



## ESL Students' Attitude towards Texts and Teaching Methods Used in Literature Classes

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### Abstract

Malaysia's Vision is for the country to become a fully developed nation by 2020. In order to compete at international level, the country needs to produce future workers who are well-versed in English. The National Philosophy of Education aims to produce holistic graduates who excel academically and have better intercultural understanding, which resulted in the re-introduction of literature into the curriculum. In addition, English is also used as the medium of instruction for teaching science and mathematics. In 2000, literature became a part of the English syllabus when the Literature in English Component was implemented in secondary schools. This paper aims to discuss students' attitudes towards the texts used in the program, the challenges faced in reading these texts and the type of texts students prefer to read. It also discusses the teaching strategies used in class, their effectiveness as well as the methods favoured by students. The study was carried out in two schools in Kemaman, Terengganu involving 110 Form Five students. Questionnaire and interview were used as the research instrument. Findings suggested that students generally had positive attitudes towards the text selection although they were less enthusiastic about the teaching methods used by teachers.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Text selection, Teaching methods, Literature

### 1. Introduction

Students' attitude is one of the main factors that determine their success in language learning. Attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context may all play some part in explaining their success or failure (Candlin and Mercer, 2001). Numerous researches have been conducted on the role of attitude in second language acquisition, spurred by the knowledge that negative attitudes can be changed. Factors like better teaching strategies, classroom and social environment can help reduce negative attitudes.

Attitude has cognitive, affective and conative components; it involves beliefs, emotional reactions and behavioural tendencies related to the object of the attitudes (McGroarty, 1996). It refers to an individual's inclinations, prejudices, ideas, fears and convictions concerning any topic. It has an evaluative aspect, a disposition and tendency to react positively or negatively to something. It is, in short, the way someone thinks or behaves.

Attitudes is related to the motives of studying a language which can be divided into two main categories; integrative and instrumental motives. Integrative motives refer to situations where a person learns a second language in order to participate in the target language group's cultural activities. Instrumental motives refer to practical purposes of learning a language such as in order to get a better job or to pass examinations. Students with positive attitudes will spend more effort to learn by using strategies such as asking questions, volunteering information and answering questions. Fortunately, attitudes do not remain static; they can be changed through the learning process such as by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques. Attitudes also improve as a result of language learning as learners who learn well will acquire positive attitudes (Choy, 2002).

One of the main challenges in learning literature are caused by the text itself, such as the language of the text, especially when there is a mismatch between the texts selected and students' language ability. Even teachers cannot agree on the type of texts that should be taught although they generally agree that the texts should promote intellectual development, independent thinking, are interesting to adolescents and meet certain cultural and aesthetic standards (Agee, 1998). Struggling readers share the same problems which are weak comprehension, lack of interest and confidence (Arvidson & Blanco, 2004). They spend a lot of time looking up or guessing meanings of words which might result in regressive eye movement, losing sight of the plot or the bigger picture by the time they reach the bottom of the page or the end of the story. To avoid frustration and students' lack of participation, it is vital to ensure that the language of the text match students' proficiency level and that there is a match "between the linguistic expectations in the language syllabus with those of the literature component syllabus" (Ganakumaran, 2002 p.65). Unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure hamper students' understanding of texts. Students tend to misinterpret key words or fail to recognize them and focus instead on the less important part of a text (Fecteau, 1999). When faced with unfamiliar or difficult words, phrases or sentences, students use their lower-level reading skills where they look at a sentence or phrase for clues instead of using higher level skills such as inferencing or relying on the context to guess a word's meaning (Sarjit Kaur & Rosy Thiyagarajah 1999).

Literary style and structure pose a problem for students in trying to comprehend literary texts (Davis et al 1992). If the writer is from a different background, students need to be aware of the cultural norms in the author's world to be able to identify language deviances and their significance, especially in poetry. Students also need a good grasp of the target language to appreciate choices and deviances in the text. Poems are generally disliked due to the abundance of figurative language and images which students fail to interpret (Wan Kamariah, 2009). Linguistic structure in poems can be especially confusing such as the use of irregular punctuation, capital letters and organization. Students generally feel that poetry contributes very little to their language development compared to other genres such as short stories and novels. Although literary texts provides contexts in which ESL students can learn more about the L2 culture (McCafferty, 2002), unsuitable texts can create distance between the text and the readers, especially culturally (Saraceni, 2003). Besides linguistic skills, students also need background knowledge to fully comprehend literary texts (Horowitz, 2002) which are written by authors who assume their readers share the same background knowledge, similar values and norms. When students encounter unfamiliar cultural aspects, they tend to interpret the meaning based on their own culture, which might results in inappropriate cultural representation. Sometimes students are faced with a cultural reference that is totally alien to them, which has no parallel in their own culture, such as the notion of autumn to the Malaysian students, as found in Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*. At other times, students come across something familiar to them which might represent something else in another culture, such as death which is symbolized by the colour black in Western society but associated with white among Muslims. Understanding culture is made even more difficult as the values which shape and influence characters and their point of views are not explicitly portrayed in literary texts. Students' misunderstanding is due to the teachers' lack of cultural awareness, the lack of support material that address cultural issues and introductory classes that pay minimal attention to the cultural elements of the texts (Gurnam Kaur, 2002 & Ganakumaran et al, 2003).

Besides cultural values, the topic of the texts can be remote to the students, not only in terms of experience but also historically, geographically or socially. Students prefer reading texts that address issues of youth, relationship and changes in social values. Texts favoured are those with clear language, careful organization and thought-provoking themes. Wu (2008) suggests using adolescent literature which is widely available thus providing more choices and are also easier to understand as they are written in contemporary English. Students feel more motivated to read literature if they are given a choice or allowed to negotiate the texts that are to be included in literature classes (Davis et al, 1992). Although teachers might feel that students do not select 'quality' works, it is important to make sure that the texts suit students' interest.

Ironically, interest in the literature teaching methodology only began in 1970s, when the number of students who choose to study literature dwindled as it was considered elitist, irrelevant and impractical (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000). There are various terms used in connection to teaching methods, namely (a) Methodology – a broad, general term which can be described as "the study of pedagogical practice" (Brown 2000, p.171) or in short, how to teach, (b) Approaches – these are theories, beliefs and assumptions on how languages or other subjects are learned and should be taught, (c) Method – refers to how language specifically, is taught based on one particular approach, it is broadly defined, meaning it is not specific to any particular context, and (d) Techniques – these are items like exercises, activities and devices or strategies used in class and the term is usually, though not necessarily, more concerned with the roles and relationship between teachers and students.

There are three most common teaching approaches in literature. The first is using literature as content which is usually reserved for tertiary level students who are considered to have enough linguistic and experiential knowledge to discuss literary texts. Students read literary texts and criticism as well as wider reading concerning the socio cultural aspects of the text. The amount of information provided usually depends on the time allocated, whether these information are

central to the text and also depending on students' interest (Carter & Long, 1991). The second approach is literature for personal enrichment. In using literature for personal enrichment, students are encouraged to relate the texts to their own experience as well as give their reactions and opinions. The aim is to encourage students to be more involved in the lesson. Techniques based on this approach can promote group work and interaction in the classroom while materials are selected based on the students' interest. Thirdly, language-based approach is used to integrate literature and language syllabus. Their main purposes are to enable students to make informed and meaningful interpretations and evaluations through detailed analysis as well as to make students more sensitive and aware of the language and its linguistic features. Using students' existing grammar, lexical and discourse knowledge, teachers guide students toward making aesthetic judgment of texts. Methods used include concentrating on the stylistic features of the texts and materials are chosen for their stylistic uniqueness as well as their literary advantage (Lazar, 1993).

Good grasp of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and understanding students' interests and needs are some of the requirements needed to teach literature competently (Agee, 1998). Students favour teaching techniques that encourage them to respond personally, give their own opinion, and concentrate on the content of the text as opposed to analyzing details of language structure as well as having class discussions (Davis et al, 1992). Students enjoy imagining themselves as the characters, writing letters as one of the characters and retelling the story from others' point of view. Students indicate negative attitudes towards activities that require them to memorize facts, answered multiple-choice questions, read aloud, drilling and teacher-centred classes where interpretations are provided only by the teacher (Wan Kamariah, 2009). Studies on teaching methods in Malaysia found conflicting results. Fauziah & Jamaluddin (2009) found that teachers used more students-centred approach in class compared to teacher-centred strategies which created a better learning atmosphere and improved students' perception and motivation towards literature. However, Daimah (2001) found the methods used by teachers in literature classes are mostly teacher-centred. Teachers agreed that their classes were usually divided into three stages which started with explanation by the teachers, followed by discussions in groups or with the whole class and concluded with some form of exercises. A teacher-centred approach is necessary in order to save time and finish the syllabus in time for examinations. Another reason cited was students' low proficiency level which prevented teachers from using students-centred techniques like group discussion, debates and role plays. Students' unwillingness and anxiety to speak or answer questions about the text for fear of providing the wrong replies also did not help. Gurnam Kaur (2003) found that students viewed teaching strategies used by their teachers as boring, dull and uninspiring as it involved mainly doing written work, especially among students with higher proficiency level. Students with lower proficiency could not understand the texts and therefore found literature lessons boring. This could be due to teachers who had very little experience and knowledge in teaching literature. Ganakumaran et al (2003) found that 48% of the teachers surveyed said that they lack knowledge about literature teaching methodology while only 51% indicated they had enough knowledge of literature. Language teachers also lack confidence to teach literature as they perceive as only competent to teach language due to their training (Katz, 2001).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' attitudes towards the texts used for literature lessons and the difficulties faced in reading these texts. It plans to examine teaching methods used by teachers in literature classes and students' reactions towards these methods. It also intends to find out the type of texts and teaching methods preferred by ESL students.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Subjects*

The subjects were 110 students from two co-educational schools in Kemaman, one located in a rural area while the other is in town. Form Five students were chosen as they had a longer experience in studying literature and had read all the texts and genres chosen for the program. Students were from science and arts classes. A total of 32 students participated in the interview, eight from each class.

### *2.2 Research instrument*

The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the first section focused on respondents' demographic profile such as their grade, gender and socio-economic status. The second part used a five points Likert scale to gauge students' attitudes towards text selection and teaching methods. The interview used open-ended questions aimed at gathering in-depth information concerning students' reactions towards text selection and teaching strategies.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### *3.1 Students' attitudes and text selection*

Short stories seemed to be popular among students. A total of 80% of the students agreed that they enjoyed reading the short stories chosen for the component. Interestingly, none of the students strongly disagreed with the statement. Students found them easiest to read as they were short and therefore not too time-consuming, which enabled them to do other homework and participated in co-curricular activities. Students also mentioned that the language was mostly manageable and therefore quite easy to understand. The plots were interesting, "like a movie". Students' responses

suggest that negative attitudes are associated with reading poetry. A total of 70% of the respondents agreed with the statement 'I find the poems difficult to understand'. Students were not too keen on poems, especially *Sonnet 18*. Interviewees felt that the use of "archaic" and "classic" language made it hard to understand and a few male students were put off by the theme, which was love. Students found the issues in the poems or the themes mostly boring. More importantly, they found it difficult to understand poetry as they considered "every word to have their own underlying meaning" and it was hard to figure out the real message in the poems. Students also described two poems, *si tenggang's homecoming* and *Monsoon History*, which are set in Malaysia, as "difficult" and "too long". Two male students found poems "okay" and "interesting", especially the poem *If* by Kipling, which they considered inspiring and meaningful.

Besides poems, novels were also not popular among students. A total of 61.8% students agreed that they did not find reading novels particularly enjoyable. Students seemed to react negatively towards reading the novel allocated for them, which was *The Pearl*. Mainly, students felt it was too long and described it as "dragging" due to its dull storyline. Students also found the plot and characters confusing, making it difficult for them to understand the text. Students also mentioned that it had "very little dialogue" which made it even more unattractive. A few students who liked the novel said that they liked the use of simple, everyday English which was easy to understand and also the portrayal of another person's life experience which was different from theirs.

An overwhelming 94% of respondents indicated that they preferred to choose or negotiate the list of texts that they have to read. Students also showed positive attitudes towards reading contemporary poetry and reading texts which are written by non-Malaysians. A total of 80% of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'I enjoy reading texts about people from different countries and culture'. Although students showed preference for reading foreign texts, 72% agreed that Malaysian texts were more familiar and easier to understand. More than half of the students indicated positive attitudes towards the text selection for upper-secondary level. 67.3% of the students seemed to think that the texts selected were suitable for them.

The most popular topics among students were mystery or investigative stories followed by adventure. These were favoured due to their plots, which were considered "suspenseful" and filled with unexpected twists. Five students, all of whom were girls suggested love story. They said that the topic was relevant to them and it could prevent them from being involved with the "negative" aspects of love. Regardless of gender, students also mentioned science-fiction and fantasy because of their setting and storyline which were "beyond their imagination". Two students also specifically stated that they would like to read *Harry Potter*. Two girls also suggested non-fiction, like *National Geographic*. Other topics included family and teenage life experience and thriller. Most of the students seemed to think that their lack of proficiency in English was the main obstacle in reading and understanding literary texts. A total of 86.4% of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'I would enjoy literature more if I'm good in English'. It seemed at least three out of the four classes (excluding the science class in urban school), the language of the texts were too difficult for them. Language problems included unfamiliar words, phrases as well as archaic language used in poems. Language problem was especially time consuming as students had to constantly refer to dictionaries for meanings of words, get help from siblings or relatives or seek explanation from their teachers. Another problem faced by the students was in understanding the 'real' meaning or the message of the texts. A total of 70.9% students agreed that although they could understand the literal meanings of texts, they had problems figuring out the underlying meanings.

Students also considered poems like *si tenggang's homecoming* and *Monsoon History* lengthy (two to three pages), mainly because they had problems understanding these texts. Students also found the plot of the novel confusing. Interestingly, only students from the highest proficiency level in English mentioned that they found the cultural elements in some of the text unfamiliar and confusing such as understanding the characters' way of life and values. This seemed to suggest that perhaps only the good students were able to appreciate the importance of cultural elements in literary texts while others face more basic problems like understanding the literal meaning of the texts. This was shown by one student who referred to Red Indians when talking about a text set in Africa. More than half of the students admitted that they usually could not finish reading the text on time. A total of 58.2% of the students agreed that time constraint was one of the problems they faced in reading literature as they had to finish homework and were also involved in co-curricular activities.

### 3.2 Students' attitudes and teaching methods

Most of the students thought that background information concerning a text such as the author's life or the setting was vital to understanding a text. A total of 97% respondents agreed and strongly agreed that background information would make it easier for students to comprehend a text. A large majority of students also reacted positively towards using a variety of activities during literature lessons, probably to reduce monotony and boredom in class. Students seemed to be in favor of working in group, with a total of 91.8% of the students supporting the idea of doing more group work. Interestingly, students were keen to voice their opinions and personal reactions concerning the texts that they read. A total of 91% of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'I think students should be encouraged to give their opinions and views concerning the text'. This could mean that students were not given enough opportunities to contribute during literature lessons, perhaps due to time constraint.

Teachers' explanation and notes was ranked as the fifth most important strategy in teaching literature, followed by using audio-visual in literature classes. A total of 86% of the students agreed with the statement 'I would enjoy watching a film or video about the text'. Results suggested that students did not get enough background information concerning the texts that they read. When asked, students stated that teachers usually explained "about the text", referring to the writer's life or his purpose for writing the text. Teachers did not seem to emphasize on the cultural elements of the texts, perhaps due to time constraint or the lack of supplementary materials. There did not seem to be a variety of activities during literature classes. Almost all the classes had similar sequence of activities during literature. For weaker classes, the teacher would read aloud and sometimes asked students to take turns to read. Teachers then asked questions and checked if students had any queries about the text. Then, there would be an explanation by the teacher, followed by note taking. For very weak classes, teacher apparently "always translated word by word" while for average class, teachers only translated unfamiliar words. Finally, students were given exercises and sometimes asked to do these in groups.

Not surprisingly, teachers spent a lot of time discussing plot, characters, themes, setting and moral values of the texts in class as indicated by 85.4% of the students. Malaysian students are generally known for their examination-oriented approach, so perhaps it was not surprising to find that 58.2% of the students surveyed admitted that they only read the texts to enable them to do well in examinations. When asked about using other languages to teach literature, 70% of the respondents said that it was acceptable for the teacher to do so in order to help them understand the texts better. Quite worryingly, more than half of the students said the teaching strategies used by their teachers were boring, 42.7% agreed while 13.6% strongly agreed, adding up to a total of 56.3% who reacted negatively towards the way literature classes were conducted. Students also didn't think that teachers were doing enough to prepare them for their examination. A total of 50.9% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'The way literature is taught is not very useful for examinations'. Interestingly, when asked if their teachers were good at teaching literature, students from rural schools showed positive attitudes towards their teachers' teaching methods compared to students from the urban school. Both classes from the rural school mentioned that their teachers used the overhead projector to show them diagrams and charts concerning the texts such as their plots and characters. Students from the science class were especially satisfied with their teachers' strategies. They said that their notes were mainly in visual form. After the teacher's explanation, they were divided into groups and allocated different parts of the text to work on. The teacher then asked students to write their own script for their drama which was later performed in front of the class. Students agreed that dramatization made it easier for them to understand and remember information concerning the texts.

When asked to give suggestions that can make literature more interesting, a lot of students suggested drama as they found it helpful and interesting. Students were also keen to watch films or videos related to the text which could help them appreciate and understand the texts better. Others said that teachers needed to explain elements of the texts especially the plot as it could be confusing. Science students from the town school said computers and internet should be incorporated into literature lessons. One student said he did not mind participating in any activity "as long as it was not reading". Other suggestions included using songs or outdoor activities, games and group work.

#### 4. Conclusion

A way to motivate students to read literature is through better text selection. The most important criterion in text selection is probably students' interest. This does not mean that the texts have to be about teenagers' issues only. Students' response suggested that they would like to read about adventure, mysteries and life experience. As students come from different background, interest and abilities, the best option is to choose texts which vary in terms of genres, topics and language level. Data from this study suggested that students were generally satisfied with the short stories but were less enthusiastic about the poems and novels. Perhaps more contemporary poems can be included in the text selection and for novels, it is better if more choices are provided and students are allowed to choose those which suits their interest and language level.

Teachers play a big role in students' education. Not only do they impart knowledge to students but they also help shape students' attitudes towards education, school and more specifically, the subjects that they teach. To do this, teachers need to be properly trained and equipped with proper knowledge and skills to successfully accomplish their tasks. Firstly, teachers need to be taught how to read any text (not just those listed under the programme) independently and to be able to make their own interpretations of the texts by using critical thinking skills. They also need to address the cultural elements of texts, which if neglected might result in misunderstanding and limited participation from students. Perhaps another skill that teachers need to acquire is the ability to produce their own supplementary materials. Instead of relying on the Ministry of Education or reference books for materials, teachers can learn how to get information through the internet for example and adapt them to suit their students' proficiency level and interest. It is important to ensure that teachers are equipped with enough pedagogical content knowledge which influences classroom practices, which in turns affect students' learning outcomes and achievement.

Using a variety of attractive teaching strategies is another way to improve students' attitudes. For students with higher proficiency level, teachers can use activities where students get to practice their creative and critical thinking skills such as writing their own scripts, staging a drama or even creative writing. Teachers can encourage students to be more

autonomous by using computers as well as the internet and guiding them in activities like researching information on the author's background or the historical elements of the texts. Using multitasking tasks in groups for large classes enable students to rotate tasks so that they can try a variety of activities and work at their own pace.

More research needs to be conducted on students' reading abilities as they seem to lack higher level reading skills. Other possible future research areas which can help improve the teaching of literature in ESL contexts are students' reading interests and teacher training.

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