

TRANSLATED MALAY SHORT STORIES AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows the interaction between language, literature and language education. Active literature teaching in Malaysian schools is back. Though it seems there is forced persuasion to study literature, we can achieve two things – acquisition of various language skills and appreciation of literature – through carefully selected texts or award-winning literary works. In this way we can not only introduce Malay or local literature to students, but also make it popular through the teaching and learning of English. In this paper the researchers will demonstrate how the above can be done. Reading, listening, writing and speaking skills will be exploited by using selected award-winning short stories. Translations into English are entirely the researchers' effort.

Introduction

Short stories are a good resource for teaching language skills in an integrated fashion for the following reasons: they are not very long, they are interesting, they deal with human relationships, and students can interpret them subjectively and gain insights in their own individual manner. Students can enhance their cross-disciplinary vocabulary competence and they can also develop creative and critical thinking further and thus gain greater control and confidence in the language. Short stories provide an entertaining alternative to the prose passages which are often used in language teaching materials, for example, newspaper and magazine articles as used extensively in the Headway series by John and Liz Soars (1986). Not least, they have timeless appeal.

Short stories in the Malay language provide insights into the life and culture of Malays in particular, and Malaysians in general. According to Baker (2003) learners ought to develop an awareness of not only their own, but also other cultures. The themes go beyond Malay and Malaysian. They even have universal interest and provide stimulating material for exploiting all the four basic macrolanguage skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Students learn grammar in context and develop the ability to communicate accurately, appropriately and meaningfully. Contextualized grammar makes the learning of grammar (which is often considered dull) motivating. Students are able to differentiate between varieties of the language – standard and non-standard language, formal and informal, register, slang and metaphors – used in the short stories. Many educationists believe using young adult literature will help overcome the reading problem because such literature motivates students to feel and talk about their experiences in relation to the texts used (Probst, 1988), cited in Too (2006).

Literature Review

Hae-Ri Kim (2003) considers the incorporation of literature in the EFL curricula beneficial as it “provides practical teaching – learning strategies that work for secondary schools as well as colleges or universities” (p. 1). In this regard the use of literary texts offers students an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their life and acquire cross-cultural understanding. The readers respond personally to the texts, appreciate literature and involve themselves actively in language learning. McKay (2001) has recommended using literary texts to integrate the four basic skills. The tips given by the educator may be improvised upon to make them particularly relevant for the various genres.

Poetry, for instance, not only provides a model of authentic language use, but it “can also serve as a springboard for a variety of teaching activities which can develop” the four basic language skills (Sithamparam, 1992, p. 144). Besides, poetry can also contribute to the holistic development of the individual as it plays an important role in students’ imagination and their sensitivity to the world around them.

Plays offer a rich context for developing pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness among students. They may be used to examine turn-taking, and understand stated and implied meanings. Students would be able to recognize that plays differ from natural conversation significantly (McKay, 2001).

The case for using stories is that they are “funny, engaging, remind us of ourselves, help us empathize, inform us, take us on journeys” (Spiro, 2006, p. 47). He asserts that they connect us with the familiar and uncomfortable, the fantastic and dangerous, subliminal fears and dreams. McKay (2001) has outlined some ideas as to how short stories may be approached in L2 classrooms. Readers are asked to assess verbally and in written form the characters in the selected stories based on their behavior, what others say about them and how they are described by the authors themselves. This would involve the students practicing the reading skill of skimming

to look for the adjectives that fit their description. Short stories may be used for improving argumentation ability. Items related to cohesion and modality may also be dealt with. Garvie (1990) believes that stories will help in discourse awareness, including understanding cohesive relationships in a text. It can also aid understanding through contextual clues. Sasser (2005) has personal experience of her intermediate and advanced level secondary students responding positively to selected short stories, for example, by William Saroyan, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, and novellas including those of John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway.

Realizing the motivational aspect of using stories, there are now many children's stories which are bilingually presented. Multicultural literature enables learners to be exposed to specific cultures and groups of people. Towards this end many popular stories from non-English speaking countries have been translated into English (Merilee, 1996).

Rahma Ibrahim and Tausiff Sultana (2008) assert that the use of stories in the language classroom has a sound pedagogical basis, besides providing insights into life, beliefs and value systems. They are utilized for the development of the four major language skills alongside critical and creative thinking skills which are currently being emphasized. They further add that when stories are used as components of a communicative methodology, learners are challenged not only cognitively and linguistically, but also affectively and socially. Puji (2008) has used the historical stories of Prophet Muhammad to teach about past activities in the four macro skills in Universitas Islam Indonesia. The aim of using the stories was not only to develop communicative ability in English, but also to introduce Islamic values to Indonesian students. Furthermore teaching the past tense is very much aided by using historical stories.

In conclusion, stories can help to stimulate students' overall creativity. They contribute to multicultural awareness, tolerance and familiarity with each other's beliefs. Stories are akin to a magnet for students to be drawn to reading. We can exploit the stories to get our students to practice the many language skills required for improved proficiency.

Methodology

This study sought to identify how short stories in the Malay language, if translated into English, could be used to exploit language skills in English. For this purpose, *Wacana Hitam Putih*, a compilation of winning short stories was used to exemplify how this could be done. These stories were declared winners in a literary competition organized by the Utusan Publication group and Public Bank. Three out of the ten published stories were selected on the basis of their suitability to be employed in

a variety of ways for pedagogical purposes. The target stories had much human interest, timeless appeal and the potential to attract students, the majority who comprise young people. Popular language teaching books and reference materials were used to identify the various language skills for students to get practice in to improve their overall proficiency in both the productive and receptive modes.

Synopses and Literary Criticism of Selected Short Stories

The three short stories chosen for the purpose of this article, all published in 1997 in *Mingguan Malaysia*, a Malay language newspaper, are namely:

1. 'Gajah Putih' ('The White Elephant') by Zakaria Ali which appeared on 23 March;
2. 'Lola' by NF Abdul Manaf, published on 27 August; and
3. 'Zel' by Mawar Shafie, which was published on 22 June.

In 'Gajah Putih' ('The White Elephant'), Zakaria Ali attempts to portray the different traits of his characters. The differences in their way of thinking and the manner in which they respond are clearly brought out. Symbolism has been used effectively. The characters in the story act harshly without due consideration and balanced judgment. They are ignorant and hypocritical. They could not appreciate the action of an elephant on its knees in a mosque, as if praying to Allah. And that was because these people rarely said their prayers, and they felt offended when an animal did what was obligatory for them. Zakaria Ali indirectly tells the people not to forget one of the five pillars of Islam. A Muslim ought to pray five times a day, and remember his or her Creator.

The main characters in the story are an *ustaz* (a male religious teacher), a lecturer, a business executive, an air force commander and some lower secondary school pupils in form two. The story begins with an elephant, not black or grey, but white in colour, standing firmly in the mosque compound of *Taman Tiga Warna*, a housing estate, one morning. This causes the people to shamelessly run helter-skelter in fear. Each of the four main characters responds to the situation much unlike people in their position should. The *ustaz* believes that a white elephant is a rare phenomenon and is a sign of the impending doomsday. In his 'wisdom' he proclaims that the white elephant is *syaitan* (the devil). The form two pupils remember their *ustazah* (a female religious teacher) saying that *syaitan* cannot be seen. *Syaitan* is within us tempting us to do the forbidden, and leading us astray.

The lecturer explains that physical development of the area in the hill and valley had blocked the passage for elephants, which had been using it for many

years. He reasoned that economic and physical development was a big obstacle to the survival of animals. The form two pupils knew that the elephants would not be using the area which had been so much developed and was unsafe for them. The business executive has a business proposition. He suggests that the residents could make a lot of money by chaining and exhibiting the extremely rare white elephant. The air force commander feels that the white elephant is a security threat and has to be terminated by using a missile. The form two pupils' comments that the elephant had not done any harm and it could easily be sent back to the jungle fall on deaf ears.

While the residents are discussing their strategy to get rid of the elephant, the animal itself performs an 'ablution' in the ablution pond, then stands facing the kiblah (the direction towards which Muslims pray) and goes down on its knees praying to God. This act of the elephant is not received well by the onlookers since many in Taman Tiga Warna do not worship their Creator. They regard the white elephant as a dangerous animal which has to be killed.

The story demonstrates how adults react irresponsibly to a unique situation, how animal life has no value to some human beings and how people fail to learn from certain incidents they witness and become wiser.

NF Abdul Manaf's 'Lola' which has a fragmentary style of writing is a narrative about incidents happening from December 1995 until July 1997. Although each fragment is capable of standing on its own, the various fragments have cohesive inter-relatedness. Kak Bedah whose real name is Fatimah, (who later takes on the imaginary name ('Lola') is a housewife doing mundane routine things. She is 35 years old with four children. She is presented with a computer by her husband on their wedding anniversary. She is then able to connect herself to the 'interesting' world outside through the internet. Kak Bedah takes on the false name 'Lola' to chat on the internet. The imaginary world Lola likes to indulge in through the internet makes her family dysfunctional. After her divorce from Seman, she becomes a guest relations officer. She seeks to become wealthy through participation in a beauty contest for which she is encouraged strongly by a Mr. Wong. Lola is detained under the Shariah (Islamic law) Criminal Act which forbids Muslim women from taking part in beauty contests. As she realizes her false pretences can take her nowhere, she realizes her folly and turns over a new leaf. 'Lola' is a story which has good moral lessons. The internet can be a blessing or bane; it depends on the user. A housewife's boredom is understandable, but Kak Bedah could have used her spare time to her advantage. But she did not. She is admonished by her husband for neglecting her duties and prayers. Her addiction to internet chat results in divorce.

The writer takes a jibe at the authorities for road users having to pay toll frequently. Toll payment digs a hole not only in Kak Bedah's pocket, but also many motorists' pockets. The writer uses the story to drive home the message that many

highway users are affected by toll payments as there are toll plazas everywhere. She also uses her story to lash out at irresponsible and immoral men who get away without paying maintenance to their wives and children. The administration of shariah law can do better where women's welfare is concerned.

'Zel', an unusually short title penned by Mawar Shafie also deals with women's issues as in 'Lola'. The writer enlightens the readers about professions which not many people are keen to pursue – archaeology and painting. Zel is short for Zelda, a female artist. The short story gives us some insight into the culture of the Tuareg people who live in the Sahara Desert. The writer is at odds with herself. She compares herself with her friend Zelda who has courage and is industrious. The writer feels that she lacks courage. Mawar Shafie uses a lot of loan words in the story. In fact the very first word is a 'Malayized' loan word – *berkompromi*. This may pose comprehension difficulties for readers who are not very familiar with such loans.

The story basically revolves around two personalities – the writer and her friend Zel. The writer who writes in the first person is an archaeologist; her friend is an artist. Zel is a single woman who was the writer's senior in the university. Zel is an independent woman whose courage and conviction the writer admires. The writer experiences gender conflict with her male boss, the head of an archaeology team. The writer does not merely entertain the readers, she also tries to bring in a religious dimension into her works, albeit sparsely. She mentions how she and Zel attend weekly Quranic study classes, the approaching time for fulfilling *maghrib* (sunset) prayers, praying in *jemaah* (congregational prayers), and ends her story with "God is great". Gender conflict is not something uncommon in an Asian society, although such conflicts may be on the wane. This issue is treated as one of the central issues in the story.

In the following sections we shall see how the three selected stories may be used in the teaching of English (and Bahasa Malaysia too).

1. Reading Skills

There are many skills related to reading which can be broadly categorized into micro-level or discrete level, and macro-level or global level skills.

In this section we look at various reading sub-skills:

1. Exploiting Prior Knowledge
2. Is a housewife's job easy?
3. Is the internet a blessing, or bane?

Before we actually go on to read a comprehension passage teachers engage the students verbally in a pre-reading activity which makes the latter warm up to handle

the passage. We can also use this skill of exploiting student's prior knowledge to make them practise speaking and develop their critical thinking. Thought-provoking and even controversial topics may be given in a pre-reading section, for example:

1. Women should be encouraged to be full-time homemakers
2. Beauty contests exploit women
3. Toll should be abolished.

b) Skimming and scanning

Skimming refers to reading quickly to understand the main points. Scanning, on the other hand refers to reading quickly to locate specific information (Cambridge International Dictionary, 1995). Both skills do not require reading in detail or intensive reading.

Example:

1. Why does Kak Bedah transform into Lola? (skimming)
2. What does IRC stand for? (scanning)

c) Summarizing

To summarize is to be able to read for the essential information needed and be able to provide a succinct account from what one has read or listened to. A short story is by definition a literary work which is reasonably short. Students can be guided as to what they have to say or write in a given number of words, or restrict the scope of the story by limiting their task. Summarizing trains students to express themselves economically.

Example:

Summarize the objections of the Form II pupils to the views expressed by the air force commander, *ustaz*, lecturer and the business executive in 'The White Elephant'.

d) Inferring

Inferring is arriving at some reasonable conclusion based on the information available to a person. In fiction, we can make inferences about the characters and the writer. Inferences can be direct or implied.

Example:

1. What do you think of the author? What makes you think so?
2. "There was too much work. My night shift was very busy. The customers came and went. Everybody mentioned Lola's name". What do you think Lola did for a living?

e) Dictionary work

Dictionary work involving finding the other parts of speech of target vocabulary items, forming different words from them, and exercises involving sense relations may also be provided. Students can learn about the origin of certain words, polysemy, i.e. about words having more than one meaning, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy and idiomatic expressions.

Example:

1. From which foreign language is the word 'kompromi' derived?
2. Is there a word for 'compromise' in the Malay language?
3. Which word is similar in meaning to 'sketsa'?
4. Which word is opposite in meaning to 'pesimis'?
5. What does the idiomatic expression 'white elephant' mean?

f) Developing awareness of text cohesion

Cohesion refers to the use of linking devices to bring about textual unity and inter-relatedness between sentences and paragraphs. Grammatical cohesion is achieved by using reference, conjunction, ellipsis and substitution, while lexical cohesion is realized by the use of sense relations such as synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy; repetition of key words, and collocation (see Mohideen, 2007).

Sentences in certain paragraphs from a short story can be mixed up. Students can be then asked to arrange the jumbled paragraph. Alternatively all the paragraphs in a very short story can be mixed up, and students be given the task of arranging the paragraphs in the right order. For both these activities, students will have to see the logical links and sequential information to succeed.

g) Guessing meaning of unknown words

As we read a work of continuous writing such as articles in newspapers, or prose, readers come across many words whose meanings are not familiar to them. It may not be necessary to know the meaning of all unknown words in a text. But if a word's meaning is helpful to understand the text we should first try to make an intelligent guess by studying the surrounding context before turning to the dictionary. Quite often there are helpful clues to help us guess correctly, for instance:

1. The residents who were lazy, forgetful and rarely prayed felt embarrassed by the form two pupils' observations. The word embarrassed could be guessed intelligibly as 'uncomfortable', 'ashamed' and 'irritated'.
2. We must organize a strategy to put into action. 'Strategy' may be guessed as being similar in meaning to 'plan' or 'way'.

h) Prediction

Being able to predict the contents of a passage, article or short story based on the title, or after reading the first few paragraphs is a reading skill. Similarly making a prediction as to what the outcome of the story would be, or what the successive paragraphs may be about in an article is also a reading skill. Predicting is an interesting skill because it promotes reasoning.

Example:

1. Write a short concluding paragraph to 'Lola'.
2. What do you think 'The White Elephant' may have as its contents on first reading the title?
3. How would you have concluded the story if you had written 'The White Elephant'?

i) Literary appreciation

Appreciation of literature is a part of aesthetic development which involves beauty, imagination, judgment and response to the text. Students should be able to draw conclusions and make judgments about the various forms of literature presented to them. The students should critically evaluate characterization, use of symbolism, main ideas, values, plot etc.

Exercise:

- 1) Do you find 'Zel' easy to understand? Give your reasons.
- 2) What effect does the author's use of many loanwords have on you?
- 3) Are you happy with the characterization of the *ustaz*?
- 4) Are the titles 'Lola' and 'Zel' appropriate? Why? Suggest alternative titles.

2. Writing Skills

We may classify writing into three broad types: Personal, transactional and creative.

Personal writing includes writing informal letters, sending greetings and taking messages. Transactional writing includes business correspondence, writing memos and reports and writing advertisements. Creative writing belongs largely to the realm of literature – writing poetry, short stories, songs etc.

Five specific types of writing students may be required to produce for assessment reasons are: narration, description, exposition, persuasion and argumentation (Nesamalar et al., 1995, p. 137). Good writing skills are required for personal, institutional and occupational purposes (Richards, 1990).

Writing skills which are highly desirable include readability, unambiguity, coherence, cohesion, clarity, and language use appropriate to the subject matter,

using writing conventions according to specific genres of texts, grammatical and organizational competence.

There are two major approaches to developing writing skills – the product and the process approach. The difference between the two lies in the overall emphasis. In the former the emphasis is “on the form of the finished product that the student produces rather than on the process of writing” (Richards, 1990, p. 108). A process approach however allows the learner to explore and cultivate a personal approach to the writing task.

Writing Activities:

a) Paragraph development

In a paragraph of between 90 –100 words describe the work of an artist. You may use the following as your topic sentence, i.e. the sentence with the main idea.

An artist is person who paints.....
.....

In the above writing task students are expected to generate and develop ideas. They need to use subject matter relevant to a particular occupation.

b) Organizing ideas logically

Complete each of the following sentences in a logical manner

1. Faridah was very bored as a housewife. So
2. Many people become wiser when they get older. However

c) Writing formal and informal letters

Students need to be able to distinguish between formal and informal writing. In formal writing, the writer has to be careful and businesslike, whereas in informal writing the writer can afford to be friendly, conversational and relaxed.

Exercise:

1. You are a member of a cultural group sent by your country overseas to promote tourism in your country. You have been away for more than a week. Write a letter to your parents at home.
2. Write a letter to the City Hall to seek permission to exhibit your paintings at their lobby hall. You are a budding artist.

d) Using register

Register is specialized vocabulary used by professionals, people in specific occupations as well as particular groups of people.

Exercise:

With the help of a dictionary list five words specific to the occupation of the following:

a soldier, an imam, an economist, and a lawyer.

e) Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a writing skill which is the ability to repeat somebody else's ideas using one's own words as far as possible. This skill is necessary for summarizing purposes

Exercise:

Paraphrase the business executive's business proposition in 'The White Elephant', from the first paragraph of page 46, in not more than 25 words.

f) Distinguishing between fact and opinion

As readers or writers we need to be able to distinguish between facts and opinions. Facts are statements which are true, based on statistics and reliable information. Opinions, on the other hand, may be true but cannot be agreed to by all. Different people can have different opinions. But this is not the case with facts.

Exercise:

Write four statements, two factual, and two based on opinion.

Example:

A waitress serves customers with food and drinks – Fact

Waitresses working in hotels are happy in their job – Opinion

g) Text completion

An interesting or suitable section from a story may be used to get students to complete a text which will have certain words deleted from it systematically or at random, but with a good reason. A text completion activity is good for practising not only writing skills, but also reading skills, grammar and vocabulary.

h) Extended/Continuous Writing

In extended or continuous writing, for example, writing a composition, book review and report, the students have to demonstrate many sub-skills of writing such as expressing ideas clearly and grammatically, using varied and appropriate vocabulary, linking ideas cohesively, generating and developing ideas and organizing ideas logically.

Exercise:

1. Beauty contests degrade women. Do you agree with this statement?

2. How can we get more tourists who are interested in wildlife to visit Malaysia?
3. Should children have the full freedom to pursue an occupation of their choice?

3. Listening Skills

Listening skills are aimed at helping people to listen carefully to get things done, to derive pleasure and learn valuable moral lessons and to gather facts and information, among other things. Specific listening skills include listening for general and specific information, transferring information, summarizing, note taking, completing a picture, diagram, map or form and predicting. With particular reference to listening to short stories we may exploit the stories in the following manner after they have been recorded:

1. We may ask the students to predict how they think the story 'Lola' would proceed after Cik Faridah is detained by the religious officers for her participation in the beauty contest.
2. Comprehension questions on the plot, characters, moral issues, style etc may be asked at the end of a story they have listened to, for instance:
Do you think the *ustaz* is a knowledgeable person? Evaluate his character. Was it right to kill the white elephant? Give reasons.
3. The summary of the story with certain words deleted for the students to fill in the gaps, or a summary writing activity related to the story they have listened to may be given.
4. The students can be asked to write a short play, using their own words, based on the story they have heard, and act out the story on another day. This, done as a group activity, can be motivating and enjoyable.

Some of the above activities integrate the major language skills.

4. Speaking Skills

Speaking has two purposes: transactional and interactional. The transactional function of language focuses on conveying information, for instance, giving instructions, describing a place and giving a short talk on a certain topic. The interactional function of speech is conversational and involves more than one person unlike in transactional speech which is usually dominated by one person. Establishing and maintaining good social relationships is the main purpose in interactional speech. Examples include expressing feelings and opinions, making

and receiving formal as well as personal telephone calls and performing various social functions involving different kinds of social encounters.

Speaking skills for both transactional and interactional purposes are developed often through discussion, role-play and short talks. Examples of activities for developing speaking skills follow:

Discussion

1. What is gender conflict and why does it arise? Discuss this in groups of four.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the internet? Provide additional points in the charts below after discussing with your partner.

Advantages:

Can gain much knowledge.

Disadvantages:

Can become too interested and neglect studies.

3. Work in pairs. Have a conversation on the following:
Some animals have become rare species. How do you think we should protect and care for them? What benefits are there?

Short Talk

Each student should prepare to talk to the rest of the class for about three minutes on the following:

1. Are you an optimist, pessimist, or realist?
An optimist is a person who tends to be hopeful in anything he or she does. Such a person believes that good things would happen in the end.
A pessimist is someone who does not see much good as a result of what they do. They do not have much hope.
A realist is one who does not have too high hopes, but hopes for only what appears likely to happen or is possible.
2. In the original short story 'Zel', there are many words of English origin. What are your views about Bahasa Melayu borrowing in this way?
3. Role-play: Discussing what program to take after Form Six (A-level)

Student A: You are the father of a girl who wants to study archaeology after completing her form six education. You are not happy with her choice for the following reasons and others: an archaeology degree has no job prospects
irregular working hours
uncertain income

no career prospects
uncomfortable working conditions

Student B: You are the mother of the girl. You do not want your daughter to be serious about taking archaeology. You have your own reasons, among others:

not a normal job for women
has to leave the family for long periods of time
may be difficult to find a suitable bridegroom
working conditions are rough

Student C: You are the girl who is very keen on pursuing archaeology at university. You have got your reasons for wanting to take up archaeology. Try to convince your parents with the reasons given here and others:

it is a very exciting job
get to travel to different countries
not interested in a nine-to-five job
can contribute to historical knowledge

The three students will have to play their respective roles and resolve their differences in an amicable manner. The same students can then change their roles and practise again. In using translated stories for speaking development, learners may be allowed to discuss a task bilingually. Discussion in their L1 may entail active involvement which would include target language vocabulary for the tasks (Nation, 2003).

Conclusion

Using literary texts such as short stories provides variety in terms of content, language use and themes and generates interest among the students. Literature not only promotes language acquisition, but also human and personal development. It also gives them the opportunity to respond to and appreciate literature, to become aware of important issues and develop universal human values which are not in conflict with one's own.

Short stories include not only contemporary modern short stories, but also fables, fairy tales, folk tales, legends and myths. These can be variously used depending on the level of students and their interest in these forms of short stories. Short stories serve as models of language use. They demonstrate how grammar, patterns of spoken and written discourse and vocabulary items may be used efficiently in speech and writing. Short stories allow students to acquire reading

skills and when used for listening purposes, they also improve their listening skills. Suitably selected stories provide a context and stimulus for learning a language. Like other genres of literature, short stories serve as a focal point for language learners to acquire various language skills in an integrated manner. Due to the 'glocal' nature of English, it is important for speakers to have the ability to function effectively in both the local and global contexts of use (Rajadurai, 2005).

The activities suggested in this paper are fairly exhaustive for integrated language teaching. A lot of other interesting activities can be also devised to teach at both upper secondary and tertiary levels. By using literary texts in the language classroom, the benefits are manifold, not least of which are literary enjoyment, language competence, and the ability to perform in the target language.

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