

LITERATURE AND GLOBAL CULTURE ISSUES - A CASE STUDY OF TEACHING PHAN THI VANG ANH'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract. In today's constantly evolving fast-paced world, the field of education has witnessed a variety of innovative and rigorous trends such as life-long learning, technological capabilities, inquiry-based instruction, SDGs lesson plans, global education and international schools. The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight into teaching literary works in the IBDP (International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme) through the lens of global issues, a pathway to establish understanding and competencies for students in the coming decades. With that aim in mind, the paper is divided into three main ideas: global trends and issues in general education and teaching literature in particular; opportunities and challenges when teaching literature through the lens of global issues to Vietnamese students in international schools; and a case study of teaching Phan Thi Vang Anh's short stories in the close relationship with the world problems. The results of this exploratory research will shed light on an innovative approach in literature teaching strategies and assessment techniques in close relationship with world issues and its potential application in an authentic Vietnamese classroom.

Keywords: global issues, multiculturalism, literature, short stories.

1. Introduction

Among the most popular and widely-accepted concepts of changes in the past few decades is globalization as a result of improved trade, modern technology and labour mobility. A comprehensive definition of globalization is developed by Friedman as "...the inexorable integration of markets, nation- states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before... [1; p.9]. The outcome of this inevitable trend are global issues related to the growing scale of immigration, social welfare and environmental degradation etc... Education, after all, is the preparation for students to deal with the significant matters, and schools are the first place to prepare learners for an inclusive and sustainable world of the 21st century. Nevertheless, the poor performance of conventional schools with passive learning, exam-oriented education has raised concerns among scholars worldwide since the second half of the last century. Edwin Reischauer, in 1973, stated that "We need a profound reshaping of education... Humanity is facing grave difficulties that can only be solved on a global scale. Education is not moving rapidly enough to provide the knowledge about the outside world and the attitudes toward other people that may be essential for human survival [2, p.4]. This is where the concept of global education comes to the stage and receive broad support across the globe. In 1985, Fisher and Hicks defined global education as "education which promotes the knowledge, attitudes and skills relevant to living responsibly in a multicultural, interdependent world" [3, p.8].

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The shift from local into global scale has brought about revolutions in the teaching content and methods towards global citizenship in the near future. Furthermore, global education is aimed to foster the four domains of Knowledge (about world countries and cultures, and about global problems, their causes and solutions), Skills (of critical thinking, co-operative problem solving, conflict resolution, and seeing issues from multiple perspectives), Attitudes (of global awareness, cultural appreciation, respect for diversity, and empathy), and Action when students 'think globally and act locally' [4, p.3-5]. In practice, a 'global education' project was implemented by the Ministry of Education of Jordan in cooperation UNICEF in 1995 whilst 'education for development' initiatives are being promoted in schools in the developed nations [5, p.38-41]. It is believed that these change initiatives will hopefully bridge the gap between theory and practice of teaching, provide a diversity of views into a lesson and create multicultural learning. At this point, it is worth mentioning the argument in favour of multiculturalism as "the term should also be understood to refer to the complex range of issues associated with cultural and religious diversity in society, and the social management of the challenges and opportunities such diversity offers." [6]. That is, teaching and learning from multicultural perspective means touching a wide range of issues on a global scale. Accordingly, it cannot be denied that school curriculum should embrace and adopt global issues in both teaching and assessment, and IBDP is without exception.

2. Content

2.1. Teaching and learning from multicultural perspective

The IBDP curriculum consists of core and six subject groups, including studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, sciences, mathematics and the arts. Among the six disciplinaries, language and literature course in IBDP has truly reflected the shift from local to international issues, with an in-depth journey into myriad works from three areas of exploration, seven concepts and at the heart of the course are five global issues. The following illustration introduces an overview of the course, and the inter-relationship between the teaching and assessment components.

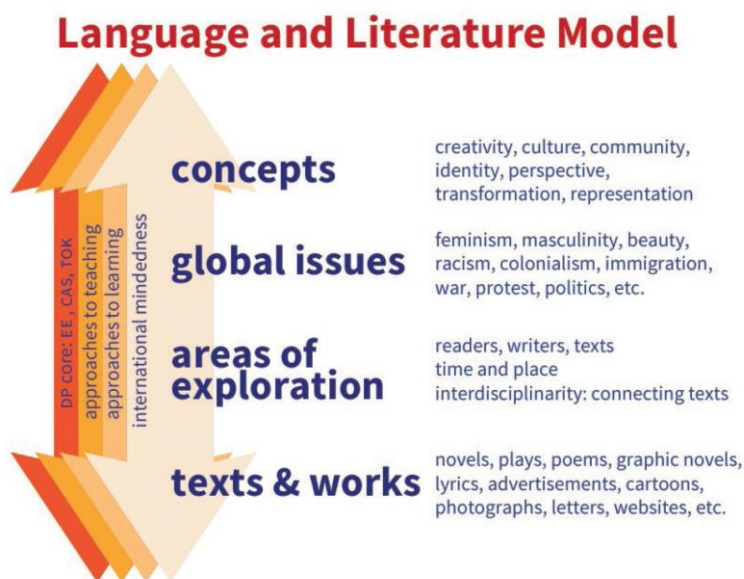


Fig. 1. Introduction Language and Literature course [7; p.xiv]

It has been proven that global issues such as feminism, masculinity, colonialism ... have their roles to play in analyzing texts and works. Through these lenses, students would develop their international mindedness, to see and interpret things from different perspectives in order to “become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right” [8] as stated in IB mission.

First and foremost, an issue would be considered “global” if it meets three criteria or three qualities: transnational, significant and relevant to local contexts. Myriads issues will be qualified as “global”, ranging from environmental conservation to LGBT, from feminism to social injustice, etc... Five broad fields of inquiry are introduced by the IB Language A and Literature guide [9, p.55] to help students generate a global issue for their oral exam, as follows:

- **Culture, identity and community**

Students might focus on the way in which texts explore aspects of family, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender and sexuality, and the way these impact on individuals and societies. They might also focus on issues concerning migration, colonialism and nationalism.

- **Beliefs, values and education**

Students might focus on the way in which texts explore the beliefs and values nurtured in particular societies and the ways they shape individuals, communities and educational systems. They might also explore the tensions that arise when there are conflicts of beliefs and values, and ethics.

- **Politics, power and justice**

Students might focus on the ways in which texts explore aspects of rights and responsibilities, the workings and structures of governments and institutions. They might also investigate hierarchies of power, the distribution of wealth and resources, the limits of justice and the law, equality and inequality, human rights and peace and conflict.

- **Art, creativity and the imagination**

Students might focus on the ways in which texts explore aspects of aesthetic inspiration, creation, craft, and beauty. They might also focus on the shaping and challenging of perceptions through art, and the function, value and effects of art in society.

- **Science, technology and the environment**

Students might focus on the ways in which texts explore the relationship between humans and the environment and the implications of technology and media for society. They might also consider the idea of scientific development and progress.

It can be easily seen that there exists an inseparable connection between global issues and language and literature. Most fiction and non-fiction works are closely connected with human experiences. Short stories and novels, travel writing essays, all reflect who we are, what we believe, which issues we care and how we navigate in this world and vice versa, global issues may be great writing inspiration and materials. Dazzling works by famous writers like Frank Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, William Faulkner, V.S. Naipaul are all inspired by issues of migration, war and peace, feminism, and their writing revolutionized not only literature but also our viewpoint of where we are in place and time.

In the context of Vietnamese literature classrooms of IBDP programs, these five global issues are extensively researched and taken into consideration when digging deep into the works. These issues offer an innovative pathway to go beyond the academic meaning and make it more meaningful in real life situations. Vietnamese students at international schools have opportunities to access internationally recognized courses and materials, to be familiar with global education so studying literature with regards to global issues is beneficial. This strength may originate from the learning environment, with teachers and peers from all over the world, sharing diverse viewpoints and different backgrounds. Students would be acquainted with

inclusivity and acceptance of various cultural values and beliefs and intercultural learning through the curriculum. Thus, approaching a literary work from international mindedness would be somehow easier and feasible in such a multicultural background.

However, the biggest challenges sometimes lie in the motivation to read and conceptual understanding of the terms and language competencies, since Vietnamese is not the language of teaching in these institutions. Students would have 2-3 hours of Vietnamese literature class per week during year 11 and 12, which present a formidable hindrance for acquiring literary understanding and interpretation. Though, thanks to the transdisciplinary nature of the subjects in IB program from Primary Years to Diploma, learners would be engaged in their pursuit of knowledge through the exploration of relevant concepts, issues or problems in various disciplines. That means what they learn in English literature or any other classrooms could be applied and enhance their knowledge and skills in Vietnamese classes and vice versa. For instance, they may have inquired into the five global issues when learning Shakespeare in an English language and literature class and studying the play *A doll's house* by Henrik Ibsen in Vietnamese class will definitely derive substantial benefits from the Shakespearean's learning experience. There are cases when students can find an equivalent literary term in Vietnamese classrooms with their English classes, for example: anti-thesis, allegory or other poetic devices. Therefore, the knowledge between and among subjects is a great advantage in language and literature classes in an international environment.

2.1. Teaching Phan Thi Vang Anh's short stories in IBDP

The following section would discuss in detail a case study of teaching Phan Thi Vang Anh's short stories in IBDP Vietnamese A classroom within the scope of inquiry into world issues. Phan Thi Vang Anh is a contemporary writer, emerging from post-war literature with distinctive writing style. Her short stories are often called mini-stories, written in informal and spoken language, most of which are filled with perspectives about life, echoing the voice of young generation. That is one reason why the stories derived from the basis of the author's life are chosen as the starting point for IBDP Vietnamese literature course.

The activities designed around these issues have sparked excitement, generated discussion and enriched learning experiences. The unit focusing on the theme: Coming of age, which resonates the most with teenagers is the very first one to start with during two-year DP literature journey. In order to engage students in global issues, the unit would begin with the conceptual understanding of global issues from Time collection of the 100 most influential photographs of our time. Students are expected to choose one photo of their favour, gather the information or story behind the photo, decide whether it reflects any critical issues facing human beings nowadays. Then, the whole class would come together to discuss on their findings, and sort out some common issues arising from their research. After that, each student would choose one of his or her own photos to include in the gallery of global issues, followed by the whole class discussion on the gallery walk. Once students have gained the knowledge of world issues, they would find it easier to understand the context and reasons for the exploration into literary texts. This activity is adopted from IB-innovate website for DP Language A Global Issues: Lenses for Learning; Lenses for Life [10]. The pros are obvious: students are provided with an opportunity to dig deep into the umbrella term of "global issues" and what it entails. This foundation knowledge and skill would then pave the way for more discoveries in the interpretation and analysis of texts.

Most of short stories by Phan Thi Vang Anh's collection, named *When people are young*, evolve around the theme of growing up, dealing with mistakes and challenges and consequences. These stories include: *Cousins* (*Chị em họ*), *When people are young* (*Khi người ta trẻ*), *Returning to the good* (*Phục thiện*) and *Pantomime* (*Kịch câm*)... Each story represents

a situation where young adolescents encounter different kinds of people from all paces of life and realize that life goes not as they expected. Regarding the story of two cousins, Ha and Thuy, after the analysis of two main characters, students would work in groups of three to share their thinking on the social issues that maybe related to the story plot. Interestingly, grade 11 students would come up with a long list of issues, including: parental pressure on children, the false and misleading content of the media, the fixed mindset about academic achievement and theoretical teaching, lack of practical life skills, pretentious acts, loose family relationship, intra-personal intelligence: how to see oneself on the outside, and the inside; autism... Such discoveries will lead to student's own reflection and connection to their daily life and true experience, and to some certain extent, help them find their own identity and pathway of character development.

Furthermore, the next story in the collection, titled *Returning to the good* features a high school rebellion named Thai Anh. She broke the rules, trying to talk back, ignoring others' feelings and emotions. Upon a failure in the class vote, Thai Anh decided to move to another school, where she did her best to stay calm and complete high school education. Thai Anh has learned how to control her emotions, how to adjust her temperament, no more stare or arguments, less expectation from others (it turns out that at the new school she has a friend from the old school, who knows her past). Thai Anh's mature and calm manners by the end of the story, showing gratitude for her schooling and courage to recognize and correct mistakes have grabbed students' attention, when reflecting on their own relationship with parents and friends. They will come to understand that growing up is a painful process, with various kinds of failure and getting up on one's feet to continue the journey is the solution. The story acts as a basis for text-to-text, text-to-self and text-to-the world connections which result in exciting interaction among the texts and students. Some refer to their own experience of growing up, while others would think further about the link with other stories or novels like *Bi vo* by Nguyen Hong, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, or a 2009 coming-of age drama movie, called *An education*. The inquiry allows room for differentiation when students create their own presentation and reflection on the youth culture from multicultural perspectives.

When people are young is an obsessive story focusing on the narrator's auntie, named Xuyen, who is in university years, falling in love with the wrong person, and falling short of her expectations and illusion of love. Xuyen decided to commit suicide, leaving her family behind with loss and grief. After intensive reading and character analysis, students will talk over the extent to which the main character's choices or decisions affect the whole story and how important cultural and historical factors are in reaching those decisions. The story in this case "acts as a stimulus that ignites interest and motivates the student by involving them on a personal, emotional level" [11, p.7 - 9].

The fourth story is *Pantomime*, published in 1994 has revealed Phan Thi Vang Anh's talent as a narrator. From a small piece of her father's love letter to another woman, the narrator "I" discovers the truth in pain and her attempt to use it as a revenge on her father has revealed the fragile relationship within a traditional Vietnamese family. She becomes an anxious, lonely teenager, who no longer sees life as it was, and constantly searches for the meaning of existence. The story raises awareness of family values and relationship crisis in the modern time. Through various literary activities like Six Thinking Hats, Opinion Poll and Think – Pair – Share, students then discovered the potential meaning between the words and the message of self-identity.

A strategy implemented in this unit is critical thinking skill and students' voice and choice. Bringing the four stories abovementioned together, students are asked to look back all the global issues and build a link with at least one. They will then propose global issue number 1: Culture, Identity and Community and put forward convincing arguments for their opinion. This global issue of Identity is relevant and worthwhile for teenagers, given the fact that they are living in

the era of globalization, in which the sense of identity and belonging needs constant review and revisit. Since the youth come under the pervasive influence of updating multicultural or technological trends, the old identities may become unsuitable or even outdated. The question is how to establish the new ones in the so-called “global village” with lots of uncertainties and changes. Each student would then complete the intensive reading of the whole collection by Phan Thi Vang Anh, and select one story for in-depth analysis presentation in front of the class. The topic of seeking identity is now thoroughly integrated into the lesson plan before the oral assessment of the unit.

The summative assessment of this unit is an individual oral exam, based on the model of the real interview which is usually due in the middle of year 2 of the program. The Individual Oral required for IB DP Language A will last about 15 minutes, including 10 minutes spoken analysis of two extracts from the works and 5 minute discussion on a common global issue with the teacher. The extracts would have to be from two authors of two different cultures, one from Vietnam and one from other country. Both extracts would be related to the mandatory prompt for all students: “Examine the ways in which the global issue of your choice is presented through the content and of one of the works and one of the texts that you have studied.” [9, p.33]. Since Phan Thi Vang Anh is the first author in the program, students are expected to focus on two of her short stories sharing a common issue and develop their speech before their classmates.

For grade 12 students, they would investigate a series of texts, look for the common issue in two works covered in the program and decide which global issues standing out from the extracts. One chose to compare the topic of coping with grief and loss after the beloved's death in Phan Thi Vang Anh's story *When people are young* and the novella titled *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto. The death of the auntie in *When people are young* is the consequence of long-term depression and failure in love and relationship, leaving the niece with hundreds of questions about identity and how to navigate herself in the world. Meanwhile, in *Kitchen*, the same topic of dealing with the death of the beloved is taken into consideration. The death of Mikage's grandmother, and the unexpected murder of Eriko Tanabe have left two young students, Mikage and Tanabe with griefs and loneliness. They too, have to make effort to overcome the death and continue their lives with optimism. Therefore, under the frame of global issue, the two literary works by different authors could be explored together, and interesting findings would follow. Another student drew a comparison between love in *When people are young* and delusions of love in *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. Both female characters in the two novels are somehow pursuing their romantic love and ended with disillusion and disappointment. Being victims of their own dreams and illusions, they both committed suicide. Two characters' life and death, from two periods of time: one in the nineteenth century and one in the modern world, from two places: one in the French bourgeois society and one in Vietnamese social community, share some common ways of thinking and actions. Thus, the exploration within the sphere of global issues have offered insightful approach into the work. Students would then rely on literary techniques, authors' choices to reveal the delusion of love, to address the prompt question. This encourages learners to apply their skills and knowledge in different setting and foster their life-long reading interest and enjoyment.

The individual oral exam is assessed against four criteria, see Table 1.

As can be seen from the table above, a students' answers should meet all the criteria of understanding and interpreting the works and the issue that they share in common. Based on that understanding and on the ground of global problem, they would analyze and evaluate the works from different angles, considering the balance between two extracts. The arguments should be

well-developed and support the main idea, and the language of delivery is relevant and perceptive.

Table 1. Internal assessment criteria from Language A: Guide [9, p.57]

| Criterion | Level descriptor | Marks |
|-------------|---|-----------------|
| Criterion A | Knowledge, understanding and interpretation | 10 marks |
| Criterion B | Analysis and evaluation | 10 marks |
| Criterion C | Focus and organisation | 10 marks |
| Criterion D | Language | 10 marks |
| | Total | 40 marks |

Language A: Guide. First Assessment 2021

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, incorporating global issues into the literature classroom is a logical outcome of globalization, global education and multiculturalism. It encompasses both opportunities and obstacles when applying global issues to teaching Vietnamese A classes in IBDP. The case study of Phan Thi Vang Anh's short stories is a good example to explore the topic in depth as it has improved student's engagement and motivation and provided a breadth of activities to the curriculum. This approach not only offers a framework to explore literary works in multi-faceted light, but also engages students in seeking the solutions to their own problems and international issues. In addition, it adds multiple cultural values to exploring literature in multidimensional world of the twenty first century. To some certain extent, teaching literary works in the light of global issues and multicultural perspectives is a meaningful way of interweaving transnational issues into classroom practice.

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