CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

As Malaysia engages in the knowledge economy and confronts the dynamics of globalization, one of the challenges English language teachers face is to nurture and prepare today’s learners to actively engage in debate and reflection to make the act of learning more personally meaningful to the learners. Traditional skills of gathering information as well as the mere learning of facts will no longer be sufficient to live, work and learn in the new millennium. Learning must be viewed more in terms of an active, creative and socially interactive process and knowledge as something learners must construct and less like something that can be transferred (Harper, 1996).

Concurrent with this stance is a new paradigm shift that suggests the heart of English language teaching has to be about discovering meaning (Foster, 2002). The current educational climate advocates for learners to be actively engaged in learning, constructing understanding and meaning, not merely receiving it. One resonating theoretical framework which underlies this education reform movement is constructivism. The central notion is “the assumption that knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experiences. Learners therefore are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather active organisms seeking meaning” (Driscoll, 1994, p.360).

This is clearly elucidated by reference to a personal response approach to literature, a constructivist approach articulated by Rosenblatt (1978) who argues
that learners’ own experiences and perceptions are brought to the reading task so that in transacting with that text, the meaning which learners construct are their own. Applebee (1993) concurs and suggests that understanding a work of literature does not mean memorizing someone else’s interpretation, but constructing and elaborating upon one’s own within the constraints of the text and the conventions of the classroom discourse community (p. 200).

One practical possibility through which teachers are to able to achieve the above objectives in the classroom is by introducing journal writing to the learners. Responding in journals allows learners to articulate connections between their prior knowledge and new knowledge better (Bruner, 1966). Every method, reading, writing, speaking and listening helps learners to learn in a different way (Emig, 1977) but Britton (1975) insist that only when learners write about the new information or ideas that they are acquiring, in addition to discussions, reading and listening, do they learn and understand better.

The connection between writing and learning has been widely documented, with the act of writing resembling a discovery process, and a way to explore, generate and connect ideas or experiences as well as a means of changing preconceived notions or attitudes and it is with this in mind that I decided to use dialogue journals with my learners with regards to literary texts read in class. Dialogue journal writing promises to be a stimulus in engaging and captivating learners’ thoughts, responses and reflections. This is because the very act of writing asks for engagement, draws the learners’ voices into the classroom dialogue and makes literary study necessarily more personal (Fulwiler, 1987).
Background to the Study

In recent years, there has been a remarkable revival of interest in literature in the ESL context. There have been recommendations that literature should play a larger, more central role in ESL pedagogy (Gajdusek, 1988; Sage, 1987). It was the resurgence of interest in literature combined with an effort to curb the declining standard of English language proficiency among learners in the Malaysian schools that prompted the Ministry of Education to introduce and integrate the literature component into the English Language Syllabus for all secondary schools in year 2000. It immediately gained great import in schools when it was pronounced that the literature component would comprise 20 percent of the English language papers in public examinations. Learners would be assessed on their personal responses to evaluate their understanding and appreciation of literary texts.

The genres offered for study include poetry, short stories and novels. The objectives for the inclusion of the literature component in the English Language Syllabus for secondary school learners are noble. One of the objectives is that learners should be able to:

"iii. Listen to, view, read and respond to different texts and express ideas and opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken or written form." (KPM 2000)

One of the content areas of the literature component in the English Syllabus includes language use for aesthetic purposes. This alludes to the capacity to enjoy literary text at a level appropriate to the learners ability. Learners are also required
to express ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively. Learners should also be able to reflect upon and draw valuable lessons from the issues and concerns of life as portrayed in the literary works and relate them to their own lives and understand and appreciate other cultures. (Ministry of Education, Secondary School English Syllabus, 2000)

Fundamentally, the introduction of the literature component is aimed at enhancing learners’ proficiency as well as fostering learners’ personal development, character building and broadening of outlook through reading about other cultures and world views. In order to make literature more palatable and learner-friendly, local literary works have also been included into the component. It was rationalized that the inclusion of local literary works by local writers like .... would enable learners to develop a better understanding of Malaysians as a ‘people’ due to the fact that learners come from multi racial and multi religious backgrounds.

Statement of the Problem

There is a growing concern among ESL teachers especially in rural schools where learners lack competency in English, on ways to engage and empower learners as both readers and creators of meaning. From my experience, these learners often remain absent in mind and spirit even when they are present in body in the classroom. They choose to remain as passive observers. Those who find courage to actively participate in the literary work read in class are often
targets for peer ridicule which effectively ensures the learners’ silence in subsequent lessons.

The learners’ lack of engagement with the literary text studied could also be due to the learners’ view of knowledge as absolute in comparison to a view of knowledge as contextual (Baxter Magolda, 1992). In this scenario, learners expect the teacher, who often speaks with confidence and expertise, to deposit information into their heads, echoing Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s (1970) banking concept of education where knowledge is deposited into learners not unlike money into savings accounts. Learners therefore surrender to being ‘consumers of predigested knowledge’ (Oyler, 1996, p.3) and as a result repress and silence their own inner voices (Herr & Anderson, 1993). ESL teachers see this dichotomy as counter-productive to the learning process.

Furthermore, in many cases, learners are extremely exam oriented and are averse to ‘wasting’ time reading a text or thinking about it. Instead they endeavour to gain access to an author’s meaning or rather what the teacher perceives to be the author’s meaning in order to answer examination questions. As an alternative, many learners resort to popular revision books available widely in the market which supply possible exam questions and sample answers. This inevitably leads to a loss of their personal interpretations of literature read (Hynds, 1992).

As such, insofar as the teaching of literature is concerned, the onus for change rests on the teacher and there is a need to redefine the teacher’s role to one of “intermediary between author, literary work and receiver” (McRae, 1991,
p.97) in order to empower the learners to construct their own knowledge and make connections between the text and their life experiences.

Hence, this study focuses on creating a space for learners to respond to literature and connect what they read to their own lives through writing dialogue journals.

The primary rationale for introducing dialogue journal writing in my literature class is to tip the responsibility for learning to the learners as well as to encourage learners to inquire, to wonder and most important of all, to make connections. As Emig(1977) and Fulwiler (1987) argued, journaling is tentative, exploratory and allows learners to think around the edges of issues. In journals, learners are liberty to confront points of confusion as well as articulate points of relative certainty. In addition, learners are invited not only to reflect on their learning but also to explicitly assess values and beliefs. This in turn deters passivity and dependence on rote thinking and learning. Journalling is not the only medium that encourages learners to make such connections but it is a visible medium and permits learners to revisit and revise their thinking process (Fulwiler, 1987).

Although my learners' language proficiency is at best 'average', this does not preclude them from the ability to respond to a text. According to Freire, "Reading the world always precedes reading the word and reading the word implies continually reading the world around us" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.35). This reinforces my belief that all learners are capable of responding to texts as each and every one of us is constantly and continually reading the world around
us. Therefore it is of critical essence to embrace meaning centered pedagogy to elicit learners' responses in the classroom. This study attempts to investigate the effectiveness of dialogue journal writing between my learners and me, as well as shared talk in small groups, in capturing the learners' emic perspectives (Neuman, 1997) to literary text read in an actual classroom setting.

Research Questions

This classroom based qualitative study will be driven by the following research question:

How does the use of dialogue journal writing

a. help learners interpret literary texts?

b. act as a springboard to small group discussion?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the interest of the learners, especially learners whose competency in English is below average and learners who show little interest in literature. By engaging in dialogue journal writing and consequently using them as a springboard towards actively participating in small group discussions, learners will not only be responding to the text but also develop abilities to interpret, explore and extend the meaning of the text read. In addition, they will acquire the skills to clarify and refine their thoughts. Due to the nature of dialogue journal writing which requires a written response to literature,
learners learn to construct meaning through writing and further develop their ability to think critically (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

It is hoped that the findings from this study can inform ESL teachers in a similar context about the importance of creating spaces in a real classroom setting to capture learners' voices and perceptions. Apart from that, it is also hoped that the findings would serve as an impetus for ESL teachers to re-examine and review current teaching practices in the field of literature teaching.

Finally and most importantly, this study is carried out in a spirit of enquiry, with increased understanding and improved practice as the intended outcomes.