

GIVING LIFE TO LITERATURE

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Introduction

Some of the ways the literature lesson can be made more interesting and spark the interest of our students is through creative methods like using video films or music to introduce the literature themes, referring to periodicals, performing drama scenes and making use of visiting speakers. Many teachers may say that there is hardly anything creative about these suggestions I have made since they have (in one form or another) become a routine part of their literature lesson.

But having taught for ten years in a number of rural secondary schools in Fiji, and having talked to teachers in conferences and workshops, I can say with some confidence, that in general, the traditional methods of reading the literature text with the students in a monotonous way or the setting of comprehension type questions to particular chapters (that the students are coerced into reading) are still very much the norm.

Most of the following methods, which I have personally tried out, have resulted in students becoming enthused with the literature text.

Using Video Films

I showed video films that were features from video hire shops or documentaries borrowed from embassies in Suva or from the Government Video Centre. These related indirectly to novels, short stories, poems and plays that the students were studying. They helped in giving the student-readers an idea of the story, poem or play, setting, plot, theme and the kinds of people who lived in those areas. It was very difficult finding feature films on the stories they were studying. But I overcame these obstacles by showing films with similar themes. For example, in *The Boy Who Was Afraid* the main theme is courage. Feature films of young people displaying this quality were shown.

Periodicals/Newspapers/Reference Books

Whenever I found pictures or stories about places where the stories had been set, in magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek* or *National Geographic*, and occasionally in the local papers, I showed these or read the articles to the students. For example, in *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*, seals, sea elephants, sea cows, sea otter and other marine life were frequently mentioned. I showed pictures of these from *National Geographic* and other periodicals. I also asked the students to look for them in geographic encyclopaedia.

Visiting Speakers

Whenever people from other countries passed through my school (for example Peace Corps volunteers, priests, tourists) I invited them to speak to the students about the places and customs of the lands they came from. For example, an American peace corps volunteer from Virginia came to the school I was at, and gave a talk on the geography and history of that area. This tied in well with the novel, *The Cay*, that the fourth formers were studying. The boy Phillip, who was stranded for a time on a cay with an elderly African-American, was originally from Virginia.

Use of Music to introduce the themes

A teacher who had used music successfully in the school I taught at described it this way.

‘I played a recording of Boney M’s *Ellute* to help the students appreciate the gravity of Mafatu’s feeling of insecurity in the novel, *The Boy Who Was Afraid*. To introduce the narrative poem *Flannan Isle* by W W Gibson to the Form Three students, I played a recording of the Saragosa Bands song, *Surabaya*. To introduce the themes of the non-narrative poems, *Friend* by Brian Olley, I played the recordings of Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton’s *Islands in the Stream*.’

Teachers find that music puts the students into the right frame of mind for assimilating the contents of a literature topic. It also allows for lively discussions of the literature materials because music draws out the creative instincts in their young minds. They therefore relate to the literary work through their own experiences. This is especially so with poetry, which they have often regarded as ‘boring’, abstract and difficult to understand.

Other methods

I had found it effective to have class discussions of the themes and to have short role-plays and drama scenes of the stories studied after every 3 chapters.

Conclusion

I should like to say here that I have seen a lot of teachers present absolutely wonderful English literature lessons during ED250 Micro-teaching classes at the University of the South Pacific but the exact opposite when I visited them in their various schools. When asked why their lessons were not innovative they came up with comments like "It's just not possible with these students." "They don't appreciate anything" or "I've got to rush through the syllabus and my students just won't understand it if I taught literature in ways they are not used to".

Teachers with these cynical views should note that Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) among others, have documented the effect of expectations of teachers on their students. They note that the higher the expectations and the more positive the attitudes of teachers, the better the performance of students in the classroom. I hope we can all have high expectations of our students and, for that matter, of ourselves. Only then can literature (and other) teaching really come alive!

References

Literature texts mentioned in this short article are studied in Forms 3 and 4 of Fiji schools.

Rosenthal, R., Jacobsen, L. (1968) *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

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