

# SELECTING PACIFIC WRITERS FOR THE LITERATURE LESSON

Katarina Tuinamuana

**Literature has the potential to provide endless hours of enjoyment and pleasure to our students. It also has the capacity to provide insights into a variety of issues by examining them in a new and exciting light. It can help to give students a better understanding of themselves, of other people and of society in general.**

The potential value of literature and of its study are endless. Each time a text is read there is interaction between the reader and the text which results in the creation of a "new" text. This happens because the reader takes his or her experience, knowledge, values and reading experience/skills into the literary experience provided by the author.

The potential provided by literature is immense but unfortunately, it is not an easy task to fulfil this potential within the classroom. Students often look forward to literature classes even *though may have some difficulty in understanding and appreciating the text*. Teachers can become disappointed with students' oral and written responses, and find it hard to understand why their students are *not able readily to share* their enthusiasm for the text under study.

Many factors come into play here, such as text selection, the choice of pre-reading activities, text-analysis, provision of follow-up activities, examination considerations, and the role of the teacher. The way in which these issues are handled will determine the success or failure of literature lessons. The concern in this article is about text selection.

Teachers usually base the selection of a text on the syllabus provided by their education departments. There are also other practical considerations, such as the availability and cost of books and materials.

However, the main criterion should be the suitability of the text to students' needs, interests, cultural background and language levels.

Brooks and Brock suggest that students more often have difficulties with the cultural strangeness of texts than with language level difficulties.<sup>1</sup> Although this does not, of course, mean that we should choose only those texts which have a culturally appropriate background, research has shown that successful reading depends more on the reader's background knowledge than on technical ability to decode the language.<sup>2</sup> The implication is that in the Pacific region we should take advantage of the regional literature available and also of literature that has some relevance to our students taking factors such as cultural bias, background knowledge and interest into account.

A Pacific literature has been emerging since the 1960's and it continues to grow and develop. We have writers such as Konai Helu-Thaman, Albert Wendt, Satendra Nandan, Larry Thomas, Raymond Pillai, Vilisoni Hereniko, Epeli Hau'ofa and Subramani. If used appropriately in the classroom, Pacific literature has the potential to create enjoyment and appreciation in students because of its local relevance.

Some may point out that these texts do not appear in prescribed syllabi, but most literature syllabi do have a section which allows the teacher freedom of choice. For example, the Fiji School Leaving Certificate prescription does not recommend any local drama text but there is always at least one general drama question in the external examination. It is not being suggested here that we teach toward exam passes but exams are a reality of our education systems which should not hinder our desire to promote learning and an enjoyment of literature in the classroom.

Curriculum developers in the Pacific must now seri-

ously consider including specific Pacific literature texts in the syllabi. Some countries like Tonga and Western Samoa have already had considerable success with the use of Pacific poetry, drama and short stories. The Fiji School Leaving Certificate prescription says that "Students should study a variety of genres, including Pacific literature in English". However, apart from *Possibilities*, by Des Petersen, no other Pacific text is listed as being recommended for teaching in 5th and 6th forms.

Generally, teachers hesitate to use texts which are not recommended as such and, in the case of Fiji's FSLC, which do not have specific questions provided in the external exams. Students who study texts which are not recommended in the prescription have to answer the "General" question on the particular genre. This is usually seen as being a risky alternative to the study of recommended texts.

For years we have emphasized the reading and study of the works of writers such as Shakespeare, Salinger, Yeats, Wordsworth, Mansfield and Shaw. These are certainly great writers whose works have had a lasting effect on many of us. However, it must be accepted

that in the Pacific we also have outstanding writers who have produced works that are worthy of study.

Current theory on the reading process tells us that effective reading depends to a large extent on the reader's background knowledge. Can we, as educators, afford not to allow our students the chance to read, enjoy and value their own home grown literature?

## **REFERENCES**

1. See Brooks, M.E. (1989). Literature in the EFL classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 27, 2, pp.10-12, 28. Also Brock, M.N. (1990). The case for localised literature in classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 28, 3, pp. 22-25.
2. Smith, F. (1988). *Understanding Reading*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Also Parker, R. (1985). The reading process: The practicality of good theory. In *Reading: An Australian Perspective*, Ed. L. Unsworth, Australia; Nelson.