Literature for Language, Language for Literature: Re-visiting the Lang-Lit Relationship in Language Education

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Introduction

In this article I re-visit the relationship between literature and language teaching, in particular to address the question: *What exactly is the place and role of literature in language teaching?* I also then discuss the role and contribution of the *language* teacher to literature education.

I am concerned with these questions in contexts where language teaching means language *education,* rather than language *training.* By the former (language education), I refer to teaching which aims not just at immediate 'practical' uses of the language taught, but more importantly also at broader, more profound *understandings* of (the) language, its nature, and how it works. The latter (language training), on the other hand, has narrower aims, limited, for instance, to specific skills for pragmatic purposes. Examples of language training courses include short-term English for Specific Purposes (ESP) type courses such as a 20-hour training programme for tourist guides in Cambodia, or a 20-hour module in scientific report writing for BSc undergraduates in Malaysia.

Thus, I am concerned with language teaching contexts where the curricula address broad-based, generic concerns, for instance, the curricula of intensive general English courses, language syllabuses for school systems, or BA programmes in English Studies (including BA programmes for English majors in countries where English is a foreign language). In general, such contexts are characterised by reasonably extensive time affordances, with more expansive aims beyond specific functional competencies for the learners concerned.

My focus is on English language teaching (ELT) and literature in English in post-colonial, 'non-native' English-learning/using contexts: in Southeast Asia, this means countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. However, I believe these explorations and arguments are generally applicable to language and literature education in any context, including those where English is a 'native', second or foreign language, and where the language concerned is any other language.

English Language Teaching and Literature in English: For and Against

If we survey the history of ELT in its varied contexts, we find that sometimes literature plays a prominent role in ELT. At other times, and in other contexts, it has been peripheral and perhaps almost entirely ignored, in deference to more 'functional' emphases (see Kramsch & Kramsch 2000 and Carter 2007 for two recent historical overviews of literature in language education). Agendas for or against literature in ELT, however, have not necessarily been underpinned by purely pedagogic rationales, and have often not adequately recognized the potentialities and limitations of literature in language education, or the position that it should hold.

Literature, the Beloved of Language?

We consider first ways in which literature, in ELT, has been treated as "the Beloved of Language" (DJ Enright, as cited by Koh 1996).

Historical accounts (e.g. Viswanathan 1989, Hall 2005) show that in the British colonial era, English literature (i.e. 'classic' literature originating from the UK) was *the* key vehicle for the teaching of English, which had its beginnings as part of the colonial enterprise. Indeed, English literature as a subject of study originated together with ELT itself, and learning English meant studying its canonical literature closely. Thus, for a long time, in the colonies, literature formed a core part of the English language curriculum in schools, as Subramaniam (2003) and Koh (1996) note, with respect to Malaysia and Singapore respectively. In fact, English literature was so much identified with ELT that in many instances, the subject, especially at university, came to be simply called 'English'.

A major rationale offered for making literature so central to ELT was quite simply that great works of English literature exemplified the best of English, both in terms of good standard grammar and masterly use of the language. Even though English literature has been supplanted in many ex-colonies by the more inclusive 'Literature in English' (which embraces works written in English from beyond the UK), this view of the role of literature in language teaching still persists in many places today. It needs to be noted, however, that the centrality of literature in colonial times was also justified in terms of what the British claimed to be their "'civilising' mission abroad" (Koh 1996): the texts of English literature were regarded as providing the 'natives' with moral and intellectual enlightenment, and hence teaching English through literature would serve larger educational aims as well. Again, the purported ability of literature to uplift and humanize is a justification that continues to be echoed today by many.

A different role that literature has played in contemporary ELT (especially what has been called teaching English as a second or foreign language) is that of a

resource: as readily available (authentic) 'input' from which learners can acquire new language, as motivating material to stimulate or form the basis of classroom activities in which the negotiation of meaning crucial for language acquisition can take place, or simply as material for language "enjoyment".

As 'input' for language learning, 'canonical' English literature (i.e. Anglo-American 'classics') has been widely used in 'graded readers' in abridged, simplified forms, to aid lexically-based approaches to teaching and acquisition. There has also been widespread use of literary texts (albeit not necessarily from the Anglo-American 'canon') in Extensive Reading programmes aimed at providing the large amount of "comprehensible input" deemed by Krashen's (e.g. 1982) Input Hypothesis to be necessary for successful language acquisition. Such texts have come to dominate these programmes also because they are often claimed to naturally provide 'pleasure' or enjoyment, thus providing motivation for learning.

Within communicative language teaching (CLT), literary texts have also been used as starting points for lessons, providing, for example, lead-ins for theme-focused discussions and activities, or as material for classroom tasks and discussions. Maley and Moulding (1985) and Lazar (1999) are examples of essentially literature-based CLT textbooks, where literary texts dominate, not to be studied in themselves, but as the basis "for intelligent discussion activities and to help the learners to develop communication skills" (Tomlinson 1986) in the case of the former, or for "a wealth of activities on vocabulary, comprehension, inference, interpretation and creative response" (Lazar 1999, backcover) in the case of the latter. In support of the CLT agenda, Collie and Slater (1987), Maley and Duff (1989) and Lazar (1993) offer compendiums of classroom tasks and activities to help teachers to use literature for language practice. Apart from this, it is not uncommon to find in an ELT textbook dominated by non-literary texts and activities one section in each chapter where, for instance, a poem is included for choral reading, or an excerpt from a novel or short story is introduced in an attempt to whet the students' appetite to read the whole story.

Again, one clear premise of all this is that literary texts can provide enjoyable language experiences. In addition, the literature/language learning relationship is clearly seen as largely uni-directional: literature in the service of language learning, even if there are attempts to construct tasks and activities that engender appreciation and understanding of literary genres (e.g. Collie and Slater 1987).

Problems & Inadequacies

These ways in which literature has been valued in language teaching, however, are problematic and inadequate in a number of ways.

To begin with, English literature was made central to English medium education in the colonies not purely (or even mainly) for ELT purposes: nor was

the 'civilizing' mission innocent. As post-colonial accounts (e.g. Viswanthan 1989, Yahya 1996), remind us, English literature was introduced also to impart the values which would instill in the 'natives' loyalty to the British Empire and culture. Teaching was also typically driven by authoritative readings and interpretations, teacher-fronted and extolling the linguistic, artistic and didactic virtues of the text: there was little encouragement for independent engagement with language and interpretation by students, involving interrogation of the texts. Ascribing to literature too central a place in ELT, especially with a top-down emphasis on the 'excellence' of traditional Anglo-American 'canonical' literature, would be to perpetuate a form of cultural colonization. Moreover, what can language learning truly accrue from students merely reproducing 'authoritative' interpretations, without personally engaging with the texts?

It may perhaps be pointed out that English literature in many ex-colonies has long been replaced by 'Literature in English', the term indicating greater inclusiveness of any literature written in English, not just 'canonical' Anglo-American literature. In addition, approaches based on Practical Criticism and New Criticism today do, in fact, demand close personal student engagement with the language of literary texts. Even so, making literature too central to language education is problematic in that this excludes or fails to give enough attention to the vast range of non-literary discourses and language use that should be part of a complete language education. Moreover, Practical Criticism and New Criticism do not offer sufficiently systematic approaches to language, and their approaches privilege discussion of literary tropes using the specialized technical vocabulary of literary criticism which are perhaps not entirely useful for general linguistic development. Besides, highly valued literary texts at times embrace non-standard, or 'bad' English, as part of their art, for example, through representation of 'Singlish' in Singaporean works: how might literature then be justified in terms of exemplifying 'best' English in use?

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in the immediate post-colonial period, literature became sidelined from the language curriculum, displaced by more functional models of learning which stressed transactional requirements of communication, and seen as something of an elitist pursuit extraneous to everyday communicative needs. For instance, Koh (1996) notes how structural linguistics and a focus on form in ELT led to the sidelining of literature in Singapore schools in the 1970s, where it was seen as, at best, providing language enjoyment for students. Subramaniam (2003) also notes how literature in English in Malaysian schools "evolved from being a core part of the English language curriculum to a point of near extinction" as a result of English being taught only as a second language from the 1970s. The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement that began in the late 1970s can be said to be another influence that has made literature peripheral in some places, especially at the tertiary level (although perhaps justifiably so, in situations where ELT is given rather limited time and has specific *training* aims). This repudiation of literature, however, not only neglects what literature can

contribute to understanding of language and communication, as I shall show, but also fails to acknowledge its importance to a complete language education: literary genres, in any case, *are* an important part of any language, and a full education about that language cannot be achieved without attention to them. Indeed, it is recognition of the inadequacies of such narrow pragmatic perspectives of ELT that led to the return of literature in the guise of "resource", in the ways that I have described.

Such a role, whatever the ways in which it is played out, nevertheless remains reductionistic, not least because it often treats literature as just a means to an end (language learning or acquisition), and fails to recognize that learning to engage with literary texts must be an important end in itself: as I will argue, literary discourse uses the language in distinctive ways, and learners need to be helped to understand these ways if they are to have a complete education in that language. Evidently, this cannot be done through merely using literary texts in abridged graded readers, or in Extensive Reading programmes. In CLT, although Collie and Slater (1987), for example, do accord some attention to helping learners understand aspects of different literary genres, the tasks and activities in the literature-based CLT textbooks and compendiums previously referred to do not often engage the students closely with the texts themselves. This should be clear from my description earlier (for example, of literary texts being used as springboards for discussion). Hence, students are not actually educated about literary discourse.

Moreover, this, as I will argue in the next section, misses the full value of literature for developing understanding of the nature of (the) language and how it interacts with context in the construction of complex meanings. Where language exercises based on the texts exist, they tend typically to be somewhat superficial treatments of vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension. For example, Lazar's (1999) literature-based CLT coursebook for intermediate teenage and adult learners contains mainly activities aimed at rudimentary vocabulary acquisition (e.g. guessing meanings of new words from 'context'), providing the basis for introducing or practicing selected sentence patterns, and traditional comprehension questions that focus on the factual meaning of the text. Although the book does include activities to encourage students to make inferences and interpretations that may be considered 'literary', and to think about the relationship between situational context and the use of particular linguistic structures and formulations, these tend to be marginal, and do not, in my view, do enough to raise student awareness of very important aspects of language, which I will now discuss.

Literature as the True Beloved of Language

Perspectives on Language in ELT

Much of (traditional) ELT treats language essentially as form, with the learning of the language being equated fundamentally with the acquisition of syntactical

and grammatical rules of a standard variety (usually British or American Standard English). This is transparent in the case of grammar-translation and the audiolingual approaches influenced by structural linguistics, with their focus on learning sentence patterns in isolation from context. But many meaning-focused CLT approaches also work on the same assumption, that learning a language is about learning its formal rules: the only difference is that these approaches believe the route to acquisition of syntactic and grammatical rules is indirect. To sum up the second language acquisition (SLA) theories (see, e.g. Ellis 1994) that underlie many of these approaches, negotiation of meaning through communicative activities provides the comprehensible input posited by Krashen (1982) to facilitate the learners' acquisition of the rules of the language.

However, functionalist views of language remind us that language is more than just a set of formal rules of syntax. As the systemic functional linguistics of Halliday (e.g. 1994) demonstrates, the lexico-grammatical system of any language is a system of resources for making meaning in context – i.e. the system of words and word-making, and of syntactic formulations, provides ways of construing different meanings in different contexts of situation and culture. Moreover, language in use is always discourse situated in time, space, relations, voices etc. (Kramsch 1993), which imparts to utterances meanings and specifications not explicitly denoted by the wordings themselves. There are also the sociolinguistic realities of language variation across place, time, gender, age and so on. Real speakers of a language do not obey a monolithic set of formal rules. And language can be creatively manipulated, patterned artistically into larger patterns to achieve symbolic effects and meanings again not otherwise explicitly articulated by the wordings themselves, as Hasan (1985, 1996, 2007) demonstrates. Literature, engaged and grappled with in appropriate ways, draws attention to these aspects of the true nature of language.

Language as Meaning-Making in Literature

To begin with, literary texts highlight language as a meaning-making system, for to engage with a literary text is to engage with meaning, expressed and constructed through form. Form both reflects and creates meanings in literary texts. This is evident, for instance, at the phonological and graphological levels in poetry: poetic sound devices such as alliteration and assonance may serve as onomatopoeic suggestions of sounds that may be heard in the scene described, and many a modern day poem uses the physical arrangement of words on the page as well as variation of font size and type for particular meaning effects, such as actual movement, hesitation, or emphasis.

At the level of vocabulary, literary texts offer extensive and heightened reminders that words do not have one-to-one relationships to meaning, but may be creatively used in relation to syntax and context to articulate new understandings of lived experience and phenomena. When Dylan Thomas titles his poem 'A

grief ago', we may be invited, amongst other possibilities, to re-conceive grief not just as an emotion, but as a temporally located phenomenon, one that though transient, lingers: Thomas creatively exploits the syntactic environment to expand the semantics of the word "grief", realizing a hidden meaning potential. Or when the speaker in Gabriel Okara's 'Piano and Drums' tells us "I hear the jungle drums *telegraphing* the mystic rhythm", we may be led to understand that the beating of the ancient drums are not just a rhythmic activity, but also an urgent message for contemporary times, because "telegraphing" more naturally refers to the act of sending urgent messages, while having the potential to connote a modernity relative to the jungle.

At the level of grammatical and syntactic choices, again the greater tendency in literary texts to more unusual and deliberate constructions highlights how the grammatical system is not just a set of formal rules and conventions, but more saliently a set of resources that may be manipulated for the writer's purposes. One small example of this is that when Arthur Yap begins his poem 'old house at ang siang hill' with the highly marked sentence "an unusual house this is", the significance of the house as "unusual" is foregrounded in a way that it would not have been in the more normal and expected construction "This is an unusual house". Poetry is replete with such and other forms of what has been called 'poetic inversion', devices which on close examination can often be seen to serve similar functions of shifting emphasis. On a much larger scale, Halliday's (1971) groundbreaking analysis in stylistics of William Golding's *The Inheritors* shows, among other things, how intransitive constructions are predominantly chosen to represent the observations and perceptions of Lok, the Neanderthal protagonist, and hence suggest Lok's limited worldview in which humans are ineffectual agents against external forces.

It has often been noted that the creative manipulation of graphology, phonology, lexis and syntax to construct meaning is not exclusive to literary texts alone, and may be found quite commonly, for instance, in advertising language. Thus, it may be claimed that the study of literature is not *necessary* for helping students to understand the meaning-making nature of linguistic form. However, literary texts arguably embed such uses more extensively and intensively, and hence offer much richer sources to students for exploring meaning-making in language.

Language as Situated Discourse in Literature

Moreover, literary texts also foreground more strongly than other forms of language the fact that real language use is discourse situated in time, space, relations and voices. Because literature is often read across cultural distances in time and space (Hasan 1996), its readers often meet allusions and references that are not immediately transparent to them, even if the linguistic forms – the vocabulary and syntactic constructions – are unproblematic: one often has the sense, in reading

a work of literature from another era or country, that one is missing something. Narrowly conceived approaches to ELT might take a negative view of this, for example, perceiving such literary texts as problematic in not providing the 'comprehensible input' (Krashen 1982) necessary for 'acquisition'. However, this lack of immediate transparency, in fact, can be exploited to draw learners' attention to the vital role that context of culture and context of situation play in realizing specific meaning potentials of linguistic constructions: it may prompt some learners to want to find out, for example, the socio-historical background to a particular work, and the point can be made how this contextual knowledge is a crucial part of understanding and interpretation of the language of the work. More everyday forms of language used in ELT material, such as conversational dialogues or functional letters, I would argue, do not draw attention as strongly to the role of context in meaning making, since the contexts of such more familiar uses are often *implicitly* understood and hence, taken for granted.

Most ELT materials also draw on sanitized examples of language: dialogues in textbooks are usually in some form of standard English, while only edited, 'error-free' written texts are usually used as reading passages or model texts for teaching writing. Many literary texts, on the other hand, reflect, as art imitating life, *real* language use across the world – the dialectal, 'non-standard', localized and colloquial varieties of English, gendered uses, social registers, code-switching etc. that learners need to be educated about, and which many will encounter. Selecting appropriate texts for study will not only familiarize students with dialectal English in England in the person of Mellors in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, or the African- and Indian-flavoured English of writers such as Achebe and Rushdie, hence raising awareness of other norms of English: it also offers opportunities for sociolinguistic discussion and education, hence enhancing learners' appreciation of how language may index social organization and relations, be 'bent' to reflect, articulate or assert cultural identity, or be re-shaped into new and fresh forms that re-invigorate the language itself. In this respect, it is important to note that all this can only be achieved if the literatures in English taught include what B. Kachru (1986) has called 'contact literatures', and what others have called 'new literatures' in English. Y. Kachru and Nelson (2006) present a cogent argument along the lines argued here, as well as pedagogical suggestions, for integrating such literatures into ELT worldwide.

Language as Verbal Art in Literature

But perhaps the most distinctive value of literature for language education is the attention it draws to the aesthetic potential of language – how the lexico-grammar of a language, conceived as a resource system, can be artistically shaped into texts with expanded polysemous potential. As Hasan (1996) points out, successful literary texts are distinguished by their capacity for what she calls

"double articulation". On one level, they express what Widdowson (1992) calls "representational" meaning, depicting everyday discourses – the story that is being told, the conversations between people, the argument that is being made etc., all read and understood at face value. Hasan calls this the "zero-level" of meaning, which concerns the discourse and exchanges *within* the text, for example, among the characters. But literary texts also communicate at a second level what Widdowson calls "representational" meaning: what happens within the text becomes a means of what Hasan calls "symbolic articulation" of larger thematic sayings. This is the level of discourse and exchange *from* the text/writer *to* the reader, the level of *theme* – what the reader understands the text to 'say' to him or her about issues larger than the events within the text.

For instance, in Lin (2007), I show how while at one level, the words of Arthur Yap's poem 'old house at ang siang hill' are just the comments of an onlooker at the site of a historically significant old house to an interlocutor beside him, at another level, the poem may be seen as the poet's invitation to the reader to interrogate attitudes to tradition in the face of contemporary forces. In the poem, the speaker, having noted that the house is "an unusual house" where "dreams are here" and into which one must "tread softly", then declares to his interlocutor "so what if this is/ your grandfather's house", drawing attention to the "re-development/ which will greatly change/ this-house-that-was" and all the others around it. It is his dismissive attitude to the house, what it represents, and tradition as captured in his closing assertion that we are invited to ponder on:

> nothing much will be missed
> eyes not tradition tell you this

What is important to note is that, as my analysis in the article demonstrates, this second level of discourse – the invitation to reflect and interrogate this attitude – is achieved through a verbal artistry which, as Hasan (1985, 1996 & 2007) postulates, involves skilful motivated patterning of language patterns to consistently foreground particular aspects or parts of a text (in the case of Yap's poem, the quoted). It is such foregrounding that invites deeper reflection on what the text might be saying to the reader: the expanded meaning potential of double articulation is achieved through artful manipulation of lexico-grammar.

Language as the Beloved of Literature

If the true value of literature to language education is as I have argued, it follows clearly that its value can only be realized if literature is to be engaged it in its own right, and not just as handmaiden to language learning. Moreover, it should also be clear from the arguments outlined above that literary discourse constitutes a set

of distinctive ways of using language with distinctive features, and for language education to be complete, such distinctive uses and features must be explored.

It follows then that any language education programme that seeks to be comprehensive should include a strong literary component – for instance, literature itself studied as a distinctive subject within a school system, or modules in literature as an integral part of BA English programmes. It also follows that such literary components should have a strong linguistic focus. Literature teaching within such a framework needs to draw attention to linguistic processes and how linguistic resources are used to create meaning, the situated nature of discourse in literature (i.e. how voices and social contexts are embedded through language in the text), and artful patterning of patterns in successful literary texts (and how this creates the kind of thematic saying earlier described).

In connection with this, I would argue that the discipline of stylistics or literary linguistics has much to offer in terms of providing an informed, systematic basis for pedagogy. This is, of course, not a new argument (see for example, Widdowson 1975, 1992), but I would further suggest that the stylistics drawn upon should be one that is founded on a socially-oriented linguistics. For instance, Lukin and Webster (2005) and I (Lin, 2007) demonstrate how stylistic analysis based on systemic functional linguistics, a framework that links lexico-grammar, meaning and socio-cultural context, lays bare the elements of text and context that should be attended to in teaching particular texts. In Lin (2006), I demonstrate (along with others in Paran 2006) how classroom pedagogy may be constructed based on such insights from stylistics. McRae and Vethamani (1999) is an example of a literature coursebook founded on stylistics with a social orientation.

In arguing for a more prominent place for stylistics-based pedagogies, I also necessarily suggest that teachers of literature should have at least some grounding in linguistics and language teaching (and in particular, in stylistics), and hence, that linguistics (and its sub-field of stylistics) should constitute a part of their training. The literature teacher, after all, has a crucial role in language education. Conversely, the language teacher also has a crucial role in literature education.

Traditional language teaching, with its focus on accuracy of grammatical form and "correct" English, and on merely using language to *express* rather than to *create* meaning, is of limited use to facilitating literary education. Language teaching needs to prepare learners for literature through, firstly, a more wholesome approach to language itself, where the focus is on how words, syntax and text organization are seen as resources to be manipulated in the creation of meaning. Only then can learners come to literary texts equipped to explore their verbal artistry.

Genre-based approaches to language teaching remind us that language teaching should enable students to achieve important social purposes through language use, that these social purposes are achieved through identifiable genres

or "text types", and that each genre or "text type" has formal features that need to, and can be, taught and learnt. Language teaching needs to recognize that literary texts form an important set of genres with functions in society (e.g. 'National Education'). Like other important genres or "text types", they hence should be included in any comprehensive EL teaching plan, and their distinctive feature of 'double articulation', described earlier, particularly needs to be understood and taught.

Finally, I wish to highlight three emphases that should characterize both literature classrooms, and language classrooms where literature is explored. The first is the development of autonomous student reading, through providing students with principled, systematic means of paying attention to linguistic, contextual and other features, while drawing upon resources that they (the students) possess. Only through personal engagement through such autonomous reading are they likely to develop sensitivity to what language can do in literary texts, and how verbal artistry is achieved. The second is the interrogation of texts, in order to explore self and social identities in relation to those in the texts, as suggested by Yahya (1996, 1999) and others. This is important to helping students understand the multi-voiced and situated nature of literary discourse. Finally, as suggested by Yahya (1996, 1999), Y. Kachru and Nelson (2006), the literary 'diet' should be varied, in the case of literatures in English consisting of both the 'traditional' Anglo-American 'canon' and 'new literatures' in English. This is essential not only because this variety would capture real language use in terms of language variation, but would also demonstrate to students how the language (in this case English) may be adapted and manipulated for new cultural contexts, and how verbal creativity is not the preserve of a designated 'canon', or of 'native speakers' of a language (B Kachru 1986).

Conclusion

Language teaching is today no longer an indentured servant to literature, as in the early days of ELT, when, some have argued, language teaching quite exclusively served literature teaching for the purposes of Empire. Instead, what remains in many places is a separation of language and literature teaching, where literature is taught quite apart from the language. In other places, literature, instead, is merely a servant in the language classroom, relegated to a secondary position.

What I have tried to show in this paper is that if *education* rather than mere training is the concern of language teaching, and if a literary education is to be complete, then both literature and language are integral to each other in the classroom: there is a pressing need for the re-integration of literature and language teaching. But this re-integration can only be meaningful if it involves literature teaching paying more central attention to linguistic construction of meaning, and language teaching including the teaching of literary discourse (and not just

merely *using* literature). Especially if abetted by socially-oriented linguistically-based approaches, literature can provide a more complete language education, and beyond that, opportunities for cultural and social education, and critical thinking. At the same time, abetted by enlightened perspectives in language teaching, literary education can be enhanced, so that 'new' literatures may be better appreciated and appraised.

While language teaching cannot be concerned only (or even mainly) with literature, and conversely, literature teaching cannot be concerned only with linguistic matters, each plays a central role in the other in ways outlined in this paper. What remains is to further explore and develop curricular and pedagogical strategies that best realize these potentials.

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