

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this classroom-based qualitative case study of dialogue journal writing between me and four ESL learners, I, as a teacher-researcher, sought to gain insights on the usefulness of dialogue journals in an English literature class in eliciting learners' response to literary texts read. I was also intrigued to ascertain if learners' dialogue journals could be used successfully as a springboard to fuel small group discussions.

In this chapter, I describe the procedures I employed to conduct the study by first justifying my research approach. To delineate the context of the research, I will then describe the research setting and the beginnings of this present study. This is followed by a profile of the key participants, duration of the study, the texts used for the study, the teaching and learning activities in the class as well as the procedures for data collection and data analysis.

The Case Study Approach

Qualitative methods are used to provide an in-depth description of a specific practice or programme (Mertens, 1998). Merriam (1998) supports this view by

defining a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit which is particularistic, descriptive, heuristic and relies heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources”(p. 21).

In adopting the qualitative case study approach to answer my research questions, I have not only drawn on the above definition as a framework but I have also relied on Denzin and Lincoln's (1994 cited in Mertens, 1998) definition of a qualitative research, which is:

“...multi method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of , or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them.” (p.2)

I feel that this approach is the most suitable in conducting this study whereby learners responses to literature are elicited through dialogue journal writing as it allows for detailed probing which gives way to an in-depth study to arrive at a rich, thick description (Gertz, 1973) of the phenomenon being investigated.

The Research Setting

I conducted this study in a national type secondary school that I teach in which is situated in Port Dickson. With a teaching staff of 48, this school houses a

student population of 1187, comprising of 37 % Malays, 44 % Chinese and 19 % Indians in a total of 28 classes, from a Remove class to Fifth Form classes.

There are five other secondary schools in the surrounding area and this school is one of parents' last choices for their children due to its former reputation as a "gangsters" school where fights were de rigueur. Although the school is now quite a pleasant place to teach and learn, it is still remembered by many in the area as a school for "undesirable" students and thus the students who are here at present comprise of the weakest students from the primary schools around. Many who come here only managed to score Cs, Ds, and Es in their Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Assessment). Only a handful come with As and Bs. All the other students with excellent results choose one of the other schools to go to.

Generally, the students in this school are not academically inclined and are merely serving time until they complete either form three or form five. Many stop schooling voluntarily or are dismissed from school due to repeated disciplinary problems such as truancy, vandalism, gang fights, and thefts . Only the top two classes of every form contain a few relatively good students.

This study involved four key participants in Form 4 Raya, the only pure science class in Form 4, the others being art stream classes. There are only 19 students in this class and they have been placed here expressly to fill up the ratio for the sciences as they lack the knowledge, skills, interest, drive and commitment to cope with the rigours of studying the sciences. There are 7 male and 12 female

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students in the class but only a total of five can speak English passably well. The other students hardly ever speak English and if forced to speak during English lessons, do so in an awkward, stumbling, stuttering hesitant manner. Thus, in relation to general proficiency in English, most of these students could be categorized as below average or average learner.

Beginnings of the Study

Every year when the SPM examination results are announced, the teachers will be in a state of anxiety. The cause is simple and is a recurring one every year; will the results of our school drop yet again and will we be relegated to one of the last positions in the Port Dickson area once more, making our school a laughing stock among fellow teachers and a source of embarrassment to all of us. The teachers' anxiety however is not shared by most of the students. Even when they receive dismal results, they are still in a joyous mood as they have finally completed their enforced schooling and can obtain their leaving certificates to be presented to future employers.

Being teachers however, we are not allowed any excuses. Results, after all speak for themselves and this means we have once more failed in our duty as teachers. Countless reports have to be written to justify the results without laying the blame on the students. Staff meetings and panel meetings are held to come up with various plans of action to improve the students' performance, in order to be at par with the other schools in the area, disregarding the crucial factor of unequal intake at the initial stage. Teachers, especially those who teach in the upper forms,

live in a state analogous to a “pressure cooker”. We are constantly pushed and prodded by the administrators to produce “better” results.

In the year 2004, I was assigned to be the form teacher of 4 Raya with the reminder that these students are supposed to be the cream of the crop among fourth formers and thus will have to be moulded to do extremely well in their SPM examinations in the following year. However, as their English language teacher, I was disappointed with their dismal performance in class especially during literature periods. Their indifferent, apathetic attitude during literature classes were a source of extreme annoyance to me. Despite numerous attempts to get them to respond in class, many could not care less and spoke in their mother tongue most of the time, concerning matters which were far removed from what was going on in class. To them responding in class was not important as everything they would need to know for the exams could be found in the numerous revision books which they religiously bought.

Against such a backdrop, I decided to introduce dialogue journal writing to these students as a form of response to literary texts read in class. Five students immediately indicated their interest in the endeavour. The others were not interested. After writing once, one student, who was the only male student, dropped out as he said that he was too busy with other things in his life which included making a play for any girl who passes by the class. Hence, I was left with only four participants, all of them female, and we carried on discussing our concerns in writing about the things we read in the literature class. Consequently,

I was able to study the effectiveness of eliciting response whilst dialoging with my students using the written mode followed by discussion in a small group.

The Key Participants

The key participants in this study were four female students, Veni, Yasha, Ai Ling, Li Hoon and myself as teacher-researcher. The students were chosen solely based on their willingness and interest to participate in the study.

The Student Participants

All four participants can speak English albeit in a hesitant manner. Due to a lack of fluency, they shy away from voicing their perceptions and viewpoints pertaining to the literary texts read in class.

Among them is Veni, a traditional looking Indian girl with waist-long plaited hair. She lives with her lorry driver father and her mother, who is a homemaker, together with her five younger brothers, in a small two – roomed house, nearby the school. She appreciates her parents' sacrifices in educating her and loves them very much. She helps out her mother with the housework and prefers to be a homebody. Among her leisure activities are reading Tamil literature books as well as watching Tamil movies on television. She is also a pious girl who religiously

goes to the temple. Veni comes across as a rather quiet, obedient girl who is quite mature for her age.

Yasha is a tall, dark girl who is very concerned about outward appearances. She constantly comments on various teachers' clothes, their make-up and the fragrances they use. She comes from a strict family background, whereby her labourer father often slaps and beats her with a belt for any wrongdoing perceived including arguing with her younger sister and forgetting to pick the dried clothes from the line. According to her, after her only younger brother passed away the previous year in an accident, her father became even more short tempered and thus she has to be careful not to anger him. Although she comes from such a background, I find her to be quite outspoken and independent. There are times though that she seems rather pensive and withdrawn.

Ai Ling is a school prefect and she is a courteous and hardworking girl. She is attentive in class and makes an effort to communicate in English to me. Although she religiously completes all her English schoolwork and homework, she ruefully confesses that she never reads any English books or magazines at home, preferring instead to read Chinese novels. Born to a fishmonger and his wife who sell fish and vegetables from house to house in a small van, she helps her parents during weekends. She also works as a part-time sales promoter for various products ranging from ice-creams to biscuits and cakes in a local supermarket. She has three younger siblings who are all girls and they live in a small wooden house in a village along the coast. Ai Ling's fondest wish is to be an air hostess so that she will be able to travel around the world and experience all

the places she now sees in the "Discovery, Travel and Adventure" channel, incidentally her favourite channel. She yearns to escape the confines of living in a small town where according to her "nothing interesting ever happens". Despite not being outstanding academically, Ai Ling realizes that the only way out for her is through education and thus she works very hard to succeed.

On the first impression, Li Hoon appears to be a rather quiet girl. However, she is a determined person whose ambition is to be a businesswoman. Coming from a family of eight, she is the second child. Her father is a lorry driver and her mother is a homemaker. Living in a small single storey terrace house with only three bedrooms, one of which is used as a storeroom, she says that there is no peace of mind or privacy for her in the house. In addition, since she has six younger siblings, the smallest of whom is only three months old, she is kept very busy doing household chores in the house. She is rather bitter that her elder sibling, being a male, escapes all the drudgery of housework. Due to this, she is determined to do well in her studies as it would be her passport to greater things. Although she knows that English is an important language, she hardly uses it out of the English lesson as she feels comfortable conversing in Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia. Moreover, according to her she rarely speaks English as the other students would make fun of her and tell her that she was putting on airs. Because of her circumstances, Li Hoon is a very capable and responsible girl with a mind of her own.

The Teacher-Researcher

In 1986, just after I had completed my fifth form at a convent school, I was offered a full scholarship by the government to pursue my studies in the United Kingdom for six years. I was ecstatic, the only damper being I had to return home and be a teacher, a vocation that I had never before associated with myself. Thus, I became a teacher by default.

In my youthful arrogance I thought I would be a far better teacher than many who had taught me. Reality quickly taught me the difference between theory and actual practice and how hard it is to be a good teacher. On my worst days, I have often entertained the thought of throwing in the towel and turning my back on the teaching profession. But somehow I have persevered because along the way there *have been many unexpected rewards; students who have excelled despite great odds against them and the pure joy of being with young minds.*

With a resolution to further develop myself professionally, I enrolled in a post graduate course (*Masters in TESL*) at the University of Malaya in 2002. My re-acquaintance with the world of academia had a significant impact on my teaching practice. I began to view the whole process of teaching and learning with new lenses.

This study grew due to an inherent interest in the area of making the study of literature a more meaningful experience for the students. I was especially interested to explore how students respond to literary texts via the written mode and how they relate the experiences in the texts to the personal aspects of their

lives . This interest developed when I encountered an abundance of literature that expounded the marvels of reader-response theory and the transactional nature of reading literature.

Fundamentally, I had to assume dual roles in conducting this study, that of a teacher and a researcher. As a researcher, I took notes of what I heard, saw and experienced and audio-taped small group discussions and interviews. Upon assuming a teacher's role, I wrote dialogue journals with my students and discussed literature in class as well as in small discussion groups. In this way, I continuously juggled between the insider and the outsider roles.

Duration of the Study

The study was carried out over a period of eight weeks. The literary texts chosen were taught during literature periods in class, which only consists of forty short minutes, and students answered structural questions in order for them to be able to answer similar examination questions. The reality of an actual classroom with disinterested learners and a limited time period did not allow for in depth discussions. The participants involved in the study met me after school hours, once a week, to further discuss the literary texts read in class and write in their journals.

Texts Used

The literary texts used for the purpose of this study comprised of two short stories which have been stipulated for form four students. The short stories included "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant which tells of a couple who had to toil and live in abject poverty for ten years because they had to replace the loss of a 'diamond' necklace which the wife, Mathilde, had borrowed from a rich friend in order to attend a grand ball in style. The second story, "The Drover's Wife" by Henry Lawson is a story about a drover's wife and her children who are left alone in the Australian bush for months on end to fend for themselves whilst the drover is out droving cattle. The life of a drover's wife is portrayed as an extremely lonely one, without the companion of other adults. In addition, danger lurks in every corner in the form of various wild animals in the bush.

I chose these two stories because both are essentially about strong female characters. Since my participants were all girls, I was inclined to think that they would easily identify with the female characters.

Data Collection

Owing to the qualitative nature of the study, data was collected throughout the eight weeks in which the study was conducted (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). The multiple data gathering techniques which typically dominate in qualitative inquiries were used: participant observations, audio-taped transcriptions, students' dialogue journals, teacher-researcher field notes and semi structured interviews. In order to ensure triangulation within the process as well as to increase the rigour

of the data collection procedures (Neuman, 1997), I gathered as many points of view as possible by using multiple data gathering procedures documenting my own observations of certain behaviours or phenomena, the talk in discussion groups, conversations with students and also written information in journals.

Participant Observation

As a teacher-researcher, I assumed different roles at different occasions during the study “examining a phenomenon or a behaviour while it is going on”. (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p.162) During group discussions I played a dual role. Firstly, I took on the role of an active participant, sharing insights and personal views about the texts read with the students and I also scaffolded the talk by asking questions to help students to review and reflect on what they have read. Secondly, and most importantly, I assumed the role of an observer whereby I observed and listened to students’ discussions whilst jotting down field notes and also audio-recording the ongoing talk.

Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals being written conversations between the students and me regarding the literary texts read in class, yielded the bulk of the data for this study. To stimulate the students into responding in their journals, I wrote down some questions for them to reflect upon before they even began reading their texts. The

questions range from the very general such as “Do you like the story? Why?” or “Do you dislike the story? Why?” to more specific, such as “Why do you think Mathilde married Mr Loisel ?” and “What would you have done if you had been in Mathilde’s place and you had just lost a diamond necklace belonging to your friend?” The students had to read the text at home as there was insufficient time to read it during class. Their journals, however were written in school after school hours as there wasn’t sufficient time during class. I stipulated this condition as I did not want them to merely reproduce notes from their revision books and cheat themselves out of a valuable learning experience. After each journal writing session, *I collected their journals, read their comments and responded with my own thoughts and some probing questions over their responses.* According to Brookes (1988), questions which are provocative in nature bring out a more powerful response in writing.

I then returned the journals to the students and based on my comments and questions, they again wrote in their journals. Having written their thoughts and reflections, they are prepared to enter into a discussion with the other key participants.

Fieldnotes

Throughout the period of the study, I maintained a journal in which I wrote an account of what I saw, heard and experienced as well as personal reflections on the activities in the classroom and the talk that took place in the discussions. I

often revisited my journal entries as the study progressed and added in further reflections which provided me with valuable insights into the dynamics of the class as a whole and of the key participants in particular.

Interviews

I conducted four informal interviews with the key participants at various points during the study. The first interview was conducted at the initial stage of the study to obtain participants' background information pertaining to their family and their past literacy practices. The second and third interviews were conducted after the participants had completed all their journal entries for each story read in class in order to probe further into their individual responses. The final interview was carried out to elicit students' opinions regarding the use of dialogue journals as well as discussions in the learning of literature. Open ended questions were asked to allow students the leeway for more personal responses. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) say that interviewing allows us to see how "the actors themselves construe their actions...as we get the actor's explanation" (p.65). Interviews also allowed me to check the impressions I gained through my observations (Fraenkel & Wallen,1996).

All the interviews as well as the group discussions involving the key participants were audio-taped and transcribed. This source of data proved to be helpful in substantiating and validating other sources of data in order to reach conclusive insights.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data I collected from dialogue journals, fieldnotes, discussions and audio-taped transcriptions in an inductive manner whereby I went through the process of "making sense" (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985, p. 202) of the data I had collected. Data analysis was an ongoing process during the course of the study as I read and re-read different parts of the data collected and coded it into broad categories. I then examined the data for recurring themes or patterns which constitute the findings of this study. By triangulating my data collection methods as well as the sources of my data, I intended to further strengthen the validity and reliability of my study. According to Brown (1996, p.16), people and their interactions are more than a collection of objective, measurable facts: they are seen and interpreted through the researcher's frame – that is how she or he organizes the details of an interaction, attributes meaning to them and decides (consciously or unconsciously) what is important or what is of secondary importance or irrelevant. Thus in a qualitative study where the teacher is also a researcher researching his or her own practice, there is rarely a totally objective point of view. However, I have tried to maintain objectivity as much as possible by trying to interpret the findings 'correctly' based on the context of the research.