

Teaching Literature Appreciation in Secondary School

Frances C. Koya-Vaka'uta

This paper looks at the constraints of effectively teaching literature appreciation at secondary school level. It also attempts to outline a guide for English teachers to enable them to go beyond the examination and unleash the creative spirits of their students. Finally, the paper discusses the implications that this change in direction of literature teaching will have on prescribed texts at secondary level.

Introduction

The Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel 2000, cites the 1969 Royal Commission as having found the Fiji system to be too examination-oriented (*Learning Together*, 2000: 17). In fact, what the 1969 report itself stated was that the curriculum seemed to be designed to 'transmit factual knowledge rather than encourage creative learning experiences' (Whitehead, 1980: np). Teachers are for most of the year burdened with the knowledge that the students they are churning out of their classrooms each year are more than anything else equipped to become professional students than they are to be creative, innovative or critical thinkers, ready for the harsh realities of the world outside the school.

English teachers in Fiji, particularly at the secondary level, feel the strain of the public examinations looming over them. They constantly need to remind students who are more interested in their subject areas of Science, Arts or Commerce than in English that, without a pass in English, they fail the examination. This, as well as the calibre of the class, often determines what genres an English teacher chooses to teach and how much

time is devoted to language learning and literature.

In many cases, English teachers opt to teach only three or even two of the four genres (short-stories, novel, poetry and drama) tested in English. This, they claim, is to enable weaker students to tackle the exams better. I personally know one teacher recently posted to a Suva school who expressed concern at having to teach poetry at the senior level as she had not taught this genre past form 4 in her 12 year career!

This paper proposes the need for the English teacher to see teaching literature as more than just another comprehension and memorisation exercise and, instead, use the texts to teach students more about themselves and human nature. In this light, English teachers must expose students to all four genres. It is a call to look beyond the examination, which mainly tests recall of plot, theme, background and character, (which are crammed in the weeks before the exam) and to literally bring the students *out of the box*, rather than punching bullet sized holes in the box and asking them to interpret the world through those holes.

Literality: Literature, Literacy, Reality: In that order

In the Pacific, the arts are an inextricable part of who we are and what we stand for. The art of story-telling is one, if not the most important, particularly for children. For a lot of Pacific Islanders, their fondest childhood memories revolve around late night stories, often mythological, told by an elderly family member. Mythology, as retold by a talented story-teller, is one of the most important means of transmitting family genealogies and a sense of identity. For many children, therefore,

their first experience of literature relates to themselves and their environment. This can and should be continued at school, if literature teachers understand how important it is for students to see literature as reflecting life — their own and that of others.

The study of literature goes far beyond the narrow scope of the study of the English language, which looks only at grammar and the technicalities of the spoken and written language. In fact, literature is, in a sense, a social study. Literature teachers in many cases have failed to teach their students about themselves and the world. They may be great transmitters of information on Wordsworth's style or the common themes that run through Thaman's poetry, but have the students really learnt anything beyond this?

The real challenge, therefore, for literature teachers is not to cover all the set texts on time, but rather to teach their students to read beyond the text, to use the literature class primarily as a means of creating an interest in reading and studying the four genres. This has serious implications for the selection of texts for use in secondary schools and will be discussed later in the paper.

The Form 4 literature teacher does, admittedly, have the challenge of preparing the students for the Fiji Junior exam, but many teachers do not realise that students are more likely to understand the text and remember details in an examination if they enjoyed reading the text.

Furthermore, it should be remembered that students learn best by doing, so writing or creating literature for themselves about themselves is the most effective way to go. Students will be able to relate to the prescribed literature texts and literature becomes less western or foreign to them. The technicalities of interpretation such as stylistic features and thematic analysis skills will make more sense to them.

When teaching creative writing, however, the teacher must give the

students freedom to write on themes they are interested in. At a later date, students should be given the opportunity to read their work to the class and explain what influenced the choice of characters, themes, style and setting. This exercise is the first step to developing the skill of contextualising literature.

To give an example, a poetry competition was organised at Saint Joseph's Secondary School in September 2000. Students were asked to write and then recite their poems. Although there was no fixed theme, at least 90 per cent of all the poems read were related to the political crisis and the events that followed. The exercise was a great avenue for creative expression as well as allowing the students to vent their pent up emotions and fears in a very therapeutic way. Many other schools have similar activities during Library Week or English Week. Participating in such creative activities is very important for students, as it puts them in a better position to interpret literature texts and understand the most important question of what makes a writer write.

The Role of the Literature Teacher

It is important that teachers of literature at the introductory level allow students to explore traditional forms of story telling, chanting and dancing as part of the oral tradition of the Pacific. Thaman (1990), in a paper presented at the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction, talks of Cultural Analysis as an essential step in developing a culturally sensitive curriculum. Some important points that she makes are given below.

1. Culture is central to understanding human beings.
2. Each group of individuals has a unique system for perceiving and organising the world around them.
3. Different parts of a culture are interdependent and form a whole.

4. Cultural patterns are reflected in language, especially meaning.
5. It is useful to see parts of a culture as they are conceptualized by members of that culture.

Cultural Analysis should be incorporated into the school curriculum, beginning in Form 3 with very simple activities such as looking at values and beliefs of their own cultures. This complements current social science which includes case studies of traditional rules and regulations. Studying their own ways of life gives students an insight into what their cultures represent. Cross-cultural studies are also important, for teachers and students alike, as they foster a sense of pride in the uniqueness of one's own culture while at the same time enabling students to see how people from different cultures value different things and perceive the world in different ways, and yet how people are alike in many ways, too. It also enables students to see how contextualizing a literature text, ie putting it into its cultural context, makes all the difference in understanding why people act in a certain way and how they relate to each other.

Asking students to write a short piece in their mother tongue and then present and translate it for the class can help students develop a sense of self-worth. It makes them feel important that they are creating and are also writers, albeit young and inexperienced.

Thaman (1997) discusses her own misconception about writers and gives a good example of what a teacher can do in the rural context to increase students' interest in literature and to help them in their studies:

I did ... understand the students' difficulties with the set texts which we had to study. I tried translating some popular Tongan songs into English and making up my own verse about themes which I thought might interest them. Tongan poetry is full of imagery and symbolism. I used to

teach them these concepts before proceeding to Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron. I attended night classes in creative writing ... At school, I had always thought that to be a writer, one had to be male, white and dead ... (later) I discovered that poetry did not necessarily have to rhyme and poets could be black and still alive!

Teachers who are attempting to release the creativity of their students must keep in mind that students need the freedom to develop their own sense of style or voice, enabling them to understand how writers develop a personal style or voice for a reason. This realisation is essential as interpretation at the senior level (Forms 5-7) requires a more detailed understanding and discussion.

Another way to maintain interest is to invite local writers to meet with students and to read their work to them. In a personal experience, a group of Seventh formers, the majority of whom despised poetry, had to study a series of poems by Konai Helu Thaman. The students lacked interest and found reading and answering questions on style and theme rather dull. When a meeting with the poet was held, the situation changed completely. Suddenly there was an increased interest in Pacific Art and History (and this was a science form). The discussion session was very interesting as the same information I had given them just days ago suddenly seemed more important and meaningful to them. In the internal examination that followed, 25 of the 28 students in the class attempted the poetry question.

At the senior level, literature teachers are expected to be well read in both the English classics as well as local works. This gives them a more balanced approach and allows them to help their students to make connections between the great classical writers and our own Pacific writers, who are in fact great in

their own right, but are often down-graded because of the perception that the classics are the ultimate literacy works and our Pacific works are second class attempts at a western art form.

Team teaching is also an effective way to teach literature, particularly for those who are less confident or comfortable with specific genres. It would, of course be ideal if teachers could specialise in either language or literature, but as this is not always possible, teachers can team up and plan schemes of work so that block teaching can take place. This allows both teachers and students to devote a lot more attention to literature texts. Rather than allocating two periods a term for studying the novel, four complete weeks can be devoted to it, using perhaps two periods a week for language and writing exercises which are based on the literature text. Block teaching also allows a teacher to move between classes, so a teacher who enjoys teaching poetry, for instance, can do so in several classes, while the teachers of those classes can take other genres in her class. This type of teaching ensures that students will study all genres with teachers who are enthusiastic and competent, thereby gaining some literature appreciation, as well as having unrestricted choice in the exam.

Implications for the Literature Component of English Prescription

Often, both the teacher and the student are frustrated by the content of the prescribed material but there is currently no alternative. A classic example of both student and teacher in such a situation, Thaman (1997) talks of her early days:

At school it seems that my teachers were not interested in what I knew, but rather what I don't know. Their task was to transmit knowledge – their knowledge – so that I could pass

the many examinations I had to sit ... We had to study English literature, the only literature deemed worthy to study ... when I returned ... to teach at my old school, I found that I was required to teach basically the same curriculum that I had studied as a student. Consequently, I was faced with teaching something which had not meant much to me, and in the case of English literature, something I actually disliked.

The Education Commission Report 2000 states that the relevance of the curriculum is a real cause for concern. This is certainly the case in English. At present, the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) is working on a revision of all curricula, beginning with those for Forms 3 and 4. However, it is sad to see that the proposed changes focus mostly on internal assessment and the language texts of Link and Target. The review is not looking to change the literature texts currently in use, apart from the addition of *Rainbows*, a collection of Pacific poems.

Whilst this addition is welcomed, the other genres remain unchanged. *A Selection of One-Act Plays* has been in use from the early seventies as have *The Cay* and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. *The Silent One* and *Roots*, the collection of short stories, have also been in use for some time now, but the stories are Pacific-based and the students are easily able to relate to settings, events and characters. *Roots* was written by a group of third year USP students two decades ago and it would be nice if a newer collection of stories could be compiled, perhaps dealing with more contemporary issues. The anthology, *Rainbows*, was compiled by Cliff Benson after calling on local writers to contribute to the collection. A similar exercise for a new *Roots* would be equally beneficial.

The CDU needs to look at locally produced materials at the junior level to enable students to work from the known to the unknown. If, at junior levels (Forms 3 and 4), the focus is on Pacific texts, then the transition to senior level international literature will be easier for both the teacher and the student.

There is no shortage of Pacific literature with playwrights like Hereniko and Thomas, and writers such as Wendt, Thaman, Figel, Veramu and Subramani to name a few. There is no reason why our students cannot learn about themselves and their world before going global. This is, after all, the more logical approach. I suggest, therefore, that Form 3 and 4 literature be called ***Pacific English Literature*** and Form 5 and 6 ***International English Literature***.

Teacher training

The BEd Teacher Training Program at the University of the South Pacific does not adequately prepare the trainee English teacher to actually teach English language or literature, let alone creative writing. It would, therefore, be an advantage if the program required trainee teachers to take a creative writing course to enable them to inspire and teach their literature students. Logically, teachers must first be knowledgeable about a subject area before attempting to teach it. Some possible inclusions for the trainee teacher are existing courses UU103, *Pacific Oral Literature and History*; and LL231, *Creative Writing I* and/or *Creative Writing II*.

Summary

I have proposed a change in the approach to literature teaching at the secondary level, which should help to create a genuine interest in literature and encourage students to view it as an art form.

English teachers must be well read, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the subject, teaching literature more as a

social study than a systematic analysis of a genre. Team teaching is an effective way of making sure that only the keen teachers take literature classes. Local writers can be invited to read to the students. Teachers can also encourage creative expression in their students by organising school activities which help unleash the students' creativity. Teacher training programs should include cultural analysis and courses of study that enable trainees to develop creative skills.

It is imperative that this change go hand in hand with a change in the literature component of the English Prescription. It is time that education in Fiji became less product based (exams) and more process based (learning). As Thaman (1990) states: "...the history of curriculum development in the Pacific Islands has been fraught with conflicts, most of which can be traced to different perceptions of what education should be."

Genuine literature appreciation cannot simply be taught. It can be nurtured and developed or it can just as easily be squashed, along with a child's creative imagination. A lot depends on the teacher and his/her approach to the teaching of the subject. To conclude, Subramani (1995: 194) beautifully expresses the importance of developing creativity and imagination in the young:

...The imagination ... is a part of human intelligence. As the mind's inner eye, it creates pictures of the world. For those who are dissatisfied with things as they are, the imagination helps in creating a model of how things could be.

References

Learning Together: Directions for Education in the Fiji Islands. Report of the Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel (2000). Government of Fiji. Ministry of Education.

Thaman, K.H. (1990) *Towards a Culture-Sensitive Model of Curriculum Development for Pacific Island Countries*, Plenary paper presented at the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction Regional Conference, Sydney, July 6-10, 1990.

Thaman, K.H. (1997) *Of Daffodils and Heilala: Understanding Cultural Contexts in Pacific Literature*, Invitation Address, Multi-Ethnic

Literature Society of America (MELUS) Conference, Honolulu, April 18-20, 1997.

Subramani (1995) *Altering Imagination*, Fiji Writer's Association, University of the South Pacific, Fiji.

Whitehead, C. (1981) *Education in Fiji Since Independence*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington, New Zealand.