

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LITERATURE IN ENGLISH LEARNING PROCESS

**Sri Wulan**

Faculty of Literature  
Islamic University of North Sumatra  
swulan@gmail.com

### ABSTRAK

Bahasa dan sastra ibarat dua sisi mata uang. Mereka tidak dapat dipisahkan. Belajar bahasa berarti bersandar sastra secara otomatis. Jadi, bahasa Inggris sebaiknya dipelajari tidak hanya sebagai bahasa tetapi juga sebagai bagian dari sastra. Dalam belajar sastra, ada banyak keuntungan baik bagi siswa ataupun bagi proses belajar itu sendiri. Menurut Collie and Slater (1990) dan Maley (1989), ada beberapa alasan pentingnya belajar sastra. Melalui karya sastra, siswa tidak hanya belajar membaca tetapi juga belajar menafsirkan dan ketrampilan menggunakan bahasa. Ini berarti belajar sastra pada proses belajar bahasa Inggris membuat siswa tidak hanya mampu menggunakan bahasa Inggris sebagai alat komunikasi, tetapi juga terampil untuk menafsirkannya sebagai elemen estetika dalam interaksi sosial. Kesimpulannya, belajar sastra dalam proses belajar – mengajar bahasa Inggris sangat penting mengingat betapa banyaknya manfaat yang diperoleh..

**Kata Kunci :** Sastra Inggris, Belajar Bahasa, Manfaat, Belajar Bahasa Inggris

### INTRODUCTION

Literature is the expression of life in words of truth and beauty; it is the written record of man's spirit, of his thoughts, emotions, aspirations; it is the history, and the only history, of the human soul (Long 1989:8). It is characterized by its artistic, its suggestive, and its permanent qualities. Its two tests are its universal interest and its personal style. Its object, aside from the delight it gives us, is to know man, that is, the soul of man rather than his actions; and since it preserves to the race, the ideals upon which all our

civilization is founded. It is one of the most important and delightful subjects that can occupy the human mind.

Literature is part of our cultural heritage which is freely available to everyone, and which can enrich our lives in all kinds of ways. Once we have broken the barriers that make studying literature seem daunting, we find that literary works can be entertaining, beautiful, funny, or tragic. They can convey profundity of thought, richness of emotion, and insight into character. They take us beyond our limited experience of life to show us the lives of other people at other times. They stir us intellectually and emotionally, and deepen our understanding of our history, our society, and our own individual lives.

A piece of literature differs from a specialized treatise on astronomy, political economy, philosophy, or even history, in part because it appeals, not to a particular class of readers only, but to men and women; and in part because, while the object of the treatise is simply to impart knowledge, one ideal end of the piece of literature, whether it also imparts knowledge or not, is to yield aesthetic satisfaction by the manner of which it handles its theme. Good works of literature are not museum pieces, preserved and studied only for historical interest. They last because they remain fresh, transcending as well as embodying the era in which they were written. Each reader reading each work is a new and unique event and the works speak to us now, telling us truths about human life which are relevant to all times.

People can gain a lot from literature in many ways, but the most rewarding experiences can come in those moments when we feel the author has communicated something personally to us, one individual to another. Such moments can help validate our personal experience at a depth which is rarely

reached by everyday life or the mass media.

Hudson (1963: 10) explains that literature can be seen as an aesthetic exploration and literary studies include recognition of the creative aspect and appreciation of this creativity. As an aesthetic exploration, its concern is with truth and as such literature may be seen as an aspect in the process of awareness of the world that very often is pursued for some significant cause (like morality or human curiosity) with great concern about human predicaments. Literature presents human consciousness of life's possibilities and consequently through the study of literature the learner will develop a responsibility for truth within his mental style.

Further, Hudson (1963: 11) also claims that literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life; what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. So literary writing, having creative and artistic intent, is more carefully structured and uses words for the rhetorical effect of their flow, their sound, and their emotive and descriptive qualities. Literary writers can also employ tone, rhyme, rhythm, irony, dialogue and its variations such as dialects and slang, and a host of other devices in the construction of a particular prose work, poem, or play.

It is a curious and prevalent opinion that literature, like all art, is a mere play of imagination, pleasing enough, like a new novel, but without any serious or practical importance. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Literature preserves the ideals of a people; and ideals - love, faith, duty, friendship, freedom, reverence - are the part of human life most worthy of preservation.

In conclusion, literature is an aesthetic element that can be as a means of learning the beauty of language. Through literature, the language acquisition can be gained with enjoyment. Therefore, it is very significant to learn literature in English learning process.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. The Reason of Learning Literature

According to Collie and Slater (1990:3) quoted by Hişmanoğlu (2005), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. In addition to these four main reasons, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are some other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the classroom context.

#### 1. Valuable Authentic Material

Literature is authentic material. Most works of literature are not created for the primary purpose of teaching a language. Many authentic samples of language in real-life contexts (i.e. travel timetables, city plans, forms, pamphlets, cartoons, advertisements, newspaper or magazine articles) are included within recently developed course materials. Thus, in a classroom context, learners are exposed to actual language samples of real life / real life like settings. Literature can act as a beneficial complement to such materials, particularly when the first "survival" level has been passed. In reading literary texts, because students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers, they become familiar with many different linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings.

#### 2. Cultural Enrichment

For many language learners, the ideal way to increase their understanding of verbal / nonverbal aspects of communication in the country within which that language is spoken - a visit or an extended stay - is just not probable. For such learners, literary works, such as novels, plays, short stories, etc. facilitate understanding how communication takes place in that country. Though the world of a novel, play, or short story is an imaginary one, it presents a full and colorful setting in which characters from many social / regional backgrounds can be described. A reader can discover the way the characters in such literary works see the world outside (i.e. their thoughts, feelings, customs, traditions, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how

they speak and behave in different settings. This colorful created world can quickly help the foreign learner to feel for the codes and preoccupations that shape a real society through visual literacy of semiotics. Literature is perhaps best regarded as a complement to other materials used to develop the foreign learner's understanding into the country whose language is being learned. Also, literature adds a lot to the cultural grammar of the learners.

### 3. Language Enrichment

Literature provides learners with a wide range of individual lexical or syntactic items. Students become familiar with many features of the written language, reading a substantial and contextualized body of text. They learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their own writing skills. Students also become more productive and adventurous when they begin to perceive the richness and diversity of the language they are trying to learn and begin to make use of some of that potential themselves. Thus, they improve their communicative and cultural competence in the authentic richness, naturalness of the authentic texts.

### 4. Personal Involvement

Literature can be useful in the language learning process owing to the personal involvement it fosters in the reader. Once the student reads a literary text, he begins to inhabit the text. He is drawn into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. At this juncture, the prominence of the selection of a literary text in relation to the needs, expectations, and interests, language level of the students is evident. In this process, he can remove the identity crisis and develop into an extrovert.

While, Maley (1989:12) lists some of the reasons for regarding literature as a

potent resource in the language classroom as follows:

#### 1. Universality

Because we are all human beings, the themes literature deals with are common to all cultures despite their different way of treatment - Death, Love, Separation, Belief, Nature ... the list is familiar. These experiences all happen to human beings.

#### 2. Non-triviality

Many of the more familiar forms of language teaching inputs tend to trivialize texts or experience. Literature does not trivialize or talk down. It is about things which mattered to the author when he wrote them. It may offer genuine as well as merely *authentic* inputs.

#### 3. Personal Relevance

Since it deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which either constitute part of the reader's experience or which they can enter into imaginatively, they are able to relate it to their own lives.

#### 4. Variety

Literature includes within it all possible varieties of subject matter. It is, in fact, a battery of topics to use in ELT. Within literature, we can find the language of law and of mountaineering, of medicine and of bull-fighting, of church sermons and nursery talk.

#### 5. Interest

Literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting, because part of the human experience, and treats them in ways designed to engaged the readers' attention.

#### 6. Economy and suggestive power

One of the great strengths of literature is its suggestive power. Even in its simplest forms, it invites us to go beyond what is said to what is implied. Since it suggests many ideas with few words, literature is ideal for generating language discussion. Maximum output can often be derived from minimum input.

#### 7. Ambiguity

As it is highly suggestive and associative, literature speaks subtly different meanings to different people. It is rare for two readers to react identically to any given text. In teaching, this has two advantages. The first advantage is that each learner's interpretation has validity within limits. The second advantage is that an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed since each

person's perception is different. That no two readers will have a completely convergent interpretation establishes the tension that is necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas.

Apart from the above mentioned reasons for using literature in the foreign language class, one of the main functions of literature is its sociolinguistic richness. The use of language changes from one social group to another. Likewise, it changes from one geographical location to another. A person speaks differently in different social contexts like school, hospital, police station and theatre (i.e. formal, informal, casual, frozen, intimate styles speech). The language used changes from one profession to another (i.e. doctors, engineers, and economists use different terminology). To put it differently, since literature provides students with a wide range of language varieties like socialists, regional dialects, jargon, idiolects, etc., it develops their sociolinguistic competence in the target language. Hence, incorporating literature into a foreign language teaching program as a powerful source is for reflecting the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language gains importance.

## **2. The Advantages of Literature in Learning English**

English is taught as a foreign language in many schools in the world mainly for educational purposes, and to a far lesser extent, to enable pupils to communicate with native speakers of the language. However, due to its growing use as a global language, English is employed more and more as a means of communication among non-native speakers of English.

As English is the global language, everyone in this world should be able to speak English in order to participate in globalization. Even, a joke says English is an angelic language. It means those who want to come into paradise should know English because all the angels use English. This joke shows what a very important role English plays in this world. Unfortunately, students who study only English language, with its emphasis on reading and writing skills, sometimes fail to see the point of studying English literature, especially if they have not plans to study English or Translation at

university. But English literature can introduce students to a range of aspects, not only of the English language but also of English culture. (Smith, 2015)

As the world is now becoming global, students can derive much apart from experiencing life itself in English literature. They will learn to be critical of the texts they read and they will have the ability to analyze the contentions of what writers had written. It could also enhance their skills in the language that would be their tool in whatever job they pursue in the future. In the globalized market, businessmen have to learn English to deal with people and conduct business. Thus, their success in life could rely on their ability in the English language and their appreciation of English literature would come in handy in those scenarios.

It is where the importance of English literature emerges because we learn how to deal with life. Reading English literature often enables its readers to become another person and experience another life. When we read English literature, we will learn many things from our readings. Thus, the essential nature of the importance of literature in literacy learning is so immense that it could not be measured fully.

When studying Literature, students can learn not only language aspects such as vocabulary items but also the language can be used for specific and aesthetic purposes. Familiarity with the concepts of beat, meter and rhythm can improve their own writing as students are able to appreciate and apply these ideas. Finally, the study of Literature can provide students with a fresh and creative angle with which to approach their studies in particular and their lives in general. So the next time you are reading a newspaper article lamenting the lack of creativity and initiative in the local workforce, remember that in a small way the study of English Literature can help to add a refreshing and further dimension to a person's life.

Another benefit of learning English literature is that we will know how the language had changed over the years or so. We will realize that there has been a revolution in English studies: teachers and students have challenged the 'traditional' approach to English and argued that there are other important ways of reading and studying literature. These new ways of

reading are lumped together, perhaps rather unhappily, in the term 'literary theory'.

Eaglestone (1999) reveals English has been linked to the view that people need to be *civilized* and provided with values through the study of literature. Looking at the development of English, it is clear that this idea was intended, subtly but firmly, to force people into a single mould of *civilized Englishness*. However, the world in which we live now is not the same as the world inhabited by what is written in old literature and others who shaped the subject. Where the founders of English wanted people to be similar, now we appreciate and celebrate difference. Where they offered certainties and definite answers, we are aware that there are rarely clear-cut solutions and final judgments. We are much less sure about many things that they took for granted. And if our world-views are changing, so must our expectations of English. These changes are most clearly explained and explored by looking at the crucial issue of interpretation.

We should know that the understanding literature is not a natural process and we have to use certain tools to find meaning in a text, whether we realize we are doing so or not. What you make of a novel, poem or play is exactly that: what you make of it. Another way of expressing this is to say that to read a literary text, to think about it, or to write about it in any way, is to undertake an act of interpretation. When you interpret a text, it means that you find some important things and not others or that you focus on some ideas and questions and exclude others. Rather than reading in a vacuum, we take our ideas, our tendencies and preferences—ourselves—to a text. This means that 'reading' and 'interpreting' mean almost the same. Apart from being shorter to write than 'novel, poem or play', it emphasizes that reading is an act of interpretation—texts are things that are interpreted. The word 'text' also makes it clear that it's not only literature that is interpreted; so are people's actions, television and music, for example. News is interpreted both when it is watched, heard or read, and when it is put together by journalists.

## 1. For the Student

Cruz (2011) explains that studying literature can be an enriching, eye-opening experience. That is why the following courses can be gained when the students are interested in learning English literature.

### a. Reading Comprehension

English literature, in all its genres, exercises your ability to understand and appreciate the language you encounter every day. Great writers of drama, poetry and prose had it in mind not only to entertain their audiences with the pleasing sounds and images of their words, but also to challenge them with fluctuations in style and rhetoric. Reading great works of literature, then, tunes you in to the varying informative, imaginative, persuasive and manipulative characteristics of language and helps you understand what those words are doing as well as what they are saying.

### b. Verbal and Written Communicative Skills

A parallel development to advanced reading comprehension is a more confident command of verbal and written communicative skills. By seeing works of literature the effects of diction on tone, for example, or rhetorical flourish on argument, becomes easier for you to learn how to wield language effectively yourself. Of course, the ability to adequately express you in both written and spoken words is a valuable skill in any area of interest or expertise. From job interviews to defending whom you voted for during the last election, a good understanding and mastery of language always work to your advantage.

### c. Adopted Worldviews

Beyond its more practical applications, the study of English literature also broadens your understanding of the human condition. By temporarily adopting the vastly different perspectives of narrators, characters and even entire philosophical movements while reading works of literature, you learn what makes humans feel, act, speak and change the way they do all over the world. This invaluable education, in addition to enhancing your own writing, enriches the way you choose to live your life.

The study of literature allows people to develop new ideas and ethical standpoints, and can help individuals to

present themselves as educated members of society. Studying literature can be an enriching, eye-opening experience.

d. Philosophical Movements

English literature allows us to understand the philosophical movements and ideas that permeated a particular culture at a particular time.

e. Aesthetic Validation

Literature is a form of art; it is capable of bringing about differing emotions and a general sense of "spiritual" well-being. Poets William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley write about this power of poetry in "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" and "A Defense of Poetry," respectively.

f. Understanding Modern Culture

By following the histories presented throughout English literature, it is possible to understand how contemporary Western culture has developed into what it is today.

g. Vocabulary

Reading new words and new phrases can increase anyone's lexicon. Literature is also crucial to learning stylistic and artistic conventions for communication and writing.

h. Becoming *Cultured*

There is a certain satisfaction in understanding literature and being able to pinpoint references to it in contemporary culture. While it is not highly important, it is always fun to shock to others by making a clean sweep of the English Authors category in Jeopardy. Moreover literature requires students to respond to books affectively as well as cognitively. Students respond, reading emotionally to the literary text as a whole. These feelings are unique and tied to each reader's life experiences. Emphasizing personal involvement in literature develops students in an imagination, a sense of wonder, and an active participation in the literary experience.

## 2. For Teaching-Learning Process

English Literature as a curriculum activity is a significant pursuit that has a wide cognitive dimension and a valid contribution to make on the quality of life (Crujar and Briffa: 2004). If it is properly assimilated, it illuminates different areas of human life so that the learner might deepen his/her views on the quality of living. It contributes to the business of

living and may alter a person's outlook of the world. The learner is educated in modes of thought that equip him/her with a cognitive disposition that may be transferred to other areas of human behavior and may eventually transform his/her view of life in general. As a significant pursuit, literature shapes the learner's attitudes and transforms his/her understanding of humanity. And to be properly assimilated, the subject has to be pursued systematically so that the learner develops mental schemes that transform his/her attitudes to other activities in life. This is all part of the concept of 'education for life' because if he learner has been properly educated in literary studies his/her conceptual designs and evaluative strategies, into which s/he has been initiated, will continue to develop when s/he leaves school.

The primary goal of studying literature is for students to discover and experience the lives of others, different time periods, places, value systems, and the many world cultures. The rich language and cultural perspectives found in a variety of literature can expand student's cultural repertoires. Using literature as an integral part of the literacy program provides meaningful social contexts that encourage students to compare and contrast literature with their own experiences and to expand their background and knowledge.

Literature cannot only stimulate students to speak, think, and read, but it also leads them to write with increasing ability. Studying good literature allows students to observe the author's skilled use of language. In addition, learning about others' experiences through good literature, children can also develop vocabulary, and learn how to listen, identify, and appreciate effective models of good writing. Through exposure to different varieties of writing—poetry, prose, drama, and nonfiction-informative—and by developing good reading strategies, students learn to think about experiences and storytelling in new ways.

Literature helps students perceive a classroom social context that views them as active cultural organisms helping to create the very circumstances of their own learning. They need to feel safe using their home discourses in the classroom to

discuss, infer, predict, persuade, and critique their own reading and writing. They need access to other ways of using language and literacy (folklore, oral traditions, etc.) that are part of their cultural group but unfamiliar to them. And they need opportunities that help them to advance cognitively by expanding concepts and content through use of the language of higher-order thinking. As students gain experience in and knowledge of written language, they will begin to examine the discourse of the home, classroom, TV, and other environments (Harman & Edelsky, 1989: 392-406).

Eisner (1990) elaborated what literature can teach by describing the interior acts it prompts. Eisner, who worked at the intersection of art and education, explains that literature can help the reader do the following:

1. *Imagine new worlds*: envision new possibilities; create new visions
2. *Become seers*: look into what we have never seen; penetrate beyond what language tells; unveil the familiar, or, as Coleridge said, "call to our attention that which we have neglected"
3. *Stabilize the evanescent*: solidify the internal; grasp the fleeting; fasten the slippery thought
4. *Exchange our world with others*: glimpse another's world and acknowledge that reality; catch who we are and who we have been; enlarge our receptive sensibility
5. *Rely on judgment without established criteria or standards*: judge without received rules or predetermined interpretations
6. *See the universal in the particular*: see the significance in the slight; see metaphor's power
7. *Learn to play*: prompt the spirit of playfulness, nimbleness, and gamesmanship; refute Ciardi's observation "There is no poetry for the practical man".

### CONCLUSIONS

English literature provides both practical and intangible advantages to the learners. Great works of literature illustrate the power and pleasure of language. In learning literature, you learn

not only to recognize and appreciate these aspects of language but also to wield them by yourself. In addition to make you a more efficient reader and writer, literature exposes you to a wide array of human experience that enriches your own individual character with empathy and understanding.

Learning to appreciate the importance of English literature could be a self-actualizing experience. Literature could serve as a tool for all of us to understand many realities in life. It could also be a vehicle that could take us to far off places that we thought we could dare not go. Lastly, it could be a mirror for us to understand ourselves, our family and other people and bridge our differences because we had connected with them through literature. To conclude, bringing students and literature together is one of the highest acts of humanity in education.

### REFERENCE

- Collie, J. and Slater, S. 1990. *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Cruetz, John. June 2011. *The Importance of Learning English Literature* | eHow.com  
[http://www.ehow.com/facts\\_5233864\\_importancelearningenglish.html#ixzz100X1ORwL](http://www.ehow.com/facts_5233864_importancelearningenglish.html#ixzz100X1ORwL) . (Taken February, 2016)
- Cuddon, J. A. 1991. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin Books.
- Cutajar, M. and Briffa, C. 8-12 March, 2004. *Assessing English Literature*: Paper presented at The Third Conference of the Association of the Commonwealth Examination and Accreditation Bodies (ACEAB) in Fiji. Retrieved 14 February 2007 at <http://spbea.org.fj/aceab/Cutajar.pdf>.
- Eaglestone, R. 1999. *Doing English: Guide for Literature Students*. London: Routledge.
- Eisner, Elliot. 1990. *The Enlightened Eye*. London: Penguin.

*Sri Wulan : The Significance Of Literature In English* .....

- Harman, S and Edelsky, C. 1989. *The Risks of Whole Language Literacy: Alienation and Connection*. New York: Language Arts.
- Harmon, William, and Holman, C. Hugh. 1996. *A Handbook to Literature* (7th Ed.). New York: Prentice Hall.
- Hişmanoğlu, Murat. 2015. Teaching English Through Literature in *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* Vol.1, No.1, April 2005
- Hudson, William Henry. 1949. *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*. London: George. G. Harrap & Co. Ltd.
- Long, William J. 1989. *English Literature: Its History and Its Significance*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publisher
- Maley, A. 1989. *Down from the Pedestal: Literature as Resource in Literature and the Learner: Methodological Approaches*. Cambridge: Modern English Publications.
- Sachs, Joe (Trans.). 2006. *Aristotle's Poetics*. London: Pullins Press.
- Smith, Sue. 2015. The reasons why a student should study English Literature.  
<http://www.itseeducation.asia/english-literature.htm> (Taken June 2016)