

**Singapore Writers Festival – What is the point of reading literature?
4 Nov, Wed 7:00 PM - 8:00 PM, Arts House, Kumon Blue Room**

Some thoughts by Suzanne Choo

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The Context

Literature education has reached what I would now term, a crisis point. Enrolment in the subject in mainstream schools at the upper secondary level has fallen sharply over the last two decades.

While 48% of the secondary school graduating cohort enrolled in GCE O level examination in 1992, the number declined to 22% in 2001, and subsequently to 9% or just 3,000 students (for the full literature) in 2012. There was another 9% or 3000 students who enrolled in elective literature but here, the content studied in almost reduced by half.

Why should this concern us?

Some people have argued that we should not be too concerned about this. After all, we have a thriving literary scene. Just look at the number of Singapore literature published each year as well as audience attendance at events like the Singapore Writers Festival. Furthermore, some would argue, we have quite a number of students opting to do literature at the JC. It is one of the more popular humanities subjects.

This line of thinking is dangerous for a few reasons.

First, to borrow what my colleague Angelia Poon said about a literary ecosystem, we need to consider that a thriving literary/arts scene should not be divorced from literature education occurring in schools. If we do not invest in literature education, we will eventually create a society lacking in critical readers.

We need to understand that literature education is not simply about reading literature. Literature education is fundamentally about criticism – it trains students to read closely, to read deeply and to read critically. These are vital skills. Even if you have a flourishing literary culture and there's growth in the production of Singapore literature, there'll be a lack of deep appreciation for such works if you don't have a critical reading public. It is therefore the task of literature education to develop and train this critical reading public.

Second, if we say that there are enough students studying literature at JC, then we forget something crucial – only about 30% of the secondary school cohort go on to JC. What this means is that in a given year, 70% of the graduating cohort may not study literature at upper secondary. Among this group, more than three quarters would probably only have studied literature up to sec 2 and will never be exposed to training in critical reading that literature education provides. We also need to remember that lower secondary texts tend to be simpler in terms of language, style, characterization – so about three quarters of our students may not have exposure to more complex literary texts.

This is why I say that this is a crisis point. Already generations of students no longer have sufficient exposure to critical reading and I would add, ethical thinking, that is also fundamental to literature education. What will happen in the future? Perhaps this may result in a vicious cycle – people who have had sufficient exposure to literature may no longer see the value in the subject.

What we can do about it

I would like to suggest that English Literature must be part of English education which is compulsory for all students.

Currently, English Literature is separate from English Language and the roots of this is tied to the Bilingual policy.

If you examine the colonial curriculum, you will find that prior to Singapore's independence, English literature was part of English language. At the time English education comprised reading, writing, listening and in the component of reading, students were required to study literary texts.

Now of course the problem was that literature played an ideological role in the colonial education system. It was meant to fashion locals who would have an admiration for English culture and cultural texts. Not surprisingly then, when Singapore became independent, the newly formed government commenced its nation building project which meant a need to distance the country from its colonial roots. Because English literature was so closely tied to British culture, the subject was marginalized. It was distinguished from English language which became prioritized as a first language.

This split between English language and Literature coupled with the prioritization of English language has led to a functional approach to English education. Indeed, a key aim in the English Language syllabus is developing effective communication.

However, perhaps we can adopt another perspective to language. According to Habermas, language is not merely a means for effective communication; rather, it is a means for reaching understanding of others. Inherent in language, is the need to relate to others. Habermas also talks about the cognitive, aesthetic and ethical dimensions to language.

In this sense, we can say that English education has over-emphasized the cognitive aspect of language by insisting that teachers teach instrumental skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. On the other hand, it has neglected the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of language. This is precisely why an English education without literature is incomplete.

What Literature brings to English education is this – it facilitates aesthetic rather than instrumental reading of texts by allowing readers to experience and engage actively and imaginatively with other realities. More importantly, it taps on the ethical dimension of language by expanding students' capacity to negotiate the multiplicity of conflicting values in our world.

Only by marrying English Literature with English Language will we resolve literature's declining enrollment because all students will be taught to critically read literature. More

importantly, we will be endorsing a holistic English education that equips students with cognitive reading and writing skills as well as aesthetic and ethical engagements with texts.