

Using Literature to Teach English in Elementary Education

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Abstract:

This paper presents several reasons why literature can transform students' lives even for the beginners of English. Before, difficulties and real background underlying Indonesian education will be laid out. Then, real case study will be narrated. At last, some conclusions will be drawn.

Keywords:

TEFL, Children literature, creative writing, elementary education

The issues of human resource, workforce, and economic instability in Indonesia have shaped the paradigm of education. English language learning in Indonesian education focuses more on equipping students with practical skills they can use in real work life, while literature is considered as a privileged for certain category of scholars. Parents send their little children to schools merely in the hope of better income for their future, it's a familiar view that if you get higher degree, you'll get better money. In Indonesia, in order to be able to continue your study to the next level, students must pass certain nationally standardized examination. As a result, schools at all levels, even the elementary, focus their fight only to get all students passing the national exam. Thus, no one have enough time to learn literature and other soft skills. However, when it is carefully crafted, literary works do not lose their strong grip in influencing human's life and educating students of various majors with a more comprehensive understanding toward their own field of study from a higher perspective.

There are several reasons why literature can transform students' lives. Literature allows students to widen their imagination, enable them to make well-informed decisions, construct their personal identities, and helps them in better communication.

“Teaching materials without any values in it makes it harder for learners to connect emotionally, moreover to organize and characterize or to communicate the emotional response towards the value given, unlike school textbooks which are dull and over-synthetic, literature vividly expose learners to a world of highly crafted alive language.” (Sudargo, 2013)

Povey (1972) encourages the use of literature to familiarize students with vocabulary and complex syntax. McKay (1982) urges the use of literature for two reasons. The first one is the argument that literary works take role relationship and social context into consideration, so students might be triggered to be more aware about language use. The second one is the influence of literature in motivational or affective and experiential factors in learner's reading proficiency. Maley (2001) most of all presents seven reasons why literature is suitable in EFL and ESL, they are universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, and ambiguity. Oster (1989) also supports literature use since it “enlarges students' vision and fosters critical thinking.” Hadaway, Vardell and Young (2002) points out literature's advantages; they are contextualization of language, social and affective factors embedded, and natural and meaningful use of language. Lazar (1993) mentions that literature could be a tool to promote chances of discussion, controversy, and critical thinking.

The discussion of using literature in English Language Teaching, even as Foreign Language is actually not a brand new issue. Centuries ago, we had already benefit from English Literature in many foreign countries. However, as issues of Canons and the very definition of Literature and Classics become gray, English Language Teaching also needs to

move to a new sphere. Settings, language styles, and topics discussed in 18th century-literary work may find difficulties for students of the 21 century. As Turker puts it:

“Teaching English through literature has become the fashionable phenomenon. However, the teaching is to feed student heavy, repetitive and somewhat redundant literature, which has little or no relevance to his immediate problems. This affords little opportunity for creativity. The student is told of literary terms and the meanings of words, and is finally asked to analyze the subject of literary piece, which is often too abstract a task for the non-native speaker. The process of analysis, therefore, takes the form of repeating the material understanding mostly by memorization and at best, partly by rephrasing. Students at the intermediate level become frustrated by being able partially to understand but unable to respond. I believe this frustration is the by-product of non involvement; the students are static participants in a one-sided process.” (1991)

Therefore, this research tries to find a relevance and applicable model of using English Literature to be implemented in English Language Teaching for Elementary Education. Despite the language barrier, a proper usage of literary work might really benefit the students, both in language skill development and character building.

METHODS

This research is a case study of Elementary Education in Pelangi Kristus Children Seminary. For the rest of the paper it will be abbreviated into PK. PK is a private school adopting American home schooling curriculum called ACE. ACE is abbreviation of Accelerated Christian Education published by School of Tomorrow from USA. ACE's mainly focuses the learning process on 60 character traits embedded within its yearly

curriculum. ACE curriculum reaches out to students of Pre-elementary up to Senior High School level 12. The lesson subjects vary on each level, but basically the required subjects are Math, English, Word Building, Science, Social Studies, and Literature. The whole learning process is personally experienced, controlled, and accomplished by each particular student. Mainly, the students work with a set of student workbook. Each year, to reach a level, students pursue the standard of 12 worksheet-books per lesson subjects. Each workbook may consist of 29 up to 39 continuum pages with 3 review chapters. These student workbooks are called PACE (Packet of Accelerated Christian Education).

Starting from the second level (around the second grade of elementary school), students study a new subject focuses not only on English Language skills but also Character Development; this course is 'Literature and Creative Writing'. This subject provides appropriate literature selection and encourages creative thinking and writing. It is presented for students of 2nd level up to 8th level. All levels require proper handwriting skills, speed reading, and creative thinking. This subject requires students to read not only short excerpts provided in the workbook, but also conducting extensive reading using literature materials available within the curriculum. These literary works are linked within the same theme, same topics, and even using same characters and settings with the PACE workbook. Therefore, students experience a specific realm simulated for their learning process.

ACE Curriculum emphasizes on individual learning process. On a usual school day, students spend their morning to finish the targeted assignments from PACE workbook. After lunch, they learn the required subjects for Indonesian schools. Each PACE student workbook may consist of approximately 6 short reading excerpts, complete with the assigned tasks and projects. Assignments given in Literature and Creative Writing might challenge student's logic in tasks such as put-into-order, matching pictures, matching sentences, constructing

sentence, yes-no-question, true-or-false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, and even creative writing essay.

This is a qualitative research. This case study paper narrates the process of a student's learning in PACE Literature and Creative Writing subject. The data was gathered in observation and interview. Observation is done prolonged in a year starting from the beginning of 2013/2014 school year. Co-researcher is actively engaged in teaching the participant for a year in Literature and Creative Writing. Interview is conducted towards the participant, 2 fellow teachers, and the participant's mother. Each data is triangulated to other data gathered from other sources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Debora is a second grade student in PK Elementary School. She is a very kinaesthetic person; she moves a lot and prefers standing than sitting calmly. Of course, this becomes a challenge for her once she entered official school. Simple things such as lining up before class starts become so difficult for her for she just cannot stand still to line up. Every time her class lines up in front of the classroom, the leader of the class needs to call her several times to remind her standing neatly still in the line. In PK, the term "leader" is used instead of "chief" because PK wants to emphasize on the character building. So does sitting down in class, she cannot sit calmly during the lesson hours. She likes to stand up and jump around for a while. Her incompetence to restrain herself affects not only her physical behaviour but also her roller-coaster emotion. Her mother once reported that since her earlier childhood, Debora has shown tendencies to be extremely moody. In the morning, Debora might come to school in happy mood, laughing all around, but having troubles lining up in front of the class suddenly changes her mood. She becomes gloomy, easily angered, and utter harsh words to her friends. Most of the time, playing time will bring back her good mood.

One day, a catastrophic incident happened. When Debora's class was lining up, the leader of the class called Debora. This time it was Casson's turn to become a leader leading his classmates. Casson has a difficult personality too, he often makes his friends cry with his harsh and offensive utterance. That day was not exceptional. Casson called Debora's name in such a harsh tone, he felt in charge that he could rule over his friends as he likes it. Casson tried to remind Debora to line up neatly and still using his offensive style. However, in her defense, Debora reported that she had tried her best to line up neatly and stand up still. Feeling offended, Debora replied in high pitch and emotional tone. As a result, they had a big fight on the spot. The teachers asked them to solve the quarrel by themselves, discussion brought nothing. Both felt they had done the right things and thus earned the right to get apology from the other. At the end, they need teacher's help to assist them in solving this problem.

Despite each student's special personalities, PACE requires student to finish individual learning process by doing the assignments provided in the workbook in accordance to daily target. Adopting home school system, PACE allows students to develop in their own speed, student A might finish a level faster than student B, and it is allowed. That very day, in the process of her individual learning, Debora came across an interesting piece of literature. It was a short piece of Hebrew ancient poem called Proverb. The English version of the proverb says 'a soft answer turneth away wrath.' The goals of this lesson, as it is mentioned on the student's workbook, are students can write words neatly, learn to finish stories, look at a picture and think what others are saying, students are able to put pictures and sentences in order, understand vocabulary 'soft' and 'wrath', and learn to give a soft answer to turn away wrath. The goals presented have fulfilled the requirement that a lesson must educate not only cognitive domain, in this case English language skill in vocabulary and sentence-writing, but

also affective domain (soft skills to handle emotion), and psycho-motoric skills (to write words neatly).

Since this is a lesson for second graders, the proverb is explained using another format of literature, a pop-lit one; a comic strip. This comic strip tells a story about a girl named Becky who accidentally made mistake by stepping her dirty shoes onto clean floor her mother had just mopped. Upon being confronted by her mother, Becky gave soft answer and asked for apology. This soft answer calmed her mother down, and problem solved.

This unit is continued with a series of question guidelines, language skills assessment, and reflective points. The whole set helps students to experience the learning process stages as presented by O'Brien. O'Brien proposed an integrated model that assists learning process using literature to enhance not only language skill but also affective and emotional domain. This model claims to be adjustable even for students with beginner level. As Savvidou (2004) puts it:

“This suggested model (O'Brien, 1999) integrates linguistic description with interpretation of the text although for the benefit of the foreign language learners it is not as technical, rigorous or analytical as the stylistics approach. With the careful selection of the text, it can be adapted for all levels.” (Savvidou, 2004)

Since the learning system is adopting home school system, the learning process happens spontaneously on each individual student guided by the steps provided on the student workbook.

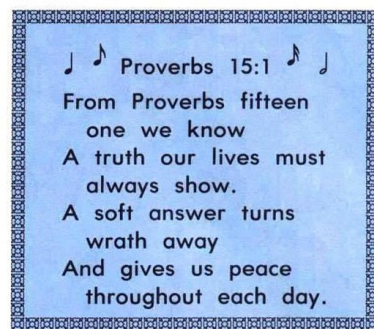
Stage 1: Preparation and Anticipation

This stage elicits learners' real or literary experience of the main themes and context of text. On the top right corner of the page, there is a short song lyric that students can sing. This simple song elicits student's interest to be engaged to the rest of the unit. This song is designed with rhymes and introduces new vocabularies they will learn in the unit; 'soft' and 'wrath'. Since the goals presented above is mentioned on the first page of the student workbook, the students will realize that they must accomplish those skills during the exercises.

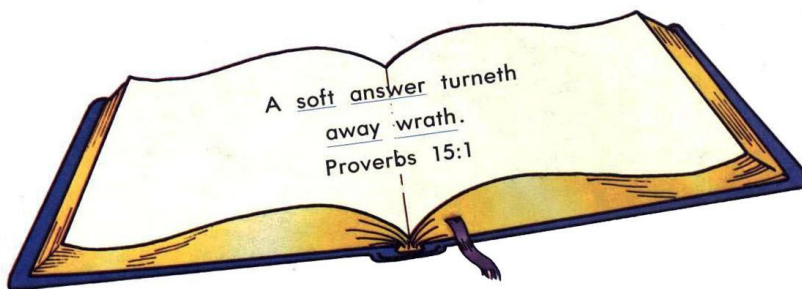
Read to your supervisor.

My Goals

- To write words neatly
- To learn to finish stories
- To look at a picture and think what others are saying
- To be able to put pictures and sentences in order
- To understand "soft" and "wrath"
- To learn to give a soft answer to turn away wrath



Learn this Bible Verse

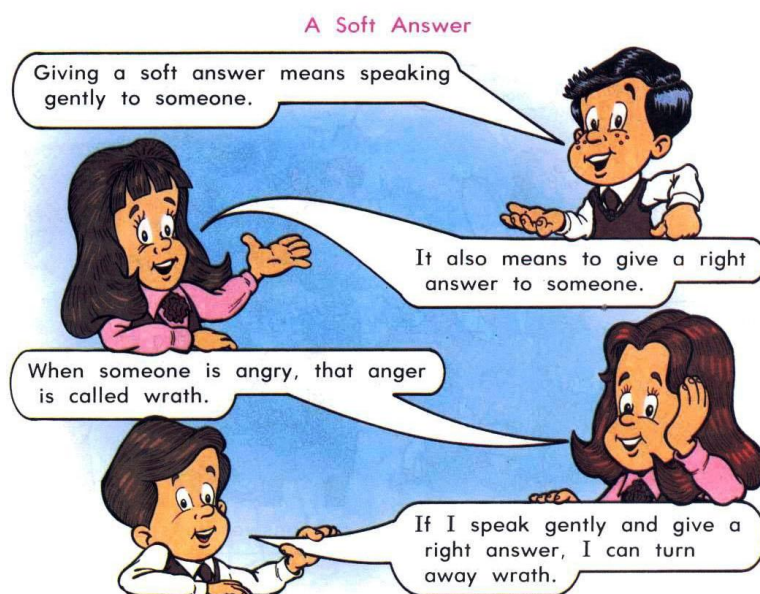


Proverbs 15:1



Stage 2: Focusing

Learners experience the text by listening and or reading and focusing on specific content in the text. The main course of this unit runs about the comic strip of Becky's dirty shoes accident. The rest of the unit assignments help students to relate with this discourse. After the students read the comic strip, there are several questions about the proverb to in-depth the students' understanding about the proverb mentioned before.



Underline all the right answers. Some sentences have more than one answer.

- (1) Giving a soft answer is (speaking gently, speaking loudly, giving a right answer, giving any answer).
- (2) Someone who feels wrath is (happy, sad, angry, loving).
- (3) If I speak gently and give a right answer, I can (sing, turn, color, read) away wrath.

Do what Ace is doing. Then put an X in the box.



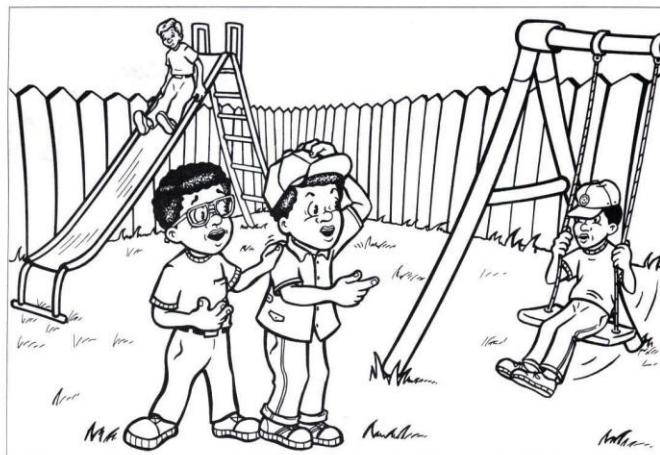
Stage 3: Preliminary Response

Learners give their initial response to the text - spoken or written. Every time the students want to read the goal on the first page of the student workbook, the teacher's supervision is required. Thus, after the students read the comic strip of Becky's dirty shoes, the teacher will give several oral questions about what the students think about the story and how they feel after reading it.

Stage 4: Working at it - I

Focus is on comprehending the first level of meaning through intensive reading. In order to check student's preliminary comprehension to the comic strip, they are asked to do a check-up consisting of three parts, a true-false, putting sentences into order, and fill-in-the-blank proverb sentence.

Look at the picture. Booker is not happy. J. Michael wants to give a soft answer.



What do you think was Booker's problem? Write your answer.

(1) _____

What soft answer do you think J. Michael might say? Write your answer.

(2) _____

Now you may color the picture.

Ask your supervisor to look at your picture and read what you wrote on pages 3 and 4.

Stage 5: Working at it - II

Focus is on analysis of the text at a deeper level and exploring how the message is conveyed through overall structure and any special uses of language - rhythm, imagery, word choice etc. The next assignments challenge students' cognitive domain to process their logic by arranging pictures and sentences into order. The students read a story that tells about a girl who does not obey her father, puts off her shoes, and steps on stickers. The students read this story in a scrambled comic strip that needs to be rearranged into the correct order. After finishing it, there are several questions to enhance student's understanding about the story on that comic strip.

Look at the pictures. Write numbers to put them in order.



(1) _____

Draw a line under the best answer for each picture.

(2) What happened to Becky?

- She had wet feet.
- She lost her ball.
- She stepped on stickers.
- She wanted a friend.



(3) What soft answer might Becky say?

- Stickers do hurt!
- I do not like baseball anymore.
- I want to go home.
- Daddy, I disobeyed. I did wrong.



Read and fill in the blank.

(4) A _____ answer turneth away wrath.

Proverbs 15:1

Stage 6: Interpretation and Personal Response

The focus of this final step is on increasing understanding, enhancing enjoyment of the text and enabling learners to come to their own personal interpretation of the text. This is based on the rationale for the personal growth model. Before the first check-up, there are two paragraphs that need to be completed. The students fill in the blanks according to their understanding about what they have learned about the proverb during the pages before.

God wants us to give a soft answer. A soft answer is gently saying the right thing.



Fill in the blanks.

(1) _____
We can give a _____ answer by gently
(2) _____
saying the _____ thing.
(3) _____
_____ wants us to do this.

Wrath is anger. Wrath can be turned away by a soft answer.



Fill in the blanks.

(4) _____
Anger is _____. A
(5) _____
soft _____ can
(6) _____
_____ away wrath.



Score pages 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Are any of your answers different? They may be right. Talk with your supervisor.

Supervisor initial _____

After reading the story of Becky, Debora knew what to do every time she did a mistake or irritate someone. Debora realized that she needs to ask for apology and utter soft answers in communicating with others. She also realized that her bad habit of harsh tone and being easily offended is not something good for her. When we finished reading the story about Becky, Debora asked me why Becky's mother could easily forgive Becky. I answered that Becky's mother was no longer angry because of the soft answer given by Becky. Debora was impressed about the strength of soft answer that could turneth away wrath. I asked her what she thought after reading it. Debora said that she wanted to be like Becky who could give soft answer when she was wrong.

The very next day, with Becky still in her mind, Debora faced another challenge. Debora was playing in the school yard at break time. Debora joined the same team with Casson, again. This time, it was a competitive game between two teams. Both teams strived so hard to win the game. Unfortunately, Debora made an error that caused her team lose the game. Just like an old story, Casson got really mad at her, he yelled at her for being so reckless. Casson blamed Debora for being the reason of the team's lost. He mocked her and called her 'stupid'. Instantly, Debora's face became red, she looked really pissed off. She just wanted to reply him with harsher words to get back at him. But then Becky came into Debora's mind, she remembered yesterday's lesson. Debora took a deep breath, frowned, and restrained herself from bursting her anger out. This time, she win, she managed to restrain her anger. Instead of getting angry, she admitted her mistake and asked for apology to Casson and her team. Casson looked surprised, he did not know what to say, his anger instantly evaporated. Debora left the playing ground without any worse incident.

When Debora shared this story, she could tell this experience without any hurt feelings left. She really forgave Casson for saying harsh things to her. Moreover, she was

proud of being capable in restraining her emotion. Debora was able not only to recite the story about Becky, relate it to her personal experience, and even narrate the values she learned from the text.

CONCLUSION

“When our schools practice educative assessment, assessment which is primarily to educate, our children and teachers will perceive assessment as a core of learning. Educative assessment is worthy of attention and closely linked to real world demands. Wiggins beautifully propose the term ‘educative assessment’ and encourage teachers to carefully assess their students. This concept reforms world’s paradigm on assessment focused on three intellectual targets. Shortly speaking, in educative assessment, achievement target is an integration of subject matter knowledge, technical skills, and performance competencies.” (Sudargo, 2013)

One short piece of literary work in format of Proverb and a comic strip might not be enough to change the whole life of a student. Yet, this narrative had proven how each lesson unit can be small puzzle pieces that construct a holistic learning process. One might not be enough, but a thorough curriculum reflecting this kind of literature-using-learning process will be a life-changing education.

SUGGESTION

There is no such thing as neutral science. Every and each topic, theme, approach, and issue in teaching-learning process is built upon certain philosophical belief. Either the belief that education is behaviour construction like Behaviorism, or that education is learning to communicate with others like Communicative Approach, everything we do in teaching-learning process matters certain belief.

“Axiology had become one of the most difficult studies in human history. Many approaches come to de-construct the study of values for human being. Unfortunately, we have to admit that no philosophical approaches can stand free of their own idealistic axioms.” (Sudargo, 2013)

Now the question is what kind of value do we teach, nothingness, studying to earn more money, or character building?

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Biodata

Gracia Sudargo attained her Master degree in English Language Studies from Sanata Dharma University, the First Rank University in South East Asia for English Department. She has been currently teaching as a lecturer of Liberal Arts Department in UPH Surabaya since 2009. She has presented her papers in international conferences such as UP DECL Centennial and Access: The 2nd Philippine International English Language Conference on “Challenges of the New Millennium” conducted by Philippines British Council on 2010, The First International English Language and Literary Studies: Expanding Horizons in English Language and Literary Studies (ELLS) hosted by Chulalongkorn University on 2011, and also in International Christian Higher Education hosted by UPH Karawaci-Biola University-Corban University on 2013. Her keen interests are among others on the field of literature study, philosophy, and education.

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Writer's Declaration

I, Gracia Sudargo, intend to publish my full paper presented at the 21st TEFLIN International Conference, in TEFLIN Journal. I have read and agreed on the terms and conditions.

Surakarta, 6 July 2014

Gracia Sudargo

Co-writer's Declaration

I, Laura Makaria Sudargo, intend to publish my full paper presented at the 21st TEFLIN International Conference, in TEFLIN Journal. I have read and agreed on the terms and conditions.

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Laura Makaria Sudargo

Subject Index:

Literature in TEFL, character building, elementary education