

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

This exploration of reading and responding to literary texts is anchored in constructivism, a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of literature is a constructivist strategy whereby meaning is located within the reader's interpretation rather than in the text, thus texts do not possess any fixed meaning or value and there is no one 'correct' meaning. Instead, literary meaning and value are transactional and dialogic in nature, created by the interaction of the reader and the text. Thus the assumption is that the teaching of literature is equivalent to improving the capacity to evoke meaning from the text. Dialogue journal writing between the learners and the teacher presents a possible solution as a means to achieve the above objective.

In this final chapter it is obligatory that I provide a summary of my key findings, discuss their implications for the teaching of literature in the ESL context, suggest possibilities for future research and conclude the study. Included in this section are also my reflections on being a teacher-researcher.

## Summary of Findings

In this section, I will discuss the key findings with reference to my research questions; The use of dialogue journal writing in helping learners interpret literary texts and the use of dialogue journal writing as a springboard to small group discussion.

### The Use of Dialogue Journal Writing in Helping Learners Interpret Literature

Dialogue journal writing between learners and the teacher has been gaining increasing recognition and recommendation as a pedagogical tool in ESL classrooms (Peyton & others, 1993). It is, however, a relatively new tool in the Malaysian classroom especially in relation to literature. The findings of this study indicate that dialogue journal writing in a literature class has considerable advantages for the learners as well as for the teacher.

Learners who previously tended to remain as detached spectators in the literature class as well as in relation to literary texts read, were transformed into relatively active creators of meaning in their dialogue journals as they formed a close engagement with the texts. Once engaged, learners demonstrated that they could make connections between the texts and their lives. It must be emphasized that scaffolded assistance (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Moore, 2000) in the form of questions and feedback from the teacher proved to be invaluable in helping learners in reflecting and responding. Purves (1993) also concurs with this

rationalization as he says that questions help in the development of a knowledgeable and articulate reader. Most importantly, all the learners involved in this study agreed unanimously that the two elements, questions as well as feedback from the teacher, acted as guides in helping them access the text and consequently, reflect in their journals.

Dialogue journal writing between the learners and me also revealed a drive for meaning as learners thought about and responded to literature in new ways, thus guiding them to a deeper understanding of the literary texts read. In the process of engaging and constructing meaning, the learners' psychological and emotional reactions to the texts were revealed (Corcoran, 1987). They took sides, assigned blames and passed judgments on the characters' actions and behaviours. It was gratifying to see them involving themselves intellectually and emotionally in the process of meaning making.

There were also times when learners distanced themselves in order to address and evaluate the decision making skills of the characters and to reflect on how they would respond personally in a given situation. As literature deals with "the universals of human experiences" (Marckwardt, 1978, p.46), the learners also tried to make sense of real life issues like responsibility, greed, pride, materialism and also divorce as depicted in the stories. In grappling with these issues, the learners drew on their own life experiences to clarify meaning. Some learners related similar experiences which happened in their lives and in a sense I feel that in this way, not only do learners gain a deeper understanding of the texts but they also experience a cathartic feeling as they are able to write about events that have

transpired in their lives to a non-judgmental audience. This is important as learners will realize that events in their real lives are similar to those that happen to other people who may live miles apart, sometimes in different eras altogether and I feel that such a realization helps them to put matters into perspective. One definite idea that my learners will take away from dialogue journal writing is the feeling that their personal responses to literature are valued pieces of writing and are important in the larger scheme of things.

Owing to the fact that my learners had never before participated in any form of journal writing and taking into account their history of participation in class, I feel that this maiden voyage into dialogue journal writing was successful as it managed to lure the learners to read the texts and respond meaningfully without having to resort to short cut measures through revision books. Although the learners' language proficiency is not very high, it was not a barrier in responding in their journals. With further practice I am confident that learners' level of communicative competence will improve in tandem with their critical thinking skills.

#### The Use of Dialogue Journals As a Springboard to Discussion

Having read the assigned stories, responded to them and dialogued with me in their journals, I was assured that my learners had something to talk about in our discussion group. My goal was to encourage learners to share their diverse responses to literature and to create a literary community where learners can

ultimately orchestrate quality conversations about literature independently, where each member of the group would benefit equally from the interaction.

I was surprised at the nuances and dynamics of the discussions that followed dialogue journal writing. Learners who had previously demonstrated extreme reluctance to talk in class actively participated in the group discussions with a feeling akin to enjoyment. They co-operated with each other and showed a willingness to listen with an open mind. With these positive vibes, the discussions were lively and helped learners to view the stories from different perspectives and in the process, deepen their own understanding. In addition, by taking part in such a discourse, learners were being trained to take part in a disciplined discourse whereby they had to think in a logical and reasonable way in order to elucidate their views and they also had to modify their responses in relation to the arguments of others. This kind of open-ended literary discussion is an ideal laboratory to stimulate imagination, develop thinking and increase emotional awareness (Lazar, 1993) whereby the sharing of ideas enriches learners "to develop as readers and responders to literature" (Howard cited in Brown, 1987,p.97) and I feel these are some of the most important reasons for reading literature.

### Implications for the Teaching of Literature in the ESL Context

The most important outcome of this study is the realization that for a learner, the act of putting pen to paper and writing can be an important index to intellectual thought and development. According to post-modern theorists of education, Aronowitx and Giroux (1991), literacy is basically about individual meaning making rather than about form. The dialogue journal fulfills such a criteria and is an excellent tool which can be utilized in literature classes as it invites engagement, draws the learners' voices into the classroom dialogue and makes literary study more personally relevant to the learners' lives (Fulwiler, 1987) Before such an undertaking is put into motion however, there is a pressing need for teachers to shift their traditional ways of constantly juxtaposing every effort in the classroom with standardized tests or report cards thus viewing each and every piece of learners' written work as a product to be evaluated to viewing it as a process of knowledge building. In this way, when learners participate in dialogue journal writing, value is placed on what they have to say and not on how grammatically well they say it. In dialogue journal writing, great value is placed on the learners' emerging voices and this is not something a teacher can see in a monthly test or an everyday essay.

From the teacher's perspective, dialogue journal writing in a literature class provides grounded evidence of how much and how well the learners know the literary texts read in class. This can be an important means of formative evaluation for the teacher as it allows the teacher to gauge learners' needs as well

as their progress, for future teaching and learning development of literature in schools.

As teachers we are often preoccupied with setting five -year targets, filling in reams of forms, report cards and various other administrative chores that we often neglect one of the most important aspects of what teaching should be all about; forming a closer bond with our learners in order to make teaching and learning a more meaningful activity for all so that learners will not feel left out and teachers will enjoy a sense of fulfillment which is now lacking in most of us. Dialogue journal writing reduces the distance between the teacher and the learners as it is a dialogic activity which transforms the participants into a community of learners who are involved in an interpersonal and collaborative activity of meaning making.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Interest in the teaching of literature in the ESL context is growing but often in the classroom milieu it is not attended to as it should be and is treated like any other comprehension text with a set of common strategies to answer a list of generic questions. Thus, the presence of literature is almost invisible as there is no emphasis on the dynamics of particular texts in relation to a particular set of learners.

In view of this, studies that explore the teaching and learning of specific kinds of literary texts in different contexts will prove to be exciting as well as enlightening. To date, there are numerous conflicting theories and methods of instruction surrounding the issue of teaching literature. What is needed now are studies that generate theories grounded in practice which explore the complexities of actual learners in particular classrooms accessing particular literary works. More such studies are needed from multiple, informed voices, preferably from those who are directly involved in the teaching process, be it in schools, or institutions of higher education, as these will in turn benefit scholarship as a whole.

#### Reflections On Being a Teacher-Researcher

According to Donald Freeman (1998), being a teacher-researcher means connecting “the ‘doing’ of teaching with the ‘questioning’ of research” (p.3). Personally, being a teacher-researcher has given me new insights into my own practice. It has enabled me to evaluate myself as a teacher. Upon listening to the audio recordings of the group discussions especially, I was taken aback as it was transparent that I often played devil’s advocate with my learners. I fired questions at them rapidly and spoke at an incredible speed. As I listened to myself, it dawned on me that to learners whose language proficiency is low, I probably sounded like a machine gun firing off a few rounds. In addition, I also discovered



that I tend to talk too much and do not give sufficient time for learners to think before they answer my questions.

I have been humbled by this experience of being a teacher-researcher as it has allowed me a glimpse of myself in action and my strengths and weaknesses are glaringly obvious. It is a good way to evaluate oneself in this way as there is no room for excuses compared to being told of your shortcomings by an outsider.

In short, being a teacher-researcher in this study has not only opened doors for my learners to explore literature in a different way but it has also helped me as a professional by enabling me to see facets of myself as a teacher which were previously oblivious to me. It is rather ironic that the objective of the study was to improve learners' understanding of literature but in actual fact I have improved understanding of myself as a teacher and I am positive that this will lead to improved practice in future.

### Conclusion

By participating in dialogue journal writing and later in small group discussions, Veni, Yasha, Li Hoon and Ai Ling proved that the learning of literature can be personally meaningful for learners. The findings show that they responded enthusiastically in their journals, connected the texts to their own lives, exchanged personal stories, negotiated meaning and made intertextual connections.

Personally, the key findings of this research brings home the realization that learners in a class are more than just a sea of faces and that each of them have their own stories to tell; each learner experiences life in many different ways and thus they comprehend the same stories read in school, differently. This is all the more reason that they need the freedom reader-response approach offers as it celebrates diversity and one of the best ways to give voice to multiple and diverse interpretations is through dialogue journal writing between the teacher and the learner. The feedback from the teacher provides the scaffolding learners need which increases the potential for understanding and reflections. Together, the voices of the learners and my voice as the teacher resemble a patchwork which provides a unique framework towards discovering the importance of learners' emerging ideas

Thus, it can be concluded that exploring responses to literature through dialogue journal writing and subsequently through small group discussions presents learners with opportunities to tell their own stories in relation to the stories they read in class. Learners need to tell the stories of their lives to be better learners and teachers need to hear these stories to be more effective in their chosen vocation. Constantly labeling learners as uninterested, lazy and stigmatizing them with other demeaning names does not do justice to either party, be it the learners or the teachers.

As a teacher-researcher, it has been an enriching experience for me to witness the transformation of my students from being reluctant readers to relatively active makers of meaning. It is hoped that this study will enhance fellow teachers'

awareness of the untapped possibilities that could be lying dormant in all learners and thus propel them to pursue a meaning centered education in order to strive towards excellence in education whereby no learner is left behind.