

On Strategies for Teaching Culturally Diverse Literary Texts

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Abstract: This paper discusses strategies for developing students' cross-cultural literature appreciation abilities. It aims at facilitating students' cultural understanding of literary texts by demonstrating the current approaches of literature teaching practice.

For nearly half a century, research has been conducted on learning and understanding literature from a variety of cultures. With the ever growing trend of globalization and modernization, it becomes more and more common to see teaching and learning practices on literature that are different from the teachers' and the students' cultural backgrounds.

Over the last 50 years, the dominant educational method for literature teaching and learning has been biographical and formalist criticism (Christenbury, 2000; Karolides, 2000). With the goal of identifying the common features of literary works from different cultural traditions, the two critical approaches promote a detached and pre-determined understanding of the nature of the meaning of literary texts, and they advocate an objective approach to analyzing literature (Christenbury, 2000; Karolides, 2000). Formalism and biographical criticism approaches guide students to understand the literature through comprehensive analysis of text-based information and identification of historical or bibliographical background in literary works. However, they have neglected the fact that literature comprehension involves readers' participation, which further includes the active understanding of cultural elements from the text as well as from the influences of their native culture.

Definition of Culture

Different scholars have different understandings of culture. According to Tapp (2007), "culture is a set of learned beliefs and behaviors shaping how members view and experience the world" (p. 45). Robbins, Fantone, Hermann, Alexander, and Zweifler (1998) stated that individuals bring their cultures of affiliation. In these scholars' perspective, cultures of affiliation may include in part religious groups, ethnic groups, social classes, and voluntary and professional organizations they have come to embrace (Robbins et al., 1998). According to Philipsen (1987), "a culture can be viewed from many perspectives, each of which provides one partial but important glance at the nature of things cultural" (p.76). In Goodenough's (1964) views, culture does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. Robinson (1985) viewed cultural understanding as "an ongoing, dynamic process in which learners continually synthesize cultural inputs with their own past and present experience in order to create meaning—a synthesis between the learner's home culture, the target culture input, and the learner as an individual" (pp. 11-12).

From the definition cited above, different scholars defined culture in different perspectives. However, the common ground of their definition is based on associating culture

with communication. Different theories of culture indicate that culture shapes individuals' understanding of literary texts.

Relationship between Literacy, Literature, and Culture

There is a close relationship between literature, language, and literacy. As Moody (1967) demonstrated, "the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation" (p. 22). Each literary work is essentially the collection of words that are permanently available for the student to inspect, to investigate, to analyze, and to build together (Moody, 1967). The inclusion of literature in the curriculum helps train students in the skills of reading, writing, and thinking, because literary works incorporate so many complex language structures, skillful writing styles, intricate social and cultural contexts, and deep portrayals of reality based on authors' observation, reflection, and recreation of the subjects that they are confronted with. The more a person reads, the more knowledge he or she gains in reading, writing, and thinking. Therefore, experiencing a work of literature for the student is an intellectual process of acquiring knowledge and developing critical thinking from text (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).

Jodan and Purves (1993) asserted that writers usually inhabit cultural contexts in literary texts. Literary works created by people from different backgrounds represent their own identities, and images and serve as memoranda for their descendants. According to Soter (1997), "the power of literature to transport readers into other worlds has never been doubted by those who, despite their own worlds, have been captured by writers no matter how different the culture they inhabit" (p. 214). Soter (1997) further pointed out that readers will play the role as insiders to understand the culture if they are familiar with the sociocultural and political context of the literary setting.

Further, different human groups have different understandings of culture (Fairchild, 1967; Tapp, 2007). Literature, as a part of culture, could be regarded as a mirror that reflects the accumulated culture. To be more specific, literature can serve ideally as a true reflection of what the society is, who humans are, and why the world has become as it is (Tapp, 2007). Spears-Bunton (1992) held the view that literature plays the role of facilitating individuals in decoding the mystery of their culture. By learning literature, one can be familiar with a certain culture. As Spears-Bunton (1992) pointed out, "literature provides us with a way of looking at how members use language to codify knowledge, determine relevance and make connections between past heroes and prophets, and present concerns and situations" (p.46).

In a sense, literary texts are culturally embedded; texts could be regarded as cultural documents that reflect all kinds of accumulated culture at racial, ethnic, national, regional, and local levels. In sum, literature, literacy, and culture are three forces constantly interacting with each other, shaping each other and ultimately affecting people now and those generations to come.

For the purpose of this paper, culturally diverse literary texts refer to literary works that reflect a multitude of cultural groups (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2006). They cover the diverse voices from distinctive cultural groups that demonstrate all kinds of culture vividly and colorfully. Cultural understanding is a method in which readers use the cultural knowledge instructed by teachers to understand the literary works. Cultural understanding of literature

refers to understanding of the cultural influences in literary texts from perspectives of the general concept of the culture, such as “a nation’s civilization, psychological structure of the nation, spiritual pursuits, cultural customs, religion, history, economy, political system and other aspects of ideology from different facets” (Zhen, 2012, p. 36).

As different human groups have preconceived cultural perspective, reading the text is to read it in the light of the culture. To some extent, how to interpret the literary works as intimate parts of their culture becomes an essential issue. However, for the current teaching practice of culturally diverse literary texts, the crucial reality is that the importance of cultural understanding is often neglected or given minimal consideration in practical literature classes.

Dealing with such problems, a growing body of research suggests that the pedagogy used by teachers who are successful with students in teaching culturally diverse literary texts can be described as a culturally-responsive approach. Such research suggests that cultural awareness of multiple identities in different races, classes, and ethnicities needs to be integrated into school curricula (Dolby, 2000; Gay, 2000; Herbert, 2001). The interrelationship of culture, literature, and literacy should receive more attention in the teaching of literary works. Lin (1994) viewed the relationship between culture and literature as something like whole and part. As Lin (1994) stated, “a culture can exist and still be divided into literature, music, etc., but literature cannot exist without a culture to portray and illuminate, and to be influenced by” (p. 27).

Pedagogical Issues and Suggestions for Teaching Literary Texts

Some scholars have addressed specific pedagogical approaches to teaching literature through cultural understanding for K-12 students and college-level students, especially in the aspect of constructing new knowledge through a critical cultural perspective. Hines (1997) identified different approaches that four teachers used in literature classrooms: (a) a new critical perspective that incorporates the text-centered and teacher-led orientations to literature instruction; (b) a reader-response orientation that encourages students to join a classroom community where reader knowledge and experience are valued dimensions of the reading experience; (c) a social justice framework that raises social justice issues and allows students to “read” culture; and (d) cultural criticism that challenges and critiques received “ways of seeing” in the literary texts. In presenting the four different teaching approaches, Hines (1997) held the view that “knowledge, language, and truth are socially constructed; thus students can assert, contest, and complicate truth claims in the classroom” (p. 118).

Jordan and Purves (1993) explored the challenges confronted by both teachers and students while they are reading texts that are from their own culture or while they are reading texts that are different from their own culture. Teachers and students are required to understand the specific texts of one or more of the target cultures (African American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic/Latino, and Anglo-European). The study indicated that on the one hand, teachers have no exact idea regarding how to “best influence students to see the same cultural concerns they have” (Jordan & Purves, 1993, p. 19). On the other hand, students have difficulties in reading texts from other cultures. The major challenges they have in the literature reading include: (a) being incapable of reading the texts within a cultural context; (b) rejecting the text as alien because of stereotyping; (c) misunderstanding the texts because of readers’ pleasant interpretations; and (d) readers’ personal judgment of texts from different perspectives

(Jordan & Purves, 1993).

Scholars (Banks, 1996; Beach, 1997; Hines, 1997; Milner, 1983) suggested that teachers need to consider as important how to deal with conflicts between personal and cultural knowledge and to employ cultural understanding of the literary works as a means of teaching literature. Milner (1983) argued that since personal and cultural knowledge is problematic when it conflicts with scientific ways of validating knowledge, it is oppositional to the culture of the school or challenges the main tenets and assumptions of mainstream academic knowledge. Some of what students learn from their home culture about unfamiliar cultures consists of misconceptions, stereotypes, and partial truths. Several scholars (Beach, 1997; Hines, 1997; Soter, 1997) pointed out that students have few opportunities to learn firsthand about the cultures of people from different racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and social-class groups in literature classes. Banks (1996) supports this view and further explains the importance of learning about multiple viewpoints in the classroom:

[T]he concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures constitute personal and cultural knowledge. The assumptions, perspectives, and insights that students derive from experiences in their homes and community cultures are used as screens to view and interpret the knowledge and experiences that they encounter in the school and in other institutions within the larger society. (p. 51)

Banks (1996) asserted that an important goal of education in literature teaching is to free students from their cultural and ethnic boundaries and enable them to cross cultural borders freely, although the school should recognize, validate, and make effective uses of students' personal and cultural knowledge in instruction. Clearly, the challenge that teachers face is how to make effective instructional use of the personal and cultural knowledge of students while at the same time helping them to reach beyond their own cultural boundaries in teaching literature.

In Banks' (1996) opinion, literature teaching aims at helping students to understand how knowledge is constructed. From Banks' (1996) point of view, teachers in traditional literature classes tend to transmit predetermined literature knowledge to the students. They pay a lot of attention to telling students what each piece of literature is about, dictating notes, and creating synopses, character studies, and similar products. They also ask students to write summaries of plots and themes, to identify certain characteristics that represent period or genre, and to identify certain traits of style and structure. Since such mechanical pedagogy shows little concern for the students' own appreciation of the text, it fails to recognize students as the primary actors in constructing the literary world. Banks (1996) proposed two possible ways that teachers could implement this in literature classes. One is to help students understand the way that the knowledge is constructed and how it reflects the social context in which it is created, and thereby enable them to develop the understandings and skills needed to become knowledge builders themselves. Another is to share their own cultural experiences and interpretations of events as a way to motivate students to share theirs (Banks, 1996). In this way, students could have more opportunities to investigate and determine how cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways that knowledge is constructed. They will also have more opportunities to create knowledge themselves and to identify ways in

which the knowledge they construct is influenced and limited by their personal assumptions, positions, and experiences.

Fickel (2000) suggested that teachers could integrate political and cultural context into literature classes and encourage students to reflect the social reality critically by reading literature. Fickel (2000) suggested that teaching students basic reading and writing skills in literary works is only the first step for teachers in class. The more important issue for teachers is to help students to acquire mental habits that will lead to literary insight, critical judgment, and ethical and social understanding. Fickel (2000) pointed out that the sources of literature are derived from social and cultural reality. When teachers explicitly engage students in interrogating the social, political, and economic forces widely existing in literary works, students could come to understand the text as a social, political, and ideological statement that reflects conceptions of right, good, truth, and other beliefs (Fickel, 2000).

Beach (1997) suggested that teachers could adopt an ethnographic approach to teaching literary texts. An ethnographic approach means that students are provided with opportunities to observe and experience characters' lives in the field or to have access to the first-hand resources that could reflect the authentic culture in the text (Beach, 1997). To be specific, teachers could require students to explore deeply particular cultural traditions or norms depicted in the text through interviewing people who are insiders of the culture, collecting written material or visual resources that are related to the cultural context of the literary works, and writing reflections that record their progress in cultural understanding of the literary works. Lapp, Flood, Jensen, and Squire (2002) stated that by using an ethnographic approach, students play the roles of cultural anthropologist. They seek understandings of the cultural patterns and practices of everyday life of the group under study from an emic or insiders' perspective (Lapp et al., 2002). They explore the culture through constant reading and observing. They confirm and contrast what they listened to, what they saw, and what they read, and eventually uncover the ways in which insiders view the world; how they construct the patterns of life; and how through their actions, they construct values, beliefs, ideas, and symbolic-meaningful systems.

Implications

Considering culture's important role in understanding literary texts, a more practical improvement of the literature teaching pedagogy is to bridge the cultural gaps between the readers and the texts. Specifically, the following approaches could be used to facilitate cultural understandings of literature texts: (a) consider readers' cultural context; (b) provide students with opportunities to observe and experience characters' lives in the field or provide access to the first-hand resources that could reflect the authentic culture in the text; (c) orient students to exploring a particular cultural issue or theme after a close reading of one or more literary works; and (d) support students' inquiry towards a particular culture and facilitate cross-cultural communication in the learning process.

In sum, it is essential for teachers to employ cultural understanding as a means of teaching literature in professional practice. The importance of using approaches of cultural understanding is as follows: First, it could demonstrate a kind of unique culture value that might not occur to students. To some extent, the perspective that each literary text provides students has unique culturally authentic characteristics. Second, it encourages students to explore a

multiplicity of cultural perspectives and to participate in cultural exchanges from diverse literary forms and literary works. Eventually students can distinguish among different cultures, ethnicities, and national identities.

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