Introduction

English has often been labelled a boring subject to learn and to teach. Some people see it as just constructing grammatically correct sentences, writing essays and reading books. But from my point of view and experiences as a male English teacher, it is the most fascinating career you can ever undertake. The English profession requires good reading, writing and analytical skills. I would like to refer to Bloom’s taxonomy theory to support my claim. Students at Foundation and degree level are expected to have good literacy skills to cope with the work load at tertiary level. We talk so much about standards and part of my job as an English teacher is to ensure that these “standards” are taught, enforced and encouraged with our students as they are the next public servants who will serve us when we retire. English covers the main skills that are useful for other respective fields of study. Reading skills, report writing skills, analytical skills, critical thinking skills, and reading skills to name a few. My paper will focus on my experience as an English teacher and lecturer in dealing with the challenges that students face when learning English at Foundation and degree level. I will touch on the appealing aspects that English courses such as HEN004 and HEN005 has to offer for students and what they can take from
these courses and use to apply to their reality. I will attempt to connect the literature we teach at
Foundation to the reality of our communities and what happens day in and day out. There is a
saying, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword.’ My concern is that students should sharpen their
mental pens so they can cope with the challenges they face in everyday life.

Situation

English literature at tertiary level is one of the most fascinating experiences I have encountered
when I was a student and now a teacher and lecturer. I take these thoughts with me to every
class I have taught. I also consider the fact that the students I am teaching are speakers and
learners of English as a second language. The content I teach in HEN004: Foundation English
and HEN005: Introduction to Literary studies is no different to the English skills that have been
drilled into the Foundation students when they were at the Primary and College levels. The only
difference is in the level of the content at tertiary level. However, students have their own set of
problems. For me, the main problem is the students’ abilities to “think outside the box”. They
cannot think beyond their own set of self-beliefs. In the study of literature, we encourage our
students to be open-minded and to be critical of knowledge, to question facts and build
character. Only a handful of students are capable of meeting these requirements of our courses
at tertiary level.

There are a handful of students who take the literature course (HEN005) who excel in the course
work and they are students who read widely and have access to reading materials in their
homes. The ones who are less fortunate struggle with understanding certain elements that allow
them to fully appreciate literature, such as symbolism, irony, mood and atmosphere in a story,
knowing the difference in a message and a theme, and relating the situation of a main character
to his or her society. These analytical skills can also introduce them to real life situations that
happen to people in real life. They can learn how to deal with such conflicts and situations if it
happens in their families, homes and communities.
Analysis of genres

In the study of literature, students are taught how to analyse and determine the reasons why a character made a decision and also evaluate the consequences of this decision. For example, one of the short stories studied in the course: The Hat by Judy Parker uses humour and satire to elucidate its message. But for most students, they have to read the story two to three times along with an explanation, and only then they understand the twist at the end of the story. Similarly with the analysis of the selected poems used in the course, students struggle to give implications to the poems and struggle in identifying the “I” in the poem, meaning the main character or persona. An example is the poem “The Sick Rose’ by William Blake which was written in 1794 but still has very many relevant issues that relate to life today. Students are limited in thinking in terms of attempting to analyse a poem through symbolic lenses, in other words, to read between the lines. There are students who can only read the literal meaning and some are often challenged to keep an open mind in analysing some of the content in the poems.

Students who are able to analyse the poems also show their abilities in their essay writing. In tutorial discussions, they express their views about a poem, short story, the drama or an incident in the novel. There are also students that are not as expressive verbally in tutorials but they excel in their essay responses. There are student who rise to the practical and expressive side of literature and those who are natural creative writers. For instance, part of the course work includes a poetry writing assessment and a performance through storytelling or Oral Literature. The English and Foreign Languages night is an annual event on our Department’s Calendar and it is where our student’s extra skills and talents with respect to literature are showcased. The Oral literature genre is very much rooted in the “Fagogo tradition”. The English and Foreign Languages night not only serves as a night of recitals and performances but, it is an opportunity to see other skills that students have. Skills such as organising skills, with group and team work as most students plan and direct their own performances with approval from their tutors. So literature here is seen in its practical aspect which can be presented by performers to an audience.
Another important genre in literature is drama. Drama is concerned with conflict; life is full of minor and major conflicts. Drama in HEN005 attempts to introduce students to challenging situations and they are guided through its content which at the same time, often reveals a possible solution/s to the conflict/s. In reality not all conflicts have a positive ending but it does prepare our students with strategies in dealing with such circumstances that the characters in a play or even in a short skit experience theatrically. Drama is incomplete if it is not performed. Students are exposed to drama scripts and are taught to read and identify aspects such as stage directions, props, and the use of their imagination to picture the time and setting whether abstract, realistic or futuristic. In the tutorials, students follow the story line and focus on more aspects such as the development of characters through their dialogue, monologues and decisions. The plays that have been covered over the last ten years are “Educating Rita” by Willy Russell and “A raisin in the sun” by Lorraine Hansberry. Both plays have universal themes that students can also apply to our Samoan context such as education and opportunities, choices, importance of family, racial prejudice and the importance of dreams. Students according to my observations enjoy the drama ‘Educating Rita’. It portrays a mature lady going back to school which turns a whole new page for her life. Students can learn from her the importance of life-long education as it gives a person a choice or choices in a step towards a career or a future ambition. The drama is known as a “two seater” where on stage, there are only two characters throughout the play but we learn about the minor characters through what they say about them.

The drama ‘A raisin in the sun’ tells the story of a lower-class black American family's struggle to gain middle-class acceptance. American struggle is a new idea for students to conceptualize. Another theme that comes across in this play is identity where African Americans struggle with identity and the sense of acceptance in an area of America where there poverty and prejudice.

Students of HEN005 find this play challenging as they try to contextualize the life style of the characters in the play. The students with advanced thinking skills pick up the situation of the story quickly. Their understanding of the play is shown in their essays and other written exercises which analyse the drama.
One of the more popular genres is short stories. Students find this genre more appealing to their taste. First, a short story is not usually lengthy, it has ideally only one setting, it focuses on one or two main characters and it can be read in one session. The collections used for HEN005 are selected from all over the world. There are short stories from the Pacific, Europe, America and even short stories from long ago. One of the most popular short stories with the students is ‘The Hat’ by Judy Parker. It is one of the shortest short stories in the history of short stories. It is interesting for students because of the ending and it deals with an issue that is very much present in our Samoan church communities today. This genre is a popular choice with students during examination time. This section of the final exam paper is usually attempted by students. Short stories are interesting in the sense that it just focuses on one phase or slice of reality and it captures students’ attention as short stories allows them to see just one aspect of reality centred on the characters or the event that occurs in the story line.

Unlike the short story unit, the novel has more time allocated for its reading and analysis. However, it is a sad reality, that most students do not have a passion or great interest in reading lengthy texts such as the selected novel studied in HEN005. The novel covered is an interesting story of Tauilopepe in Wendt’s ‘Leaves of the Banyan Tree’. Students find it difficult to grasp the language used as the author uses a lot of symbols and figurative language in his prose. Students also find it challenging to accept the context and content of the novel as it depicts Samoa as it is in real life and not some fairy tale such as in the work about Samoa by Margaret Mead. The novel introduces the students to the concept of realism. Most of the students are not aware of the fact that they are reading and studying a novel by someone of their own race, culture and also reading about a piece of their history as the book describes the town of Apia as it was during post-colonial times. The novel goes on to explain things that people do not say in-front of others, such as concerning affairs of the heart, corruption, deception and hypocrisy. These are issues which are still present in societies today. There is also the description of the lifestyle in the village on a Sunday or a day at the plantation. A typical response from the students is laughing at incidents in the novel such as brawls, sex encounters, swearing, and even death. It is something that is realistic to our Samoan communities. We laugh at almost everything.
The students can cope with the content of the course and they excel in the different genres. To me, the most popular one are shorts stories, poetry, the novel, and oral literature. For drama, it was a popular choice when Educating Rita was studied. And now the play “A Raisin in the sun” is recent and students are contextualizing the play as they try to see the play from a Samoan perspective.

The different genres and their different qualities have different appeals to the students. For instance in the study of poetry, the different poems covered gives them an open-minded perspective about issues represented in the poems. An example are the poems that have theme of the different facets of life, such as love, death, acceptance, and identity, social issues such as poverty, the environment, culture and change. Themes covered are the more common ones that also come through in other genres and students are not only reading and learning poems and stories about these issues, but they are also introduced to them as some are sensitive and not talked about in front of parents and elders. Like the poem ‘The Lemon Tree’; children in the Samoan protocol do not ask parents or elders for advice about love or sexual relationships. So they learn about these matters from reading stories and from their peers. The stories studied also touch on issues that are very sensitive and if students or children talk about them openly, it would be seen as questioning authority and considered culturally disrespectful. An example is the poem ‘The Sick Rose’ by William Blake. It has symbolic implications. The poem on the other hand speaks about the truth of reality. Similarly, in a course I have been recently teaching, HEN104: Children’s and Young Adults Literature which looks at analysing literature suitable for young children and is a course offered to primary school teachers, students analyse stories such ‘Little Red Riding Hood’. It was to a surprise that mature primary school teachers did not fully understand the original implications of this famous story. They did see the big bad wolf as a symbolic means of the “evils of men” in society. The reality of young girls being abused as certain levels was not seen as a concern portrayed by the story of the girl in Little Red Riding Hood. It shows that the appreciation of children’s stories is not fully taken into consideration by even primary school teachers in HEN104. It relates to Bloom’s taxonomy (refer to Table 1 and 2). Bloom’s ideals about that higher level of thinking and analysis
which is a skill that is essential for tertiary level and especially for these 100 level students doing Bachelor courses. These are the skills I feel as a lecturer should be taught and drilled from college level in both English and Samoan. There are a handful of students in the Foundation programme who can excel in analytical skills and key to this is LITERACY. These are the skills that can give the student the joy and willingness to take Literature as a major. It all starts with the ability to read and write. But to read at a higher level, to be able to analyse, critique and question why things are the way they are, are very important skills to master at tertiary level.

So literacy can lead students’ to excel in analytical skills, but it also needs proper drilling of language skills. This is where a student’s learning from as far back as reading in Sunday school (Aoga a Faifeau) or in primary school, learning the parts of speech, the basic tenses (present, past and future), the basic structure of sentences (SVO-OVS in English or in Samoan VOS-VSO)
and learning the figurative use of language through figures of speech such as similes and metaphors.

In my teaching experience from college to tertiary level, language has been the more challenging phase of teaching English. This is the technical side of English and students at tertiary seem to take grammar for granted. But I feel if the student does not have a full grasp of understanding in the structures of English and the mother tongue of Samoan; he or she will not grasp and appreciate literature as a course of interest. In my view, students learn the mechanics of language first, before they venture into reading in-depth, reading for understanding and reading for deeper meanings. It is also a concern that we have students at degree level who cannot apply critical analytical skills. These are the students that the Department must engage and work with as they are the ones who will be going out and serving the public in the near future.

So the three key aspects to enjoying literature studies are:

1. Knowing the mechanics of English and Samoan.
2. Being able to read, write, speak in English and Samoan:
3. Being able to apply analytical skills at tertiary level to content and context.

Table 2 demonstrates some of the instructional words and terms that help students to practise analytical skills. It helps them to identify key issues in a play, drama, novel and poem. The table is also applicable to other subjects studied by students at secondary and tertiary level of education.

The questions appear simple to follow but there are students who struggle in expressing themselves by not being able to provide what the question is asking for. For instance, the use of instructions such as; examine, compare, evaluate, the use and application of the 5 W'-H (what,
when, who, why, which and how). These instructional transitions can be used for all other respective subjects and fields as well.

(\text{Table 2: Bloom's taxonomy in action: http://classroomitcs.edublogs.org/2013/04/21/another-learning-framework-dimensions-of-learning/, 2013})

With secondary school English, the main aspects used to assess students are summarized by the acronym FUKA; focus, understanding, knowledge and appreciation. At tertiary level, the assessment criteria are much more detailed and specific. (Refer to marking criteria for literary
essays attached.) The assessment looks more at aspects such as thesis statement, topic sentences, the importance of the use of paragraphs to separate ideas, and the proper acknowledgement and use of references as plagiarism is a serious matter at tertiary level. Referencing, in my view, should be introduced at Year 13, emphasizing especially the importance of acknowledging sources for information used for an assignment, at least introducing the basics which involve the proper citation of references and learning how to write a bibliographic entry.

Referencing is a problem I have encountered with HEN004 students, but for HEN005 students, they focus on the analysis, deeper implications of the genres and their implications and relevance to modern communities. The HEN005 course introduces students at Foundation level learning how to read and appreciate the different genres of literature and also preparing them for literature courses at degree level. The genres are studied separately in courses offered at 100, 200 and 300 levels, that specifically focus on a particular genre. So HEN005 prepares them for the work that comes later if they choose to pursue a major in English literature and language studies.

Students therefore are not only prepared for life experiences but also for the next step in their educational journey if they choose to pursue a degree majoring in English. Furthermore, the skills taught in English are applicable to other respective fields of study and employment. English can teach writing skills. There are reports, memos, writing proposals, translating court documents to Samoan and vice versa, giving a prepared speech, telling a story, giving an impromptu speech or talk, learning debating and argumentative skills. Argumentative skills deal with organising an argument either in the form of an essay or an oral presentation. It concerns putting your argument into a structure that makes it interesting to listen to.

Students need exposure to literature, especially Pacific Literature. They need to be exposed to other writers apart from Ruperake Petaia and Konai Helu Thaman. I think the more they read about writers they can personally relate to, the more capable they are of learning how to analyse creative writing. One of the novels we teach to the students at Foundation level is the ‘Leaves of
the Banyan Tree” by Samoan writer and poet, Albert Wendt. It is interesting that most of the students I have taught in the last ten years did not know who Albert Wendt was. If we could incorporate more writing from other Pacific and Samoan writers, students might be able to connect to the stories and their contents. Today we have new waves of modern writers who have written books and poems about their life experiences. But, in order for students to take literature seriously as a career in the future, they have to be exposed initially to literacy training which should have started at home with parents reading to their children or getting students to take an interest in reading as a pastime. But today’s generation are into iPods, laptops, smart phones, internet and television.

Literature is very much part of everyday life. This is an aspect that students do not truly take into consideration. For instance, there are also students who just enrol in the English literature courses for the sake of getting a good grade to be entitled for a scholarship. There is more concern on getting good marks rather than appreciating the content and context of the genres covered. Only a handful of students take joy and interest in appreciating the selection of poems and short stories. In addition, the poems given also introduce the students to writers from different centuries. For instance, there is a sonnet by William Shakespeare, “that time of year...” and also a poem by William Blake, “the Sick Rose”, “do not go gentle into that good night” by Dylan Thomas and “If” by Rudy Kipling, to mention only a few. There are also poems from the Pacific, from poets like TalosagaTolovae, Nora Vagi Brash, and Albert Wendt. A selection of short stories from Pacific writers is also included in the Course Reader.

We have stories from all over the world. This gives our students a perspective about the world and these texts that are out there for them to explore. It also introduces them to the types of genres that they will encounter when they pursue a major in English literature for their degree studies. One of the most appealing short stories that students respond to is “The tell tale heart” by Edgar Allan Poe. I have found that it helps students’ understanding about issues that are commonplace in our communities. Poe also shows that in life, there are realities such as insanity, anger, hatred and dying. These are things that happen in real life and students learn about it by
reading and reflecting upon it. Similarly, a short story studied “Dear Mr. Cairney” expresses a concern about corporate punishment and parents being protective over their children due to an experience about a student who was punished in school.

HEN005, the Foundation literature course introduces students also to prominent writers of literature. It gives them a scope of the issues that people have faced from the time the text was written, and it is here we witness universal themes and issues. We are able to teach students about history repeating itself, why people behave the way they do and also looking at a slice of the life of the authors from different times with different circumstances, choices and decisions.

Literature studies go on further to introduce students to creativity through writing and performance; performance in the sense of storytelling through oral literature. Students are reminded about a traditional practise, the ‘Fagogo’ which was a common practise after the evening meal in Samoan households which has now been replaced by watching television, listening to the radio and using other modern technologies like mobile phones and computers with social media such as Facebook. In reality, students do tell stories every day. The only difference is to be aware of what a story is and what gossip is? Our Samoan community was once an oral society where information was transmitted through songs and stories passed down by word of mouth. Students are reminded about how people learned and how information was stored and recorded through oral traditions. Oral literature also introduces students to stories of beginnings from other nations. For example, myths and legends from Ancient Greece, teaching aspects such as the difference between morals and values, teaching actions and consequences, cause and effect together with origins.

The study of the novel also comes with its own set of challenges. The first one is reading. Most students are put off by the amount of reading that they have to do for the novel. The novel studied is “The Leaves of the Banyan tree” written by Albert Wendt. The novel consists of three books which allow more room for the characters to develop, unlike the short story and poetry which are quite short. The novel also introduces students to timely reading, considering they are given three weeks to complete reading and discussing the novel with a follow up test and an
essay. The novel is discussed chapter by chapter in tutorials and students are expected to read the novel in their own time. In tutorials, key events and incidents are discussed and explained for the students to pick up the connection of events and its effects on the characters or effects of decisions made by characters on others. The same approach is used for the study of the play.

The ‘transformative learning theory’ attempts to explain how people revise and reinterpret meaning (Wikipedia, 201 looking at two dimensions; ‘habits of mind’ and ‘point of view’. The first dimension is something that is common amongst students. An example is ‘ethnocentrism’ where some cannot accept another point of view other than their own belief and values. The second dimension suggests that a person’s view may change over time as a result of influences such as reflection, appropriation and feedback. So learning takes place when discussing with others the reasons for something to occur in a story or literary text in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative point(s) of view. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_theory_(education), 2014)

This transformative learning theory is also a learning experience for me as a tutor. I think I learn more from the students than what I pick from reading and marking their work. And if that works for me, the same principle of learning should apply to the students when they have group discussions. But there are also students who refuse or have a fear of participating in an open discussion, there are also students who express themselves in the Samoan language even though it is an English literature class. For some of them, when they use the Samoan language, they can clearly explain the plot and the situation but they often cannot do the same as clearly in English. They understand English being read to them but cannot give feedback in English.

A simple example of a short story discussed in class where the students use Samoan language to give feedback is the “Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe. “First published in 1843, it is told by an unnamed narrator who endeavours to convince the reader of his sanity, while describing a murder he committed. The murder is carefully calculated.” (http://en.wikipedia.org, 2014) The reasons described by the main character as motivation for his actions is difficult for some students to grasp, as Poe is one of the most difficult writers of literature with his gothic and horror
stories. Similarly in the short story “My Oedipus Complex”, the ideas put forward by its theme clashes with students’ beliefs. When students are asked about daughters favouring their fathers and vice versa for boys and their mothers, they find it hard to believe and argue against it. But critically, it’s something that happens in every society. The saying “mamma’s boy or daddy’s little girl” is an example of an issue whereby the students argue that an idea in a genre is wrong but the story poses an idea that is commonly universal. Students in Samoa in my experience often refuse to let go of their ethnocentric beliefs. It is through discussion and letting them “pick at it” in class, they come to discover that these issues are indeed relevant to our Samoan society. This is seen when the child is spoilt by the parent of the opposite sex, i.e. the father spoils the daughter and vice versa for the mother and her son. These are the types of themes and messages that literature allows the reader to excavate. Thus, it is imperative that students must have these analytical skills in order to appreciate literature and literacy.

Currently, students face similar challenges of literacy that students experienced in the past. However, to the students’ advantage, they now have access to online copies of books, for example the novel ‘Leaves of the Banyan Tree’ is now online and students can download the novel to their smart phones and other electronic devices. They are learning to use this technology as hard copies of books are more expensive. Our HEN005 course reader alone costs $50.00 tala, so financial cost is another obstacle that students face but in order to pass the course, they need the Course Reader. However, in most cases, students borrow text books from students who took the course in the previous year. Also, there is normally a lot of sharing of text books in tutorials.

Another aspect of the course is the fact that students do not go further and look up information on the authors or the poems and short stories or research whether other people have written critiques on the different genres. Their knowledge is limited to what is printed in the Course Reader.

Conclusion
Overall, my observation of Samoan students and their abilities has been a learning experience. They have the skills and knowledge to pursue literature and take on further studies. I have seen students come and graduate, go abroad and come back to serve as public servants or work in the private sector and I am also aware of students who struggled with their studies especially with literacy skills. They know what must be done to improve their reading and writing but in some instances, they do not care! They are just happy to pass and to be able to get a job. This is why we have graduates who are not performing in the work place. But my main concern is that if students first get exposed to literacy skills like those emphasized in Bloom’s taxonomy theory, only then they will be able to meet needs and demands of society and hence make learning more interesting. It can also help boost their confidence and character to face people because in the work place, literacy at a high level can make communication more efficient and convenient for everyone. Students are competitive in English but the sad reality is that they only do work that is related to a stimulus, meaning they only work for course marks. It is this attitude that has been carried on to the work place, work only for money. Students at the National University of Samoa, in my view have worked hard towards a piece of paper with the notion that it gets them a job. But companies, business and Government ministries need and want active thinkers. Not only that but young graduates are promoted to higher positions such as school principals and yet they have not attained the right skills and experience to meet the obligations and demands of these job descriptions. So, it all goes back to literary skills at the higher levels. These are my views based on my experience as a lecturer in the English and Foreign languages department for the last ten years. NUS lecturers cannot fill all the learning gaps of the students coming to the Foundation programme as we have expectations that the skills they should have and should have covered and learnt at Primary and Secondary levels of the education journey. If the basics are taught at the right time, each level of education should just flow. But we should not blame the fact that English is our second language, which is why we send our children to school. Whether it is at primary, secondary or tertiary, each level plays an important part and competitive students who manage to adapt to high levels of thinking move onto further studies and get jobs.
So everything points back to literacy skills. Literacy skills can help students to understand and appreciate literature. Furthermore, it gives students knowledge to apply analytical skills to different facets of life.

Acknowledgement:

I wish to acknowledge and thank Silafau Professor Sina Vaai for inviting me to be part of this panel of presenters. I am honoured to present and reflect on my experiences as a male English lecturer and special thanks to the Centre of Samoan Studies at the National University of Samoa in hosting conferences such as this to showcase what we have to offer.
References

The English & Foreign Languages Department, (2014), HEN005 Course Reader: Introduction to Literary Skills, Faculty of Arts, NUS, Apia.

Bloom. B, (2000), Bloom’s Taxonomy, (revised), cited in:  

http://julietovar.edublogs.org/2011/05/14/blooms-taxonomy/; date viewed: 18/08/2014
