

Teaching and Learning Literature in the English Language Curriculum in Vietnamese University Education: Problems and Solutions

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Taking as its point of departure the problems which English-majored students face when confronted directly with the course in literature at university, this study was conducted mainly through an analysis of student-and-teacher responses to questionnaires together with document analysis and reviews on the author's experience in teaching and managing literary courses at his university. The sample includes 10 teachers in charge of the courses and 150 students attending these courses from five universities. The findings indicate that the teaching and learning of literature in the English language curriculum at these universities is facing certain problems, among which are: limited experience of mother tongue literature; limited experience of literary language; limited experience of English or American literature; and limited experience or knowledge of the world, life, people. From the implications identified, the findings of this paper are believed to yield further insights into the improvement of literature teaching and learning at university in Vietnamese contexts.

Keywords: literature autonomy, literature teaching and learning, language curriculum

Introduction

Background to the Study

Literature has long been a subject in many countries at different levels ranging from tertiary to higher ones. It was not until the 1980s that this area has started attracting more and more interest among EFL teachers. During this time, "literature is undergoing an extensive reconsideration within the language teaching profession, provoking a series of articles in professional journals, books, conferences and curricular reviews" (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 1). In Vietnam, the teaching and learning of literature in English is a rather new concept and it is really a challenging task for both teachers and learners of the language in dealing with this subject.

Research Purposes and Questions

Conducted within a limited amount of time, the main purposes of the study are (i) to find out students' problems in studying literature in English at the level of university education in Viet Nam, and (ii) to propose solutions to the enhancement of literature teaching and learning in Vietnamese contexts.

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Accordingly, the study is specifically designed to find answers to the following questions: (i) What are students' problems in studying English literature at the level of university education in Viet Nam; and (ii) What are solutions to the enhancement of literature teaching and learning in Vietnamese contexts?

Time and Scope of the Study

Due to the limited timeframe, the survey was conducted at only five universities (including one university in Binh Duong Province and the other four universities in Ho Chi Minh City). With the large number of students participating in the survey, however, the results can be generally applied to Vietnamese educational contexts in general.

The Statement of Value

This research investigated problems in literature teaching and learning in Viet Nam, and then presented solutions for lecturers to tackle these problems. Towards this objective, the author of this study does hope that the study will contribute to the improvement of literature teaching and learning in the English language curriculum in Vietnamese contexts, all with an effort to create good opportunities for English-majored students to learn the language better and more effectively.

Literature Review

Literature in Language Learning

Over the last decade or so, literature has been an academic subject crucial to the whole curriculum for English majors at colleges and universities. In some institutions, it is one of the compulsory subjects in the graduation exams.

For students with some and high English language proficiency, the literature component was a welcome as it added a dimension of enjoyment to their learning while developing their language skills. As Carter and McRae (1996, p. 21) stated "literature is always more than language and that appreciation and enjoyment of literature transcend the development of linguistic capacities". This is partly because

the reading of literary texts involves the development of complex skills and tools of inquiry and these skills and tools may be interpreted to include the gathering of information related to an issue or problem, an analysis of personal values as they relate to the issue or problem, reflecting upon various options for solution, and selecting and applying the most appropriate option. (Ganakumaran, 2003, p. 1)

Collie and Slater (1987) pointed out four main valuable benefits of literature inclusion in the language curriculum: valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement. Based on the learning objectives, Carter and Long's rationale for the inclusion of literature in the curriculum is manifested under three models: (1) the cultural model; (2) the language model; and (3) the personal growth model (Carter & Long, 1991). According to these authors, the teaching and studying of literature in the language classroom serve several purposes, among which some of the important ones are: (1) enhancing students' cross-cultural knowledge; (2) improving students' language skills; and (3) offering students chances to reflect upon themselves as well as connect themselves with the society and the world they are living in and thus they "grow".

According to Vethamani (2004, p. 57), among the aims of incorporating literature into the English language programme were "to help students improve their language skills (especially reading comprehension

skills)” and also “to experience both education and pleasure when reading literary texts”. Rashid, Vethamani, and Rahman (2010) also claimed that the incorporation of literature in language education has a lot of benefits, among which are (1) inculcating reading habits among pupils, (2) enriching pupils’ vocabulary and language content, (3) enhancing pupils’ thinking skills, (4) promoting cultural understanding, (5) improving English language proficiency, (6) providing lively, enjoyable, and high-interest readings.

Literature has recently been considered as one of the most important, and therefore, one of the compulsory subjects in the language classes, especially those at college and university levels. It is broadly believed that through literature, students can widen their knowledge in terms of culture, history, nation, people, and so on. As Sage (1987) has put it “literature can be a special resource for personal development and growth”.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons, literature teaching and learning in the EFL/ESL classroom has occupied a long-established place in the language curriculum.

Factors Affecting Literature Teaching and Learning in the Language Curriculum

As it has pointed out earlier, there have been different models suggested on the teaching of literature to ESL/EFL students: the cultural model; the language model, and the personal growth model (Carter & Long, 1991). The cultural model views a literary text as a product. This means that a literary text is treated as a source of information about the target culture. The language model aims to be more learner-centred. Within this model, the teacher can choose to focus on general grammar and vocabulary (as in the same way in which these models are presented in coursebooks) or use stylistic analysis in their teaching. The personal growth model is also a process-based approach and tries to be more learner-centred. This model encourages learners to draw on their own opinions, feelings, and personal experiences. How the teacher uses a literary text depends on the model they choose.

From the author’s teaching experience, one of the most important factors that can greatly contribute to the success of students in studying literature is the background knowledge. Background knowledge is, in fact, a broad term which consists of different kinds of knowledge. According to Carter and Long (1991), there are at least three areas for consideration concerning background knowledge, which are: (i) experience of mother tongue literature; (ii) experience of English literature; and (iii) experience, or knowledge of the world, life, people.

In a literature course, learners who have read widely in their own literature will find it easy to read or study literature in a foreign language. It is, therefore, suggested that this experience should be exploited wherever possible: “Far from giving up the mother tongue literature, then learners of a second literature should be encouraged to read it further, and to use the experience to make comparisons and to mark contrasts” (Carter & Long, 1991, pp. 48-49). From this experience, the interpretation of literary texts in a foreign language will not be a problem at all. In contrast, the ignorance of their mother tongue literature may limit their ability to study the foreign language literature.

Methodology and Research Results

Methodology

Research methods. This paper takes as its point of departure the problems which EFL students face when confronted directly with the course in literature in the English language curriculum at university. Together with document analysis, both quantitative and qualitative research designs are also used. The data collected almost

come from document reviews, questionnaires, and the author's actual teaching experiences. Besides, ideas from informal talks with the teachers in charge of literature courses from five universities in the survey are also taken into consideration.

Participants. The sample of the study includes 15 lecturers in charge of literature courses from five universities (one university in Binh Duong Province and the other four universities in Ho Chi Minh City, three teachers for each university), and 150 students who have attended at least one literature course from the these universities (30 students for each university). Both the teachers and the students were chosen randomly from the population without taking into considerations of their linguistic, literary, and general background knowledge. As all of the teachers in the survey have at least five years of experience in teaching literature to English majors, their responses can give a vivid and real picture of the situation of literature teaching and learning in Vietnamese context in general and in these universities in particular.

Research instruments. For the purpose of primary data collection, the research instruments include two questionnaires (one for the teachers and the other one for the students), focusing on finding students' attitude towards literature learning and their problems in studying literature at these universities. The questionnaires consisted of Yes-No items followed by "what", "why", "how" question items and several open-ended question items to allow the respondents to express their opinions and suggestions on matters related to the research topic. The research results will be synthesized by using basic excel software, counting and making out the percentage of each case for analysis.

The interview questions for the teachers were categorized and coded into a few constructs, namely profile of teachers (Q1), teachers' views on the importance of literature in the language curriculum (Q2), students' problems in studying English literature at university (Q3), and their experience in dealing with literature courses in the English language curriculum (Q4).

Data analysis and procedures. The study required quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was used for the quantitative data. Questionnaire survey was carefully conducted and the results were compiled, synthesised, analysed, and compared in order to draw appropriate conclusions and interpretations. The interview transcripts were grouped, synthesized, and then appropriately used to strengthen the basis of argument.

Research Results

Results from the questionnaires. As the objectives of the survey are clearly stated right at the beginning, both the teachers and students are interested in completing the questionnaires. The questions in these two questionnaires are related to the importance of literature in the English language curriculum and students' problems in studying literature at university.

The importance of literature in language teaching and learning. Most of the teachers and the students recognize the importance of the literature in the language curriculum, in which, 40.01% of the teachers and 38.01% of the students recognize the course in English literature "very important", 40.01% of the teachers and 40.00% of the students recognize it "important", and a few recognize it "normal" (Table 1). It can be concluded from this result that there are almost no differences in responses from the teachers and the students concerning their awareness of the importance of literature in language curriculum.

Table 1
The Importance of Literature in the English Language Curriculum

No.	Options	Responses from the teachers		Responses from the students	
		Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Very important	6	40.01	47	38.01
2	Important	6	40.01	60	40
3	Rather important	2	13.32	25	16.66
4	Unimportant	1	6.66	8	5.33
Total		15	100	150	100

Students' problems in studying literature at university.

Table 2
Students' Problems in Studying Literature at University

Options	Responses from the teachers (N = 15)				Responses from the students (N = 150)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1 Limited experience of mother tongue literature	N = 15 7	5	2	1	N = 150 74	63	8	5
	% 46.62	33.40	13.32	6.66	% 49.39	42.00	5.33	3.33
2 Limited experience of American/English literature	N = 15 6	6	2	1	N = 150 74	63	8	5
	% 40.01	40.01	13.32	6.66	% 49.39	42.00	5.33	3.33
3 Limited experience, or knowledge of the world, life, people	N 6	6	3	0	N 69	68	8	5
	% 39.96	39.96	20.08	0.00	% 46.01	45.33	5.33	3.33
4 Limited experience of literary language	N 8	7	0	0	N 74	67	6	3
	% 53.38	46.62	0.00	0.00	% 49.34	44.66	4.00	2.00

Notes. Agreement scales: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) disagree, (4) completely disagree.

The data from Table 2 reveal that there are almost no differences between teachers and students' ideas concerning the problems of literature teaching and learning at the universities. The common problems that are recognized by both of the two groups include: (i) limited experience of mother tongue literature (80.02% for the teachers and 91.39% for the students); (ii) limited experience of American/English literature (80.02% for the teachers and 91.39% for the students); (iii) limited experience, or knowledge of the world, life, people (79.92% for the teachers and 91.84% for the students); and (iv) limited experience of literary language (100.00% for the teachers and 94.02% for the students). These problems are inevitably considered as factors affecting literature teaching and learning and therefore should be carefully addressed in finding solutions to the improvement of literature teaching and learning in Vietnamese contexts.

Results from the interviews. There were 15 teachers involved in the interviews. As the objectives of the study were stated clearly by the researcher himself, these teachers are interested in answering the interview questions. Their answers reveal notable issues concerning the importance of literature in English language curriculum and students' problems in studying literature at university as well. From the data collected through the interviews, it is discernible that teachers had their own way to improve literature teaching and learning in their literature classes.

Discussion and Teaching Applications

Discussion of Results

As it has been mentioned above, the teaching and learning of literature in the English language curriculum at university is very important in that it provides students with different kinds of knowledge, and as a result, it can enhance English language teaching and learning. However, it seems that the task of teaching and learning of this subject has long been a challenge to most Vietnamese teachers and students. From the researcher's personal experiences in teaching literature to English majors at university, from the research surveys and from the data collected through the interviews, three five remarkable problems are identified:

Lack of background knowledge related to literary texts. As it is stated by Carter and Long (1991), there are at least three areas for consideration concerning background knowledge, which are: (i) experience of mother tongue literature; (ii) experience of English literature; and (iii) experience, or knowledge of the world, life, people.

Firstly, Vietnamese students' experience of their mother tongue literature, as it is shown by the survey results, has been still a big problem for most literary teachers. This kind of knowledge is concerned with students' knowledge or experience of their mother tongue language. The simple reason is that under the influence of the past pace of living, students nowadays are not eager to engage themselves in literary texts even those in their mother tongue ones.

Secondly, the lack of students' experience of English literature is another point that should be complained about. This is the second component in background knowledge that should be taken into consideration in reading and studying a foreign literature. It is believed that a certain amount of knowledge of foreign literature can give a clue to the better understanding of its texts. It is unfortunate that for many Vietnamese students, even for those who are native speakers of English, the amount of English literature which they have read is not large enough. Although we should not be discouraged for students' awareness of this kind of knowledge, it is advisable that they should be provided with access to it wherever and whenever possible.

The third problem concerning background knowledge would be students' limited exposure of the world in general. By this, the author of this study is referring to the kind of knowledge that is rather personal, depending on students' exposure to the world around. This kind of knowledge may include experience or knowledge of the world, life, people, and culture that are described or implied in the literary texts.

While it is possible to read these texts without background knowledge, it seems certain that it would be an "incomplete" reading. Lack of background where background is needed is perhaps among the first reasons for putting a text aside and not continuing to read. (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 153)

To some extent, the lack of this kind of knowledge may make many texts puzzling, remote, and inaccessible.

Lack of knowledge of literary language. It is acknowledged that literature is not an easy subject to master as most literary texts are written in a different style of language. Basnett and Grundy (1999) cited by Mario Sarceni (2003) claim that literature is learnt because of its powerful language which marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Chan (1999) further argues that literature is illustrative of different genres, text-types, register, narrative structures, point of view, patterning of words and sounds. In the same view, Maley (2001) cited by Mario Sarceni (2003) claims the text may also be used as an example of certain types of pattern and structure. This linguistic style can be reflected in the stylistic features of literature. From

these views, the reading and studying of literature in English require lots of students' skills among which linguistic-literary skills have long been considered as the most important ones.

Unfortunately, research surveys show that it is this language barrier that makes literature inaccessible to many English-majored students. The reason for this could be traced to the fact that not all students are born to have a special or an inborn talent for literature study. As the majority of Vietnamese students are not proficient enough in literary language, they did not know how to read or write about a literature work effectively and independently. In most cases, these students often complain that the language used in the literary work is somehow old-fashioned and even strange, which is hard for them to understand or interpret.

Lack of preference for the subject. Nowadays, more and more people globally are enjoying the rat race in the market economy. They tend to be engrossed in the fast pace of living. One of the results of this may be the erosion of their interest in literature: It is rare to see young Vietnamese people spending time enjoying a long novel, a poem, or even a folksong in their mother tongue, let alone in the English language.

The case of the students in the survey is, of course, of no exception. To these students, the idea of reading or studying a literary text is ridiculous because they think it is only a waste of time and it will not bring them any money or other benefits. At the other extreme, these students have no actual interest and intrinsic motivation in reading and studying literature as well. As a result of this, they are normally very passive and do not take any initiative in studying the subject. It seems that they come to learn this subject just for the sake of passing exams to meet the curriculum requirements. "This also results in that their passivity and dependency are exacerbated, but their creativity and uniqueness are undermined which, again, may end up in their complete loss of enjoyment for the subject" (Truc, 2004, p. 3). When asked to work on a certain literary text, most of these students usually read the text for only once and some other students do not even read it at all. When required to write an essay or to answer questions on a literary text, they tend to resort to the teacher's ideas, to reference books, to sample essays, or to any other kinds of materials. These make it a barrier for language teachers to teach this subject effectively in Vietnamese contexts.

Teaching Applications

The key issue of this study is to find out the solutions to the problems of literature teaching and learning in the English language curriculum in Vietnamese contexts. From the research surveys and the author's teaching experience, there are various things that should be done to improve the situation:

Developing student's preference for reading and studying literature. As it is pointed out earlier, most students from survey universities have little or no interest in their literature study. It is, therefore, a good idea to raise students' awareness of the importance and values of this subject so that they will come to study this subject for academic purposes on their own as well as for relaxation and for enjoyment out of compulsion.

Theoretically, motivating students to study literature should be the first step to solve these problems because when students are aware of the importance of literature in the language curriculum as well as in their life, they will be inspired to explore it and study it better. When they are intrinsically motivated, they will then devote more time and energy to their literature study and seek enjoyment in it.

In language teaching methodologies, there are many ways to develop students' motivation or preference for literature study. It may be drawn that the teachers' wisdom, enthusiasm, sympathy, patience, and flexibility can play a vital role in developing students' preference or liking for literature. In curriculum design and

development, furthermore, literature should also be incorporated as a compulsory subject in the English language curriculum at university.

Developing students' autonomy for literature. Tierney and Pearson (1983) cited by Collins (1993) claim that readers will use their prior knowledge to interpret meanings. Collins (1993) further argues that in order for a learner to achieve a higher level of reading, he/she must be able to relate new information to what is known in order to find answers to cognitive questions.

As I have mentioned above, most of students in Vietnam in general and English-majored students in particular do not have enough self-control in their literature study and, as a result, they cannot be naturally autonomous in this field. It is, therefore, important that these students should be trained in order to study literature more successfully and independently (Sinclair, 1996).

According to Sinclair (1996), there are four techniques that may be helpful in developing students' anatomy in literature study: (i) psychological preparation: Psychological preparation is used to build up their self-confidence by means of class discussion sections; (ii) methodological preparation: Explicitly training is not only used to equip students with the metalanguage used in reading literature such as stylistic aspects but also provides them with the methodology in dealing with literature texts; (iii) practice in self-direction: Practice in self-direction is used to give students opportunities to practice self-direction in reading; (iv) systematic training: Systematic training often trains teachers how to study literature in an effective way. In this technique, students should be equipped with learning strategies including both cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Among these techniques, the preparation and promotion of critical thinking, reading and writing skills for students should be taken into consideration as the first start for a literature course in the language curriculum.

Combining teacher-centered approach and student-centered approach. As I have stated right at the introduction of the study, the task of teaching literature to Vietnamese students is not easy for most language teachers. It is, therefore, advisable that every teacher should develop his or her own strategies for studying and teaching the subject.

Basically, whatever approaches that are used in language teaching can be applied effectively to literature teaching. Here, the writer of this study refers to teacher-centered approach and student-centered approach. In teaching literature, these two approaches should not be used exclusively: In order to develop literary competence for students, there must be a combination between these two kinds of approach in the process of teaching and learning the subject. These two kinds of approach "are not mutually inimical but can and should rather complement each other as necessary continuities in the development of learning to lead literature" (McRae, 1996, p. 23).

In many literature classes, teacher-centered approach is used before students start reading the text to guide them towards an accurate interpretation of the text. At this stage, for example, the teacher can give some explanations and elicit personal responses from students about the cultural factors or other types of background knowledge that are related to the literary texts using different questioning strategies.

However, the objectives of literature teaching and learning will not be obtained without the application of student-centered approach. As Carter and Long state

a student-centered literature class is the one which allows more exploration of the literary texts by the learners and invites learners to develop their own responses and sensitivities. It leads learners to make their own judgements and to refine and develop their techniques for doing so that they can apply them to a wider range of text for their own benefits. (1991, pp. 24-25)

It should be remembered that by student-centered approach, we can develop students' interest and motivation in reading literary texts and studying this subject.

Modifying the whole language curriculum and the literature course. Together with the above-mentioned suggestions, it is also necessary to adopt and/or modify the whole language curriculum and the literary course at college or university. Towards these objectives, the author would like the language curriculum developer to consider following aspects:

Designing an introductory course to literature as a preparation for the study of this subject. Together with other courses in the language curriculum (such as Reading and Writing Skills, Semantics, Critical Thinking Skills, British and American Cultures, Cross-Cultural Communication, etc.), this introductory course can provide students with useful background knowledge. This has, in fact, been done at many colleges and universities nowadays, bringing some satisfactory results.

Designing activities to arouse students' interest. These activities should include features of cross-cultural aspects that are embedded in the literary texts. These activities are very useful because they can provide students with some background knowledge that may later help them in the interpretation and understanding of the literary texts. Concerning the teaching procedures, these activities should be conducted before students come to read the texts. The thing is that these activities should be graded from simple tasks to complex tasks, from closed tests to open tests, from language-based tasks to literature-based tasks. Extra-curricular activities should also be used to develop students' enjoyment of literature reading and studying.

Careful choice of texts. Selecting literary text to present is considered the first and very important step of the process of teaching literature. As part of literature curriculum design, the choice of texts can be considered as a primary factor contributing to the betterment of teaching and learning literature. As Brumfit and Carter (1986, p. 15) have pointed out: "The content of a literary text if appropriately selected can be an important motivation for study". The text is, therefore, one of the factors that shape the success of the whole process of teaching and learning literature. Text selection may bring initial desire to the learner and point out the path for them to get further motivation to explore the literature of the language. However, it is completely difficult for teachers to choose texts that can meet all of these requirements as the selected text may either foster or devalue the teacher's efforts. As part of a language course, simplification of the texts is not preferable because it may bring about the loss of the texture of the original and that it can become unnatural and authentic: The use of simplified texts may be still appropriate for students at an early stage only. In a relative sense, in my opinion, the four characteristics of a good text should be the following: (i) The texts should not be far beyond students' current linguistic and literary levels; (ii) the texts should be related to students' interest; and (iii) the texts should be a resource not only for studying the language and literary enjoyment but also for a motivating and fruitful opportunity for students' education and personal growth.

Conclusion

As it is stated right at the beginning of this study, because of its importance, literature has become one of the compulsory subjects for English majors at most colleges and universities in Viet Nam. On the one hand, literature learning can build up students' competence for both literature and the language. It is one of the main tools for studying the language. On the other hand, literature learning can help develop students' personal growth as individuals. Unfortunately, the teaching and learning of literature in Vietnamese contexts, as it has been pointed earlier, has undergone a lot of problems arising from students' lack of preference for literature,

students' lack of experience or background knowledge in dealing with the subject, and so on. For the betterment of the situation, lots of interventions should be done concerning psychological factors, teaching methods, curriculum development and implementation. Together with these interventions, it is of great importance that both teachers and students should change their attitudes towards the teaching and learning of this subject in the language curriculum.

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