

Using English Literature written by Asian authors in EFL/ESL Classrooms in Asia

Flora Debora Floris

English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University,
Surabaya-Indonesia

e-mail: debora@peter.petra.ac.id

Abstract: This paper proposes an argument that literary texts in English which are written by Asian authors should be more extensively used as language teaching materials designed for EFL/ESL classrooms in Asian countries. The use of these texts can overcome the cultural stumbling blocks experienced by students. In addition, the texts can be utilized to promote cultural awareness and the role of English as an international language. To support this point of view, various issues in using what is often called non-native English literature are examined in the essay.

Key words: non-native English literature, Asian literature, literary text, teaching resource, English language learning.

Literary works have been subsequently brought back into serious consideration in the English Language Teaching syllabus. They have a significant place in many language classrooms because they offer various advantages and benefits to assist students' linguistics, cognitive and social development.

Nowadays, most of the literary texts used in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms in Asia are "native" English literature written by nationals from – usually – the United States or United Kingdom. The need to know the origin of the language and its cultural aspects is one of the reasons often cited by those who support the use of content from native English-speaking (McKay, 2003, p. 143). Others mention that native speakers (and their works) should be highly respected because of their language expertise (see Quirk 1990 and Freudenstein, 1991 for details). Some also mention the need to get exposed to the "standard" English. These assumptions seem reasonable and incontrovertible.

However, studies show that many EFL/ESL students in Asian countries struggle so much with these kinds of literary texts. A study by Jayakaran (1993) revealed that students often face problems in comprehending native literary texts because they are loaded with unfamiliar foreign culture. A small-scale survey conducted in a Singaporean Secondary School pointed out similar result, i.e. students had to deal with problems in comprehending the “alien cultural settings” (Teo, 1994). Another study carried out in a Thai university also indicated that certain texts are full of lexico-grammatical complexities, so that students struggle to have a full understanding of the events narrated (Cheavinchai, 2002). Students are not motivated to read literature because of these stumbling blocks. In the end, they might not be able to obtain the benefits offered by the use of literary texts.

As the research findings indicate that while native (English) literary texts are often too difficult for the EFL/ESL learners, something needs to be done as far as the selection of the text is concerned.

Literary works in English written by Asian authors may serve as an alternative means to gain the most from the use of literature in EFL/ESL classes. To support my point of view, in this essay, I will further examine 3 major pedagogical issues often proposed by those who support the use of native literature in EFL/ESL classrooms.

EVALUATING THE NATIVE SPEAKER/AUTHOR FALLACY

One of the common reasons for using native English literature is that because the texts were written by native speakers. These speakers/authors are always associated with higher degree of language proficiency and particular models of English, e.g. British and/or American.

Such perception is not tenable. English has grown to be a world language. As a universal language, it is not only used to communicate with people from other nations (international) but even within EFL and ESL countries (Pennycook, 1994, p.7).

Graddol (1997, p. 2) observes that one out of five of the world’s population speaks English. In addition, there are 375 million speakers of English living in ESL countries and 750 million in EFL countries speak the language. Statistically, native speakers are in a minority for language use because there are only 375 million people living in ENL (English as a Native Language) countries. It is even predicted that by 2050, the number

of non-native speakers will outnumber the native speakers (Graddol, 1997, p. 60).

The facts show that English does not belong to one particular country. It is now depicted as a universal language and no country or culture has the authority to claim its ownership. The time has come now for bilingual speakers of English to use the language for their specific purposes. The growing use of Asian literature in EFL classrooms demonstrates the appreciation to the role of English as an International language which does not belong to any particular nation.

EVALUATING THE MONOLINGUAL FALLACY

If literary texts are chosen for EFL teaching, the selected ones are usually those written in standard or native varieties of the language. It is feared that the use of literary texts in non-native varieties of English may expose students to the non-standard and unintelligible English (Talib, 1992, p. 51).

Such insight might seem justifiable. However, studies show that varieties of English actually emerge out of the needs of its users. Kachru and Neslon (2001, p. 10), define varieties as “types of English that are identified with the residents of particular places.”

This definition thus does not differentiate the English spoken in ENL countries from those spoken in ESL/EFL countries. Therefore, American English, British English are basically the same as Singaporean English, Indian English and Malaysian English in the sense that they are all varieties of English. Varieties of English are not foreigner talk (Crystal, 1997, p. 57). They do have a distinct local flavor and that should not be ignored or suppressed. They are actually a clear indication of the importance and status of English in the world today.

In addition, as Vethamani (2003, p. 5) suggests, English speakers “should be able to make the shift from standard to non-standard forms or they may appear affected of phony in certain circumstances”. To this, Crystal (1997, p. 138) further argues that in fact, people who can use both varieties are in a much more powerful position than people who can only use one. They have a dialect to express their national identity; and they have another dialect which can guarantee international intelligibility, when they need it. In this case, therefore, EFL learners should know when and to whom standard English and varieties of the language should be used.

Literary texts have richer and more varied language because they are not created for the specific purpose of teaching. Therefore, students are exposed to natural standard and non-standard forms of the variety of English. They can enjoy and experience the wealth of the language varieties while reading the text. At the same time, they develop their awareness to appreciate all English varieties. To merely teach a standard variety of an English variety would, in many ways, withdraw our learners of enjoying and experiencing the wealth of the new varieties of English.

EVALUATING THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

As language and culture are inextricably interwoven, native writers, like everyone else, think and compose chiefly through culture-specific schemas (Alptekin, 1996, p. 56). The writers are influenced by the social context in which they live. Consciously or unconsciously, they transmit “the views, values, beliefs, attitudes and feelings of their own English-speaking society” (Alptekin 1996, p. 56). Native cultural content is then reflected in the subject matter and situations portrayed.

In comprehending a literary text, it is not enough to understand the meaning of the words only. Kramsch (1993, p. 26) states, “the semantic meanings of verbal signs had to be supplemented by the pragmatic meanings of verbal actions in context”. Thus, students need to understand the meaning of the utterances and at the same time, they have to understand what the characters said, how they said it, to whom they said it, and other situational contexts.

Consequently, when students are geographically and socioculturally remote from the realities in which the narrative is set, they will miss the relevant cultural background assumptions and constructs. Even if the elements are explained, they may still fail to perceive the text in the same way in which they are normally evoked in the mind of native speakers, as “one’s natural tendency is to assess [the text] stimulus with respect to one’s own cultural system” (Alptekin, 1996, p. 54). It explains why there are many EFL/ESL learners in Asia undergo laborious and frustrating learning experiences and react to the native literary texts context without full comprehension.

As English now becomes an international means of communication, the cultural content of literary texts used in the language classrooms should not be limited to native English-speaking cultures. English should act as a vehicle of world cultures. As Kachru (1992, p. 359) claims,

“The reference points and underlying cultural and literary assumptions are no longer exclusively Judeo-Christian; there is a larger set of reference points, historical, cultural, mythological, and literary. These come from diverse cultures of, for example, South Asia, Southeast Asia and West Africa”

Students should be exposed to local cultural content so that they can enhance their local and regional cultural identities and value systems while learning the language. Accordingly, Mitchell and Myles (1998 as cited in Tomlinson, 2000, p. 19) argue that experiencing literature can both facilitate language acquisition and help students to develop local and regional cultural awareness. The more they understand and empathize with other cultures, the more positive and constructive they can be (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 20).

Furthermore, it was found to be essential that the literary texts chosen for study should have direct relevance to the students’ situation. The familiarity of setting and culture removes many, but not all, of the stumbling blocks (Sevier, 1994, p. 2). EFL/ESL learners are motivated to study as their ideas and experiences are not completely at variance with what they are asked to read.

I believe that Asian literature offers special benefits to students learning English in Asia. These literary texts can provide a rich and fruitful basis for cross-cultural communication. In addition, they can promote learners’ awareness of the sort of presence that English has in the world today. More local works then should be highly considered for use in EFL/ESL classrooms.

TEACHER LESSON PLAN: A SAMPLE

To illustrate my points, I have designed a series of open-ended tasks for Senior High School students based on an excerpt of “Gift From the Gods”, a short story written by a Singaporean author, Su-Chen Christine Lim. This is a contemporary text which has few language difficulties. The voices in the story would be recognized by Asian readers and others familiar with Asian life. The story lends itself for the examination of the values subscribed by the characters; and EFL/ESL learners can examine how their values might or might not reflect their own values about the gender discrimination and equality.

Task One

- Distribute the following poem:

Birth

How sad it is to be a woman;
 Nothing is held so cheap.
 Boys stand strong and firm,
 Like gods fallen out of heaven.
 No one is glad when a girl is born.

(Hakka Cradle Song)

- Ask student to comment on this text orally. What do they think when they read it? Do they have any experiences and/or information that they can share?
- Have a class discussion until the ideas are exhausted.
- Ask the students to predict what the excerpt of the short story will be about.

Task Two

- Distribute the following excerpt:

An excerpt of **Gift From The Gods**
 (Su-Chen Christine Lim)

The farm lay at the edge of a plantation. Everything in the wooden farmhouse smelt damp because of the rain. Seventeen-year-old Pang Yoke-lin lay among the crumpled sheets of the four-poster bed, moaning softly.

.....

[Mr. Chow] strode into his daughter-in-law's bedroom and hung the lamp from a beam of the ceiling. Then he closed the room's only window, shutting out the black night. Like all peasants, he was superstitious – no one could tell what evil spirits might lurk out there, ready to harm the newborn.

The room was warm and bright. First Aunt bustled in, pushed Yoke-lin to one side of the bed and began lining it with cheap absorbent paper.

“The baby is due. I’ll fetch the hot water”.

Unable to bear her pain any longer, Yoke-lin let out a groan, then another and another, louder and louder. The pain in her loins was excruciating.

“Open your legs. Wider, ah! Wider!” her mother-in-law leant over her. “Hold your breath. Don’t scream!”

“Remember, the medium said don’t let out too much air!” First Aunt cautioned her.

Yoke-lin gritted her teeth and tried not to make a sound, grasping her bed’s headboard till her knuckles went white.

“I can see his head! Push, push!” First Aunt cried.

“Harder! Harder!” urged the mother-in-law. “He’s coming!”

Yoke-lin obeyed with anger, frustration and despair.

.....
The baby was coming. Yoke-lin could feel something tearing through her.

“Push, push!” Her mother-in-law held her legs.

“Push! Push! With all your strength! Push!” First Aunt held her trashing arms.

She was being torn apart. A long animal howl escaped from her as she shut her eyes and let the darkness slowly flood over her.

When she opened her eyes again, the room was bright and warm, the air damp with the smell of blood, and the papers under her were sodden wet. Pale and worn out, she could feel the sweat of labor flowing unchecked, soaking her sarong and the sheets beneath her. She lay back, exhausted.

“Aiya, no good, no good, a girl!” First Aunt was bending over her, looking distressed. The two of them stared at the pink bundle in her arms.

The father-in-law strode into the room. Without a word, he unhooked the kerosene lamp and extinguished it, plunging all of them into darkness.

Hours later, old Mrs. Chow [the mother-in-law] snuffed out the red candles, leaving only the oil lamp burning. The room was filled with shadows while outside, scattered dots of light showed the houses of the villagers. A warm breeze brought the foul smell of pigs’ swill and manure. The heavy peasant woman let out a sigh and sat down on the earthen step of the doorway.

“It’s fate. What else but fate”, she muttered, trying to explain the incomprehensible to herself. “I did everything; saved the money for the bride, took her to the temple, made the son marry her and prayed to the ancestors day and night”.

.....
 “I could see from his face,” Mrs Chow continued, “Ah Chong’s father was bitter. I thought he was going to slap Yoke-lin”.

“A girl! In my village in China they threw girls into the river,” said First Aunt.

“In our village, Ma said that the father pressed their girl babies into the mud!”

And in her bedroom, Yoke-lin was sobbing quietly. She was a failure.

- Ask the students to read the excerpt.
- Have a class discussion to see whether the students’ prediction in the previous stage is correct or not.

Task Three

- Have a class discussion about the content of the passage.

- Why did the parents wish to have baby son (boy)?
- Were there any superstitious things described in the text? Why did the family believe in them?
- What is your attitude toward this family?
- What would they do if they were Pang Yoke-lin?
- If you could change the storyline, what points would you make?

- Ask some students to report back to the class.

Task Four

- Ask the students to work in groups of 4 and prepare a short role play

Imagine if Pang Yoke-lin and her husband are not the traditional Chinese parents. What would they do to solve this problem? How would they argue with the parents? What would the parents say? What kind of conversation (debate or argument) would these 4 people have? Remember, although Pang Yoke-lin and her husband welcome the new baby, but they still have to respect the parents.

Task Five

- Ask the students to work in groups of 5 (it is assumed that there will be 4 groups in the classroom).
- Ask group A and B to have a discussion on the following topic: “Justice vs Injustice”. The discussion may cover sub-topics such as: the definition of justice, what justice means for the women, what the government has done to make sure that the women have equal rights as men’s, how to enact the law, etc.
- Ask group C and D to have a discussion on the following topic: “The idea of feminism is appropriate or not appropriate in this modern era”. The discussion may cover sub-topics such as: whether women (feminists) have asked too much from men, whether women should accept that there are differences between men and women, what women should do to be treated more appropriately, etc.
- It would be more interesting if each group works on the different point of view.
- Ask the representatives of each group to present the result of their discussion.
- Have a class discussion

The excerpt of Su-Chen Christine Lim’s *Gift From The Gods* as presented above is a fine example of Asian literary text that can be used in EFL/ESL classrooms. Learners will be able to empathize with the characters and situations depicted because they are familiar with the local setting. Furthermore, they will be more aware of the appropriateness of the use of lexical items in general. They are encouraged to become involved in genuine interaction while improving their language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided some underlying issues, concerns and ideas involved in using Asian literature in language classrooms. Literary texts used in EFL/ESL classrooms should not focus exclusively on the native culture. In addition, there is no need to base the content of literary materials on native-speaker models. English literary texts which are written by those from ‘outer circle’ should be more significantly utilized in EFL classrooms.

I believe that Asian literature offers an extremely rich source of texts that can be used profitably in the EFL/ESL classrooms. By using this kind of literature, students can be guided to ‘a personal discovery’, experiencing the pleasure and enjoyment of learning a second/foreign language. Hopefully this article will be beneficial for those who are engaging in the same practice.

REFERENCES

- Alptekin, C. 1996. Target-language culture in EFL materials. In T. Hedge & N. Whitney (Eds.), *Power, Pedagogy and Practice* (pp. 53-61). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cheanvichai, K. 2002. *Students' responses to literary texts in the EFL classroom: an empirical study in the IELE, Assumption University*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Bangkok: Assumption University.
- Collie, J., & Slater, S. 1994. *Literature in the language classroom: a resource book of ideas and activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. 1997. *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freudenstein, R. 1991. Europe after 1992: chances and problems for the less commonly taught languages. *FIPLV World News*, 55 (21), 1-3.
- Graddol, D. 1997. *The future of English?* London: The British Council
- Jayakaran, M. 1993. Teacher support materials in the treatment of cultural elements for the Malaysian class reader programme. *The English Teacher*, 22, 16-26.
- Kachru, B.B., & Nelson, C.L. 2001. World Englishes. In A. Burns & C. Coffin (Eds.), *Analysing English in a Global Context* (pp. 9-25). London: Routledge.
- Kachru, B.B. 1992. Teaching world Englishes. In B.B. Kachru (Ed.), *The Other Tongue: English across Culture*, 2nd ed. (pp. 354-365). Urbana: Urbana of Illinois Press.
- Kramsch, C. 1993. *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lim, S.C. 1994. An excerpt of gift from the Gods. In C.Y. Loh & I.K. Ong (Eds.), *The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword. Skoob Pacifica Anthology (2)* (pp. 263-270). London: Skoob Books.

- McKay, S. 1982. Literature in the ESL classroom, *TESOL Quarterly*, 16 (4), 529-536.
- McKay, S. 2003. Teaching English as an international language: the Chilean context. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 139–148.
- Mitchell, R. and Myles, F. 1998. *Theories of second language learning*. London: Arnold.
- Pennycook, A. 1994. *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.
- Quirk, R. 1990. Language varieties and standard language, *English Today*, 21 (6), 3-10.
- Sevier, M.L. 1994. Using Asian literature in the English language classroom: an avenue into cross-cultural education, *Guidelines*, 16 (2), 1-15.
- Talib, I. 1992. Why not teach non-native English literature?, *ELT Journal* 46 (1), 51-55.
- Teo, W. 1994. Singaporean secondary three students' perception of literature. *Guidelines*, 16 (2), 137 – 153.
- Tomlinson, B. 2000. Materials for cultural awareness: combining language, literature, and culture in the mind. *The Language Teacher*, 24 (2), 15-25.
- Vethamani, M.E. 2003. New Englishes, new literatures in English: challenges for ELT practitioners. In G. Subramaniam (Ed.), *Teaching of Literature in ESL/EFL Contexts*, (pp. 1-12). Petaling Jaya: Sasbadi.