

# Teaching English through Literature: Little House in the Big Woods

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**Abstract:** *Teaching language, in this case is English, through literature is not a new phenomenon. However there are still debates on it. Meanwhile the language teacher should be able to find interesting ways to teach English. Due to the communicative competence target of teaching language, teaching English through literature can be one of alternative that can be used in the class. It is because literature provides the learners with authentic language materials that are good to improve the learners' communicative competence. Having read the novel entitled Little House in the Big Woods written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, the writers realized that there are many elements, especially the cultural elements, that can be brought to the class for teaching English. So the writers would like to explain the cultural elements in that novel that can be used in teaching English and what language skills can be taught by those cultural elements. This research hopefully can be an inspiration to teach English in the class by using literature especially novel. This is a descriptive research. The data of this research are cultural elements found in Little House in the Big Woods and the data source is Laura Ingalls Wilder's novel entitled Little House in the Big Woods. The technique for collecting data is documentation with content analysis. The cultural elements found in the novel are geographical condition, tradition, belief, and social values. The results show that the cultural elements on the novel can be used as material for teaching vocabulary (geographical situation, tradition), English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The genre of the text for teaching the language skills can be in the form of descriptive text (tradition that deals with needle work and belief that deals with religion and folklore) and procedure text (tradition that deals with how to cook). Besides, it can be used to teach culture through Cross Culture Understanding with social value materials (speaking manner, eating manner, and meeting person manner)*

**Keywords:** *Language, Literature, Language Skills, Little House in the Big Woods*

## INTRODUCTION

Last September 15, 2018, TVRI, Indonesian Television Station replayed their old TV series name Oshin and Little House on the Prairie. Those two TV series have very good moral values for character buildings. As we know that one of the TV series, i.e. Little House on the Prairie is adapted from Laura Ingalls Wilder's novel. She was an American writer. Little House on the Prairie is one of her Little House Series. There are nine series of Little House such as Little House in the Big Woods, Farmer Boy, Little House on the Prairie, On the Bank of Plum Creek, By the Shore of Silver Lake, Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, The Happy Golden Years, First Four Years.

In this article, the writers focus only on her first novel namely Little House in the Big Woods. This novel was published on 1932. This novel tells about the Ingalls who became a pioneer family in America. Having read this book, the writers realized that there are many cultural elements that can be used to teach English such as the tradition of sugar snow in winter time. Other examples of cultural issues are about the hunting tradition, cooking of some traditional food such as rye Injun bread, salt-rising bread (Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi, 2015, 120). As we know that such kind of materials can be used to teach procedure text. Besides, there are many vocabularies dealing with meal, clothes. In the writers' mind perhaps it would be a good idea if we can use Laura Ingalls Wilder's novel name Little House in the Big Woods as a teaching material in teaching English in the class.

Nowadays teaching English via literary work is a common phenomenon. However, using literary work to teach did not get attention in the past time. In recent times a renewed interest has emerged in the literature in language class, and quite a lot has been written on the subject whereas in the past, not much was actually said about literature in the foreign language classes (Bottino) Literary work is considered to give less communicative competence and give burden to the students. Teaching English with literature to EFL/ESL students is not an easy task because they should read and comprehend the literary text in which the sentence structures are complex and most of the vocabularies are passive ones which is rare in use. So that's why some of language teachers are still reluctant to bring literature in the EFL/ESL classroom.

Whereas, literary works can be used as one of media in teaching English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as its language elements (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar). Hismanoglu (2005, 54) states that the use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation). Literary works is one of authentic material that can be used to teach English. Literary work is not created for teaching language in the classroom. As authentic materials, literary works are rich in content, language use, idiom, and vocabulary (Setyowati, 2017: 41). Besides, literary works have cultural content that can improve the students' awareness on culture.

Previously, the writers have held a research on cultural elements found in Little House in the Big Wood. On the previous research, the writers found some interesting materials dealing with cultural elements in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House in the Big Woods that can be used in the class. Besides, there are still several issues in this book that can be used to teach language in the class. The writers would like to explain the cultural elements in the novel that can be used in teaching English and what language skills can be taught by those cultural elements.

## **TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH LITERATURE**

Teaching English through literature is not a new thing in language teaching. At the beginning, it is not quite popular. The use of literature in language teaching can be trace back to the nineteenth century (Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini, 2012, 32). At that time, literary text is just for translation. It is closely related to the language teaching method that was popular that time, i.e. Grammar Translation Method. Duff and Maley in Llach (2007,9) mention that in the Grammar Translation Method, literature was the central component. Literary texts of the target language were read and translated, used as examples of good writing and 'illustrations of grammatical rules.

Previously, literary texts were thought to embody archaic language which had no place in audiolingualism where linguist believed in the primacy speech (Riverol, 1991, 65). Even in the audilingualism there was no place for literary text because audiolingualism focuses on speech competency. With the advent of structural approaches to language and popularity of direct and audiolingual method, literary was not utilized in language classes anymore (Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini, 2012, 32). Literary text then just forgotten because it just for the representation of old tradition. Besides, it is forgotten since most of the method of language teaching after Grammar Translation Method are focused on communicative approach and literature has no communication function or to be authentic examples of language used (Llach, 2007,9).

However, around 1980's there is a changing toward the use of literature in taching English. But in the middle of 1980's the interest in literature as a teaching resources has renewed and continues until today (Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini, 2012, 32). One of the reasons behind this changing is the appearance of language teaching method that focuses on communicative approach suggesting the use of authentic language.

In addition, Sanz and Fernandez in (Llach, 2007,9) mentions this is in consonance with the new currents within the communicative approach that see in reading literature the perfect realization of their principles, namely developing communicative competence, that is teaching learners to communicate in the second language and accounting for real life, authentic communicative situation. It means that the interest in literature as a language teaching material sources is in consonance with the new trends of communicative approach that focuses on developing communicative competence within an authentic communicative situation. Tukker (1991,299) adds that the so called “Communicative Language Teaching” which is very popular nowadays, gives credit to the use of the “authentic language” as it is used in a real life context whenever possible. Literature itself is one of authentic language material besides cartoon, advertisement, article from magazine and newspaper.

Even though, the use of literature is getting popular, apparently there are still pros and contras on it. Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012, 205) states that from time to time the need or value of teaching literature in the language class, as a teaching material, has been questioned. Meanwhile Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini mentions that there is still controversy over the use of literature for the purpose of teaching and learning language (2012, 32). Teaching English through literature is just another burden for the students that can make them frustrated. It happens because literature text is sometimes lack of standard grammar rules and some of the sentences have complex structure. Besides, literary text uses connotative vocabulary so some students feel bored to reading the text.

For some language teachers, literature is just a kind of work of art and does not support the students’ proficiency so they do not use literature in their class. However, for some teachers, literature is considered as one of authentic language material that can be used for teaching English in the class. Literature can be a great source for teaching language especially with EFL. In addition, Povey in Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini (2012, 32) mentions that some of scholars believe that literature expands the linguistic knowledge of the learners. From the short description above, it is clear that there are two opinions toward the using of literature in teaching language. Some are pros and some are contras.

Literary text is considered as one of the authentic language materials. It is authentic because literary work is not made for a teaching and learning purpose. As quoted from Hismanoglu (2005, 54) literature is authentic material. Most works of literature are not created for the primary purpose of teaching language. In addition, Riverol (1991, 66) adds that literature then provides us with authentic language – works which have not been written specifically with the foreign learner in mind. Meanwhile Duff and Maley in (Sell, 2005,86) mentions that literature is genuine linguistic material, not a linguistically contrived text book. Most authentic material such as literary text, travel timetable, city plans, pamphlet, cartoon, advertisements, newspaper or magazine articles lead the learners to actual language example of real life or real life context or setting. This real context can make the learner familiar with several different linguistic forms, communicative function, and meanings. Moreover, Hadaway, Verdell, and Young in Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini (2012, 34) mention that one of the advantages of using literature is the contextualization of language. Learners become familiar with the use of language in different situations when they read a piece of literature. Meanwhile Pugh in Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini (2012, 32) argues that literature is a rich source of meaningful input especially in EFL setting.

Besides, literature can promote language learning. Literary text can be used to increase language skills because of its linguistic knowledge content. Literary text can be considered as linguistics model. It means that literature provides examples of “good” writing, linguistic diversity, expressive ranges (Sell, 2005, 87). Learning literature can improve not only the basic

language skill but also vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Literature usually consists of complex syntax, figurative language, extensive and connotative vocabulary. Those can expand the learners' language skill. Povey in Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini (2012, 33) states that reading literature familiarizes students or learners with subtle vocabulary usage and new complex syntax and through this contribution to the extension of language usage and linguistic knowledge. Abraham (2010, 80) states that also can introduce the students to the varieties of English; it can be a source of linguistic and communicative enrichment. Using the literature in the class can lead the learners to language use or communication. Literature can train the learners to think critically and express their idea through the language they learn.

In addition, literature can facilitate the learners to know and understand about culture. When we learn about literature, it is not easy to forget about the culture because literature is the reflection of culture. Haris and Haris in Tukker (1991, 301) say likewise the cultural benefits of studying literature are hard to ignore, since literature mirrors national culture. Literature usually consists of cultural enrichment. Maley in Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini (2012, 33) points out that one of the reasons for using literature as a resource in EFL and ESL setting is that universally all languages have literatures and most of the themes explored in the literature such as love, death, separation, and separation, nature which are so common in all cultures. Sell (2005, 87) states reading literature promotes cultural understanding and awareness. Literature helps the learners to understand the other societies and society. Literature can be a gateway for the language learners to get in touch with the culture of the target language as well as to form a cultural competence. Hismanoglu (2005, 54-55) says that literature is perhaps the best regarded as a complement to other materials used to develop the foreign learner's understanding into the country whose language is being learned. Also literature adds to the cultural grammar of the learners. In fact one of the advantages of using literature is that it can serve a medium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written (Valdes, 137).

On the other hand, some language teachers disagree with the use of literature to teach language in the classroom. Some of the language teachers think that literature does not support the teaching of grammar as one of the main goal of language teaching. It happens due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language. Even, Topping in Tukker (1991, 300) argues that literature should be excluded from foreign language curriculum because of its structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules, and remote control perspective. In teaching language with literature, the learners, of course, have to read literary books or texts which they cannot understand easily since the complex structure. Then after reading they still have to discuss about the literary text structure, author's style. Those make the teaching foreign language literature especially for the learners with non native speakers. It is true that literary text has cultural contents but for some teacher the culture contents in literature can contribute to the learners' difficulty in language class. Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini (2012, 33) argues that grasping and making sense of cultural perspectives may be difficult for the students especially for EFL or ESL students.

## **LANGUAGE SKILLS AND LITERATURE**

It is mentioned previously that literature can promote language learning. Abraham (79, 2010) states that "learning literature not only improves the basic skill like reading, writing, listening and speaking but also other language areas like vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation". Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012, 208) writes that some scholar (Stern, 1991; Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Erkaya, 2005; Van, 2009) believes that "literature can provide a medium through

which these needs can be addressed and literature can improve language skills”. Literature has an important part to teach four language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Besides, literature can also be used to teach other language elements or areas such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. However, when using literature in the language classroom, skills should not be taught in isolation but integrated way.

Povey in Tukker (1991, 303) argues that “literature will increase all language skill because literature will extend linguistic knowledge”. Literature consists of language enrichment that facilitates the learners to study the language especially its skills. Obediat in Abraham (2010, 80) mentions that literature can help the learners in many ways dealing with learning language, especially English. It helps the learners to acquire English competence like a native does, and convey their idea in good English. Literature can also help them to study the features of modern English as well as how the English linguistic system can be used to communicate. The learners will also know how idiomatic expressions are used. They can also learn how to speak clearly, precisely, and concisely that can make them become more proficient in English. Besides, literature can make the students think creatively, critically, and analytically.

Berardo in Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012, 208) believes that literary which becomes one of authentic language material can help the learners to increase their language skill, especially reading. It is due to reading involvement on teaching language with literature in the class room. Literature can be a motivation for the students to read in English. Reading activity is considered as the interaction between text and readers so the readers must be willing and motivated to read the literary text so in this way the literature can be considered as the tool to give the learners motivation to read (Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini, 2012, 33). Collie and Slater in Abraham (2010,81) suggests that “ add fresh momentum into teaching of literature by stimulating students’ desires to read and encouraging their response”. Reading literature gives influences on the learners’ reading proficiency. Good reading proficiency usually can bring the learners to the achievement in academic and occupational goal (Khatib, Hosseini and Rahmini, 33, 2012, 33).

Teaching literature involves some reading activities such as pre-reading task, interactive work on the text, and follows up activities. Reading literature teaching can be integrated with the teaching of vocabulary especially in some activities such as predicting, gap filling, creative writing, role playing (Abraham, 2010, 81). Hismanoglu says that reading lesson begins at the literal level consisting direct questions from the text that can be answered by specific reference to the text. Then move to the next level named inferential level in which the learners have to make speculation and interpretation concerning about the literary text. After that there is a collaborative work where they share their evaluations of literary work and their personal reaction to the literary works as well as the author’s point of view. The last level is the personal/ evaluative that stimulates the learners to think imaginatively about the literary work and to stimulate their ability in solving the problem (2005, 57). In this case, the students need to think and interpret critically when they have discussion session so it can train and improve their speaking ability.

In line with the previous sentence, Lazar (1993) says that “literature can be used as a tool for creating opportunities for discussion, controversy, and critical thinking. There are many topics that can be generate from literature and they give the opportunities for the students to have a discussion that supports the oral practice. The students can be grouped to do general class discussion, small group work, panel discussion, and even debate that can develop the learners’ speaking ability and pronunciation practice (Hismanoglu, 2005, 60)

Teaching language with literature usually is closely related to reading and writing, however it plays an important rule in teaching speaking and listening (Murat, 59). Reading literary text

aloud can help the learners to develop their speaking as well as listening. In addition, reading aloud can also monitor the learners' pronunciation. Literature is good to improve the listening skill, for example by listening to a story in telling story, can improve the learners' listening ability as well as to comprehend a language. Reading is closely related to vocabulary. Llach (2007, 10) mentions that "reading contributes greatly to vocabulary development and also listening comprehension". In addition, Ghosn in Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012, 208) argues that literature presents natural language so that it can improve learners' vocabulary development in context.

Besides, reading not only provides lexical competence that consists of more vocabularies and meanings and more uses of the word already known, but it also contributes syntactic knowledge for the second language learners (Brumfit and Carter in Llach, 2007, 10). Literary works are considered to hinder the teaching of grammar because of its complex structure, unique, and non standard use of language. However, literary texts can provide us with linguistic model. It means that literature provides us model of good writing, linguistic diversity, and expressive ranges. By being exposed to literary texts, the learners become familiar with the written language forms. Besides, they learn about syntax and function of sentences, variation of possible structures. In addition, nowadays grammar learning is not teacher-centered and transmissive. Carter in Lau (174, 2002) states that "a study of grammar in texts is a study of grammar in use". Literary texts, of course, consist of grammar use through the sentences, so the learners can be familiar to the complex syntax or grammar.

## METHODOLOGY

This research belongs to a descriptive research. This research observes the cultural elements found in *Little House in the Big Woods* that can be brought to teach language in the class. The source of data is Laura Ingalls Wilder's novel names *Little House in the Big Woods*. The data of the research is the cultural elements found in the novel. The technique of collecting data is documentation. Then the data found is analyzed using content analysis.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the previous research held by the writers, there are several cultural elements found in the novel *Little House in the Big Woods*. Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi (2015, 119) shows that the cultural elements found in *Little House in the Big Woods* are (1) those dealing with the geographical situation such as animals, plants, and season, (2) those relating to the traditions such as eating tradition (meal time, food and beverage, way of cooking), cloth tradition (types of clothes), medical tradition, hunting tradition, needle work, sugar snow tradition (3) those dealing with religion and folklore, (4) those relating to social values (speaking manner, eating manner, meeting people).

Those elements are good enough to be used as materials for teaching English in the class. They can be used for teaching language skills as well as other language areas such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Here, the writers propose what can be taught with the novel *Little House in the Big Woods*.

### Geographical Situation

The setting of the novel is in little city called Pepin, Wisconsin, Minnesota, USA, located in a big wood area that consists of prairie. The cultural elements belonging to the geographical

situation are plant, animal, and season. The plants found are trees (oak, maple, pine, hickory, walnut) which are commonly grown in Big Woods area, flowers (buttercup, violet, tiny stary grass flower), vegetables (potato, carrot, beet, turnip, cabbage, pumpkin, and squashes. The other plants are corn and wheat which are considered as their staple food (Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi 2015, 126). Meanwhile the animals found are classified into wild animal (wolf, bear, panther, black cat, and fox), rodent (muskrat, mink, otter, and squirrel), prey (rabbit, deer), livestock (chicken, pig, cow), and packing animals (cow and horse). The last cultural elements that belong to geographical situation is season. Minnesota is in the area with four seasons (winter, spring, summer, and fall/autumn). Season has big influence in the clothes and way of adaptation (Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi, 2015, 126).

Those names of plants, animals, and season as well as all the words related to them can be used to introduce new vocabularies. The teachers can provide the pictures of all the plants, animals, and season. Meanwhile, the season is appropriate material to teach a descriptive text. The author described the situation on every season such as when the season begin and end, how the weather looks like, etc. This material can be used by the teacher to teach all language skills. The teacher can create a descriptive text based on the description of seasons given by the author. Then it is used for teaching reading. Besides, it can be used to for teaching writing or speaking. The teacher can ask the students to write a descriptive text about the seasons or the teacher can ask the students to describe the season orally. The teachers can also ask the students to compare the season in the novel to that in their country.

### **Tradition**

Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi (2015, 127) mentions that the traditions found in Little House in the Big Woods deal with meal tradition (meal time, food and beverage, how to cook meal), clothing tradition, traditional medical treatment, hunting, needle work, and sugar snow. Meal time consists of breakfast, dinner, and supper. Food and beverage contains vegetables, meat, bread, and milk. There are several names for meat such as venison (meat from deer), pork (meat from pig). Even for pork which becomes the most favorite meat there, its meat is still classified into several kinds such as ham, shoulders, side meat, spare ribs, and, belly. Besides there are many products made from pork such as headcheese, sausage, lard, and cracking.

The bread found in Little House in the Big Woods is salted-rising bread, rye'n Injun. Meanwhile the cake mentioned in this novel is Johny cake or Jonny cake or Shawnee cake or Johnny bread or corn bread or Jonikin or Mushbread. There is also several pies found in the novel such as pumpkin pie, vinegar pie, dried apple pie (Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi, 2015, 128). Pancake is also one of food and beverage found in the novel and the last is sandwich.

Meal tradition also deals with description of how to cook the meal mentioned before such as sausage, headcheese, bread, pumpkin, etc. There are many procedures of cooking some food such as how to smoke meat, how to cook pork (headcheese and sausage), how to color the butter, how to make candy, how to make pumpkin pie.

The next tradition deals with clothing. Clothes are influenced a lot by season. There are several vocabularies dealing with clothes such as head cover, cape hood, sunbonnets, coats, robes, petticoat, shawls, mufflers, mittens, and shoes. The tradition for medical treatment found in the novel deals with how to cure the bee sting (Yellow Jacket). Hunting tradition is also found in this novel. Dealing with hunting tradition there are things introduced, i.e. how to make bullet and deer-lick. Needle work tradition talks about nine-patch work and knitting. The last tradition found is sugar snow tradition. There is a special sap from maple tree that can be produced into sugar in winter time (Giyatmi, Wijayava and Arumi, 2015 131)

Those traditions can be developed into some different materials that can be used to teach English. Name of the meal time, food beverage, clothes can be introduced to the students and hopefully can increase their vocabularies. Meanwhile the tradition dealing with how to cook can be used to teach procedure text whether the text is for speaking skill, listening skill, writing skill, and listening skill. The author described the process of how to cook meal in detail and clearly in several chapters. The teachers can ask the students to read the text in the novel and then ask them to write a procedure text based on the explanation. Besides, the materials can also be used to teach speaking skill by retelling the procedure text they have already made. Meanwhile there are also some materials that are appropriate for teaching descriptive text in speaking, listening, writing, or reading. Those materials are needle work that concern with nine-patch works. The author described what nine-patched work is and how to make a patch work.

### **Belief**

Belief found in this novel is classified into religion and folklore. The novel is situated in a loyal Christian society. One of the significant religion lives in this story is about Sunday. Sunday is observed as a day of worshiping and rest. Meanwhile, folklores found in this novel are Jack Frost, an imagined old man with pail and brush who painting leaves on autumn and Santa Claus, a mythology figure dealing with Christmas so that's why he is well-known as Father of Christmas. The last folklore is a saying that says The moon is from green cheese.

Those elements can be used to teach descriptive text in all language skills. The author described about Jack Frost and Santa Claus. The students can be asked to make a descriptive text based on the description given by the author. The students also can be asked to tell a story about santa and Jack Frost with the text they have made.

### **Social Values**

There are some social values found in the novel such as speaking manner, eating manner, meeting people manner. Those manners can be used to teach Cross Culture Understanding. They can be used as topics for a discussion by comparing those manners to those in the students' culture. This can be a good material for teaching speaking and writing. The teacher may ask the students to make a comparative composition.

## **CONCLUSION**

As the time goes on, the language teachers especially English should be able to find an interesting method to teach English. One of the alternatives is teaching English through literature such as novel, poem, or drama. As one of children literature, *Little House in the Big Woods* written by Laura Ingalls Wilder uses a simple language so it is easy to understand. Besides, there are several cultural elements that can be used to teach English in the classroom. They can be used to teach language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as other languages areas such as vocabulary and pronunciation. Besides, it can be used to teach culture too.

The results show that the cultural elements on the novel can be used as material for teaching vocabulary (geographical situation, tradition), English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as culture. The genre of the text for teaching the language skills can be in the form of descriptive text (tradition that deals with needle work and belief that deals with religion and folklore) and procedure text (tradition that deals with how to cook). The materials that can be used to teach cross culture understanding deals with social values such as speaking manner, eating manner, and meeting person manner.



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