

Literary Texts for Malaysian Secondary Schools: Needs versus Policy

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Abstract

This paper reports on a two year research sponsored by the Education Ministry of Malaysia on a selection of literary texts needed for Malaysian secondary schools. This selection is perceived and voiced by the students and teachers in a research carried out in the state of Perak, Malaysia. Participants in the research were drawn from teachers and students in non-residential schools in all districts of Perak. A total of 422 secondary school students from Form two to Form five were involved in the cross-sectional survey. A total of six teachers, TESL trained, possess literature learning background and have at least ten years of English language teaching experience in secondary schools were interviewed. The students think that the choice of themes should differ across gender and class levels (Form 2 – Form 5). They feel females like love themes much more than males and this applies for all Form Two to Form Five students, both enjoy mystery and adventurous texts. Texts should be contextual and culturally bound. More local texts should be used. Texts should be happy ones and not morbid. Texts should be suitable for teenagers so that they can relate easily for example themes related to teenagers' issues. The teachers believe that literary texts used in Malaysian secondary schools are challenging and difficult in terms of the students' level. Foreign texts used are difficult and should be used at a later stage. Texts should be selected based on Malaysian and Asian context. Foreign texts selected must be easy to be comprehended and enjoyed by Malaysian students.

Keywords: Text selection, Literary texts

1. Introduction

In the Malaysian secondary school syllabus, a literature component is added to the curriculum for English from Form One to Form Five. This will enable learners to engage in wider reading of good literary works for enjoyment and self development. They will also develop an understanding of other societies, cultures, values and traditions that will contribute to their emotional and spiritual growth. The texts selected are from various genres comprising short stories, novels, drama and poems. A range of texts are offered in the secondary school curriculum and covers Malaysian, British, European, Australian, American and African works. Learners are expected to be able to follow a storyline and understand a poem and to give their own personal response to the text. The study of these texts is meant to inculcate values and broaden learners' outlook.

Contrary to beliefs and expectations, learners are often intimidated by the idea of learning literature because they think literature is about a lot of difficult and incomprehensible words (Doris Boo & Navinder Kaur, 2000). Often, to most of these learners, literature is synonymous with works of Shakespeare and his archaic or classic language, and works of poets with their unfamiliar language of poetry. These unusual stylistic devices often make comprehension near impossible (Gwin, 1990). Deblase (2005) reveals students often struggle with Shakespeare's language. Perhaps this holds true for learners in Malaysian secondary schools as the foreign texts selected for use in literature classrooms are difficult for them to understand and enjoy. Learners find that they cannot identify with the cultural and social contexts of some of the text.

The Ministry of Education embarked on a policy shift in 2000 with the incorporation of literature in English language lessons in schools. It was stipulated that one of the five English periods in schools be allocated for the literature component. Following this move, literary texts of various genres were introduced in schools from Form One to Form Five. The selected texts were written by both English and Asian writers. The aim of learning these literary texts is to enhance students' proficiency level of English, contribute to students' "...personal development and character building and widen their outlook of the world through reading about other cultures and world views" (Ganakumaran 2003).

The implementation of this policy has varied repercussions, both positive and negative. In a study of the incorporation of the literature component in schools Ganakumaran (2003) states there are a number of challenges and implications especially in the selection of appropriate texts. He suggests that the text chosen must be both readable and accessible to pupils. It is also important to maintain a consistency in the themes of the language proficiency aspect and the theme of the literature component (Ganakumaran, Shahizah & Koo, 2003). He also believes that another aspect of readability should be seen from the perspective of culture. The texts are selected from both local and foreign ones. For instance, the poem *Life's Brief Candle* by Shakespeare or the novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by R.L. Stevenson used in the lower secondary syllabus is both geographically and historically distant to the Malaysian student. In fact, some of the cultural information in some of the texts is obsolete even in the countries of origin (Ganakumaran, Shahizah & Koo 2003).

Vethamani, M.E. (2004) says the literature component implemented in the schools has a strong bias for texts from the British and American literary traditions. Not denying that these two traditions have a canon of literary works, there is also a need to acknowledge the emerging trend of local literary works in English or translated into English from Malay and should be considered for use in schools. In addition, the status of English in Malaysia as a second language or sometimes to that of a foreign language has resulted in English being used minimally in communication. Therefore students have little interest in the culture of the target language.

Incorporating Malaysian literature in English would offer a more familiar setting and cultural elements. It could encourage students to enjoy the literary texts as they would be able to identify with the local characters and issues (Vethamani, M.E. 2004). The relation between student and text is an important element in determining the choice of suitable texts for use in the classroom, even in the context of the teaching and learning of English in the first language. According to Blocksidge (2000) it is not a simple task of listing those texts which will "always do well" in the classroom, but they must also be able to portray the intellectual, cultural and emotional assumptions. Texts should have a 'public theme' and also within the grasp of students and similarly they are capable of extending the students' moral, social and emotional understanding (Haddon 2000). A study conducted by Norton (1995) in the teaching of literature in Swedish Upper Secondary schools shows that the pupils find reading in English as a foreign language difficult than reading in their mother tongue, prefers texts that are 'amusing, thrilling and not too demanding'. Norton states the problems teachers face in teaching literary texts, especially in a foreign language context is the choice of texts. The texts must enable pleasant reading by being on the appropriate level for students that is the linguistic or vocabulary-wise level and on the intellectually or content-wise level (Norton 1995).

Literary appreciation is the true key to understanding and enjoyment of a work of literature (Gwin, 1990). This level of literary appreciation can result only from reading texts that have a genuine and meaningful impact on the individual (Keshta 2000; Ballentine & Hill, 2000). Consequently, to achieve this level, careful consideration must be given to selection of texts for use in the literature classroom. This is because the key to success in using literature in ESL classrooms depends primarily on the texts selected. A research conducted by Che Ton Mahmud (2005) on rural secondary school students reveal that if the aim of the literature component in the English language syllabus is to be achieved, the text used needed due consideration. In the context of the Malaysian rural classrooms, texts selected should trigger the students' schemata so as to provide a genuine platform for students and teacher interaction, and reader-text interactive processes to take place. Localized literature should be favoured but specific related themes should take priority. Results of the research reveal that texts used should relate to the students' life experiences, activate their prior knowledge and convey a message. The titles selected should trigger and maintain students' interest and should be able to provide avenues for spontaneous students' responses and involvement.

Cole (2003) reiterates that it is crucial to offer students a rich, literature environment in the classroom. An array of books that represent a variety of topics, levels and genres of literature is necessary to capture students' interest. Ballentine and Hill (2000) in an experiment with elementary school students found that authentic literature which addresses real-life issues enhanced students' engagement with texts. Students were deeply engaged in interacting with each other and were able to respond well to the themes highlighted in the texts. Another research conducted by Siti Norliana Ghazali, Roszainora Setia, Chitra Muthusamy & Kamaruzaman Jusoff (2009) reveal that better text selection would motivate students to engage in literature reading. Text selection appears to be the most important consideration that must be taken seriously if we seek for a more meaningful engagement with literary texts. They assert that the interest factor of students must take precedence in any text selection tasks.

Although literary texts are laden with many new words and complex structures, it is interesting to note that often, it is the cultural strangeness more than the technical difficulties that pose the greatest comprehension problems to learners (Brooks 1989). It is the cultural origin of the literary piece which has more effect on the reading comprehension of ESL learners than did the level of syntactic or semantic difficulty. It is important for students of literature to be introduced and exposed to some foreign texts but this has to be carried out at a later stage. Perhaps foreign texts can be used in upper secondary level. Learning literature via foreign texts gives students different perspectives of people and their cultures. Through literature the teacher can help boys and girls realize how people in different cultures live, what some of their ceremonials mean and how being different does not mean being inferior (Poe, J.W. 1961).

2. Defining literature

Eagleton (2006) says by definition literature is imaginative writing in the sense of fiction – writing which is not literally true. He explains that literature is a special kind of language in contrast to the ordinary language we commonly use. He believes literature has become a whole alternative ideology and the imagination itself, as with Blake and Shelley, becomes a political force. He feels the task of literature is to transform society in the sense of those energies and values which art embodies. Welles & Warren (1977) say that the term ‘literature’ seems best if we limit it to the art of literature, that is, to imaginative literature. They believe the simplest way of solving the question is by distinguishing the particular use of language in literature. In Malaysia, literature is taught to enhance the students’ grasp of the English language and to be enjoyed. One therefore finds that while literature can be used as a tool to promote literacy and proficiency in the language, one should never lose sight of the fact that literature is meant to be enjoyed. Striking a balance between the two is not easy but it is not impossible (Karen Kow Yip Cheng, 2008).

2.1 Theories of Literature

Literary theories help students of literature and avid critics analyse literary canons. They are like a stance that the analysis can fall to. Eagleton (2006) talks about literary theories postmodernism, post-colonialism, New Historicism, and Feminism. Selden *et al* (2005) explain Romantic-humanist theories emphasize the writer’s life and mind as expressed in his or her work, ‘reader-criticism’ (phenomenological criticism) centres itself on the reader’s, or ‘affective’ experience; formalist theories concentrate on the nature of the writings itself in isolation; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical context as fundamental, - the writer, the audience, and the text are all included within a generally sociological perspective.

2.1.1 New Historicism

Greenblatt (1989) says he used the term new historicism to describe an interest in the kinds of issues he has been raising, the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history. He explains that the term ‘man’ in new historicism, by contrasting it to the dictionary meaning of ‘historicism.’ In the new historicism, man acts according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture, conditioned by the expectations of their class, gender, religion, race and national identity, and are constantly effecting changes in the course of history. Hence, each of the diverse races in post-independence Malaysia behaved according to the conflicts that they experienced, due to the expectations of their particular race and their community. To exemplify, the Malays in early post-independence, as indigenous people demonstrate dissatisfactions as a result of conflicts they experienced when their demands and aspirations were constantly not met (Nor Hashimah Isa, 2009).

According to Patterson (1996) ‘Our experience also teaches us that the historically real – as economic, political, social, and material reality – does indeed exist, and that action in the world has a presence and consequentiality that cannot be evaded.’ The people’s experience in post-independence Malaysia does exist in history and it is real. Undeniably, the races’ experience in post-independence Malaysia is related to history that really exists and that cannot be avoided. A research carried out by Nor Hashimah Isa (2007) on post-independence Malaysian Malay and English short stories exposes a marked difference between the stories. In the first quarter (1957 to 1959), the Malays and non-Malays were portrayed as individuals and communities who were more concerned with personal and social problems rather than economic and political ones. In the second quarter (1960 to 1962), the rural and low-income urban Malays felt their communities’ actual outcome was not the fair/just outcome they deserved’, but the non-Malays felt the strain more as individuals. This indicates that the non-Malays felt the strain individually than communally as they struggled to escalate socially via arranged marriages to professional suitors.

In the last quarter 1967 to 1969, the Malays felt they were deprived of opportunities unlike the non-Malays (Chinese), who were not only given chances but had made use of them extensively. The non-Malays felt very upset and concerned with the Malays' accusations, anger and prejudice towards them. Nor Hashimah Isa (2010) says the Malays were thrown into the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation of good education. Hence, students of literature must learn from the past to understand the present and work together to achieve the future.

2.1.2. Feminist Theory

Hooks (2000) says by the late 70's feminist thinkers were already engaging in dialectical critique of the feminist thinking that had emerged from late 60's radicalism. That critique formed the basis of revisionist feminist theory. She also states that feminist thought and practice were fundamentally altered when radical women of colour and white allies began to vigorously challenge the notion that "gender" was the primary factor determining a woman's fate. Sands & Nuccio (2008) say feminist writings across disciplines have illuminated an understanding of the status of women in a patriarchal society, sexist biases in social and behavioral theories, and the feminization of poverty. They explain that liberal feminism emphasizes the attainment of political rights, opportunities and equality within the existing political system. Socialist feminism attributes women's oppression to interaction among sexism, racism, and class divisions which are produced by patriarchal capitalism. Radical feminism finds patriarchy on omnipresent influence that needs to be dismantled.

Tyson (1999) says a feminist analysis of the patriarchal ideology operating in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), for example, might examine three related areas: (1) the ways in which the female characters (Biff's and Happy's various "conquests" the woman Willy meets in the Boston hotel and Linda Loman) function as tokens of male status; (2) the ways in which the "good-girl"/"bad-girls" view of women validates the Loman men's sexism; (3) the ways in which Linda Loman has internalized patriarchal ideology. In contemporary Malaysia gender issues and women rights are constantly stressed and put forward. Hence, students of literature in schools are able to read and comprehend issues that relate to women and the feminist theory in the novels and short stories that they are exposed to. This would be a wakeup call for them.

2.1.3 Post-colonial Theory

Post-colonial literature refers to literary creations and aesthetic works created by local writers from post-colonial countries. Ashcroft *et al* (1989) define post-colonial as the culture affected by the Imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. Ashcroft *et al* (2000) explain the term "post-colonial" to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day and not merely the semantic basis of the term 'post-colonial' suggesting a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power. Hence, post-colonial includes the literature of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka.

Ashcroft *et al* (2000) say literature offers one of the most important ways in which the experience of colonialism are expressed and it is in their writings, through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential. Post-colonial literature is slowly being accepted by the western world though the degree of acceptance is still small. Literatures from Africa, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines are now studied in some western universities. Eminent post-colonial writers such as Shirley Lim, Anita Desai and Ngugi Wa Thiong' O are also invited to lecture on post-colonial studies in some western universities.

2.2 Malaysian English Short Stories and Novels

The British did not expose Malaysians to western education; thus the majority of the citizens remained illiterate until the late 1950's. For a long time the English language in Malaysia never became a literary medium. Hence the development in short story writing in English by the Malaysian writers was indeed slow. Fernando (2001) says Lee Kok Liang is the only writer with a book of short stories to his name, namely 'The Mutes in the Sun (Kuala Lumpur 1963)'. Fernando (2001) states Lee Kok Liang's short story 'Return to Malaya' as an example of writing with expressions of the Malaysian scene - "Its closeness of observation stems, nevertheless, from an intimacy with the local scene which only a local writer can have". Tan Chin Kwang (1978) states "the English-educated which in pre-War Malay and Malayan society represented the higher strata, kept almost completely aloof from participation in literary development."

English education was prestigious and restricted and for those not granted scholarships, extremely costly. Early English education was not intellectually oriented and the least literarily oriented among the different streams of education. Tan explains this:

“This had and still continues to have an influence on the development of writing in English and on the contribution of the English-educated to local literary development generally”.

As a result, English writing that constitutes poetry and fiction was confined almost exclusively to the campuses. Short stories in English written by Malaysian writers have been published in local newspapers and magazines in only the last twenty years. There is no compilation of stories in English after independence until 1969.

Muhammad Quayum (2007) says English is not the native language of any of the ethnic groups in Malaysia but it is the writers' choice of medium, and their efforts to “re-place” it in the local context, through a process of appropriation and infusion of local blood. Hence, literary selection in Malaysian schools must use local texts so that students will understand and enjoy the local writers' efforts.

Muhammad Quayum exemplifies with Lloyd Fernando's two novels, *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour*. They were published seventeen years apart and deal with the similar experiences of political turbulence that beset Singapore and Malaysia, respectively, before and after independence. *Scorpion Orchid* is set in Singapore, in the 1950s, when Singapore was still a part of colonial Malaya. *Green is the Colour*, on the other hand, deals with the inter-racial riots that rocked Malaysia on 13 May 1969, twelve years after independence. He reveals that the novels examine the causes of the turmoil and their effects on the society at large, and suggest ways of overcoming them in future. Hence, students of literature will undeniably benefit from these novels as they tell stories of people and places that are close to their hearts and homes. The young generation must learn from the past to appreciate what the country and their forefathers have given to them. Malaysians need to attain nation building.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research design involves both the quantitative and qualitative research methods in collecting and analyzing data. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to elicit information from secondary school students who experienced the teaching and learning of the literature component in the English language syllabus. In addition to the survey, several semi-structured, individual in-depth interviews with practicing English language teachers were carried out to supplement and complement the quantitative evaluative measure. For this purpose interview sessions were conducted adopting the multiple case multiple site design (Yin, 1994).

3.2 Research samples

Participants in the research were drawn from teachers and students in 40 non-residential secondary schools in the state of Perak. The schools are situated in the district of Batang Padang, Perak Tengah, Hulu Perak, Larut Matang and Selama, Hilir Perak, Kuala Kangsar, Kerian, Kinta Utara and Selatan, and Manjung. A total of 422 students from Form 2 to Form 5 were randomly selected as respondents for the cross-sectional survey. Form 1 students were not included as during data collection they had only about three months of learning literature experience. A random purposive sampling was carried out to select participants for the interview. Based on the process of data saturation whereby adequacy was attained, only six teachers were involved.

3.3 Research instruments

A questionnaire and an interview protocol are two major instruments developed to collect relevant data from the students and teachers respectively. The items in the questionnaire and questions in the interview protocol were built on and guided by the research questions to be addressed which are (i) *What are students' views on learning literature?* (ii) *What problems do students encounter in comprehension of the literary texts selected? Why?* (iii) *What are the features required /considerations to be addressed in the selection of literary texts for the Malaysian classroom?*

The questionnaire took the form of a fixed format self-report measure. The first section focused on the students' demographic profile relating to the respondents' gender, race and the class they were in. The following sections involve the use of a five-point Likert scale. The scale allowed the respondents to register the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a particular statement of an attitude, belief or judgment.

The second section gathered their views on learning literature, reading literary texts during leisure and appreciation of literary texts. The third section seeks their opinion on the literature texts currently prescribed for their learning in schools. The final section gathers information on the type or kind of literature texts which would appeal to them based on their gender and various age levels and groups.

An interview protocol was developed to collect data from the teachers involved. The interview questions focused on the suitability of the literature texts prescribed for the Malaysian secondary school students. Also included are the features required in the selection of literary texts for the Malaysian classroom from the teachers' viewpoints.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Students' views on learning literature

Generally, the students have positive views on learning literature. A total of 68.5% of the students feel that they gain benefits in learning literature. Students believe that learning literature helps in developing their awareness for other cultures, beliefs and values around them. A total of 78.2% agreed that they begin to understand the cultural differences of people. They believed that learning literature provide insights on the relationship of man and their life events. In the course of such insightful and heightened awareness, they develop a better understanding of their weaknesses in coping with their life experiences. As such, 70.8% of the students agreed that they develop open-mindedness and the ability to accept others as they are and life events and experiences as it occurs. It is enlightening to note that 72.1% of the students believed that learning literature enhances their creative skills while 59.4% of the students agreed that it enhances their critical thinking skills as well.

The results suggest that at least the aims of incorporating the literature component in the English language syllabus for secondary schools is achieved if not all. Through their engagement with literature texts in schools especially, students develop an understanding of other societies and their cultural practices, and the various values and traditions which they adhere to. This exposure will in effect contribute to the students' emotional and spiritual growth as outlined in the National Education Philosophy of Malaysia.

A total of 53.1% of the students enjoyed the novels and 59.5% the short stories used in schools. The data showed that 72.5% of the students can identify and relate to the setting and the characters portrayed and the issues highlighted in both the prose forms. In contrast, the poems prescribed for use in secondary schools were unpopular. A total of 40.8% of the students understand the poems and 34.4% of the students understand the various language styles in poems. As such only 47.7% of the students liked the poems.

Despite the positive response towards learning literature in English, the data revealed that only 39.3% of the students chose to read English language literary materials during leisure. During their free time only 36.3% of the students read English novels as a favourite leisure activity. The results suggest that reading literary text in English is not a preference as a hobby. This gives the impression that most students learn literature because it is part of the school curriculum. This is reflected in the moderate percentages of students who enjoyed the novels, short stories and especially the poems as discussed earlier. As the data suggest, there appears to be problems of interest associated with the learning of literature. When the interest is lacking, this will in turn affect comprehension.

4.2 Problems encountered in comprehension of literary texts selected

Based on the data, it is obvious that comprehension of poems is most salient. The various language styles and the linguistic literary devices used in poems make it difficult for students to engage with the text. Students find that getting the writer's message is far reaching as they are not able to go beyond the literal meaning of the words or the lines. The novels and short stories also received a similar response. Some texts are culturally and contextually foreign that students lose interest and fail to engage deeply with the texts. These texts lack appeal to the students concerned.

Teachers interviewed shared the same views. All agreed that the literary texts used for all the Form 1, 2, 3 4 and 5 are not suitable to the students' level. Based on their experiences, most of the teachers reasoned that the foreign texts used are too difficult for the rural and sub urban school students. Poems such as Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, Emily Dickinson's *There's been a death in the house opposite* are not easily comprehensible. Short stories such as *The lotus eater* by Somerset Maugham and *The drover's wife* by Henry Lawson fail to attract students' attention.

They proposed that foreign texts should be introduced at a later stage when the students are more familiar with the local literary texts. These teachers also asserted that foreign texts are challenging in terms of jargons and cultural context. They are adamant that foreign texts should be selected with caution as these texts are not easy to teach. They also voiced their concern over exam-oriented teaching and time constraint in the literature classrooms. Despite the arguments raised, the teachers pondered on the question of *what is literature without works from the canon?* As such, the teachers believed that Shakespeare can be introduced to the students. They agreed that it is good to expose students to works of Shakespeare but insisted that to have them introduced in Form 1 is much too soon. They felt that the students should be given the local flavors of Malaysian and Asian literary texts at lower secondary school before they embark on earlier works.

All 6 teachers agreed that foreign texts can be used in literature classrooms but at a later stage- perhaps for the upper secondary. Three teachers agreed that this is enriching to the senior students especially those who are passionate about literature and are interested to pursue literature at the tertiary level. The other three teachers are more concerned about their students in rural and sub urban schools not being able to understand foreign texts used in literature classrooms. It must be noted that local texts are also prescribed for use in the Malaysian classrooms. However, the teachers interviewed stated that one Malaysian novel used in the literature classroom is too difficult for the students to grasp. *The Return* by K.S. Maniam is more suitable and relevant for tertiary education as the story calls for a consideration and weighing of many internal (the self) and external (the self and others) debatable issues. Included are social and political issues set against pre and post independence settings.

4.3 Features required /Considerations to be addressed in the selection of literary texts for the Malaysian classroom

Data collected from the survey suggest that only certain themes appeal to the students involved and received high preference. This specific selection of themes is preferred by students probably due to their age groups and levels, interest, familiar context and culture. The themes highlighted are issues on adolescents 86.2% ($x=4.31$), mystery 84.4% ($x=4.27$), love and care 85.3% ($x=4.18$), adventure 78.2% ($x=4.07$), horror 73.9% ($x=4.02$), family life 78.5% ($x=3.93$), and science fiction 59.7% ($x=3.69$). Nonetheless, it must be noted that themes on happiness (92.2%) underpins the aforementioned with a mean score of 4.45.

The data also suggest that students like novels and short stories both with local (58.8%, $x=3.62$) and foreign (60.9%, $x=3.67$) content which are related to their society (64.0%, $x=3.72$) and their life as adolescents (71.8%, $x=3.92$). About 62.7% of the students prefer kampong settings ($x=3.62$), and 63.1% of the students prefer modern society settings ($x=3.64$). On the contrary, 65.2% of the students have a high preference for local poems ($x=3.79$) as opposed to foreign ones (50.9%, $x=3.5$), especially those which are related to their life (64.0%, $x=3.79$).

Analyses of the quantitative data results suggest a need for careful consideration pertaining to selection of literary texts for the Malaysian classrooms. Texts selected should be contextually and culturally bound relevant to their age groups and proficiency levels, as well as social and emotional development. Selection of the various genres also seems to have an impact on the students' interest in learning literature. It appears that students prefer prose forms with local and foreign content provided that they can relate to the content, context and culture. Though a fair percentage of students enjoy local poems, the foreign ones do not received similar response as the contents are contextually and culturally detached. This is probably because the language styles of those poems, the ambiguity of words, and use of literary devices makes it difficult for students to appreciate the poems. The linguistic structure of poems, the need to read between the lines, getting the intent of the author, and the multiple interpretations to a poem adds up to a great confusion in understanding poems. In contrast poems with local content received positive response as students can relate to their life experiences and situation and immediate environment.

It must be noted that based on the percentage and mean scores, students do not especially enjoy themes on patriotism and history. Only 46.5% ($x=3.29$) and 43.9% ($x=3.17$) of the students enjoyed those themes respectively. This is disheartening because as much as we would want to instill love for the country and knowledge of history especially of the nation, it appears that these themes do not interest them. This information should be a clear indicator to educators of the need to find other means of instilling patriotism among our school students, the generation of a future Malaysia. Cross-tabulations on the survey data collected suggest that a difference exist in the choice or preference of the themes of texts between the male and female students. Nonetheless, in some instances both genders appear to agree strongly.

Data are presented in TABLE 1. Both parties seem to enjoy themes on horror (M=75.6%, F=72.6%). Female students like these themes more than the male gender: family life (F=82.7%, M=72.9%), love and care (F=93.3%, M=75.2%), happiness (F=96.6%, M=86.5%) and issues of adolescents (F=91.5%, M=79.4%). Male students on the other hand prefer these themes more than their counterparts: mystery (M=89.2%, F=80.6%), adventure (M=86.5%, F=71.7%), and science fiction (M=69.7%, F=51.9%).

The results also reveal that both genders prefer short stories and novels that relate to their society (M=60.0%, F=67.1%) and those with foreign content (M=61.6%, F=60.3%). In addition they also prefer poems written by local poets (M=69.2%, F=62.0%). Contrary to the male students, female students prefer short stories and novels (F=75.1%, M=67.5%), and poems (F=70.1%, M= 56.2%) which relate to their life as a young adult.

Table 1: Text Preference across Gender

No	Item	Gender	Text Preference (%)		Pattern of variation
			Low	High	
1	I like themes related to family life.	M	10.3	72.9	F>M
		F	8.9	82.7	
2	I like themes on love and care	M	9.1	75.2	F>M
		F	3.4	93.3	
3	I like themes on mystery	M	3.8	89.2	M>F
		F	7.2	80.6	
4	I like themes on horror	M	7.5	75.6	M=F
		F	15.2	72.6	
5	I like themes on adventure	M	3.2	86.5	M>F
		F	11.0	71.7	
6	I like themes on happiness	M	7.6	86.5	F>M
		F	1.2	96.6	
7	I like science fiction themes	M	10.8	69.7	M>F
		F	19.4	51.9	
8	I like themes on issues of adolescents	M	9.1	79.4	F>M
		F	1.2	91.5	
9	I like short stories and novels which are related to my life.	M	13.0	67.5	F>M
		F	8.0	75.1	
10	I like short stories and novels which are related to my society.	M	10.3	60.0	M=F
		F	12.7	67.1	
11	I like novels and short stories with foreign content.	M	13.0	61.6	M=F
		F	14.0	60.3	
12	I like poems which are related to my life.	M	14.1	56.2	F>M
		F	9.7	70.1	
13	I like local poems	M	12.5	69.2	M=F
		F	13.5	62.0	

TABLE 2 presents data on the text preference observed across the upper secondary classes (Form 4 and 5) and lower secondary classes (Form 1 and 2). There appears to be not much differences in the preference of texts for learning literature between both the upper and lower secondary classes. Nonetheless, students in the lower secondary classes seem to favour themes on adventure more than the upper secondary classes (L=82.6%, U=73.6%). In addition, they like science fiction themes more than their seniors too (L=68.0%, U=51.2%). The upper secondary school students on the other hand, prefer short stories and novels which are related to their society more than their juniors (U=68.7%, L=59.6%).

In the interview, all 6 teachers agreed that literature classrooms should use Asian literary texts especially from the South East Asian corpus. This is because these texts will be more meaningful and close to our Malaysian students as the literary works have issues and culture that are closer to home. A majority of the teachers prefer a selection of Malaysian texts and Asian texts for lower secondary school students. They felt that foreign texts or poems should be introduced at a much later stage, perhaps in Form 4 and 5, the upper secondary classes.

Table 2 : Text Preference across Upper Secondary (U) and Lower Secondary (L) Classes

No	Item	Class Levels	Text Preference (%)		Pattern of variation
			Low	High	
1	I like themes related to family life.	U	8.4	77.8	U=L
		L	10.6	78.9	
2	I like themes on love and care	U	4.5	86.2	U=L
		L	11.4	84.4	
3	I like themes on mystery	U	5.4	81.5	U=L
		L	6.0	87.2	
4	I like themes on horror	U	10.4	72.6	U=L
		L	13.3	75.3	
5	I like themes on adventure	U	8.4	73.6	L>U
		L	6.9	82.6	
6	I like themes on happiness	U	3.0	93.3	U=L
		L	5.1	91.3	
7	I like science fiction themes	U	17.1	51.2	L>U
		L	14.2	68.0	
8	I like themes on issues of adolescents	U	4.5	88.8	U=L
		L	5.0	84.0	
9	I like short stories and novels which are related to my life.	U	11.3	72.1	U=L
		L	9.2	71.5	
10	I like short stories and novels which are related to my society.	U	9.8	68.7	U>L
		L	13.3	59.6	
11	I like novels and short stories with foreign content.	U	10.8	63.4	U=L
		L	16.5	62.0	
12	I like poems which are related to my life.	U	10.8	64.2	U=L
		L	12.4	63.8	
13	I like local poems	U	14.2	62.3	U=L
		L	11.9	67.9	

Based on the results and discussion of the research analysis, the following major conclusion can be drawn on text selection in Malaysian classrooms:

- i. Select authors or poets with a simple style of writing which poses minimal linguistic difficulties
- ii. Students' age and interests should be weighed heavily in relation to the themes.
- iii. Texts should be selected based on Malaysian and Asian context during the students' initial acquaintance with the literature component. Works from the Western literary canon can be introduced at the upper secondary level.
- iv. A wide range of texts should be made available for students' selection. The themes should centre around issues on adolescents, mystery, love and care, adventure, horror, family life, and science fiction. These themes should be happy ones.

5. Conclusion

This research has provided valuable insights in the attempt to engage students in meaningful literature learning experiences. The teaching of literature would be a laborious task if issues relating to texts selection are not addressed. The very aim of the inclusion of literature component to motivate students to read may be in jeopardy if students feel burdened by texts in which they cannot make sense of or connections with. Thus, careful selection of texts is strongly recommended to meet the diverse interests of both genders and the various age levels. This paper has discussed the literary text selection needed for Malaysian secondary schools and has reviewed many evidences and data that pertain to the various needs that must be taken into consideration. It has been found that students of literature have their own choice of literary texts. This discussion has led us to believe that these needs are significant and are having an adverse effect on the literature classrooms if they are not met. It was also found that the teachers teaching literature believe in local texts for their learners. Teaching hometown literature helps students better understand their own identities because part of who we are, is determined by where we are from and where we are now (Cahalan, J. M. 2008).

Thus, the evidences suggest that a new literary selection is needed for Malaysian secondary schools. The literary texts used in Malaysian secondary schools should ideally be affectively and intellectually challenging. Texts prescribed should cater to the needs of the learners, and engage students in thought provoking tasks. Only then will students derive pleasure and enjoyment in their acquaintance with literature. The concern now is needs or policy? In 2010 the ministry introduced new texts for Form 1 to Form 3. Ironically they are no different from the ones they replaced in terms of incorporating student's preference and local flavours. Hence, it is a compelling necessity for the ministry of education to look into the existing literary texts used in schools and use this research's findings to select a new array of short stories, novels, drama and poems.

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