

Language and Interaction in the Teaching of American Literature

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For some teachers, teaching literature is an interesting activity for transforming knowledge about an event or a phenomenon that happened in any society in a particular time. The teachers with their foresights can bring the students to comprehend any literary work by using language and culture. Language itself is a product of culture. It is used mainly as a means of communication. In this case, language has a central role in getting a deep meaning of a literary work. As Faninie (2000: 25) stated, as a means of communication, language has some functions: it can be used to explain why a certain event happened, to set a regulation to control a certain event, and to describe the event.

American literature, as one kind of literature, can be called international literature. What is international literature? The terms "international," "global," and "trans-cultural" are often used interchangeably. However, it is not difficult to give the meaning of it. Most people said that international literature refers to any literature originally written in English or languages other than Indonesian and literature written for members of another culture by a long-term participant of that culture. The best and most authentic materials by which to understand another culture are books and stories written by authors of that culture for the participants of the culture. As the written symbols of culture, books both transmit and reflect culture. No serious study of a culture can exist without an attention to its literature (Sutherland & Arbuthnot, 1981).

Literature not only illustrates and reflects the culture from which it comes, but it also gives us insights into the reasoning and belief systems of people whose outlooks and life experiences may be far different from our

own. For example, in her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan explores the struggles of parents who implant their cultural heritages towards their children living among American society. Some conflicts arouse when two cultures, American and Chinese, meet. The parents found difficulties to pass down their cultural heritages for their children who grew up in America. Some experiences from her mother in the past gave great influences in teaching her family values. Thus, teaching American multi-cultural literature gives students knowledge of histories, nations, and other people. The students can also learn new values, new emotions, new appreciation, new methods of literary analysis, and so forth. It is hoped that the students can improve their inter-relationships with others, regardless of their ethnics, beliefs, religions and nationalities.

Moreover, American literature teaching indirectly gives some good guidance to the students as it is a means of transformation. Sometimes, the students may find good lessons of themselves from any literary work. It also encourages students to be philosophic, moralistic, or religious and helps them to be realistic, mature, humane, and wiser. Furthermore, it alleviates students to understand human sentiments, human interests, human problems and so forth. The students are indirectly guided to select some beneficial lessons that they can get from American literary work. Thus, students' capacity for feeling and appreciation increases, and so does their capacity for enjoyment. This is because literature endows its readers with the vision, from which conclusions, perspectives, and interpretations about behaviors, and about what is worth striving for in life can be gained.

In teaching literature, the teachers should be familiar with some approaches. A literary approach is no different from any other kind of analysis; it attempts to find truth. The process of analysis begins with dividing a problem into parts. Once the parts are separated and considered singly, it is easier to study their natures, functions, and interrelationships. In very much the same way, you cannot talk about everything in a literary work at once, even though the work is an entire literary work. It is better to narrow the scope of discussion by dealing with separate topics like point of view, character, or imagery. It is necessary to remember that literary analysis is a way of deepening understanding and appreciation of the work (Robert, 1983: 7).

Some approaches to teaching literature must be known by the teachers well. Six frequently discussed approaches to literary analysis include New Criticism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Structuralism, Language-Based Ap-

proach, Reader-Response, and Critical Literacy. This chapter focuses on Language-Based Approach.

WHY IS LITERATURE TAUGHT?

In Sultan Agung Islamic University, Semarang, Central Java, literature is one of the courses offered to both English Education Program and English Literature Program. The literature course which is given in the third semester aims at making the students understand the nature of literature. Commonly, students in the English Literature Program are familiar with the word *literature* but some of them still find it difficult to understand it. In response to a simple question like “What is literature?” they often state that it is anything written such as brochures, timetables, text-books, magazines, and novels.

There are two types of literature: informative literature and imaginative literature. Informative literature presents information and tells us about things such as facts, explanations, history, and real great figures in life. Its main purpose is to offer knowledge. Meanwhile, imaginative literature aims to arouse thoughts and feelings. Its author expresses his or her idea, feelings and attitudes. Imaginative literature refers to writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life (Rees, 1973). Thus, the author wants to communicate not only information, but also feelings or emotion. Imaginative literature is considered to have deeper sense than informative literature. Kinneavy (1983) stated that literature has a communication triangle. Literature can be *expressive*, which focuses on personal expression (e.g., letters and diaries); *transactional*, which focuses on both the reader and the message (e.g., advertising, business letters, editorials, and instructions); and *poetic*, which focuses on form and language (e.g., drama, poetry, novels, short and stories). Teachers play an important role in teaching various aspects of language such as vocabulary and structure, or testing learners’ comprehension.

To teach a work of imaginative literature, mainly novel, poetry and drama, the teachers need to learn a number of things. They need to understand what it means to teach English literature in the class; they need to know what kinds of roles they should play in promoting English literature pedagogy; they also need to be willing to learn new knowledge and skills before they can comfortably assume their roles in teaching literature. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, they need to develop a favorable attitude

towards the teaching of American literature. They must give whole-hearted support to the literature teaching model. However, many teachers are still less eager to embrace that literature model of teaching.

In teaching literature, there is satisfaction when our students' learning potentially increases, when their attitudes are positive, and when motivation runs well. It is not an easy task to conduct literature class without understanding some variables like the students' backgrounds. For example, students' ability to learn literature can be influenced by their attitude towards the target language culture as well as the social and psychological aspects of human behavior. Therefore, the teachers should recognize all students' characteristics in varying degrees. They must help the students achieve an understanding and appreciation of a foreign culture.

Another problem is that some students do not like literature. They think that it is not true, just made up, and not real life. Therefore, they would say that there is no good literature. Simply because it is not true. To cope with this issue, we must see the differences between truth and fact in order to see literature. A fact is a statement of a thing done or existing, for example, humans and living things will die. A truth is a little bit more difficult to be defined. What may be true for one person may not be true for another. Truth is what some people believe, whether you agree or disagree. Commonly, an author of literary work makes his or her characters to behave in a certain way because he or she knows certain facts and accepts truth. In addition, he or she is always concerned with how truth and fact relate to each other.

Therefore, the word *why* is very important to clarify. The teaching of literature aims at the following. The first purpose is to inspire inquisitiveness. Some students may not enroll with any innate sense of curiosity about the material taught. They see their academic degree as a vehicle to better career opportunities. They do not read for pleasure; they do not see education as something that is potentially transformative. That is why, it is necessary for the teachers to encourage them by involving them in the process of teaching. The second purpose is to make students better understand the world. The teachers have to insist that students must think of their approaches, words, and responses in learning a literary work. By using literature, teachers can bring the students to "travel" across the world. In short, they just want students to be more interested and find a literary work more interesting. The last purpose is to give students a vocabulary for discussing

things that are complex, which is ultimately about socializing them to talk, think, and feel. This will trigger the students to arouse their responses towards any issue in a literary work. Moreover, the students can sharpen their knowledge in problem solving and know the real fact of a phenomenon that happened in a society;

TEACHER'S ROLES IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Teachers have significant roles in transforming knowledge to their students regardless of the teaching methods they use. Most good teachers hope that they perform certain roles that are essential in their jobs. One of the most important roles is to construct. As instructors, they are expected to be able to teach in a manner that the students can understand easily and in a manner that engages the students to participate optimally in the lesson. According to Wlodowski (1999: 58-59), in order to achieve instructional clarity, teachers need to be able to: explain things using simple and clear language; teach things step by step; use examples and explain them until the students understand; repeat things when the students do not understand; teach at a pace that is not too fast and not too slow; explain something and then stop so that the students can ask questions; stress difficult points; and ask questions to find out if the students understand.

Another key role of the teachers is as a motivator. In literature class, motivation plays a significant role in learning. The relationship between motivation and academic achievement is consistently positive (Brophy, 1998). Some students are enthusiastic, opportunity-oriented, committed, persistent and self-learners. The teachers can encourage the students to have goals. Then they are willing to work hard to achieve their goals and do not easily give up until they achieve those goals. In the classroom, the students are engaged in a range of activities that contribute directly and significantly to learning. So they are more attentive during lessons; they take notes to help them retain information; they ask questions when the teachers' explanation is not clear; and they reflect on their understanding of the lesson (Wlodowski, 1999). In addition, the roles of motivation have largely influenced the general education. Dornyei (2001: 5) states, "during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign language, the learner's enthusiasm, commitment and persistence are key determinants of success or failure."

Traditionally, the teachers are also expected to carry out tasks that relate to curricular issues, even though many may not be directly involved in curriculum development. According to Brown (1995) and Richards and Lockhart (1994), teachers can play roles as need analyst, material developer, and assessor. As need analysts, good teachers carry out needs analyses on an on-going basis and make use of the information to customize their lessons so the needs and aspirations of the individual students can be optimally addressed. As material developers, teachers write their teaching materials and adapt them according to curricular requirements, students' need. As assessors, teachers continually assess the students' learning in order to monitor their progress, or lack of progress, and uses this information as a basis for developing remedial lessons or other course improvement purposes.

Sometimes, a teacher needs to be a participant. It means that there are times when the teacher might take part in an activity as a participant and not as a teacher. Taking this role will allow the teacher to understand the students better not only in terms of how they learn and process information, but also in terms of the kind of difficulties they encounter in their learning. Teaching drama often uses some actors. It is very beneficial for students to act that is similar with the teacher's act. In teaching novel, when the students are asked to write down an essay on a certain topic, the teacher can actually write an essay him or herself. This role helps teachers to be more tolerant and sympathetic towards our students' learning process. It also helps teachers to better anticipate their students' learning difficulties.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND INTERACTION IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Language and interaction in teaching literature are interrelated, mainly, in teaching imaginative literature. This is a task of a teacher to be a native language model. The teacher serves as a model of desirable language use which the students should aspire to imitate and to attain. Because it is about American literature, the teacher has to use a native standard of American English. In teaching literature, the central task of the teacher is not only to help the students attain native-like competence, but also to teach the cultural norms and conventions of native English speaking communities.

Language and culture cannot be separated in line with teaching literature as teaching literature entails teaching culture. In this case, the teacher

sees him or herself as a 'representative and interpreter' (Ellis, 1996: 213) or 'ambassador' (Llurda, 2004: 319) of American cultures in the classroom. The students with their capacities are asked to demonstrate their understanding about any culture which is completely different from that in the Indonesian context. In this way, in a literature class, the teacher not only takes the role of a language teacher, whose job is to help the students develop linguistic competence, but also the role of an intercultural teacher, whose job is to help the students acquire intercultural communicative competence by fostering the ability to use English to communicate with their students culturally. According to Byram (1997), there are five important issues in line with an intercultural teacher. They should know the self and the others, know how to relate and interpret meaning, develop critical awareness, know how to discover cultural information, know how to place oneself, and know how to value the attitudes and beliefs of others.

When teaching these skills, the teacher may engage the students in activities that raise awareness of their own culture and other people's cultures; promote greater understanding and respect of their own culture and others' cultures; develop more positive and accepting attitudes towards cultural differences; and raise awareness of the potential misunderstanding that can occur in cross-cultural interactions and awareness of the need to develop skills to resolve potential communication problems. In this case, cultural relativism is suitable to be applied for the students in understanding inter-cultural values. It means that students can see another culture by using its culture as a yard of stick not their own culture so that it will not trigger misunderstanding and conflicts.

LANGUAGE-BASED APPROACH

The language-based approach emphasizes awareness of the language of literature. It facilitates students' responses and experience with literature and it is considered more accessible for language learners (Klarer, 2004). There are some activities in relation to this approach, for example brainstorming to activate background knowledge and make predictions, rewriting the ends of stories or summarizing plots, completing cloze procedures to build vocabulary, forming opinions, and involving the students in debates.

The language-based approach responds to language students' needs in studying literature. By applying this approach, the students can get the skills and techniques to facilitate access to texts and develop a sensitivity to dif-

ferent genres so that they can enjoy a piece of literature that relates to their lives. There are some advantages for the students in receiving this approach. The students communicate in English to improve their language competence; they develop the necessary skills of working in groups; and they become active learners while teachers support and guide them in the learning process.

Reflecting on my own experience, I was very much impressed when my class analyzed Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." I gave an illumination about an American identity in culture, which was individualism. The students with their backgrounds explored the individualism values by connecting the values to their life experiences. Some of students' commentaries modified with my own responses are as follows.

What Emerson means when he said "*whose would be a man must be a nonconformist.*" I think that self-reliance has a meaning identical to the idea of individualism. In the beginning of the essay, Emerson stated that our soul always hears something, which is original, not conventional, whatever the subject is. Therefore, we have to speak of what we, not what other people think. In "to believe your own thought" Emerson would urge his audience to throw off the shackles of tradition and conformity. Emerson asked them "*to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius.*"

Emerson also courageously points out that in every human being, there is a unique power, which enables him or her to face his or her destiny. He or she has to do his or her own best so that this power will not loose its strength, and he or she will have no peace nor can he or she achieve any success. A human being is a being to whom God has given ability or inherent strength to trust himself or herself. "*Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string*". If a human being realizes this and develops self-trust, he or she will have a new power. On the other hand, if he or she is always governed by society in his or her every action, he or she becomes weak, turns into a depending person, as well, and will never be satisfied with himself or herself. Emerson writes "*Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.*"

Having pointed out his idea in his 'self-reliance, Emerson concludes that he believes in individualism or non-conformity. He has a strong belief that a

human being has to trust himself or herself, since he or she has his or her own power, mind, and originality of thought. It is interesting to compare between Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry". Both of them are from Romantic era in which their work supports each other. But in Whitman's work, his poem contains wider meaning about individualism dealing with society. He stresses the idea of personality. An individual does not stand alone. An individual has to be a member of society. This membership involves the rights or duties that accompany freedom. Whitman wants to identify the principle of equality and individuality. He admits his self-identify clearly as reflected in Section 7 as follows:

Closer yet I approach you
What thought you have now, I had as much of you-I lasid in my stores in
advance
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you born
Who was to know what should come home to me
Who knows but I am enjoying this
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you
now, for all you can not see me

In short, the language-based approach is motivating because it fulfills students' needs in learning about literature and language. It helps students handle a text, enhances their enjoyment and interest in literature, develops their autonomy, and improves their learning of English. In order to give an illumination toward this approach, I use American poem 'Mulatto' which is one of Langston Hughes' poems. 'Mulatto' is regarded as Black's way, mainly for the mulattoes to protest White people for their injustice treatment to Black people. This poem is opened by a line from a Mulatto boy's voice demanding White people, his father, to accept him as his son.

'I am your son, white man!'

The above line is in italic form. It seems that the poet wants to give more emphasis to the meaning of that he really wants to declare to White man that his father is White although the Black woman is his mother. It cannot be denied. That is the fact. It is the result of his intimate relationship

with a Black woman. He has to be in charge of it. He should not be a hypocrite man. There are also some lines reminding the White man of a place where he meets the Black girls.

The moon over the turpentine woods
The Southern night
Full of Stars
Great big yellow stars
What's a body but a toy
Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
(*"Mulatto"* by Langston Hughes)

By stating those lines, the poet wants to give the flashback of the White people's memory when he meets the Black girls. To him Black girls are very nice to see, however they look toys. Then the White man treats her like a toy as well. Those lines let the White man remember about anything he has done that has relationship with sexual freedom towards the Black girl. Shortly, the poet wants to tell that actually the Black girls' body is not a toy. She is a human being. There is also a line written in italic form as the following: *What's the body of your mother?* Explicitly this question is addressed to the son. However, this line has an implicit meaning of claiming or asking White people for their perception of the Mulatto's mother.

CONCLUSION

Language and interaction are closely related to the some roles of the teacher in the class. Traditional roles combined with language communicative aspects give positive impacts towards the students' acceptance of literature materials. In teaching American literature, a teacher must have a competence in mastering a suitable approach along with cultural perspectives of learning that is valued by the native speaker cultures of learning. Accordingly, the teacher takes on roles that, to a large extent, conform to these assumptions. It is undeniably true that now English has obtained a status as a global language. At least, it is used mostly for global inter-relationship among nations over the world. In relation to literature teaching, there is a need for teachers to critically examine their pedagogical practices

and adjust their roles so that they are more in keeping with the principles that underlie the teaching of English as a global or international language.

When evaluating the relevance of approaches to teaching American Literature to university language students, it is useful to consider the purposes of learning, the activities in the classroom, the essence of meaning, the roles of the teacher, and the roles of the students. Finally, teaching American literature as an international study must embrace the holistic learning method. To make the teaching process effectively, it needs scanning and leveling, active interaction and learning conditioning. The other significant factors referring to the success of literature teaching are the existence of following activities: story telling analogy and case study, body language, self reflection, focus and point basis as well affirmation and repetition.

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