Proposed Criteria for a Global Approach to the Teaching of English Literature

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Most involved in choosing the curriculum for English literature courses now acknowledge the necessity of expanding the canon beyond the traditional collection of works written by dead white males. Moreover, teachers of English in countries where it is a second, or intranational, language and those where it is a foreign, or international, language generally recognize the absurdity of the added difficulties in comprehension posed by such choices as Drayton (1990) describes:

> "While the ideas of literature are universal, the imagery and structures of meaning which bring these ideas to the West Indian child are foreign, requiring an extra reach of imagination and abstraction. The first sight of daffodils and the first smell of box are both shocks to the West Indian who have encountered them only in Wordsworth and Tennyson." (p. 217)

While realization of a problem is an essential step in its resolution, it is hardly enough. Too often, well-meaning teachers either completely or partially abandon the classics in favor of a haphazard assortment of multicultural writers without considering thoroughly the goals of teaching literature and the most effective means of achieving such aims. Teachers in postcolonial nations are certainly sensitive to the political ramifications inherent in reading the literature of the colonizing nations. However, EFL teachers are often rather less concerned with the range of implications involved in their choices of reading material.

As Said (1993) succinctly states, "What to read and what to do with that reading, that is the full form of the question." (p. 60) It is this matter that I will explore with particular reference to the teaching of English literature in EFL settings, arguing that we do our students a disservice if we provide

them only with examples of writing from those countries in which English has been the main language in use for centuries, and further proposing criteria for selecting other materials.

Widdowson (1992) emphasizes that literature's function is representative rather than referential. Because literature pulls the reader into its unique world and demands the reader experience this world on its own terms, it can be more effective than referential types of writing, such as newspaper articles, in conveying a vision. Literature's immediacy is its power and its danger: certain cultural values are represented as the norm, but this is rarely explicit in the text.

Ascertaining exactly what is being represented is at the core of comprehending literature. Clark and Ivanic (1997) suggest that although writing appears more decontextualized than speaking in terms of its physical context, it is equally embedded in its immediate social context. They further assert that both the "macro-purposes" for writing, such as maintaining or challenging ideologies, as well as the "micro-purposes", writers' immediate motivations to write, are culturally and socially influenced.

Valdes (1986) concurs:

> "An understanding of literature depends upon discernment of the values inherent, but not specifically expressed, in the work. The values of any cultural group, even if the author's own values differ from those of the group to which he or she belongs, underlie plots and become themselves the theme in virtually all works of literature. Obviously values are not universal even within cultural groups, or there would be nothing to write about, but there are certain concepts in each cultural group that carry general consensus, despite dissenting minorities." (p. 138)

Valdes notes that the process of perceiving these embedded values can result in a deepened understanding of one's own cultural values. She does not appear, however, to challenge the assumption that literature in English means literature which predominantly reflects American and British cultures. In fact, as Pennycook (1995) cites from the Cambridge Encyclopedia

of Language, "English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents." (p. 36)

Therefore, there is no reason to equate literature in English with American and British literature. Such a facile supposition, moreover, seriously detracts from the notice students are likely to take of teachers' frequent assertions that English is an international language. We cannot argue that English is a language of wider communication (LWC) and, on the other hand, present students with no evidence of its being used in this way.

The problem fundamentally is one of ownership. As Wolfson (1989) states:

> "Those of us who are native speakers are fortunate in being spared the time and trouble of learning English as a second language, but we must also recognize that our native use of the language gives us no superior rights over it. Because English has gained worldwide use, it can no longer be regarded as the exclusive property of a few nations for which it happens to serve as the dominant native language." (pp. 287-88)

Despite the validity of Wolfson's claim, the reality is that many speakers of standard English are often quick to reject outright non-standard versions or even those versions in standard English but which are the product of non-native speakers, that is, those speakers who did not acquire the language in early childhood. Davies (1991) lists six characteristics of the native speaker which include "a unique capacity to write creatively" (p. 149) and in considering the non-native speaker concludes, "With practice it must be possible for a second language learner to become an accepted creative writer in the TL. There are of course well known examples of such cases — Conrad, Becket, Senghor, Narayan — but there is also the interesting problem of the acceptability to the L1 community of the second language learner's creative writing." (p. 150)

Surely what we seek for in global literature is a wealth of creative visions, not convergence to one standard. Kachru (1996) questions the

relationships between use and acceptance, particularly focusing on the arbitrary nature of norms:

> "Observing the different attitudes toward possible norms of English around the world prompts the notion of *pluralistic* centers of reference for norms and standards; if there are two — the United States and Britain — why not three? If three, why not a dozen? It is all too easy to step back from the world and pronounce upon this or that as 'should be done otherwise.'" (p. 84)

For Achebe (1965) uniformity in English is far from being a desired goal. Nonetheless, he does not suggest that "anything goes." His main criteria is that the English convey the writer's vision effectively and comprehensibly:

> "So my answer to the question, 'Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?' is certainly 'yes.'. If on the other hand, you ask: 'Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?' I should say, 'I hope not.' It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience." (p. 222)

It is precisely this peculiarity and universality, a message that is uniquely their own yet capable of being transmitted to the world, that we may hope to guide our EFL students to as well. To reject this notion is to place the teaching of English in the realm of imperialistic activity. We should not wish our students to speak and write English "just like an American" but rather to use it exactly as they are, while at the same striving for mastery of it as a tool of communication across cultures.

Cummins (1994) in discussing problems in minority education notes that historically such students "were required to acquiesce in the subordination

of their cultural identities and to celebrate as 'truth' the 'cultural literacy' of the dominant group." (p. 46) In the teaching of English to foreign learners also, it is important to help them to create through English a representation of their reality rather than assuming that fluency requires students to toe the line culturally as well as linguistically.

Regarding this construction of an English that reflects the writer's identity, it is important to point out that the burden of responsibility is by no means only on the writer: the reader is similarly obligated to strive to understand the writer as well. Sociolinguists generally recognize communication as a negotiation of meaning. While this effort toward the successful accomplishment of communication is primarily considered in terms of speech, where participants usually take turns as the speaker and listener and additionally offer non-verbal cues, the reader is also not passive but rather actively forging meaning via the text through their general knowledge of the world, their knowledge of the language, and contextual information.

This is equally true of L1 and L2 readers. Consider, for example, Hemingway's use of Spanish in *The Old Man and the Sea.* At times the Spanish is accompanied by an English explanation: "But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky . . ." (p. 9) At other times, we must read a whole passage for understanding:

> "But the bird was almost out of sight now and nothing showed on the surface of the water but some patches of yellow, sun-bleached Sargasso weed and the purple, formalized iridescent, gelatinous bladder of a Portuguese man-of -war floating close beside the boat. . . .
>
> "'*Agua mala*', the man said. 'You whore.'
>
> ". . . But these poisonings from the *agua mala* came quickly and struck like a whiplash." (pp. 35-36)

Are we to assume that Hemingway intended his readers to all be fluent

speakers of Spanish or to have on hand a Spanish-English dictionary for quick reference? Certainly not. Did he, a native English speaker, have no recourse but to use Spanish? Yes and no. He could perhaps have avoided it, but to represent the scene effectively required the language: in English, for example, we do not have separate words for different gradations of bad luck but inclusion of the Spanish word *salao* enables us to experience naturally an unfamiliar cultural concept. With a bit of careful, imaginative reading, those who do not speak Spanish can apprehend the meaning and join more fully in a cooperative relationship with the text.

Code-mixing often occurs when the English equivalent is in fact not quite equivalent so that strict adherence to an English-only policy may result in a less accurate portrayal. One example of this is Japanese students' attempts to express in English the *senpai/kouhai* relationship which is such an integral part of their school and company life. Simple consultation with the dictionary gives them words such as "senior", "superior", "elder" on the one hand, and "junior" or "younger generation" on the other. These words are in no way adequate to convey the reality and there is obviously no reason they must therefore adapt their reality to fit the English words that are easily available. They must rather creatively work at communicating an accurate sense of the words but they cannot do it alone: their non-Japanese readers must meet them halfway through imaginative effort.

Too much explanation can also distance the reader from the text. To prevent this, in much literature, written by both native and non-native speakers, the reader is plunged into a world and expected to "get with the program" with a minimum of assistance from the writer:

> "It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr. Farraday's Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days."

So begins Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*. Who is speaking?

Who is Mr. Farraday? What is Darlington Hall? Because no explicit information is offered, almost as though we should know already, the reader must build upon the hints available: the narrator's language is rather pedantic, he appears to not own his own car but rather must borrow it — not from a friend but from someone referred to as "Mr. Farraday", he is further "preoccupied" with the trip, and it is perhaps unusual that he be away from the grand-sounding Darlington Hall for a length of five or six days. We are, in short, in the midst of a specific culture, that of the British butler half a century ago.

Doubts might be expressed that literature written by people of other cultures and in other varieties of English might confuse the L1, ESL, or EFL reader excessively. However, as the Hemingway and Ishiguro passages illustrate, a certain degree of initial confusion and effort required of the reader to make sense of the situation is typical of literature, which aims to construct in written form specific realities.

Perhaps another concern might be whether reading literature written in non-standard English might not damage the EFL student's already tenuous grasp of standard English, possibly even leading them to adopt non-standard forms in their own speech and writing. However, just as young children soon learn to distinguish fact and fiction and understand that all they see on TV or read in books may not be completely true (though it certainly contributes to the construction of their concept of what constitutes reality), students of literature, particularly those who have attained literary competency in their L1, are unlikely to assume that everything they read is the way people speak in normal conversation, while it may nonetheless serve a function of providing input which adds to their fluency.

All literature contains deviant uses of language. If students were unable to recognize this, teachers would not only have to remove the literature of NIES, for example, from their syllabus, but also much of the canon: we would hardly want our students to imagine that Wordsworth, Shakespeare, or Joyce, to name a few, are examples of typical English for them to emulate. On the other hand, while some explicit guidance is likely to be necessary in getting students to recognize the various techniques employed

by writers, such language awareness will also enable to recognize not only what is deviant, but also what is not, and further free them to see the vast range of what words can do.

Said argues forcefully that both British and American traditional literature reflect cultural values of imperialism: "In British culture, for instance, one may discover a consistency of concern in Spenser, Shakespeare, Defoe, and Austen that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive, and development to distant or peripheral worlds (Ireland, Venice, Africa, Jamaica), conceived of as desirable but subordinate." (p. 52); "In fact, there is no way that I know of apprehending the world from within American culture (with a whole history of exterminism and incorporation behind it) without also apprehending the imperial contest itself." (p. 56)

Is it necessary to expurgate such literature, laden as it is with imperialistic cultural values, from the EFL classroom? Pennycook emphasizes how we read over what we read: "Thus, the question is not so much replacing, validating, or incorporating new forms of English language or literature, but rather rethinking our understanding of language practices." (p. 52)

It always necessary to return to the question of what our aims are in the teaching of literature. From the EFL perspective, I would like to posit the following goals for the English literature classroom:

1) To develop an understanding and appreciation of a variety of literary techniques in the English language.
2) To give students a chance to see how the English language can be put to use in constructing a variety of realities throughout the world.
3) To make students aware of English as a truly international medium of communication.
4) To encourage them to not simply imitate writing that may not reflect their experiences but to actively create expressions of these experiences in the English language; to see that they are not passive vessels but language creators in their own right.

In order to achieve these objectives, the criteria listed below might be useful in selecting materials:

1) Appeal for the teacher and students.
2) Literary merit apart from use as an English teaching resource.
3) Inclusion of as broad a range as possible of writing of different cultures, social groups, and gender.
4) Avoidance of works translated into English in favor of works originally written in English.

Regarding the third criterion, it is certainly not necessary and probably disadvantageous to choose only books that are blatantly political or exotic. Works which promote an agenda at the expense of literary merit are generally unsuccessful in true representation of any reality. Moreover, it is often in the experience of the minutia of daily life that cultural insight can be apprehended. Many countries object to the media's stereotyped portrayals: in literature we seek not to confirm such misleading simplification but rather to grapple with cultures in all their complexities.

There are certainly a wealth of excellent works by American, Canadian, British, Australian, and New Zealand writers about other cultures and the interface of cultures, for example, Alice Walker, John Irving, Louise Erdrich, and Amy Tan, to name just a few. However, often these writers form the large part of an ostensibly global curriculum with no effort made by the teacher to include writers of English of other nationalities of which there are many of outstanding quality. Booker Prize winners in the 1990s include Arundhati Roy of India, Roddy Doyle of Ireland, and Ben Okri of Nigeria.

The fourth point is essential in providing EFL students with a sense of English as a living medium of communication. While there are certainly excellent works of literature that have been originally written in languages other than English, students are surely aware that many of these could be read translated into their own languages and reading them in English adds an undesirable sense of artificiality to their learning.

On the other hand, experiencing firsthand English as a language of wider communication provides a powerful impetus to the student to learn English not simply for the occasional sightseeing trip to the U.S. or Australia, for example, but to become part of a worldwide exchange of ideas and opinions. In addition, experiencing the various ways English is used to represent different realities can free the students to put English to use in constructing their own cultural identities in the global sphere.

All literature is laden with cultural values. It is important to guide students to a critical reading of literature which includes the ability to metaphorically map out the the different worlds skillful writers so persuasively create, perhaps finding some common territory on the way. Too often we take our students on the same scenic ramble along the safe, well-known terrain of standard Western values. However, global literature can offer entry into a wide variety of different visions of humanity.

The English language no longer belongs to one set of linguistic or cultural norms. When we present our EFL students with English literature written only in the U.S., England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (or an even narrower range), we give the dual message that the English language is inextricably linked to certain kinds of experience and identity only, and that all discussion of English as an international language has been so much propaganda.

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