

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the relevant conceptual and relevant research literature that underpins my study. It is within this theoretical and practical framework that I situate and pursue my study on exploring responses to literature through dialogue journal writing.

Primarily my focus on this chapter is on literature in the ESL context, reader response approach to literature, responding to literature, the reasons for responding, dialogue and knowledge building, dialogue journals, the purpose of dialogue journals and the benefits of dialogue journals.

Literature in the ESL Context

Literature promises inherent benefits for language learners and the pendulum has again swung in support of literature teaching. It plays a larger, more central role in ESL classrooms than ever before (Brumfit & Carter, 1986). In addition to being a linguistic resource for language growth, it also emphasizes the personal development of the reader. Literature is powerful as it provides a genuine context for learners to communicate as they discuss stories, analyze characters, debate issues or explain events (Purves, 1993). The organization of the family unit, traditional and cultural practices as well as daily lives and experiences that touch

upon aspects of real life can be seen through the eyes of the respective writers. Its universality appeals to many varied imaginations (Sage, 1987).

According to Duff and Maley (1990 p. 6) :

“This genuine feel of literary text is a powerful motivator, especially when allied to the fact that literary texts so often touch on themes to which learners can bring a personal response from their own experience.”

Carter and Long (1991, p.3) also assert that , “literature can be a special resource for personal development and growth, the aim being to encourage greater sensitivity and self-awareness and greater understanding of the world around us.”

In the year 2000, literature was incorporated into the English Language Syllabus in Malaysian schools and one of the main objectives of the integration was to enhance learners’ personal development and growth as they make sense of their reading. This draws on the notion that reading is a transactional process (Rosenblatt, 1978) between the reader and the text as “the reader must in a real sense construct the text” (Rosenblatt, 1978). Meaning is shaped by what each reader brings to the reading experience. Thus, literary texts are open to interpretation and no two readers will have the same exact interpretations. This is advantageous as it creates a genuine context for learners to share personal interpretations and exchange ideas. From here, learners can generalize from the text read to other aspects of personal and social significances outside the text (Brumfit, 1985, p.108).

In the ESL classroom, this translates to the fact that literary texts can present numerous opportunities for learners to interact with one another regarding the

literary text read and beyond. Duff and Maley (1990, p.6) state that “literary texts give access to the worlds of personal experience which every student carries within”. Also endorsing similar benefits are Carter and Long (1991) who assert that “literature can be a special resource for personal development and growth, the aim being to encourage greater sensitivity and self-awareness and greater understanding of the world around us” (p.3) .

Thus as a contribution to classroom learning, literary texts possess the inherent ability to engage the reader by encouraging interaction between the writer, the reader and the text. In addition, literature plays a positive role not only in enhancing and enriching learners’ personal development through meaningful reading experiences but also in bridging learners’ experiences to the experiences of the characters in the texts.

Reader Response Approach to Literature

The current trend in the teaching of literature emphasizes the need for learners to express their own responses in reaction to what has been read. McRae (1991) elucidates, “teaching literature has moved towards interaction, reader response and activity work on the texts” (p.9).

The reader response approach to literature has been greatly influenced by the work of Louise Rosenblatt. According to Rosenblatt, reading is a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader’s interpretation reflects both the meaning intended by the author and the meaning constructed by the reader. Meaning does not reside in a text but is made by the reader (Probst, 1994).

Therefore, different readers will have different interpretations of a text as meaning is constructed, interpreted and revised by readers themselves. However, the interpretation, according to Rosenblatt, has to be warranted and reasonable. Every reader has a right to his or her own interpretation as long as the text supports it.

Purves et al. (1990) define response-centered reading in the following way:

- a. An individual will feel secure in his response to a poem and not be dependent upon someone else's response.
- b. An individual will know why she responds the way she does to a poem – what in her causes that response and what in the poem causes that response.
- c. An individual will respect the responses of others as being valid for them as his is for him.
- d. An individual will recognize that there are common elements in people's responses. (p. 47)

Rosenblatt identifies two stances that can be adopted by a reader; the aesthetic and the efferent. The aesthetic stance focuses on what the reader experiences, thinks and feels during reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). It is “the lived through experience” which Sebesta (1997, p.546) describes as “responding from the heart or the creative mind”. In contrast, in efferent reading, the reader's purpose is to carry information away from the text; to learn something rather than to experience something. Reader response approaches generally emphasize the aesthetic stance (Spiegel, 1998) although most reading is on a continuum across the two stances.

While Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response focuses on the elements of reader and text, other reader response theorists emphasize the importance of the context of the reader. In reader response theory, context refers to the many different communities to which the reader belongs to, including both the broad socio-cultural community and the local or situational community, such as the classroom.(Galda, 1992) The various communities to which readers belong to are assumed to influence their responses to texts.

Research has found the following benefits to reader response approaches (Spiegel, 1998) :

1. Growth in ownership of and responsibility for reading and responding. Students, who participate in response-based activities assume more responsibility for reading, running discussion groups and explaining their interpretations.
2. Increased personal connections with literature. With reader response approaches, students tend to make more personal connections between literature, their own lives and the world.
3. Greater appreciation for multiple interpretations. Students develop an appreciation and tolerance for different interpretations and tend to be more open to new ideas.
4. Growth in critical reading and thinking. Students become more reflective and more critical readers who engage in higher levels of thinking and construct richer understandings of what they read.

5. Increased repertoire of responses. Through reader response approaches, students acquire a variety of responses that they can then use with new literature.
6. Growth as strategic readers. Students tend to perceive themselves as successful, confident readers and are more aware of the strategies they use as readers. They also learn to clarify their ideas, develop speed and fluency and become more effective listeners.

Based primarily on the reader response theory of Louise Rosenblatt, reader response approaches are the most meaning centered approaches in responding to narratives. According to Winterowd (1989), "reader response theory allows for the experiences and opinions of the reader and allows the reader to recreate the text" (p.24). Thus, I feel that adapting reader response techniques in the classroom may lure disenchanted readers back as reading would be personally meaningful to their lives and as such it would create a tangible link between the world of school and the world outside school.

Responding to Literature

Reading and writing share similar underlying cognitive processes. Research shows that writing improves reading achievement, reading results in better writing performance and combined reading writing instruction leads to improvement in both areas (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Furthermore, engaging learners in combined reading -writing experiences promotes a higher level of thinking than engaging in either process alone (Braunger & Lewis, 1997).

This concept can be realized in the classrooms by adapting reader response approaches which contain two essential elements – reading and responding. Emphasis is placed on learners reading authentic literature and responding, usually in the form of journals. Often, peer discussion is encouraged following a written response. This serves a dual purpose; firstly it elicits personal response from learners and secondly, it makes the response public through discussion (Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998; Spiegel, 1998). In addition, Spiegel (1998) says that responding in journals helps learners rehearse the ideas they want to talk about in their discussion groups.

Reader response approaches also emphasize talk or discussion as a valued form of response. Spiegel (1998) contends that discussion permits intensive, extended interactions over books or literary text read. Discussion also allows sustained dialogue and a forum in which to raise questions, argue, reflect and negotiate meaning (Noll, 1994 cited in Spiegel, 1998). Dias (1992) states that he prefers discussion to written response as he finds it less censored, less likely to come to closure prematurely and more amenable to quickly capturing thoughts.

Responding to literature is a direct or indirect result of reading , writing or hearing (Cooper, 2000). Inevitably, each and every one of us responds in some way to external stimuli as responding is part of the natural process of constructing meaning. Rosenblatt (1995) opines that each person's construction of meaning is personal and individual, existing between themselves and the text. Hence there can be many acceptable responses to a literary text read.

Personally, I feel that the most important element of reader response theory is the contention that interpreting literature should be a personal thought process and not something that is directed by the teacher to a singular 'acceptable' meaning (Cothorn & Lyman, 1993). Ideally, this means that teachers should not presume to impose their meaning of literary text read on the learners. Instead, all efforts should be made to allow learners the freedom to explore their cache of prior knowledge and make connections with literature read in class. Most important of all, teachers of literature should recognize the unique experiences of each learner and thus promote multiple and diverse interpretations to a text read and subsequently be prepared to accept and even celebrate the diversity of individual responses.

The Reasons for Responding

Cooper (2000) suggests two types of responses to literature; personal and creative. The former are those in which learners tell how they feel about what they have read, including favourite parts of characters and how what they have read relates to their own lives. In the latter, learners respond to what to what they have read through creative means such as art, music and drama (Cooper, 2000).

Applebee (1978) looks at response from a different platform. He distinguishes four kinds of responses, each reflecting a different thought process: retelling, summary, analysis and generalizations. Retelling is an exercise in the recall of the text read; summary is where events are retold in order of importance; analysis is where learners respond personally to the text and generalizations address the

theme or main concept of the text. Many (1991) argues that responding through these activities is within the capability of even the youngest learners because even they are able to generalize or analyze to some degree.

It is important for every learner to be given the opportunity to respond. As learners practice different response methods, their responses begin to develop patterns which show growth in analytical skills, questioning skills, the ability to form an opinion and the increased ability to relate literature to personal experience (Barone, 1990). Equally important is the fact that learners' response in journals provides teachers with information on how they are grappling with the text . Clery and Smith (1993) contend that teachers can gauge this through the learners' engagement with the text and the world. Thus, response adds an element of dynamism to the learning process for learners instead of merely requiring them to regurgitate facts and storylines in a passive teacher-directed classroom.

Responding to literature pushes learners to the next level of learning. In response-centered classrooms, learners are encouraged to develop a sense of ownership, pride and respect for their learning (Hansen, 1987). Regardless of their language proficiency, learners in these classrooms are taught and encouraged to have a sense of pride in their responses as these responses are valued and respected by both their peers and teacher. In these response-centered classrooms where individual responses are embraced and celebrated, learners respond in a manner consistent with their own learning level (Cooper, 2000; Cothorn & Lyman, 1993).

Dialogicality

Knowledge is created and recreated “in the discourse between people doing things together” (Franklin, 1996 cited in Wells, 1997). This the stance that encompasses all aspects of learning based on the social constructivist belief that understanding is constructed in the process of people working together to solve the problems that arise in the course of shared activity. Also deemed equally important is the dialogic mode of interaction which is thought to play a central role in helping the participants engaged in a dialogue to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the issue in question.

Knowledge building is thus always situated in a discourse in which each individual contribution both responds to what has preceded and anticipates a further response. To some extent, as Bakhtin (1986) pointed out, all discourse is dialogic. Not only are the meanings of words “borrowed” from the speech of others, but each “utterance is a link in a very complex organized chain of utterances”. (p.69) Both these ways are “filled with dialogic overtones” (p.92). Hence the dialogic principle is an essential element of any discourse that aims to be “progressive” (Bereiter, 1994).

Bereiter (1994) also suggested the term “progressive discourse” to describe the process by which the sharing, questioning and revising of opinions leads to “a new understanding”. (p.6)

The term dialogue is most often synonymous with face to face interaction because this is how it is first experienced and it remains the most ubiquitous and versatile. (Wells, 1995) However, the process of knowledge building also

includes dialogue that uses writing and other modes of representation. The most important features of “dialogue” that supports knowledge building are responsivity and the attempt to achieve enhanced understanding (Wells, 1995).

Lotman (1988 cited in Wells, 1995) argues that a text can serve a dialogic function becoming “a thinking device” and “a generator of meaning” as written text is a relatively permanent representation of meaning and can be responded to by readers, be critically reviewed and revised, by both writer and readers and be improved and developed upon.

The potential of writing as a means of learning is attested to by some who argue that “writing shapes thinking” (Langer & Applebee, 1987). However, many learners are oblivious to this strand of reasoning. Owing to the undue emphasis given to examinations which demand accurate reproduction of information from the textbooks, many learners resort to “knowledge telling” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

As a result of this unfortunate phenomenon, there is a dearth of dialogue in most classrooms today (Lemke, 1990). The prevailing perspective of knowledge throughout the years of schooling is that of a commodity that is either stored in individual minds or in texts. It is treated as something that can be transmitted from one person to another. Thus, classroom dialogue is often seen by both teachers and learners as an unnecessary extravagance in a schooling system that glorifies the end product, which is gauged through examination results, instead of the process of knowledge building. In such a system, learners who aspire to succeed need only read and listen attentively to the knowledge imparted through

authoritative texts and presentations by the teacher and retain the information for subsequent reproduction.

Due to this, learners are often bewildered by the prospect of generating original responses to literary texts they are reading. Even when learners find certain areas that intrigue them, they are often at a loss as to the position they ought to take in response to ideas in the text read. In instances such as these, writing can help learners respond effectively and discover interesting viewpoints. In order to accomplish this, learners need to understand that writing is not merely a means of telling but can be a means of knowing as well. Many writers claim that they do not know what they think about a certain topic until they write about it. To quote C.J. Lewis about his writing,

“ I do not sit at my desk to put into verse something that is already clear in my mind. If it were clear in my mind I should have no incentive to write about it, for I am an explorer... When I have discovered the meaning to me of the various fragments of experience which are constellating in my mind, I have begun to make sense of such experience and to realize some pattern in it.”

(quoted in James Mc Crimmon's "Writing as a Way of Knowing")

Writing, thus, has properties that promote individual , sustained intellectual thought in ways very different from other modes of response as it can be used for knowledge transformation (Wells, 1995) and knowledge building. Learners who write about ideas have the advantage of constructively and critically engaging

with it and trying to anticipate the likely response of the audience. In this way, the learner is actually carrying on a dialogue with the text being composed.

The special properties of writing are articulated clearly by Neil Postman (1985) in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

“Writing freezes speech and in so doing gives birth to the grammarian, the logician, the rhetorician, the historian, the scientist – all those who must hold language before them so that they can see what it means, where it errs, and where it is leading” (p.35).

This is the principle underlying many initiatives in literature based reading and writing programmes in which learners read and engage with texts, write responses to texts read and co-construct meaning during interaction, either orally with peers or through other means like participating in dialogue journal writing with their teachers as their dialogue partners. In this way, writing legitimizes for learners the value of their private voices and helps them to explore what they know, what they don't and what is questionable. It adds vital dimensions to individual expressions and engagement with a text read as well as helping them to find, shape and extend their voices. (Fulwiler, 1984)

In addition, learners' written responses are legitimate documents which provide the most satisfying evidence to a teacher on how well the learners have been able to delve into, analyze, synthesize and respond to a piece of literary text read in class.

Dialogue Journals – What are they?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation, or more precisely, a conversation on paper between the learner and the teacher (Artwell, 1984; Graves, 1983). The most distinguishing factor that sets dialogue journals apart from other types of journals is the importance given to communication between the learner and the teacher (Tierney et. al. 1990). Dialogue journals add an additional dimension to the process of journaling; they incorporate the powerful dimension of dialogue through teachers reading and responding to learners' journal entries. Over time, teachers and learners are able to carry on evolving conversations through sharing ideas, feelings and concerns in writing (Cooper, 2000; Staton, 1987). The input or guidance from the teacher allows learners to construct meaning more effectively.

In a dialogue journal the teacher is primarily a participant in an ongoing written conversation with the learner rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the quality of the learners' writing. To be precise, what learners write is written to be read and not written to be graded for exams. Thus the implication is clear; the criterion for authenticity is important as the primary goal of writing is communication.

Dialogue journals are functional as well as interactive. The topics are mostly self-generated and both the teacher and the learner write to each other in an informal, direct style about topics of mutual interest on a regular basis (Staton, 1987).

The first documented use of dialogue journals was in the 1980s with sixth grade students, both native and non-native English speakers, in California (Peyton, 1996). Leslie Reed, a teacher in Los Angeles first used dialogue journals to meet several needs; to get to know her students better, to get feedback on lessons, to improve classroom discipline and to involve each student in meaningful reading and writing. At present, dialogue journals are used in various educational milieus, both with children and adults, with native and non-native English speakers and in many different languages (Peyton,1996).

One use of dialogue journals in an English class is as a form of response journal that allows learners to have a “conversation” in writing with their peers or their teacher about their reading. In these journals, learners write a response to their reading and the teacher writes a response back to the learner, offering opinions, personal connections to the original response or other ideas that the response triggered. Also in these journals, learners could write predictions about plot, analyses of characters, insights about theme or even appraisals of the author’s technique (Simpson, 1986). Dialogue journals used in this way presents a viable platform for learners and teachers to share their reactions to literary texts read in class.

The Purpose of Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journal writing is consistent with a learner-centered curriculum orientation in which learners write to express themselves, to make sense of their

own and others' experiences and to develop their abilities (Auerbach, 1999). In dialogue journal writing, learners have the freedom to express their own understanding of literary works in contrast to the teacher's understanding. Learners also make connections between reading and writing by combining the two and constructing their own meaning (Tierney et. al. 1990).

The force compelling teachers to use dialogue journals in response to reading literature can be directly attributed theories of social constructivism (Graves, Watts-Taffe & Graves, 1999). Journalling presents opportunities for informal writing experiences that encourage personal reflection and growth whilst allowing learners to connect what they learn through social interactions in connection to literature read. In addition, journaling also introduces learners to view writing as a method of knowing oneself and one's world (Staton, 1987). This type of writing can also be an important component of a critical inquiry approach, as learners and teachers think critically together about texts and events that affect them and respond in writing.

According to Shanahan (1998), in order to communicate effectively, learners must have three essential components; knowledge, flexibility and awareness. Dialogue journals allow for these three variables. Barone (1990) succinctly sums up:

“ The dialogue journal can help learners discover that both writing and reading require awareness of and collaboration with others, not merely

putting words on paper in a vacuum or absorbing information that has magically appeared.” (p.364)

Dialogue journal writing in which two participants converse in writing serves as a bridge between natural spoken conversation with its participants and turns and the traditional classroom tasks of composing essays and writing reports to an unknown or fictitious audience. Engaging in dialogue journal writing also allows learners to develop more coherent self-expression and a personal ‘voice’- both essential aspects of writing which are often lost when basic composition skills are stressed in classrooms (Staton,1987) .

Claims have also been made by educational theorists that responding in journals allow learners to individually reflect upon cultural roles. These cultural roles are reflected upon through decision making and self-awareness within learners’ responses in their journals (Cothorn & Lyman, 1993). In addition, journals have a metacognitive function and can serve as an audit of meaning that enables readers to revisit their ideas for assessment and possible revision (Berthoff, 1987 cited in Spiegel, 1998).

Dialogue journals also act as tools which allow the teacher to really listen to the learner as an individual in his/her own right (Staton, 1987). This in turn enables the teachers to understand the dynamic mind of the learner. Apart from this, some learners may be reluctant to write in their journals without the support of a response from the teacher. It is therefore important to have a teacher to write to and who will in turn, write back (Staton, 1987).

The Benefits of Dialogue Journals

Teaching is by nature an extremely demanding profession and due to time constraints teachers have precious little time to give individual attention to every learner in the classroom. Dialogue journal writing extends the teacher's contact time with learners by creating a legitimate space for a personal relationship to flourish between learner and teacher in which both academic and personal concerns may be discussed. To borrow Leslee Reed's expression, the teacher can then "have a constant finger on the pulse of each student" (Staton et. al. 1988, p.71).

Dialogue journal writing also represents and embodies a concrete application of Vygotsky's theory that learning of functional human activities occurs first through the learners' cooperative participation in accomplishing tasks with a more experienced partner. By creating a dialogue setting , the teacher supports the learners emerging reading and writing competencies and the acquisition of more complex reasoning skills (Kreeft, 1984).

Dialogue journals also provide opportunities for learners to engage in open communication through reading and writing. Each learner in turn benefits differently from this exercise. Research has shown some of the following benefits:

1. Opportunities to engage in reflection about experiences and to think together with an adult about choices, problems and ideas (Staton, 1987).

2. Opportunities to engage in a natural, purposeful way in different kinds of writing – narration, description, argumentation and even poetry and thus using all the functions of language (Kreeft & others, 1985; Staton & others, 1987).
3. Opportunities to read a personalized text – that is the teacher's written responses about topics the learner has initiated . The teacher's responses provide clear, comprehensible language for learners to absorb subconsciously as a model of language acquisition (Kreeft & others, 1985).
4. The development of learners' communicating, thinking and learning skills whereby according to Staton's study, "dialogue journal combination of purposeful, heuristic writing and the dialogic , responsive structure create cognitive demands on the student to elaborate his or her own thinking, and to become involved in examining the situation from the perspective of another person" (Staton, 1988, p. 317).
5. Marked development in the comprehension at the emotional level involving moral rights and wrongs and increased sensitivity to other people were also recorded by Reed (1988) in her investigation on the use of dialogue journals in her own classroom context.
6. Dialogue journal writing being interactive in nature enables learners to develop a greater understanding of the importance of audience which in turn helps them to shape their writing (Vanett & Jurich, 1990).

Many a research shows that participating in dialogue journal writing can indeed contribute to learners' development in numerous ways. However, there have also been some negative results reported. Anderson (1993), says that learners have complained about being "journalled" to death due to its wide use in many classes. Also a study by Shelton (1992) revealed that learners' writing did not improve as the same errors were repeated throughout the year.

Dialogue journal writing between learners and teachers promises both immense potentials as a tool of learning, as well as some drawbacks. Thus, its implementation might prove useful in some classroom contexts whilst proving otherwise in some other contexts.

In this chapter, I have drawn comprehensively on the appropriate literature to help situate this study within its theoretical and practical paradigm. In the following chapter, I will discuss the procedures I used for gathering and analyzing the data for this study.