

**PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE
IN THE FIRST YEAR HIGH SCHOOL CLASSES
IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The course for first year literature is prescribed in the Course of Study in Literature for Secondary Schools published by the Department of Education, Bureau of Public Schools. This manual was printed in 1932 for use in all types of secondary schools. It was reprinted in 1935 and revised in 1938. After liberation it was reprinted in June, 1950. This manual serves as a guide for teachers of English for all the four years in high school. It contains a list of objectives, allotment of the work by years and suggested methods of teaching. It also contains a list of basic texts, supplementary readers and homereading books for each year's work.

The principal objectives for the teaching of literature in the secondary schools as embodied in the course of study are as follows:

1. To cultivate the attitudes, habits, skills, and abilities essential to efficient reading.
2. To establish permanent, varied, and desirable interests in reading.
3. To enrich and extend experiences through reading a wide variety of materials.
4. To inculcate fundamental attitudes and ideals of behavior.

In the first two years, the work is mainly exploratory.

The student is introduced to a wide variety of materials which make "it possible for each pupil to find the type which holds for him the highest pleasure and the greatest good ¹. The main emphasis, though, seems to be on selections about the student's own country and people. These selections are supposed to appeal to the student and arouse his interest because of familiarity with their background. Other selections taught pertain to the world of nature, modes of life of people in other lands, men who have achieved great things, and characters in literature and history that personify high idealism and good conduct. Thus, provision is made for a wide variety of materials to suit the students' interests.

The work for first year literature is offered in two semesters, and the subject is taught five days a week. The first twelve to fourteen days are spent in giving the students library lessons which will help them in acquiring good study habits. In this connection, one day each week is set aside for silent reading which frequently takes the form of supervised study period. The Philippine High School Readers Book One by Mendez, Mendez and Potts, which is the basic text, takes most of the time allotment of from forty-four to

¹ Bureau of Public Schools, Course of Study in Literature for Secondary Schools, (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1950), pp. 10-11.

fifty-six days. Part of the week is spent on supplementary readers, tests, and checking home-readings. The second semester's work consists of practically the same type of work with more emphasis on supplementary readers. This time, however, the basic text is the Philippine Prose and Poetry Volume One. This is a compilation of exclusively local contributions in literature used as subject matter for classroom instruction. Published first in 1927 by the Bureau of Printing, Manila, it is now on its fifth revision. It is the first of a series of four volumes planned for each year of high school. In some instances, however, the main textbook, the Philippine High School Readers Book One is still being used in the second semester.

The Philippine High School Readers Book One is the first of a series of readers prepared for high school students. It was planned to follow immediately after the completion of the study of Book VII of the Philippine Readers by Camilo Osias and others¹. The first year literature text was written by two Filipino authors, Paz Policarpio Mendez, an assistant professor of English, University of the Philippines and Mauro Mendez, editor-in-chief, the D-M-H-M news-

¹ Camilo Osias and others, The Philippine Readers Book Seven, (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1932), 211 pp.

papers and formerly instructor in English, University of the Philippines. Corroborating with these Filipino writers was Merrill S. Potts, Chief, Publications Division, Bureau of Education. The book was copyrighted in 1932 and was published by Ginn and Company, Boston, U. S. A. It was adopted immediately the next year after its publication by the Bureau of Public Schools¹.

Here is the description of the contents as stated in the preface²:

Part One trains the student to become a useful member of his family and his community, to love nature, to cultivate his powers of observation, to develop an interest in his country's past and in other Oriental people and to cultivate a desire to improve himself.

Part Two consists of the simpler kinds of literary forms, such as anecdotes, letters, descriptive sketches, narratives and plays. These selections are adapted to various purposes: silent reading, memorizing, dramatization, reading for essential details, reading for classroom discussion and study, reading for expression and many others.

For what type of students was this book written? It was meant to create literary appreciation and interest in young boys and girls who are supposed to have had seven years of elementary schooling which after the war was reduced to only six. These children, coming from homes where only the

¹ Paz Policarpio Mendez, M. Mendez, and M. S. Potts, Philippine High School Readers Book One, (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1932), 206 pp.

² Ibid., p. vii.

vernacular is spoken have to learn English as second language. To add to this difficulty, they are taught all their subjects at school with this foreign language as the medium of instruction. In many high schools in the Philippines most of the students come from rural areas where they do not or only rarely hear English spoken in their homes, and where the only reading material they can get hold of, is a copy of the local vernacular weekly.

Then, in an upsurge of nationalism, our congressmen passed a law making the teaching of the Filipino National Language a "must" in all schools, public and private. Not to be outdone, another congressman who believes that Spanish is "The Language", managed to convince his colleagues. Now the poor high school student is confronted with three foreign languages, since the Filipino language, as the national language is now called, is just as foreign to him as the others, because it is a conglomeration of several Philippine dialects. It is a wonder that he ever learns or masters any of these languages at all, especially the English language, to an extent as to enable him to make a useful tool of it in studying the other subjects which are taught to him in English.

These handicaps to which the students are subjected, the changing times and situations that demand also corres-

ponding changes to meet the needs they create, changes that go hand in hand with progress, have made the teachers realize the pressing need for keeping up-to-date and making due changes in the materials for instruction, especially the textbooks. For despite the many tirades against the use of textbooks as learning materials, there seems to be little evidence that their use is declining. In the high schools in the Philippines, every student is supposed to have a textbook for practically every course. There is no doubt that nearly all the teachers use the textbook optimally towards achieving the objectives of learning.

A. THE PROBLEM

Teachers of English throughout the Philippines have long been confronted with a lot of problems regarding the teaching of literature in the high school. These problems are most difficult in the first year where it is quite a task to bridge the gap between the six-year elementary course and the high school. It has become increasingly clear in the minds of those who face the practical problems of improving the reading instruction, that the textbook usually determines the success or failure of any method or technique. Since most of the problems in the teaching of English literature

are related to the reading materials, especially the textbook, it was decided to limit this study to the evaluation of the basic text, in order to find out how it can be made more readable and interesting to the first year students today. With the years, it has become increasingly difficult for the teachers to render comprehensible the materials in the literature text which was written more than two decades ago for first year students who had had seven years of elementary schooling, without the necessity for adjustment to the new educational trends in the Philippine public school system and with a wealth of other reading materials provided for them.

Many educators believe that in the field of Philippine education today mass promotion, the elimination of the seventh grade, the double-single session plan, and, in some instances, the inferior methods used due to the dearth of teaching materials have brought to the high schools a mass of inadequately prepared students lacking proficiency in the tools of learning, and in the basic skills needed to cope with the more advanced and more complicated high school work. These pedagogically unsound practices introduced by the government to implement its austerity program are detrimental to the education of the elementary school children. Such practices have resulted in a group of unskilled learners who

are still unable to recognize words when they see them, are unable to comprehend them when they do recognize them, and worse still, cannot with fluency give oral or written interpretation of what they have read. As the students attempt to read selections which are neither readable nor understandable to them, it is not surprising, therefore, to find them developing a distaste for and a lack of interest in their literature or reading textbook.

Many of the English teachers believe that the selections included in the basic reader for the first year possess vocabulary quite difficult for students with such inadequate background for reading. Others are of the idea that the selections are either too mature or too outdated for our students today. Some believe that the physical makeup of the book itself does not make it suitable or attractive to our present-day first year students who are about the same age as the seventh grade pupils before the six-year elementary course was introduced. Quite a number of teachers suggest the reorganizing and rewriting of the selections in these readers either to bring them up-to-date or, as Dr. Antonio *Indro* advocates, to simplify them so that "the substance and content are better understood by the learners even if much of the elegance and beauty of the language of the classic.

authors may disappear"¹. There are even some radically inclined teachers who recommend the changing of these texts for more recent editions.

That people are now aware of the existence of this problem of teaching in the high school is manifest by an editorial in the Manila Chronicle dated May 30, 1953 which states:

Admittedly, the teaching of literature to high school students is a difficult and thankless job. We are referring particularly to present-day students whose capacity to absorb knowledge has degenerated to a new low. It is to be expected that, despite the two or three years in which they are supposed to have been exposed to the classics, they neither have the feeling for, nor the understanding of, the poems and stories they were supposed to have read and studied... The problem, as we understand, of teaching literature to high school students cannot be solved by rewriting literature. It can only be solved by using such samples as are intended for readers whose emotional experience and intelligence are about the same as those of our present-day high school students.

Another proof of the urgency of this problem of literature teaching is the fact that it was one of the major topics discussed in the seminar for English teachers of the Philippines held from May ten to thirty last year at the Araullo High School in Manila.

It is with the full realization of such a pressing need, that this study was undertaken. However, this present

¹ Antonio Isidro, quoted in the editorial, Manila Chronicle, May 30, 1953.

investigation is limited only to the problem of finding out the suitability of the current text¹ in literature in the first year for our present day students. It is an attempt to analyze and evaluate this reading textbook in the light of the questions and conjectures raised as regards readability, interest value and physical makeup, and other such factors as they affect students' understanding and interest in their literature course.

It is hoped that this study may discover enlightening facts about this book which will answer these questions of the reading and literature teachers and help them to make greater use of this text as a tool of learning and to develop in their students interest in and appreciation for literature. Whether or not this study results in the reorganizing or re-writing of the contents of this basic reader or in changing the whole book itself, it is hoped that the methods of analysis and evaluation employed in this study as well as the findings and recommendations made, will be helpful to teachers and school administration or whoever find it their job to select textbooks so that they will be able to choose good and suitable textbooks not only for reading and literature but

¹ ~~Menden~~ Mendez, and Potts, op. cit.

also for other fields where a basic text is needed for effective study.