classroom has been of recent interest to a number of language teachers all over the world, leading to the publication of many books and articles on the subject. In the recent past, many interesting activities and techniques for implementing this area of teaching-learning have been developed and are available to language teachers. Similarly, this inclination to use literature as a language teaching resource is not new for international schools in Bangkok. The purpose of this research is to find out whether they think there is any special advantage or disadvantage for

them of using literature as a language teaching resource or not. The study would pursue the views of the present English teachers and students about this possibility of integration of “literature with a capital and small ‘l’” in language teaching¹.

Many scholars (Lazar, 1993; Collie and Slatter, 1994; Ur, 1996; Carter and Long, 1996; Pison, 2000; Maley, 2001) have discussed the various advantages of using literature as a language teaching resource. These reasons can be interpreted in the following ways:

1. Linguistic reason: Students are exposed to real, authentic usage of language in literary texts; these texts show them a variety of styles, registers and language learning materials at several stages of difficulty.
2. Methodological reason: Literary texts are open to various interpretations and therefore create an enormous opportunity of interaction in a language class.
3. Motivational reason: As literary texts are the product of the writers’ particular feeling about certain aspects of life, this ‘genuine feel’ motivates the reader a lot. Students can easily be stimulated to express their opinion, to relate the topics and the characters in the literary texts to their own life.

Context of the Problem

Cheanvichai (2002:3) was of the opinion that Thai students do not belong to a reading culture. This assumption is further supported by Fowles (2000). His survey: to investigate Thai students’ attitudes towards reading in English (first published in Bangkok Post, 4th April, 1997) revealed that ‘Thais are not book lovers... 30-40% of the people in the 72 provinces of Thailand rarely buy books’. This could be because the texts used in Thailand for teaching English tend to give them information only and not really invite any personal involvement. Nevertheless, reading literature is more likely to provide the students with opportunity for reflection and personal growth.

¹ Literature with a small ‘l’ includes imaginative texts which can be used as language teaching resources and are not usually considered to be literature, for example: advertisements, newspaper headlines, articles, jokes, puns, songs, computer games etc. **McRae (1991)** named this category “literature with a small ‘l’” Whereas examples of Literature with a capital ‘L’ are: novels, plays, poetry and so on.

Research Questions

This study will be guided by following research questions.

- What are the views of the teachers on using literary texts in the language classroom?
- What are the views of the students on using literary texts in the language classroom?
- Do the classroom activities correspond to the teachers' and the students' views on using literary texts in the language classroom?
- What kind of literary texts do the teachers prefer?

Literature in the language classroom: some advantages

Many writers in the field of ELT have emphasized the benefits of using literature for language teaching and learning purposes. These scholars state various reasons and justifications for incorporating literary texts in the language classroom.

Hirvela states some ideas about the benefits of using literature as a resource in ELT (2001: 117). He believes that reading literature is one of the best ways to inspire the writer in the learners. He asserted that literature creates a longing for learning the language. His ideas can be paraphrased in this way:

1. Conventional texts used in ELT, which are usually only information based, come from no particular context. In activities with these texts, the learners are only supposed to take the role of a passive learner. Literary texts encourage the students to *identify with* or *react against* the characters that attract their attention. The learners become more active, involved and engaged while learning the language through literature.
2. Literature stimulates the learners to solve mysteries and answer questions, creative activity that fosters deeper connections.
3. Literature also has many instances of 'deviant language' usages. These can be used as a resource for the teacher to expose the students to a variety of text types and different uses of language, and thus in turn to teach the language.
4. By reading literature, students are exposed to various cultures as well as various styles and levels of English.
5. The imaginative properties of the literary texts foster the students' academic literary

skills, which is not so easy if a non-literary text is used as the language teaching material.

Ur (1996: 201) also lists some of the advantages of literature as a language teaching resource, which can be summarized in the following way:

1. Literature is a very enjoyable resource to learn a language.
2. Literature provides examples of different styles of writing, and also representations of various authentic uses of the language.
3. Literature is a good resource for increasing word power.
4. It encourages developing various reading skills in learners.
5. It can be used as a springboard for exciting discussion or writing.
6. It involves both emotions and intellect, which adds to the motivation and may contribute to the personal development of the student.
7. English literature (in general) is a part of the target culture, and therefore it has a value as part of the learners' general education.
8. It encourages critical and creative thinking.
9. It enriches the students' world knowledge.
10. It makes the students aware of various human situations and conflicts.

Some disadvantages of literature in the language classroom

During the past few years, there has been much discussion on the significance of using literature as a language teaching resource (Sullivan, 1991). Two major difficulties of literature in language teaching, discussed in Sullivan's essay, are as follows:

1. Linguistic difficulty of the text is one of the major arguments against using literature in the language classes.
2. Learners may need a lot of background knowledge about English language and culture to interpret some texts.

At the end, it is important to remember that, when literature is brought into the language classroom, it needs a clearly defined aim. Only then can literature be

successfully integrated into language teaching.

Criteria for material selection

The difficulties that students encountered while using literary texts during the researcher's Teaching Practice constitute a part of her motivation to write this thesis. If teachers are aware of the potential problems involved in the use of literature in language teaching, they may be better equipped to use this kind of material more effectively. The essence of any literary experience must be an examination of how the text provokes an inter-subjective experience that generates reading and interpretations. Text selection is a 'crucial factor' (Maley, 2001: 184) in making literature a resource for linguistic development, personal enrichment and cultural appreciation. McRae (1997) also says that "careful text selection is fundamental to the successful use of any kind of representational materials" (1997:49). Collie and Slater (1994) suggest that text selection depend on "each particular group of students, their needs, interests, cultural background and language level" (1994: 6). Robert Hill (1995) demonstrates two sets of criteria in his essay. Lazar (1993:52) also talks about some criteria. Combined criteria from all the sources mentioned above are formulated in the following section:

- The student's cultural background
- The student's linguistic proficiency
- The student's literacy background
- The data of composition
- Interesting texts
- Availability and suitability of the text

Criteria for selection of classroom activities

Language teachers of young children have a much wider responsibility than the mere teaching of a language system; they need to bear in mind the education of the whole child when planning their teaching programme. Systematic criteria for selection of classroom activities are at the heart of this responsibility. According to Phillips (1993) some points to keep in mind while designing the activities for children (aged 5-12 years) in the language classroom using literary

texts as the material are:

1. The activities should be simple enough for the children to understand what is expected of them
2. The task should be within their abilities: it needs to be achievable but at the same time sufficiently stimulating for them to feel satisfied with their work.
3. The activities should be largely orally based (reading aloud, recitation so on). Indeed, with young children listening activities will take up a large proportion of class time.
4. Written activities should be used sparingly with younger children.

The kinds of activities that work well are games and songs with actions, total physical response activities, tasks that involve coloring, cutting and pasting, simple, repetitive stories, and simple, repetitive speaking activities that have an obvious communicative value.

Thus, Phillips (1993:91) provides an enlightening guideline for language teachers of children learners in the area of setting criteria for selection of classroom activities to be done with literary texts. The following questions are relevant here:

1. Are the activities more about discussion of the literary text than reading comprehension questions?
2. Do the activities focus on the text as a whole, or on the details?
3. Do the activities develop cultural awareness in the students?
4. Do the activities develop language awareness in the students?
5. Do the activities need too much of any specific kind of background knowledge?
6. Does the teacher provide a guideline to understand literature, for instance in classroom activities?
7. How free do the students feel during the activities to “have a go in English”?
8. As children mature they bring more intellectual, motor, and social skills to the classroom, as well as a wider knowledge of the world they live in.

Operational definition for ‘literature’ in the research

Having clarified the emphasis of this study, the next point to consider is what ‘literature’ as a language teaching resource is. For many language scholars and teachers Literature consists only

of canonical texts, such as novels, poetry and drama. But in this study the word Literature refers to both these canonical and literature with a small 'l'. The word literature with a small 'l' means the selection for short, imaginative texts not normally considered to be literary. John Mc Rae has termed them as literature with a small 'l' (Mc Rae 1991; McCarthy and Carter 1994 in Carter and McRae 1996). Literature with small 'l' includes advertisements, newspaper headlines, articles, jokes, puns, songs etc.

Subjects used in the study

Altogether **8 English teachers** who were teaching these 10-12 years old students participated as respondents in this study. All of the teachers were native speakers of English. These teachers were selected randomly. Among these teachers 3 were observed in the classroom and 6 were interviewed. **70 students** from all the schools were given the questionnaire for the students. For most of the students, English was L2/FL; however some of the students were native speakers of English. Seven (7) students, randomly chosen from the student respondents, were interviewed.

Types of Instruments used

Three types of instruments were used for this study. These were the teachers' and students' **questionnaires, classroom observation** and semi-structured **interviews** of the teachers and the students.

Chi-square analysis of the research results (teachers' and students' questionnaire): The chi-square test was used to compare the quantitative data from the questionnaires about the teachers' and the students' questionnaires about using literature as a language teaching resource. The following description of the chi-square test explains its purpose and also its advantages for analyzing the relatively small amount of data this study produced:

Chi-square is a non-parametric test of statistical significance for bivariate tabular analysis (also known as cross breaks).

(Source:http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/webtools/web_chi.html;

Created April 7, 1996. Last updated March 22, 2003. Last viewed August, 2006)

Data Analysis and Discussion

Analysis of the Questionnaire Data: Teachers' Questionnaire

The aims of the questionnaire for the teachers are to find out the teachers' views about the integration of literary texts in the language program; to get information about the teachers' views concerning the advantages of using literary texts in the language classroom; to find out what difficulties the teachers face in using these literary texts; and to obtain information about the types of literary texts these teachers prefer to use.

Q1 Literature is a good language teaching resource for international schools in Bangkok. (Please check ✓ one)

Seventy four (37+37=74) % of the teachers agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. Whereas an equal number (13%) of teachers disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. That is, in total only (13+13=) 26% of the teachers disagreed with the statement; this is a promising indication for the teachers who want to incorporate literary texts as a language teaching resource.

(Answers to the Q 2,3 about benefits and difficulty of literature in language classroom are mentioned later; Pg-)

Q 4 Which of the following types of literary texts do you prefer to use in language teaching? (Please check ✓ one)

Half (50%) of the total number of teachers preferred short stories as a language teaching resource amongst other types of literary texts listed in the questionnaire. On the other hand, an equal number of teachers (25%) preferred poems and plays as a language teaching resource. However, none of the teachers preferred novels or any other type of literary texts in language teaching.

Q5. Please list any criteria that you think are important for selecting literary texts for use in language teaching. (Please check ✓ one)

When asked about their preference of criteria for selecting literary texts for using in the language class, again an equal number (25%) of teachers preferred 'interesting', 'short', 'linguistically appropriate' and 'culturally appropriate' texts. None of the teachers suggested any other criteria.

Q 6. I encourage my students to read literary texts by themselves in their free time.

When asked about giving encouragement to the students about reading literary texts in their free

time, Hundred (100) % of the teachers stated that they ‘always’ encouraged the students to read literary texts in their free time.

Q 7. I encourage students to relate the topics and themes of the literary text they read to their own personal experience, feelings and opinions.

Thirty eight percent (38%) of the teachers said that they ‘always’ did so, whereas 62% of them said that they ‘often’ did so.

Q8. I provide enough guideline and instructions to understand the literary texts introduced in class especially in classroom activities.

Eighty Seven (87)% of the teachers said ‘yes’, they did. In addition, 13% said that they did not provide enough guidelines and instructions.

Q 9. I pre-teach all new words of the literary texts I use.

When teachers were asked whether they pre-teach all new words of the literary text or not, 25% of them said ‘always’, 13% said ‘often’, 49% said ‘rarely’ and 13% said that they ‘never’ did so.

Q10a. I like to split the classroom activities into phases like: pre-reading, while reading and post reading activity. a)

All of them answered ‘yes’ they like doing it. The reason behind saying yes are various: for example, ‘discussion makes it all very relevant’; ‘follows the guidelines of a three part lesson in the British Curriculum’; ‘in this way the students can look up for word meaning ahead’; and ‘can exploit different language skills’.

Q10b. I like to split the classroom activities into phases like: pre-reading, while reading and post reading activity. b) Please check \surd one (to show the degree of your preference).

When asked about the degree of preference to split the classroom activities into phases like: pre-reading, while reading and post reading activity, sixty two (62)% said ‘always’, while 38% said ‘often’.

Q11. I encourage students to enjoy the stories as a whole, and not to focus on details

Seventy (70)% of them said ‘yes’ they did encourage this way of reading the stories, while 30%

said 'no' to the statement. The teachers who said 'yes' to the statement explained the reason as, 'to encourage enjoyment, regular reading habit.

Q12. You prefer activities that emphasize on: discussion about the literary texts, or reading comprehension questions. (Please check ✓ one)

Seventy (70)% went for the ‘discussion about the literary texts’, whereas 30% preferred ‘reading comprehension questions’.

Students’ Questionnaire

Students had to answer almost similar questionnaire like the teachers, their answers differed a bit.

In conclusion, the data from the questionnaire show that the use of literature in the international schools at Bangkok can have its advantages, for example: promoting the use of English literature in the language classroom through discussion and activities related to the literary texts; promoting cultural enrichment; promoting a reading habit among the students; and encouraging young language learners to ‘fall in love with’ English.

4.1.3. Chi-square analysis of the research results (teachers’ and students’ questionnaires)

In order to compare the significance of the quantitative data from the questionnaires about the teachers’ and the students’ views on using literature as a language teaching resource, the chi-square test was used.

Table 9

Q.1. Literature is a good language learning/teaching resource

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Teachers	37	37	13	13	100
Students	30	68	0	2	100

Degrees of freedom: 3 Chi-square = 30.9503909026297. p is less than or equal to 0.001. The distribution is significant.

In Table 9, it can be seen that teachers’ and students’ views on literature as a good language learning resource differs significantly ((here p value (3) is >0.001)). The students agree more than the teachers that literature is a good language learning/teaching resource. Also teachers disagree more than the students to the idea of incorporating literary texts as a resource in ELT.

Table 10

Q.2. Which of the following type of literary text do you prefer in your language teaching/learning. (Please check \surd one)

	Plays	Short Stories	Poems	Novels	Others	Total
Teachers	25	50	25	0	0	100
Students	26	26	16	26	6	100

Degrees of freedom: 4 Chi-square= 41.5741649676559. p is less than or equal to 0.001. The distribution is significant.

In table 10 it can be found out that the degree of freedom that is p value (4) is greater than 0.001, which means that there is a difference between students' and the teachers' preference for the kind of literary texts they want to be used in language classes. It can be seen (Table 10) that students liked novels more than teachers do, whereas teachers preferred short stories more than students like them.

Teachers' and students' questionnaires were compared and analyzed by using chi square method in this way.

Analysis of Classroom Observation Data

The aims of the classroom observations were to find out how the teachers deal with the literary texts in the classroom, in particular, whether or not the classroom activities match the teachers' and students' views about literature in the language classroom. Another reason for the classroom observation was to find out whether or not the materials correspond with the teachers' and students' views about literature in the language classroom.

A checklist (see Appendix C) was devised and used for the classroom observation. It focused mainly on:

- The types and focus of classroom activities
- The relationship among the teachers' and students' views on using literary texts in the language classroom and the classroom activities

Four classes from three different schools were observed with the following checklist at hand.

The classroom observation checklist (class one)

	Frequency	Comment
1. Discussion based activity (between teacher and students)	2	
2. Reading comprehension based activity	x	
3. The teacher asked the class close-ended questions about a literary text	2	<i>What is a preposition?</i>
4. The teacher asked the class open-ended questions about a literary text	x	
5. Students nominated themselves without the teacher calling on them	4	
6. Students asked the teacher questions when they did not understand something	2	
7. Interactive group activities (among the students)	1	

Conclusion

All the research tools show that, like the teachers, the students were aware of the benefits of literary texts in language teaching. While talking about any special advantage of using literature with a small 'l' in literature classes, the students commented that these are usually shorter and easier to read, take less time, are not boring, and let them learn how to read actual 'language in use'. Some of the students said that to them, literature with a small 'l' was more creative and helped them to think more.

Compatibility of classroom activities and the teachers' and students' views

The activities reflected the students' and teachers' views about using literature in the language classroom. The activities were focused on reading and writing, especially vocabulary. Individual reading and also some group activities were used, for instance, rewriting the stories with different endings and making story maps. Students also did research work on related topics. Some teachers used games and crossword puzzles. Most of the teachers felt that both reading comprehension and discussion based activities were necessary in the journey of learning a language. Although these teachers had to keep in mind what the students would have to do in their exams, they dexterously incorporated

their views about literature in the language classroom while designing the activities.

Teachers’ preference about ELT materials

From the teachers’ interview data, it was found that the range of materials available in the international school libraries was good. According to some of the teachers the only problem with the materials was that sometimes the settings and characters (mostly English) were totally alien to the students. Some of the teachers suggested that to solve this dilemma, some materials from the Asian or Thai context might be helpful. Teachers liked using literature with both a small and big ‘l’ in their language classes. In fact some of them commented that in certain cases literature with a small ‘l’ was more functional, as it gave the students a quicker glimpse of various styles and structures. To some, it was a richer source of ‘learning with fun’ (T5).

Overall findings of the study

a) Similar views of the teachers and the students about the literary texts as a language teaching resource:

- Good resource for learning/teaching vocabulary
- Improves all four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening
- Interesting for group work
- A doorway to other cultures
- Language level sometimes too high
- Texts sometimes too long and boring
- Resources sometimes lacking

b) Different views of the teachers and students about the literary texts as a language teaching resource:

Teachers	Students
74% agree to the statement that literature is a good language teaching resource	98% (‘strongly agree’ + ‘agree’) agree
Prefer novels as the language teaching resource	Prefer short stories
All the criteria (interesting, short, easy language, culturally familiar) are equally (25% each) important	‘interesting’ most important; ‘short and culturally familiar’ are the least important criteria for them
100% encouraged their students to read by themselves in their free time	14% (always) read by themselves in their free time

38% encouraged their students to relate the topics and themes of the literary text they read to their own personal experience, feelings and opinions

Only 3% actually 'always' did so

Concerning approaches to using literary texts in the language classrooms, most teachers said that they ‘always’ encourage the students to relate the topics and themes they read to their own personal experience, feelings and opinions. The students on the other hand said that they liked their teachers to focus on activities that would allow them discuss the literary texts in groups or pairs. It was also noticeable in the questionnaire data that, although some students said they read on their own and relate what they read to their own life experience, they still depended a lot on their teacher for guidance and instruction in order to understand the literary texts read in their language classes.

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