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Original Research Article

Aligning the Teaching of English Literature: A Conceptual Paper

ABSTRACT

Culture is deemed as one of the indispensable constituent of language teaching and learning. While its significance has been collectively established, there is no accord on how culture should be incorporated into language teaching and learning yet studies have verified that learning literature is beneficial to students' critical thinking and analytic skills. Findings of many studies have demonstrated that learning literature could aid in the understanding of other societies, cultures, values and traditions that will contribute to their growth.

Undoubtedly, there has been a budding interest in the shifting of paradigm where it goes beyond the conventional representations of culture in the classroom; however, the methods used to teach literature do not seem to be relevant to the younger generations. Indeed,

language instruction with the incorporation of culture-specific learning has been acknowledged yet what is demarcated as intercultural communication competence defined by Byram as a series of five *savoirs* (knowledge-abilities) [1], subsequently summarized by Schenker: "knowledge of self and other, attitudes of openness and curiosity, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness" is still absent [2, p.450]. In spite of its recognition, intercultural competence is yet indeed to be mastered by the language teachers/lecturers. Hence, this paper proposes to review on the existing literature in order to synthesize the gaps in the teaching of literature with the identified variables; culture, range of text and antiquated language.

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Keywords: Culture, language teaching and learning, literature, intercultural competence

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature, as imaginative writing, and comprising fiction and non-literal texts, employs a unique set of discourses [3]. At the onset, avid art and language devotees read and appreciated literature; however, literature has surfaced as an increased vigorous and dynamic resource, especially in language education. Initially, the teaching of literature constituted English education, prior to the WW2, at which time it was perceived as an outstanding model of language use and as a source of high ethical values, consequent to the study of the literary canon of the target language [4]. To reiterate this, according to Carroli, study of literature emerged as the main component of the learning, and not as an ingrained facet of language development [5]. Conversely, leaning changed when the espousers of the Functional Approach debated to abolish literature from language education, influenced by the dispute that the study of literature did not match the essentials language skills of the students [6]. To exemplify the circumstance, student conceptions indicate that they have limited opportunities to employ developed language competence, as lexicon employed was not able to be contextualized to social practice. Literature education in Malaysia aims to augment student comprehension of the English language, as it does offer enjoyment. Hence, literature can offer both a tool to enhance literacy and accuracy in the language as well as a means of pleasure. Finding a balance of the two becomes possible, despite the inhibitions [7].

In the year 2000, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia opted to integrate literature as a tested component in the secondary school English language education syllabus [8]. In the year 2005, the ministry included literature into the English language extended reading program for Primary 4 to 6. The change towards the incorporation of literature as a tested component in English education for the local context indicates that Malaysia not only intently adheres to current global trends in language education, but has also revealed the value of literature for English language education for Malaysian students. Influenced by the fact that literature in English language education comprises part of the traditional language teaching approaches, literature decreased in popularity when language education embarked on a focus on the functional uses of language. However, the role of literature in the English language classroom has received renewed attention, and many now view literary texts as providing rich linguistic input, effective stimuli for students to express themselves in multiple non-primary discourses, and a potential source of student motivation. Formal English language education has existed globally due to the global application of English in media and popular textual modes, commerce, and the transactions of cultural commodities. It follows that developing competence in the English language presents increased opportunities for employment. However, to compete globally, persons must be equipped with intercultural communication competence in particular. The inevitability of cultural diversity in the market place demands it, thus making intercultural communication competence an extremely important skill to develop and to cultivate. As a measure, literature in English language education can narrow the cultural gap.

Institutions have employed differing approaches in language and literature-based education to thus constitute one of the teaching approaches used in language education [9]. By increased familiarity with literature, students can extrapolate their conceptions, a sense of what becomes possible, and their ability to empathize with others. In addition, literature education can also improve an ability to read critically and interpret texts, while gaining appreciation for literary genres and theories of interpretation (Writing Commons). Consequently, we can argue for greater appreciation of the role of literature as a basic component and a source of authentic text of the language curriculum, rather than as an inserted component, an ideology which has recently emerged [10]. In the Malaysian English syllabus, exposure and familiarity to literature contributes to developing conceptions of other

69 cultures, societies, values and traditions, and ones that can contribute to emotional and
70 spiritual growth [11]. Therefore, the objectives of the literature component taught in schools
71 include to boost student proficiency in the English language by exposing the students to
72 prescribed literary texts, to assist in development and character building, and to appreciate
73 cultures portrayed in the texts. Unfortunately, these aims materialize with difficulty if students
74 do not have reading skills and the strategies with which to comprehend texts [12]. Such
75 ramification may emerge from selected texts, which contain words and images unversed by
76 students; hence, students have an impeded competence associating with existing
77 knowledge, or engaging in active learning processes. The situation suggests that reduced
78 affordances among students in Malaysia have warranted concerns within the Ministry of
79 Education even prior to the introduction of the literature component. Henceforth, various
80 issues related to literature education should take account of the stakeholders, so as to effect
81 improvement in and to confute student's negative perceptions of literature.

82 83 **1.1 The Array of Prescribed Literary Work**

84
85 The Ministry of Education boarded on a policy change in the year 2000, at which time policy
86 acted so to integrate a greater exposure to literature into English education, whereby one of
87 the five English periods required a greater component of literature. Subsequently, literary
88 texts of a plethora of genres emerged in schools, where designated texts have English and
89 Asian writers. Through exposure to these literary texts, student proficiency increases,
90 contributes to student growth of character, as it does widen student viewpoints through
91 exposure to an increased number of cultural varieties [8]. These selections of texts emerge
92 from numerous genres. These Malaysian, British, European, Australian, American and
93 African texts, consisting of short stories, novels, drama and poems, have become secondary
94 school curriculum as school systems anticipate that students develop competences to
95 effectively conceptualize and mentally delineate plots, to comprehend the poems, and to
96 provide personal retort to texts. Exposure and increased familiarity with these texts intends
97 to instil values and widen student perception and attitudes towards the world.

98
99 Differing to the beliefs and expectations, students often experience fear when considering
100 the exposure to and acquaintance with these texts added with influence and perceptions that
101 literature encompasses challenging and perplexing lexicons [13]. This becomes influenced
102 by that literature is equated as similar to Shakespeare and his deemed archaic and
103 antiquated language as well as works of poets which employ that language of poetry still
104 unfamiliar to students. According to Deblase, students often encounter difficulties with
105 Shakespearean language [14]. This context applies to Malaysian students, who experience
106 difficulty with comprehension of the selected texts for the literature component, and with
107 experiencing enjoyment with these texts, largely influenced by a not yet developed
108 competence in identifying with the cultural and social contexts of these texts. Ganakumaran
109 discusses a study aimed at incorporating literature into a classroom context and the study
110 revealed challenges and repercussions on the selection of texts, where the texts selected
111 must have both manageable and readable qualities for students [8]. Moreover, maintenance
112 of the uniformity of themes of development of language affordances, as well as themes in
113 the literature constituent, becomes crucial [15]. According to Ganakumaran, the readability
114 trait should also appear from the perspective of culture [8]. For example, some of the
115 materials employed in lower secondary syllabi have somewhat little relevance to Malaysian
116 students. To echo this statement, a study by Ganakumaran, Ismail and Koo exposes that
117 cultural information in texts has indicated a reduced chronological relevance, despite its
118 proximity to countries from which authorship emerges [15]. In addition,
119 the literature component implemented in schools indicates an inclination and bias for texts
120 from the western countries, and predominantly from the British and American literary
121 traditions [16]. These two countries have produced a canon of literary works; however, there

122 should be an immediate attention given to the evolving trend of local literary work where they
123 should be considered for the materials used in schools. Integrating Malaysian literature in
124 English may well increase familiarity with context and cultural facets for students, thus
125 increasing satisfaction, as students may better identify with the characters and themes more
126 implicit in the texts [16]. Consequently, students will develop competences to identify not
127 only with the cultural contexts, but also the vocabulary employed, greatly influenced by their
128 already established accustomed strengths.
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130 According to Brown, to many English students, the term English Literature would connote
131 difficult books predominant in libraries but which have scarce readership [17]. In Malaysia,
132 students at secondary and tertiary levels developing knowledge of English literature
133 employing traditional method, require sequential methods when reading texts, a process
134 which can increase the monotonous nature of learning. In addition to having to develop
135 conceptions of literary texts, students must search for definitions of lexical items, at which
136 point the students frequently experience difficulties in comprehending the archaic literary
137 texts [18]. Such complications could ultimately incur an absence of interest among the
138 students, and may unground pedagogies that include exposure to literature. Relationships
139 between students and their readings of texts contribute to determining suitable texts,
140 including in contexts where English language education occurs in the primary discourse [19],
141 as interaction in the primary discourse can contribute to reducing anxiety in the classroom
142 [20]. Blocksidge exposes the impediments in selecting text that correlate with student
143 mental, cultural, and affective affordances texts [21]. In addition, texts should contain public
144 themes and must sit within the grasp of students who can extend their moral, social, and
145 affective competences [22]. Moreover, literary appreciation can result greatly from reading
146 texts that have a candid and significant impact on the individual [23, 24]. Consequently,
147 students and teachers must deliberate on the choice of texts in the literature classroom,
148 which would reflexively motivate student learning.
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150 Work by Mahmud on rural secondary school students indicates that to attain objectives of
151 literature components of courses, texts require due consideration, and in the context of
152 Malaysian rural classrooms, for the reader-text interactive process to emerge between
153 students and teachers, thus prompting student schemata [25]. Consequently, respective
154 courses should favour localized literature, though syllabi should prioritize specific
155 significantly related and connected themes. Results of the research also reveal that texts
156 should relate to student life worlds, should activate prior knowledge, and should convey a
157 message. Themes should trigger and maintain students' interest, and should effectively
158 provide avenues for spontaneous responses and involvement. Cole reiterates the cruciality
159 of offering students a classroom environment rich in literature [26]. An array of books that
160 represent a variety of topics, levels, and genres of literature becomes necessary to capture
161 student interest. Ballentine and Hill, in a study with elementary school students, found that
162 authentic literature which addresses real-life issues enhance student engagement with
163 texts [24]. Students deeply interacted and indicated a strong competence to respond to
164 themes highlighted in the texts. Another study conducted by Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and
165 Jusoff revealed that text selection correlates with student motivation to engage in literature
166 reading [27]. Text selection appears to offer the most important construct for meaningful
167 engagement with literary texts as interest factors amongst students must precede the text
168 selection.
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170 **1.2 Impediments to Cultural and Language Teaching**

171
172 With the inception of language teaching, the concept of culture should be embedded as
173 being a set of learned behaviours shared among the society. At its core, the unique
174 relationship and inhibition between learning and culture is ubiquitous, and undoubtedly,

175 culture exists in all learned behaviour. An indispensable facet of culture is that language
176 perpetuates to shape and express cultures from one society to another, and from one cohort
177 to another. Literary style and structure can pose difficulties and challenges for students,
178 particularly when writers comprise various ethnic enculturation. In this case, students must
179 make sense of the writers' background. Therefore, to increase knowledge of the text,
180 students must identify the language deviances and their significance.

181
182 According to Wan Kamariah, students commonly develop a negative conception of poems,
183 influenced by the abundance of figurative language and images employed, which students
184 fail to comprehend [28]. In addition, linguistic structure in poetry can increase confusion,
185 influenced by irregular punctuation, as well as organization. Despite that literary texts can
186 assist students to develop competence in a secondary discourse, and respective set of
187 cultures [29], inappropriate texts may engender gaps between the texts and the reader's
188 perception, particularly in the cultural context [30]. For example, the words or notion of
189 autumn in Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, can present itself as alien to students
190 who lack knowledge to equate words employed in the aspect of cultural reference. As
191 another example, students experience a familiar concept which can have representation as
192 something else in a different cultural context, such as death, which receives representations
193 in the colour black in western societies yet in Malaysia, death is associated and symbolized
194 with the colour white in the Muslim society. In this context, a student's reduced competence
195 to conceptualize could result from not only the teacher's lack of cultural awareness and lack
196 of support material, which could otherwise address the cultural issues but more significantly,
197 the teacher's lack of intercultural competence [15, 31].

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199 However, to be able to think interculturally, to know the products of a culture such as music,
200 history and language, or having an intercultural experience is not enough for a person to
201 develop intercultural competence [32]. Since it does not occur naturally, it can be argued that
202 it is crucial to intentionally develop and cultivate intercultural competence. Research has
203 shown that teachers intend to include a cultural dimension, but do so only intermittently and
204 in unplanned ways due to lack of attention to the cultural dimension in teacher training [33].

205 "The expectations in the intercultural domain currently voiced towards foreign language
206 teachers require them to acquire a different and more substantial body of cultural knowledge
207 and develop a range of new skills that will allow them to promote their learners' acquisition of
208 intercultural competence" [34, p. 6]. Further, she presumes that foreign language teachers
209 are already moving in the direction of multicultural and intercultural teaching. Intercultural
210 competences need to be taught and works by Byram and Sercu et al. attest to this approach
211 [35, 36]. To this end, Byram's landmark five *savoirs* was created to help foreign language
212 teachers to plan more deliberately to include intercultural competence in their pedagogical
213 aims. The *savoirs* are *savoir être* (attitudes), *savoir faire* (knowledge), *savoir comprendre*
214 (skills of interpreting, relating), *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery, attitudes), and
215 *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness).

216
217 Commonly, literature classes require students to read and comprehend pre-scribed texts,
218 thus antagonizing students as they encounter unfamiliar yet intimidating words. However,
219 the fascinating cultural variation in the texts which consist of various characters, themes, and
220 styles, may interest students to explore literature [37]. According to Hinton-Johnson,
221 multicultural literature texts can integrate into classroom practices from kindergarten through
222 to college [38]. This extended practice can assist students to explore, understand, and
223 appreciate literature, as they cannot adequately read literature without developing
224 knowledge of cultural and historical circumstances. In addition to effectiveness in the
225 development of language affordances, literature can motivate, and can assist students to
226 build emotional affordances, and literature can foster positive interpersonal and intercultural
227 attitudes among children [39]. Therefore, if students have reduced awareness of culture,

228 history, values, modes of thinking, customs, religious rituals, and lifestyles, they may fail to
229 effectively conceptualize the texts, and to exemplify such circumstances.

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231 Students in rural areas experience difficulties in literature education, due to language and
232 cultural barriers. Littlewood asserts the exposure to such texts becomes crucial for
233 development of reading skills and evidently, literature learning presents the “key source” if
234 cultural constraints do not impeded learning [40]. Awang, Kasuma and Akma studied student
235 motivation towards English literature components in a primary school in Malaysia, designing
236 the investigation by creating and distributing a questionnaire instrument to sixty female form-
237 four students [41]. The result indicates student positive attitudes towards the literature
238 component, however most students aspire more than simple exposure to literature texts
239 through reading. The linguistic and cultural barriers separating knowledge and literature
240 components contribute to such perceptions. However, the suitability of the component for
241 Malaysian students also contributes to educational effectiveness. Various groups of students
242 in Malaysia have displayed a diverse knowledge of literary work, whereas some students
243 have never had exposure to foreign literary works, while others have developed familiarity
244 with foreign literary pieces [42]. To echo the statement, a study to place literature as a
245 subject in Singaporean secondary schools considered the role of literature in the current
246 political, economic, social, and educational factors [43]. Increasing familiarity with these
247 factors emerges as important as it influences the teaching and learning of literature in
248 secondary schools. In addition, as a multi-racial country, the cultivation of shared cultural
249 identity presents a formidable challenge. Consequently, the teaching of literature in schools
250 should see revision, so to encourage younger generations to enrich their creativity as well as
251 endorse vigorous thinking amongst the society [44].

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253 It becomes crucial to view literature as a form or means by which to reserve cultural facets,
254 where consequently universities and art faculties frequently prioritize. Furthermore, at the
255 tertiary level, literature becomes embedded in English courses [45, 46]. According to
256 Sivapalan, it is important to integrate multicultural literature to young adult education, in
257 order to instil increased understandings of different cultures [47]. However, the debate on the
258 role of literature in English language education contexts has presented an issue of
259 continuous debate and recently, it has regained importance as researchers have exposed
260 the plausibility of integrating literary works into current communicative frameworks of
261 language education [46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52]. The notion of incorporating literature into the
262 English language educative contexts would enlighten perceived issues, which can be
263 categorized into two main aspects; was in which literature becomes perceived as a subject
264 matter and the conventional teaching approach employed. As a subject matter, literature can
265 point to linguistic complexity, historical, geographical and social remoteness from students,
266 text length, and the lack of functional authenticity [50, 52]. Regarding teaching approaches,
267 conventional means employed focuses on the interpretation of meaning, assigning credit to
268 neither student nor teacher opinion [46, 48, 49]. With the recent communicative approaches
269 employed to teach, the techniques employed do not cohere with common approaches in the
270 teaching and learning of literature, and which include inculcated memorization, verbalization,
271 and translation [50]. On the contrary, in the context of English language education,
272 employing literary texts as materials has become common and popular practice as well as
273 tolerance among students when developing familiarity with new cultures [52].

274

275 Some Saudi Arabian universities teach English language literature meagrely, due to the
276 doctrinaire religious considerations. Research on culture and literature teaching in English
277 language courses has explored perceptions and attitudes of faculty and students, as well as
278 motives for facilitating and inhibiting literature teaching in Saudi Arabian English language
279 educative contexts, and more so as this education includes implications for pedagogy and
280 curriculum development [53]. Teaching English literature does not necessarily adhere to a

281 specific nation, but reflects multicultural educational messages that can provide multicultural
 282 representations of the English language. In this case, the exposure of multicultural literary
 283 texts can encourage students to develop competence in literacy, so to compare and analyse
 284 the cultural viewpoints and values of the East and West. Furthermore, a significant link
 285 between language and culture exists as a key role in communication and learning [54]. This
 286 emerges from that language reflects the culture of a society as well as the social interaction.

287 Thus, reduced understanding of various respective cultural contexts can motivate
 288 miscommunication and confusion of these cultural differences, where cultural values
 289 influence teaching and learning through many communicative activities in classroom, which
 290 becomes an imperative relationship between culture and communication.

291
 292 Brumfit and Carter, Littlewood, as well as Chambers and Gregory have explicated the
 293 benefits of literature in language development and have developed a model with means to
 294 employ literature in language development [40, 49, 55]. Furthermore, developed countries
 295 such as the U.K, the U.S.A, and Singapore, have increasingly realized the importance of
 296 teaching literature in the school curriculum, and hence, when the Ministry of Education in

297 Malaysia announced the incorporation of literature into the national English language
 298 curriculum, advocates of literature in English language teaching have viewed and welcomed
 299 its introduction in the Malaysian context as timely, and the most prevailing advancement
 300 following the adoption of the communicative approach [56]. However, the newly introduced
 301 literature component has raised some issues, and has invoked a variety of views and
 302 feedback from stakeholders. Consequently, numerous studies have risen to observe and
 303 describe the efficacy of this implementation. The results of a study conducted by
 304 Ganakumaran, Ismail and Koo pointed to the still lingering large number of school teachers
 305 not prepared to teach, as many have inadequate preparation [57]. Sidhu found that teachers
 306 do not know how to incorporate literature into English language education; some teachers
 307 depend solely on supplementary materials [58].
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310 **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

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 312 For this study, a review on existing literature to probe further on the gaps was done by
 313 employing the systematic review method. The review was commenced based on a
 314 formulated question in order to identify relevant studies, evaluates the quality of the studies,
 315 consequently the findings are summarised. The identified and relevant articles were
 316 analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used for 'identifying, analysing, and
 317 reporting patterns (themes) within data' [59]. By employing the thematic analysis, the
 318 methodologies, research questions, and theoretical frameworks were unearthed, and
 319 subsequently recurring patterns were categorized. Table 1 was developed to synthesise and
 320 integrate the studies.

321 **Table 1. Table to synthesise and integrate studies**

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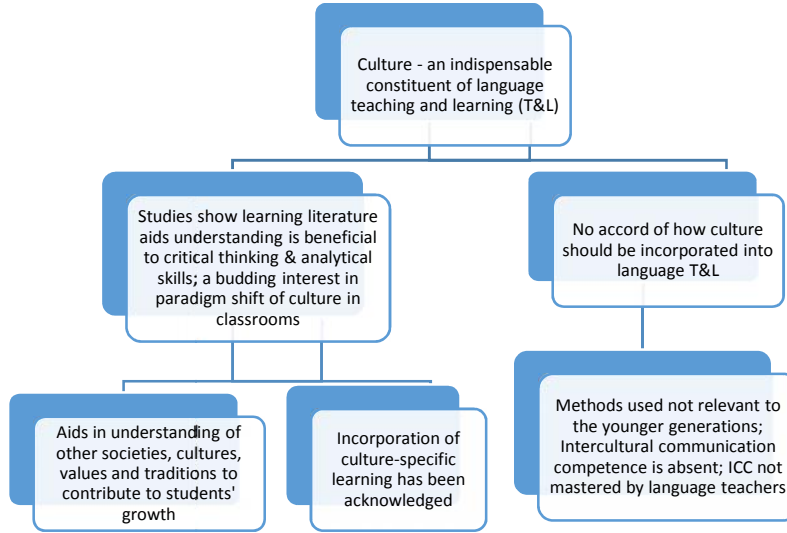
No	Author & Title	Objective & Variables	Methodology			Analysis Technique	Result/ Finding	Comment/ Gap
			Research Design	Sample	Instrument			
		Objectives:						
		Variables:						

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3. FINDINGS

The sole purpose of this study was to better understand what the major gaps on the teaching of literature. The review was done to synthesise and integrate the substance of those studies that were impacting the circumstance. This study does not review all research on the teaching of literature however, but it does give us a sense of what is being discussed in those publications. A fair amount of attention in literature teaching research is being held about topics of intercultural variable and selection of text—gaps which may be of a great concern and vital in the teaching of literature’s ecosystem as shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.



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Fig. 1. Summary of intercultural variable in the teaching of English Literature

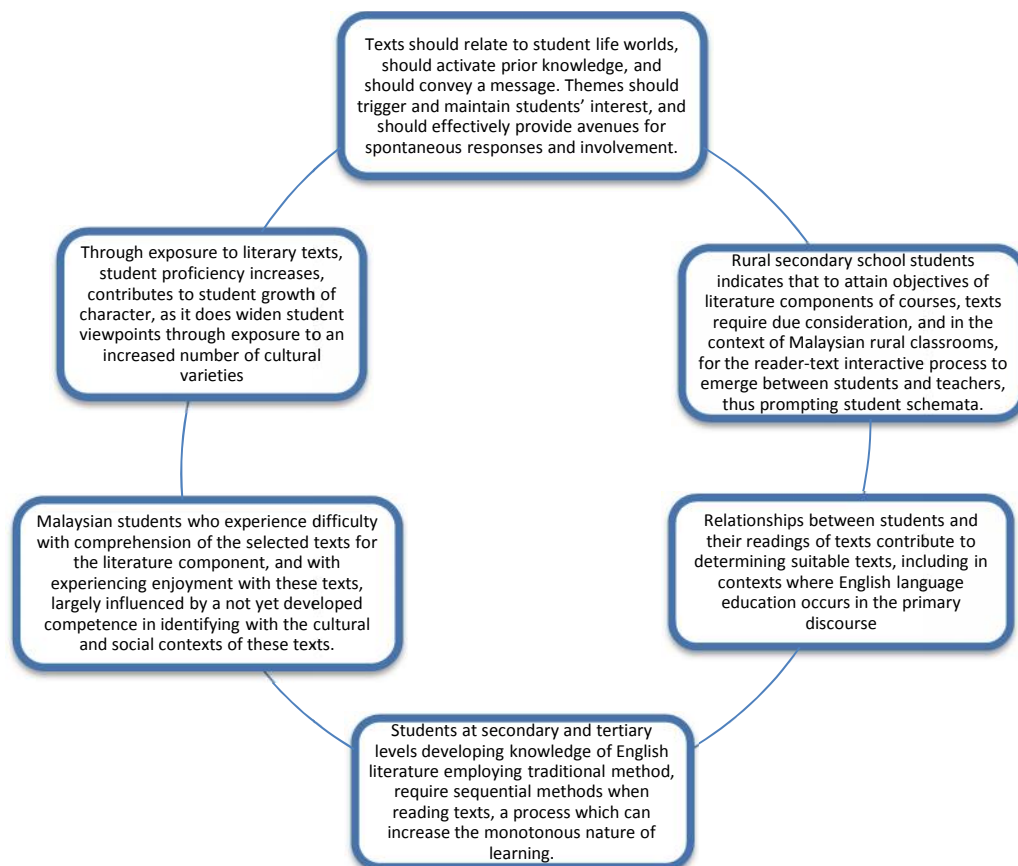


Fig. 2. Summary of selection of text variable in the teaching of English Literature

4. CONCLUSION

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Emanating from renewed attention assigned to literature in language education, we can well see the importance of issues such as intercultural competence, diversity in the range of text, and the use of antiquated language in relation to literature in the Malaysian context, where there exists significant need to further investigate the matter to expose information on ways in which teachers, and students cope with the literature component. This becomes crucial as continuous research may assist in not only identifying perceptions and problems encountered in the implementation of literature in the English language classroom, but also to suggest specific ways in which teachers and students may negotiate to effectively include the literature component into syllabi. Existing studies can offer recommendations to institutions responsible for the preparation of future English language teachers for the challenges corresponding to their teaching profession. Issues underlying the implementation of the literature component may include the viability of the component for Malaysian students, as texts written by foreign authors constitute a considerable number of the manuscripts selected. College students who have had little exposure or contact with foreign settings and cultural background presented in texts may face difficulty in visualizing and imagining intended descriptions, thus hampering understanding of the literary works. Students and classrooms are becoming more diverse and multicultural each day, and therefore, mastering intercultural competence is a desirable option for a start. The variety of language learning situations has resulted in a growing demand for flexible and well-tailored

367 approaches to intercultural communication in order to fill the gap. The challenge now is for
 368 language educators to respond to this demand by enriching language learning and by
 369 integrating into an informed awareness of intercultural issues. Educators are well placed to
 370 respond to this challenge, but they will need to adapt their professional profile to meet the
 371 new needs.

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