

## **SEVEN ISSUES AND DILEMMAS IN LITERATURE TEACHING IN EFL CONTEXT: LESSONS FROM INDONESIA**

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**Abstract:** Using literature instruction practices in different “literature programs” as a point of departure, this article discusses some knotty issues and dilemmas confronting English literature instructors and researchers in Indonesia, especially those working in the context of English as A Foreign Language (EFL). First some commonly adopted approaches to literature teaching are outlined and specific issues and dilemmas located. Next, using Indonesian current situation as a case in point, these perceived issues and dilemmas are fleshed out and possible solutions from diverse fronts are then sketched out.

**Keywords:** Literature in EFL, Literature and ELT, Literature Programs, Literature Teaching and Learning

Like other purposeful activities we choose to engage in, literature teaching is a political act. This instructional practice results from a complex interaction among varied forces, including instructors’ conception of what literature is, how it might contribute to human development, what learners are capable of learning and how literature should be learned and what resources—both internal and external—are at the instructors’ disposal. To make things even more complicated, these determinant factors are themselves fluid, making it virtually impossible to make fixed generalizations across contexts.

The purpose of this article is to bring to our attention the situated nature of literature teaching and learning by bringing to fore diverse conceptions of literature, various options of how to approach literature and its teaching together with their concomitant issues and problems. To situate the discussion into a relatively concrete context of situation, some explicit reference will be made to observations of instructional practices and course offerings in various English Studies programs recently joined an organization

called *Indonesian English Studies Association* (IESA) based in Depok, including those affiliated with UPI (Indonesia University of Education), UNPAD (Padjadjaran University), UTama (Widyatama University), UI (University of Indonesia), UNJ (State University of Jakarta), UNSOED (Soedirman University), UNY (State University of Yogyakarta), UGM (Gajah Mada University), USD (Sanata Dharma University), UKSW (Satya Wacana Christian University), UNNES (State University of Semarang), UNDIP (Diponegoro University), UNESA (State University of Surabaya), Unand (Andalas University), Unsrat (Samratulangi University), Universitas Papua (UNIPA), and Petra Christian University, Surabaya.

Based on program descriptions officially provided by department chairs of these university members, some common issues are explored and possible ways for improvement charted.

### **WHAT LITERATURE IS**

Many different definitions of literature exist which point to different directions: some

definitions are very exclusive and some others are more inclusive. For the purpose of this article, two representative definitions are used here. The first definition comes from Moody (1991:19) who defines “literature” as constructions (or artifacts) in language which may be designed for any of the whole range of human communication needs, private or public, oral or written, for which language is used. The second definition is from Purves *et al.* (1990) who refer to literature as a work of art that “seeks to please the person who made it and the person who attends to it” (p.11). From the two definitions above we can infer that two criteria are important: the intention of the writers and the reception of the readers. It therefore makes sense if literature is perceived as an artifact of communication. And to ensure that communication works as expected, some kind of conventions binding both readers and writers are indeed in order, and it is these conventions which make up a major concern of the academic programs focusing on the teaching of literature as their programmatic mission.

### WHY TEACH LITERATURE?

Literature teaching has a long history, and a relatively established body of knowledge has also developed in the discipline. This lengthy history has contributed a relatively systematic understanding about why literature needs to be taught to students.

Carter & Long (1991) and Lazar (1993), for example, specify three main reasons for teaching literature, each of which has its own learning objectives: the cultural model, the language model, and personal growth model. Instructors working within *the cultural model* value literature because it contains accumulated wisdom—“the best that has been thought and felt within a culture” (Carter & Long, 1991:2). Literature in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is, in this case, expected to promote students’ understanding and appreciation of cultures

and ideologies reflected in the literary texts they read.

Believing in the idea that literature teaching is justifiable primarily because of its value for promoting students’ language development, instructors who subscribe to *the language model* take literary texts as an authentic locus from which to study vocabulary items and structural aspects of the language. From this engagement with literary texts, it is expected that students will later develop “ways into a text in a methodological way” (Carter & Long, 1991:2).

While proponents of the cultural model emphasize the cultural wisdom aspects of the literary texts, and the proponents of the language model stress linguistic realization contained in literary texts as the primary value of literature, instructors who subscribe to *the personal growth model* believe that students need to be encouraged to engage aesthetically with literary texts so that some sense of enjoyment develops in them out of their engagement with literary texts. It is this aesthetic literary experience which is believed to be transferable beyond the boundary of school context. In other words, the proponents of the personal growth model expect that as result of students’ engagement with literary texts lasting love for reading will develop; and this love for reading will fuel students’ further personal growth as literate individuals.

How are these useful potentials of literature to be brought to literature class? This is a question of approach which is discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

### APPROACHES TO LITERATURE TEACHING

Four common approaches to literature teaching have been identified: language-based approach, literature as content, literature for personal enrichment (e.g., Carter & Long, 1991; Lazar, 1993), and literature as a resource for empowerment.

1. *Language-based approach*

Guided by a methodological assumption that studying the language of English literary text helps integrate the language and literature syllabuses more closely, literature programs subscribing to this approach will focus on stylistic analyses of literary works being used as learning materials. With a primary focus being placed as it is, this program will encourage learners to draw on their linguistic-based knowledge resources to appreciate and make judgment of the literary texts they are reading.

Proponents of this approach to literature might argue for the adoption of this approach for a diverse instructional purposes. For instance, some instructors might use literary texts pedagogically as a locus from which students can learn registers and writing styles. Some other instructors might use literary texts as an object of study by encouraging students to learn the linguistic tools they need to interpret literary texts and to make critical judgments of the texts they are reading.

Either way, the focus is on texts and students are being encouraged to treat literary texts as a source for learning English. At this point, as far as the students are assisted in understanding and appreciating literary works they read, the business of teaching literature is taken care of.

However, if during the teaching-learning processes the use of *bahasa Indonesia* (rather than English as the target language) predominates, then the opportunities for students to learn English as it is used in literature are downplayed. At issue here is, then, if the use of English is being encouraged and facilitated because the extent to which this language-based approach to literature teaching hits its target depends on how much the learners

get exposed to and learn the English language.

2. *Literature as a content*

As the title suggests, this approach treats literature as the primary materials for students' learning of English. Using English literature itself as the content of the course, instructors of English engage their students in reading literary text sets and literary criticism relating to the text under discussion. The course contents might be organized in terms of literary genres (e.g., prose, poetry, drama), rhetorical devices, the history and characteristics of literary movements.

Treating literature in English as a content means focusing on literature as a body of knowledge which covers details such as genres and subgenres of literary texts, characteristics of literary periods, defining stylistic features of works falling under a certain literary period, and other formal features of literary works. Programs which take this direction lead students to develop expertise in literature and graduate from the programs as a literary scholar.

Can Indonesian undergraduate students develop into an excellent scholar in English literature? As a possibility, nobody can say otherwise. We know, however, what our students' reading habits generally are and it seems fair to characterize our students as having low interest in voluntarily reading literature in English (and this is true even in *bahasa Indonesia*). Assuming that this speculation has some truth in it, learning English literature as a content is too challenging a job for our students to handle and this can be counterproductive for two reasons. For one, generally speaking, students' English proficiency is too low to benefit from independent reading activities—especially on tough topics such as literary theories and criticism and critical analyses of literary works (especially

poetry). The second reason is related to the instructors. Usually, when discussing a phenomenon (be it activity or concept) unfamiliar to students, temptations are great for instructors to resort back to using *bahasa Indonesia*. When instructors do use *bahasa Indonesia* rather than English, this very act is practically blocking the achievement of the instructional objective of the course they are trying to teach.

### 3. *Literature for personal enrichment*

Underpinning this approach is the assumption that literature is a useful tool for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings, and opinions. Materials for students' learning can be selected on the basis of their assumed relevance with students' interest and abilities and these materials can be organized thematically together with other non-literary texts which deal with a similar theme.

Literary texts, in this approach, are treated primarily as a vehicle for personal development, especially as readers and writers. While theoretically defensible, this approach may face difficulties in classroom practice especially when the instructors of English literature are not well versed with reading-and-writing instructional techniques, and task designs, which eventually determine how students' attention is to be paid and their energy channeled. The challenge here is, that is to say, to find pedagogically informed instructors who can model reading-and-writing behaviors and can "walk the talk" so that students have real examples and tangible models to observe and learn from.

### 4. *Literature as a resource for empowerment*

Using literature as a resource means treating literary texts as a locus to invite students' highest personal response and involvement. Unlike treating literature as a

content which tends to focus exclusively on the acquisition of a body of knowledge *about* literature (i.e., accumulation of facts about literary contexts, dates, authors, titles of texts, literary terms, etc.), treating literature as a resource has the primary purpose of imparting personal pleasure and enjoyment in reading literary texts.

In real practice, positioning literary texts as a resource for empowerment means showing to the students how instructors themselves enjoy literary texts and develop as readers (and writers) of literature. At issue here is whether Indonesian instructors of English literature can show the students "ways with literature" so that the learners can develop genuine interest in literary reading and writing, and useful skills in engaging literary texts.

## **SEVEN ISSUES AND DILEMMAS SURROUNDING THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN ENGLISH**

Teaching is a very complex enterprise, involving a series of decision-making activities that occur across range of ideas, issues, and events (Loughran, 2010). Teaching is a theoretical act, and theories—whether explicitly or implicitly held—have powerful effects on what teachers do, how they do it, and how they determine if they are successful (Beach *et al.*, 2006). As teaching comprises various demands—many of them are conflicting one another—teaching requires continual decision making: making judgments about what is considered to be appropriate actions in a given situation at a given time. At this juncture, when teachers are faced with choices, teachers' personal professional judgments become paramount in responding to problems at hand. And this in itself is subject to differing interpretations which can lead to dilemmas—that is, situations that need to be managed (Loughran, 2010:13).

What dilemmas and issues are common in the teaching of literature in EFL/ESL

context? Building on what Bernhard (2002), Byrnes & Kord (2002), and Scott & Tucker (2002) have identified, in what follows seven issues and dilemmas are presented which have been facing many literature instructors in many collegiate foreign language departments. These include differences as a source of threats and/or opportunities, instructor's personal-professional preferences and faculty development, task designs, assessment methods, programmatic missions, available resources, and academic leaderships.

*1. Differences as a source of threats and/or opportunities*

It has been observed in foreign language departments outside Indonesia that some dichotomies have been made between literature and language; content and language, and between literary scholarship and teaching of literature. Bernhard (2002), for instance, observes that some real sense of separation exists between instructors who teach literature courses and language courses. Similarly, Scott & Tucker (2002) have noticed that content courses and language courses pose strikingly different challenges at various levels to instructors.

A similar sense of separation has also surfaced in the Department of English Studies, Indonesia University of Education. Probably driven by the fact that the literature program came much later than the English Language program, instructors in the former program feel less established than their fellow instructors in the English language (or linguistics) program. A more substantive reason for this uneasy feeling especially among junior literature instructors is very well reflected in what Scott & Tucker (2002) have observed:

Unlike the language course, which is frequently dictated by explicit content (grammar structures, vocabulary units, short readings with guiding questions, culture capsules, current

events, etc.), ...literature course has little in the way of prescribed support system for the teacher (p.xi)

We have also observed that there is a noticeable pattern among literature instructors, especially those with Master's degree from overseas universities, that they tend to teach undergrad students materials the instructors themselves have learned from graduate programs overseas. This practice, while practical for the instructors, can create serious problems because the materials are not developmentally appropriate for undergraduate students. Too difficult materials can frustrate the learners.

What is at issue here? Evidence exists which indicates that many instructors of English literature do not feel comfortable teaching literature major courses for lack of confidence. This lack of confidence can come from two possible sources: one is because the instructors themselves never took any courses in their previous schooling experiences similar to those literature subjects they are supposed to teach. Examples may include subjects on post-structural theories and cultural studies. A second reason is simply because the instructors do not like the kind of literature subjects they (happen to) have to teach. Examples may include subjects such as "poetry" and/or "drama" (e.g., exploring poetry/or drama, and critical analysis of poetry/or drama).

If we closely examine this issue of lack of confidence, chances are that the instructors misconstrue "teaching literature" as teaching philosophical/theoretical constructs which are commonly of concern to literary theorists. As a matter of fact, the instructors can position themselves as a "consumer" (or experience) of literary artifacts. As such, the primary job of literature instructors is more like "guides" into the

act if reading literature rather than “experts” on theories of literature.

## 2. *Instructors' personal-professional preferences and faculty development*

Lecturers are recruited into an educational program in different times and under different contextual forces. Some lecturers were recruited into an academic program as a result of relatively competitive recruitment processes; while other lecturers have joined the teaching force in response to an invitation for letters of application which means being admitted to the academic post without a rigorous academic screening process.

Viewed from their academic qualifications and fields of expertise, lecturers are also varied. While this variety in itself is potentially beneficial (because of its possibility for synergy), imbalance of the proportion and distribution of expertise can pose a serious challenge for productive program implementation. Take for example faculty members in UNJ (State University of Jakarta): out of the total of 27 lecturers, only nine (only 30%) lecturers with some experiences and interest in literature. In UNIPA, instructors with interest in literature make up only 20% of the total (and the other remaining 80% come from linguistics background). The same picture of imbalance is also clear in UTama (Widyatama University): there is only one lecturer who is interested (and therefore willing to teach courses) in literature compared to ten or so lecturers with linguistics background.

This imbalanced proportion of human resources in the program can pose serious problems, including low-quality literature instruction and this, in turn, sends a negative message to the public. It is probably because of this low-quality instruction that only 20% of students at UNPAD chose literature major while the

remaining majority opted for linguistics major.

At issue here is faculty development. When left to chances, the gap in numbers between lecturers of linguistics and those willing (and able) to teach literature courses can become worse. Take for instance what happens in UTama: while nobody holds an advanced degree in English literature, there are two faculty members who are currently working on dissertation in linguistics. The same phenomenon happens in our English Studies program at UPI: out of eleven lecturers who are currently doing doctorates overseas and in-country, only one lecturer is taking literature as a major.

Given this unfortunate trend, it is high time that staff development be carried out more systematically by considering the principle of balance and long-term benefits for the study program.

## 3. *Task designs*

It has been a common place now to state that one very important determiner of student learning in the classroom context is what learners are asked to do with the texts they are reading (Frantzen, 2002). This is what is commonly called task design—which serves as a bridge between what is expected by the instructors and what is understood by the learners.

As participant in the teaching-learning process, students are very perceptive and they actively interpret what they experience in the classroom. As a matter of fact, decades of research in literature learning and teaching have led to a relatively conclusive set of generalizations, including “(1) Students generally learn what they are taught and do not learn what they are not taught; and (2) what students are taught is not always what teachers think is being taught” (Purves, Rogers, & Soter, 1990: 162).

Given this set of research findings, teachers should pay extra serious attention to what they teach and reflect on results of students' engagement with the classroom-based learning experiences.

#### 4. *Assessment methods*

It has become common knowledge within the teaching profession that tests as a form of learning assessment has great consequences beyond the mere purpose of giving a mark to relative achievement of student learning. First, test drives student learning—that is, what is consistently asked in tests will gain attention from the part of the students. And what test format is being used will impact on how students will invest their energy and what approach the students will adopt in tackling the test.

Building on the idea that education should facilitate students' development as independent life-long learners, it is a good idea to involve students in preparing assessment of learning results—a matter of importance to students. There are at least two places where students' involvement in this case is potentially productive: when determining the focus and coverage of assessment, and when formulating rubrics to describe grading specifications with explicit achievement benchmarks.

What is commonly problematic in practice here is the way instructors construct evaluation tools to assess relative success of student learning. That is, many lecturers misconstrue literature only as a body of knowledge and tend to dismiss literature as experience. In consequence, literature instructors in Indonesia tend to ask students to read efferently (and not aesthetically) (Rosenblatt, 1978). This practice will lend itself to treating literature as information and as such this can be assessed using multiple-choice format.

#### 5. *Programmatic missions*

What exactly is the mission of the program you are working in? Is it a department of literary studies? Or is it department of EFL teaching? To make this issue of program missions more concrete, it might be useful to frame it in terms of “role models” the study programs are inspired by (Spiro, 1993:18)

Emphasizing the importance of clear directions of where a program should go, Spiro (1993) proposes six role models for a program developers and teachers of literature to refer to: (a) the literary critic, (b) the literary scholar, (c) the poet, (d) the appreciative reader, (e) the humanist, and (f) the competent language users. Each of these target role models has a distinct view of literature teaching. For example, the literary critic is primarily associated with literature as philosophy; the literary scholar is tied up with the notion of “literature as a sacred canon” (p.18); the poet is primarily connected with the concept of literature as a training in creativity; the appreciative reader is consistent with the view of literature as an incentive to independent reading; the humanist is associated with literature as a training in humanism; and the competent language user is tied up with literature as an example of language in use.

Which way to go? Which role model is to take as a guide? Either way, students should be exposed to at least three kinds of knowledge: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and conditional (or metacognitive) knowledge. That is, students should be exposed to the best knowledge base and experiences they deserve to have. These knowledge base and experiences should be processed by the students in such a way that they develop confidence in holding on to these as a guide for future literary encounter. Aside from this declarative knowledge, students should also be equipped with procedural

knowledge about ways with literature—that is, students should learn and acquire proven strategies so that—upon completion of the study program—the students become strategic and independent in their learning of literature and other similar fields. In addition, students should also be accorded with opportunities to explore and do some experimentation with “ways with literature” so that they acquire not only the knowledge about which strategies work under what condition but also know why they work and others do not. This conditional knowledge (or metacognitive knowledge) is important for students to hold on to so that they develop a good capacity to assess relative merit of ways with literature for their further, independent personal development as scholars with academic background in English literature.

The challenge here is the clarity of purpose that literature instructors have in mind. Without a clear role model in mind, literature instructors can lose focus in their teaching. This lack of focus, in turn, can create disorientation on the part of both instructors and their students.

#### *6. Available resources*

Good academic programs should equip themselves with a wealth of academic resources. EFL/ESL literature programs are no exception. The resources should at least cover the following categories: collections of literary works, references, theoretical readings, research-based reports, and on-going projects documenting research on instructional practices.

Our English literature program at UPI has in recent years been investing a great deal of budget to develop a self-access center where abundance of academic resources are made available for students and instructors alike. With long working hours, this center has assisted a great deal in facilitating the development of academic

community of literature readers and literary interpreters.

What remains to be enlarged is the collection of research-based reports and published articles written by faculty members. These faculty-developed literacy artifacts are an important part of environmental support for the development of an academic culture in the department.

What is at issue here? English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as a context for literature instruction in Indonesian universities needs to be taken seriously in the sense that wealth of reading materials in English should be made available and specific stipulations and arrangements should be established so that students get optimally exposed to English literature and other supporting academic literacy materials and activities in English. With this serious effort in immersing students in English literature it becomes likely that both students and their instructors develop a sense of familiarity with “ways with literature” so that gradually they “feel at home” in the English literature studies program.

#### *7. Academic leadership*

Development of academic programs (in Indonesia and elsewhere) is heavily determined by structural leaders (who themselves are determined by their educational background). Given limited nature of their own personal experiences, leaders should be open to possibilities. To ensure that the departments can capture the dynamic nature of scientific development, they should make serious efforts to (a) research what is practiced, and (b) practice research-based models.

To this end, using funding supports from both external and internal sources, many of our faculty members have engaged in a long term, multi-year research scheme which enables them to produce research-

based knowledge and proven instructional strategies. This new idea is worthy of special notes because using such a funding scheme it now becomes possible for faculty members in Indonesia to produce—to mention only one—knowledge-base uniquely Indonesian. That is to say that the development of “ethno pedagogy” is now likely for many of institutions offering literature studies in English.

The only issue conceivable here is whether or not the program chairs are willing to take a perspective broader than the mere short-term benefits.

### **WHERE TO GO FROM HERE: WAYS FORWARD**

By way of situational analyses, previous parts of this article have highlighted problems and issues of various nature surfacing at different levels in EFL/ESL Literature programs. The remainder of the article will concentrate on possible way out for better future development.

First, to address the issue of the split between language courses and literature courses, following ideas proposed by Bernhard (2002), students should be helped to see that, in actuality, the acts of language and literature teaching are far more alike than they are different. Given this thinking, it is proposed that more collaboration be developed between language and literature programs beginning with a change in approaches to training teachers of the future. That is, lecturers should also be prepared to teach both literature and language at the same time.

Second, concerted efforts should also be made to move from dichotomous perspectives to synergistic, empowerment perspectives. Rather than going to different directions and splitting resources, ESL/EFL Literature Programs are better off if collaborative efforts are made to promote mutual assistance so that everybody in the department is optimally

supported in their both personal, professional development as individuals as well as a collective. To this end, a better strategy should be devised to ensure that programmatic missions are clear to everybody in the working unit, mutual learning among faculty members is encouraged and optimally supported, and productive, concerted efforts are made to promote literacy habits in which faculty members write what they practice in their class and practice in class what they write.

Third, a better orientation should be developed to facilitate movement from focusing on oral-based communicative competence to the notion of active multiple-literacies which include important academic skills such as writing about literature (in English), reviewing literary works (e.g., prose, poetry, and drama) in English, and reviewing literary performance such as poetry reading, and drama performance in addition to talking about literary experiences out of engagement with literary artifacts of various kinds. To this end, currently held conception about what it means to be communicatively competent should be carefully reviewed and improved by expanding modes of expressing ideas. This can be done by enriching task designs used by lecturers to guide students’ learning engagement and their multiple ways of externalizing results of their learning. Faculty members should also make an effort to initiate collaborative writing with their students so that the development of a literate community of writers can be initiated.

The last suggestion is that we need to shy away from mechanistic, transmission model of teaching practice, and move closer towards reflective teaching practice. This would require some adjustments on the part of faculty members including positioning themselves as learners, and doing classroom action research and documenting their professional experiences.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has discussed what literature is, why it is taught, and what approaches are commonly used in teaching literature in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By way of situational analyses and by bringing to fore examples from various literature programs in Indonesian universities, seven issues and dilemmas have been identified and delineated. In response to the perceived issues and dilemmas, some practical suggestions have also been forwarded so that initial thinking and concrete (plans of) actions can be initiated to improve the teaching of English literature in Indonesian universities.

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