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The Role of Literature In the Secondary School In Singapore¹

In recent years we have witnessed a growing ferment about issues concerning language usage in Singapore. English and Mandarin in particular have been, and still are, the focus of considerable attention on the part of the authorities and the populace. However, the emphasis on improving competence in the use of English has had a rather ambivalent effect on the fortunes of literature in English as a school subject. Since 1969 when the common curriculum for Secondary 1 and 2 was issued to schools, first language and literature have appeared as a single subject in the curriculum. The question of weightage in schools varied for many years, some giving equal weightage to language and literature, some giving less to literature, while others not assessing their pupils in literature at all. Although it is true that the Ministry of Education has not indicated favouring a 70 per cent weightage for language and a 30 per cent weightage for literature, the decision on the exact quantum of weightage when left to the discretion of principals would surely imply a shrinkage in the weightage for literature. This is because principals would have "to take into account the fact that a pupil needs a pass (i.e. 50 per cent more) in his first language as a condition for promotion" (*Straits Times*, July 10, 1978). To some extent one can see a possible diminution in the significance of literature as a school subject in the lower secondary classes despite the increased significance of English language usage in recent years.

This suggests the need for re-thinking some of the basic premises regarding the role of literature in the education system and, indeed, in society itself – since we cannot justifiably divorce the education system from the social context. If English is regarded as only a tool for the transmission of scientific, technological and business contents, what exactly would be the relevance of literature in the education system? Would its place be that of a strictly delimited supplement to the language programme? Is it merely an embarrassing post-colonial affliction or past-time which

the education authorities have not had time to scrutinise closely? Has it a significant role to perform in school and society? Should we go on doing literature the way we have been doing it or should adjustments be made to the literature programme? These are some of the fundamental issues that will be considered in this paper.

Assumptions

Before proceeding further, it might be useful to make explicit the main assumptions upon which this paper is based.

Firstly, it is not often that we have an attempt at public discourse on issues which are generally debated on behind closed doors. What we are considering here would normally be the province of the relevant authorities in the Ministry of Education, but I hope this paper on what I think are key issues concerning the fate of literature as a secondary school subject would not be looked upon as a piece of impertinence. It is meant to help towards an understanding of a fairly complex area of the curriculum.

My second assumption is that we share the opinion – with varying shades of conviction, I suppose – that one of the fundamental aims of education is to arouse and nourish the spirit of inquiry. Put simply, education makes us ask "why"? It is in this spirit that I would like to examine the place of literature in our occupations and our lives.

My third assumption is that knowing why we are teaching a particular subject would help in teaching it better. This may not be as self-evident as it appears to be. I am sure that there are many

¹This article was adapted from a paper presented at a seminar on "The Teaching of Literature in Secondary Schools", organized by the English Studies Department, Institute of Education, on 21 – 22 March, 1980.

good teachers of literature who have never asked themselves why they teach the subject. It is sufficient that whatever they teach they teach well and if they are required to teach literature they do it to the best of their abilities. These are the saints who do not know they are saints. They belong, I think, to a time when literature was on such a firm footing that there was no questioning its existence – it was like the air we breathe, it came with education, it was taken for granted, although, in some instances, I suspect, it was taken with a grain of salt.

Clarification of aims is certainly a necessary activity in any area of the curriculum. But in some areas, the sciences, for instance, this kind of clarification seems to be more easily come by than in a subject like literature. Few would want to ask "What's the use of Physics or Chemistry?" The impact of the sciences on our environment in terms of tangible products and methods of enquiry pre-empt any apologising, but with a subject like literature we are dealing with intangibles to a large extent. We confront human relationships, feelings, aspirations, dilemmas, dignities and indignities, the sense of wonder, despair, joy, . . . the multifariousness of human existence. We are concerned with the human image or "the human form divine" to enlist the help of William Blake. If one were to ask "Is it any use knowing what it means to be a human being?" or "Does our society need this kind of understanding?" then we would urgently need to have an entirely different kind of seminar. We would need to include philosophers, religious thinkers and anthropologists. And even more fundamental questions need to be aired like "What is society for?", "What do we live by?", "What exactly do we mean by the good of the people?". Fortunately enough, these large questions would be outside the pale of our discussion. I say "fortunately enough" because these are questions which often remain unresolved within the course of a life-time while we measure out our lives with coffee spoons and cars.

Definitions

At this point, it might be necessary to establish some guide-rails for our discussion on the role of literature. I could have assumed, since all of us are connected with teaching literature, that you would know what I am talking about when I refer to "literature" (e.g. Dickens' *Hard Times*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, etc.); but

since the paper is also aimed at providing a defence against the uninitiated or the deliberately unsympathetic, it would be useful to start with an attempt at cleansing our instruments.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, when we speak of "literature" we mean:

Literary productions as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general; now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of form or emotional effect.

We shall be using the more specialised sense indicated in the second half of the definition. But this, definition – like many definitions in the humanities – is not wholly adequate. It does somehow seem more susceptible to a kind of effete and hedonistic view of literature than one would want to convey when considering literature in the context of the education system. To come to the point, it almost robs literature of moral significance. Nevertheless it is hard not to admit that it is in the artistic organization of language that literature lays the greatest claims to distinction.

If, however, we need a definition that does not lay explicit emphasis on aesthetics, we could point to George Steiner's view of literature as "language in a condition of special use" (1972, p. 126). This should not be confused with English for special purposes. Steiner's "condition of special use" is defined as

one of total significance, and of a significance which is – for every true poem or piece of literary prose – unique. No replacement of any semantic element, however small (consider the role of typography in Mallarmé, in e.e. cummings) will do (p. 129).

In common speech, it would be possible, without loss, to present a piece of information in a number of alternative ways. Much of the linguistic material would be merely conventional or even superfluous but, in the case of literature in its ideal condition, a single alteration could transform or even destroy the literary text.

What of the insights, perceptions, "truths" embodied in literary texts? Should a definition of literature not encompass this aspect as well? Steiner presents a view which, although cogent, one cannot quite see as fully compatible with an instrumental attitude towards the curriculum. In other words, if one is primarily looking for the uses of literature, one has to emphasise what Steiner de-emphasises in his view of literature:

The paramount responsibilities of literature, its ontology or *raison d'être*, lie outside immediate utility and/or verifiability. But

note how difficulties bristle: the immense moral, psychological 'utility', of literature is a common place — though one which I feel needs re-examining — the 'truths' discovered and communicated by great art are among the best we hold. I mean something more banal: the poem or the novel may prove of extraordinary use to the community; the propositions it puts forward about life may be authentic and of deepest validity. But these benefits will, as it were, be ancillary (p. 128).

Note that Steiner is not denying the "utility" of literature, he is only indicating that what distinguishes literature from other forms of communication is not so much the conveyance of "truths" but the condition of being of total significance — every sentence, every word, every punctuation mark would count towards the enactment of meaning — to the extent that we would not be able to tell "the dancer from the dance" to quote Yeats.

The Functions of Literature

Defining "literature" cannot be wholly divorced from an examination of its functions. But the controversy over the function of literature is an ancient one. There are two major camps as John M. Ellis indicates: "On one side are those who have wished literature to have an immediate and identifiable purpose, on the other those who have argued that it should be an end in itself, for aesthetic delight" (p. 233).

There is no reason why we should plug either one or the other position. Both positions have their validity and can co-exist quite comfortably. It would clearly be unrealistic — in the context of the local school system — to adopt an art for art's sake stance, although even aesthetic delight would have its social uses since it would be a way of occupying time in a socially acceptable manner at the very least and since it appears to be fulfilling some deep recurrent need in mankind as can be seen in the important place given to the fine arts in most societies.

Richard Hoggart, in an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Birmingham in 1963 on "Schools of English and Contemporary Society", sees literature as having a vital role to play in exploring, understanding and ordering human experience. Yet, with characteristic common sense, he indicates the need for caution against over-playing this aspect of literature:

I have admitted the danger of too contemporary a slant in English studies, of too social a slant and even of too moral a slant. If we forget the 'celebratory' or 'playful' element in literature we will sooner or later stop talking about literature at all and find ourselves talking instead about history or sociology or philosophy — and probably about bad history and bad sociology and bad philosophy (1963, p. 17).

It would be dangerous to talk glibly about the "truths" presented through literature because we would be faced with complex problems concerning the validity of the information presented. One could point to sociological information in the novels of Dickens, but obviously the kind of validity they have would not be quite the same as that obtained in sociology with its battery of survey data. But that literary works can have important implications for the social sciences is borne out by the fact that sociologists include literature as one of the modes of understanding society. It is heartening to note that in the Sociology Department of the University of California, Berkeley, Course 174 is called *Sociology of Literature: the relation of literature to social order and to systems of social control, analysis of the social role of the writer*. Another very heartening illustration of the relevance of literature to other disciplines comes from Singapore itself. In a paper on "*Novels and the Historian: A Case Study on the Indonesian Revolution*" (1979), Yong Mun Cheong of the History Department, University of Singapore, poses this question: What can the historian learn from the novelist? And answers it with remarkable candour,

A historian writes about man in society. So does a novelist. But because of the latter's greater sensitivity, he may be more aware of the shifts in meaning inherent in changing social situations. He may be aware of themes that escape the eye of a historian. On that ground alone, it would be worthwhile for the historian to consider seriously the contribution of the novelist to the former's craft (p. 31).

Literature teachers can hold their heads high when their discipline is proffered such dignity from someone in another branch of the humanities.

But what is even more gratifying is that a Professor of Mathematics at London University, Hyman Levy, has co-authored a book (with Helen Spalding) entitled *Literature for an Age of Science* in which the significance of literature as a means of extending human consciousness is given an important place vis a vis the sciences:

With scientific and rational thinking developed to its present high level, it might be supposed therefore that the methods of science could adequately cover those forms of human understanding which it has traditionally been the function of literature and the arts to heighten. But, as we seek to show in this book, both approaches are aspects of one venture; they are complementary, and mutually supporting. Both seek to widen the horizon of experience and understanding; both seek to enrich man's awareness of himself and his environment. Each in its own way is experimental. Both move forward under the pressure of social experience, and the need for finding new forms and techniques for dealing with this ever-growing content. But because their disciplines, their methods, and their means are so clearly different, it is too often readily assumed that their ends do not converge. In this book we try to show not only that this assumption is unfounded, but that an understanding of the one is essential if the outcome of the other is to be properly appraised (p. vi).

It is a bold enterprise that Levy embarks upon in this book, and although one cannot quite agree that it is wholly successful, there is room for admiration and there should be a strong measure of thanks from those whose lives revolve around literature and the teaching of literature.

There is actually little need for literature teachers to be on the defensive — although this seminar itself, you might well say, arises from a certain degree of insecurity. Yet the insecurity is really misplaced. It probably stems from a certain lack of awareness — not so much among literature teachers themselves as among those outside the discipline. In a book published for the National Council of Teachers of English in the United States these brave words occur:

Art, literature, anthropology and linguistics — to name but a few subjects — have their reasons for being. Literature, for example, enlarges experience vicariously and in a controlled manner that firsthand experience cannot match. Not only does it enlarge or widen experience (in time and place) but it is also an exploration of the mind and spirit of man and of his relationship to himself, to society, and to nature. Looked at in this way, literature is not impractical and need not be defended weakly as its own justification. It is ironic in these times to encounter statements by responsible people which assume the impracticality of subject which as much

as any obey the injunction that the proper study of mankind is man (Sherwin, 1969, pp. 139 – 140).

Kenneth Burke, a critical theorist, has a fascinating essay entitled "Literature as Equipment for Living" (1941) in which he looks at literature as a means of naming typical, recurrent situations. In this way literature achieves that quality of timelessness: "Art forms like 'tragedy' or 'comedy' or 'satire' would be treated as equipments for living, that size up situations in various ways in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (p. 304). In other words beneath the trappings of the age, behind the array of different characters and episodes, one might often be able to discern a typical, recurrent situation in the work — a situation which might be of relevance to one's own life or to one's society. In this way, according to Burke, great literature achieves its universality and despite the fact that literature is steeped in the texture of the particulars of life, it is ultimately concerned with the general behind the particulars.

Another literary theorist, John M. Ellis (1974), advances four outstanding functions of literature, two of which would seem to have immediate relevance to educators. Firstly, he states that literature offers us "dramatic and violent experiences without the actual drama and violence that would threaten the stability of our society" (p. 244). Since we have a surfeit of television programmes, like "Starsky and Hutch" or "Spiderman" in addition to Kung Fu movies, this function would seem to be superfluous in the local context. Secondly, literature can assist in

creating a sense of the cohesion of a social unit the extent of which is invisible to the individual. We commonly speak of national identity involving prominently the literature of a country. . . . Here, then, is a factor that tends to hold an unwieldy social unit together (p. 245).

This function is of great significance to us in Singapore. We have one link language binding all the ethnic groups in our country and it is through this language that more and more vicarious and ordered experiences are being shared as the language is further extended through the mass media as well as the education system. In a thesis on the *Singaporean National Identity*, for instance, Chiew Seen Kong states: "The relatively high scores on national identity by the English-educated, therefore, confirm the hypothesis that the English-educated in Singapore tend to be more highly identified with Singapore than

the vernacular-educated in parallel institutions” (pp. 128 – 129). And if local writers continue their contributions to writing in English, it would not seem too remote that a national literature with English as the base would, in due time, emerge.

It would, however, be dangerous to advocate premature attention to local writing in schools because one has to consider the maintenance of standards and the suitability of texts for specific age levels. But in this respect there would be little harm looking further afield and exploring Commonwealth literature with its increasingly fertile contributions to writing in English. R.K. Narayan, Randolph Stow, Dennis Brutus, and Mulk Raj Anand are a few of the writers that local secondary school teachers and students would find profitable if they were better acquainted with their contributions to the growing body of Commonwealth literature.

In this respect the question of the remoteness of a text from the socio-cultural context of the student might be useful to consider. In 1975 in a project entitled *An Approach to the Teaching of Literature in a Local Secondary School*, Lee Sin Kee found that it was much easier teaching Tan Kok Seng's *Son of Singapore* than Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The students were more interested in the former largely because of the ease with which they could relate to the characters and the environment presented in the text. In addition, the language proved to be no obstacle to an understanding of the text and, with a bit of imagination, there were many possibilities for involving the students in the lives of the characters via visits to the actual locations referred to or described in the book.

This, of course, does not imply that the book was in any literary way superior to *Jane Eyre*; it was merely easier to teach in a local school. Now if we could select texts which are both easy to teach and of a fairly high literary quality we would not be far away from the ideal syllabus. Sacrifices in quality, it should be noted, would invariably imply sacrifices in standards.

However, this is a digression. Let us return to the third outstanding function mentioned by Ellis, i.e. the educative function. He sees two aspects of this educative function: the transmission of values and the development of the imagination. For him transmission of values is more explicitly carried out by literature in more primitive societies. Stories handed down by the tribe “impress on children in a forceful yet palatable way, the values of the tribe, its social system, the chief dangers of its environment” (p. 245). Not far different from

what our moral education programme here in Singapore is aimed at. However, a distinction needs to be drawn between the overtly moralistic in literature and the obliquely moral. The morality of literature is not exactly that of the parable although there are examples of fine literature which are at the same time consciously moral (e.g. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). Richard Hoggart (1963) has this rather illuminating observation on the relationship between literature and morality:

Literature, then, has to do with ‘knowledge’, with meanings. It is not primarily analytic or discursive, or it would be something else, something valuable perhaps (say, philosophy), but not art. *Only here in art is life embodied, recreated, in all its dimensions – so that a particular moral choice is bound up with this time and that place, with that other person and those habits. Only here do we, at one and the same time see ourselves densely and vulnerably* (p. 5).

Literature does not prescribe morality but it often presents moral dilemmas with all the attendant circumstances that are to be found in the actual context of living. In other words, in literature moral issues are seen in the flesh. We see the conflicting pulls of wife, kinship, ambition, loyalty to king, honour and other attendant circumstances in Macbeth's decision to kill Duncan. In other words, it is through the particularities of experience that we perceive moral abstractions.

The fourth function that Ellis mentions is the use of literature for ideological purposes: “If one is convinced that society needs rapid and fundamental reshaping (as, say, Marxists do) there is nothing inconsistent in demanding that literature help to promote this” (p. 246). In much of Lu Hsun, for instance, one could say that art serves a suasive function. This, however, does not mean that his stories do not often rise above their suasive role. It must be remembered that it is precisely when literature is no longer propaganda that it impresses us with its authenticity.

However, of more immediate relevance to the local context is a function which Ellis does not include as one of the outstanding functions of literature. In the education system it would be impossible to bypass this function. Literature is also a means of increasing one's competence in the use of the English language. Through reading, students are presented with a variety of structures and lexical items which they would find useful when they speak and write. Of course, it is not only literary texts that would be giving them this kind of enrichment. But if proper attention is

paid to the choice of texts, the literature programme could support and enrich the language programme and vice versa.

Why Teachers Teach Literature

So far, we have been dealing with why literature should be taught. A complementary question that invariably arises is why teachers in local schools are teaching literature. Do their motives tally with the functions that literature is said to subserve? Largely because of considerations of time and manpower, sampling is limited to 45 teachers of literature in Mission and Government Secondary Schools and a Junior College. The teachers included in the sampling were taking classes ranging from Secondary 1 to Pre-University 1. Because of limitations in terms of the size of the sampling and questionnaire design, the findings, at most, should be regarded as highly tentative.

The four most significant questions in the questionnaire were:

- Q 3 Why do you teach literature?
- Q 4 If you had a choice, would you teach another school subject rather than literature?
- Q 5 The biggest obstacles to teaching literature satisfactorily in local secondary schools are:
- Q 6 What do you think should be the role of literature teaching in local secondary schools?

Since the sampling was fairly small, there was no attempt at dividing the respondents in terms of different categories. The respondents came from all categories although the non-graduate teachers tended to predominate.

The responses to Question 3: "Why do you teach literature?" are first discussed here. The alternatives were as follows:

- (a) It is a subject I studied for the highest academic qualification I possess.
- (b) I enjoy teaching it.
- (c) The principal/vice-principal/senior assistant instructed me to teach it.
- (d) It helps transmit values that are relevant to my students.
- (e) It helps improve the student's ability to use English.
- (f) The students would understand Western culture better.
- (g) The students learn more about living in a contemporary industrial society.

- (h) Students find it an interesting subject.
- (i) Students learn more about life.
- (j) It is a relatively easy exam subject.
- (k) There's nothing else I can teach.
- (l) It helps stimulate critical thinking.
- (m) It is important for students to know the classics.
- (n) It promotes creative writing on the part of the students themselves.
- (o) Any other reason (please specify).

By far the largest number of votes went to alternative (b) "I enjoy teaching it." 26 respondents picked this as the number one reason while a total of 39 picked this as among the top three reasons for teaching literature. A healthy enough reason one might say, if enthusiasm for a subject makes it easier to be a good teacher.

As first choices, alternative (a) "It is a subject I studied for the highest academic qualification I possess" and (c) "The principal/vice-principal/senior assistant instructed me to teach it" tied for a far second place. Both scored 6. However, if we extend the choice to the first three places, alternative (a) had 13 votes altogether, which might delight the hearts of administrators since this would be one of the foremost considerations if one is interested in maximising manpower.

Alternative (c) drew a total of 10 votes for the first three choices. It was notable that among the 10 were two who did not want to teach literature. There was, in other words, some measure of frustration. They were just obeying orders, so to speak. But these formed a very small minority.

Although only 2 picked alternative (d), "It helps transmit values that are relevant to my students" as first choice, 15 selected this as one of the three main reasons for teaching literature. This ties in with the responses to the last question:

- Q 6 What do you think should be the role of literature teaching in local secondary schools?

The alternatives in the questionnaire for Question 6 were as follows:

- (a) To help develop the student's ability to use the English language.
- (b) To transmit moral values relevant to our society.
- (c) To develop a sense of humanity transcending geographical boundaries.
- (d) To stimulate critical thinking.
- (e) To promote creative writing among the students.
- (f) Any other item (please specify).

14 indicated (b) "to transmit moral values relevant to our society" as first on their list of priorities. And if we include the first three places, then the number would swell to 25. This was the second highest score for any of the alternatives for Question 6. One could, therefore, conclude that many perceive that literature has a strongly educative function and this is connected with a sense of moral values.

This perception of the role of literature as transmitter of values is connected with the development of a sense of humanity extending beyond one's own country. Thus, high scores were recorded for alternative (c) "to develop a sense of humanity transcending geographical boundaries" for Question 6. The second largest number, 11 respondents, picked this item as first choice. Altogether 18 nominated it to be among the top three priorities.

For Question 6, although only 9 respondents picked alternative (d) "to stimulate critical thinking" as top priority, altogether 29 saw it as one of the top three priorities. Perhaps the writing of responses to the literary text is perceived by a large number of teachers to be part of critical thinking. Also, the word "criticism" is central to the study of literature and so the connection between "critical thinking" and the teaching of literature is established.

One interesting alternative provided by a respondent for Question 3 under "any other reason" is connected with this particular function of literature. The alternative reads thus,

Because I believe that literature offers an awareness of different sensibilities as well as insights into the human-ness of man. This I feel is important to balance the emphasis on economic, technological and scientific progress.

Here we have, briefly summarised, the moral value of literature. A value that need not be circumscribed by culture, ethnic group, religion or geography.

Unexpectedly, for Question 3, alternative (e) "It helps improve the student's ability to use English" did not score votes for the top spot. However, 12 respondents picked this alternative as among the top three choices. When we compare the scores for Question 6: "What do you think should be the role of literature teaching in local secondary schools?", we find that the position of this same alternative has strengthened to 6 for top priority and 22 for the top three priorities. There could be various reasons for the ideal not being realised in the school situation. Factors like the

syllabus, the relationship between language and literature periods, time-tabling, type of examination, etc. could well have an immediate bearing on the issue. However, the data, in its present state, cannot really yield anything but tentative conclusions.

One rather notable fact about Question 3 is that none picked alternative (f) "The students would understand Western culture better" for any of the first three places. One wonders whether Western culture itself had pejorative connotations for the respondents. Nevertheless, judging by the texts taught in schools, Western culture was what was being transmitted. In fact, in other countries, literature as a means of acculturation is one of the major reasons for its place in the curriculum. In a study (Purves, 1973) based on literature education in ten countries, reports submitted by the National Centre for each country stressed "the necessity for literature education to perform the role of acculturation, although the degree of that stress varies" (p. 37).

It would also seem as though the fairly high scores for literature as a means of transmitting values referred to values which are perceived as universal values — not values that are culture-bound. In this way, a text may be written in England by an Englishman but might not be perceived as transmitting peculiarly Western values. On the other hand it might have been a simple failure in perception on the part of the respondent.

Alternative (1) "It helps stimulate critical thinking" seems to play some part in literature teaching motivation. However, only 2 respondents listed it as a top priority while 9 saw it as among the top three priorities. If we compare this with the scores for Question 6, the same reason appears to be given added weightage. 9 respondents listed it as the most important role that literature should be performing in local secondary schools while 29 placed it somewhere among the top three priorities.

Since knowledge and understanding of the text would be what tests and the GCE O and A level examinations for literature assess, it is not surprising that none of the respondents selected (n) "It promotes creative writing on the part of the students themselves" as one of the top three priorities. However, when asked to define the role literature should be performing, 1 respondent listed "to promote creative writing among the students" as a top priority and 13 listed it as among the top three priorities. Despite this, however, this aim appeared to have the lowest priority — judging from the scores for Question 6.

Question 5 required respondents to rank the biggest obstacles to teaching literature satisfactorily in local secondary schools. The alternatives given in the questionnaire were as follows:

- (a) the insufficient number of hours allotted to the subject
- (b) the cultural remoteness of the texts
- (c) the lack of English competence on the part of the students
- (d) the inadequate preparation given to the teaching of literature during teacher training
- (e) the influence of popular culture through the mass media.
- (f) the lack of background or critical material for the selected texts
- (g) the lack of audio-visual materials
- (h) an insufficient number of teachers who are academically qualified to teach the subject
- (i) any other item (please specify)

Not unexpectedly, the overwhelming vote went to (c) "the lack of English competence on the part of the students". 22 respondents put it in top spot while altogether 30 saw this as one of the top three obstacles to teaching literature satisfactorily at secondary school level.

It would be hard to refrain from pointing the finger at the kind of texts recommended for study in the secondary school. At Secondary 4 and in the Pre-University classes, students are faced with a syllabus that would be, to some degree, outside the purview of major modifications via the local Ministry of Education. However, it would seem that the students are not quite prepared to meet the texts on the basis of their command of the language. This could lead to a lot of drudgery on the part of the teacher. Much attention should be paid to the question of selecting texts for the lower secondaries and the list of approved books would have to be drawn up with a clear idea of selection criteria and the language competence of the students.

Remarkably enough, it was not the cultural remoteness of the texts that the respondents saw as a big obstacle. Only 1 noted alternative (b) "the cultural remoteness of the texts" to be the biggest obstacle while 6 respondents saw it as among the three biggest obstacles. On the whole, these scores were low if we compare them with the scores for the other alternatives.

The second biggest obstacle to teaching literature appears to be (a) "the insufficient number of hours allotted to the subject". 9 respondents listed this as the biggest obstacle while 16 noted

this down as one of the three biggest obstacles.

Almost tying for second place, (d) "the inadequate preparation given to the teaching of literature during teacher training" is a factor that strikes close to home. 7 respondents listed it as the number one obstacle while altogether 17 looked upon it as one of the three biggest obstacles. If the results of the survey have any validity, then a close scrutiny of the courses connected with the teaching of literature might be needed.

Two other fairly important factors were (f) "the lack of background or critical material for the selected texts" and (g) "the lack of audio-visual materials". Although both had negligible scores for first place, yet the scores for one of the top three factors were fairly high. They were 16 for (f) and 14 for (g). The respondents did appear to feel a sense of deprivation when it came to background and audio-visual materials.

In this paper, I have attempted to underline the rationale for the teaching of literature in local secondary schools and its important links with society. Literature has been seen as being of significant utility to society as well as an end in itself. In addition, I have attempted to present a brief outline of how a small cross-section of the teaching population sees the role of literature in secondary schools in Singapore and some of the obstacles to success in teaching literature. ☺

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