CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Response to literary texts is rooted in the transactional theory of literature. According to Rosenblatt (1978) who proposed this theoretical shift, we need to see the act of reading as a transaction between the reader and the text that "involves a particular individual and a particular text, happening at a particular time, under particular circumstances, in a particular social and cultural setting". In short, the reader, the text, and the context are linked and cannot be separated. For literary texts to be meaningful, it is important to develop students' responses. However, meaning does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but comes into being during the transaction between reader and text.

In the process of meaning-making, the reader brings to the text his/her own past experiences in literature and life. The reader-response theory presumes that no two readers will read a text and get the same meaning because each reader brings a different set of personal experiences to the text. As each reader reacts to the same text differently, his/her responses would be unique. These multiple and different responses by the readers are due to the aesthetic transaction between the reader and the text. Thus, it is important that students be encouraged to develop responses and value their individual interpretation of the literary texts.

As such, this study explores how students' responses to literary texts can be developed in an ESL classroom in a Malaysian urban secondary school, through the use of journal writing. As a background to the study, a description of how and to what extent Malaysian students have been exposed to literary texts in the ESL classroom is given.

Background Of The Study

Literary Texts in the Malaysian English Language Classroom

Literary texts have been used in the Malaysian English Language classroom since British colonial days when literature was part of the school curriculum. Here, the traditional syllabus was subscribed to, and students were exposed to canonical texts by writers such as Shakespeare, Coleridge and Wordsworth. However, the medium of instruction was changed to Malay in 1971 and in this new paradigm, there was little place for the teaching of English Literature.

To this date, literature remains available as an elective subject for students in Forms Four, Five and Six, but fewer students opt to sign up for this subject. In 2000, less than 50 students sat for the Form Six literature paper throughout the country while in 2001, the number rose to slightly below a hundred (Subramaniam, 2002). Most often, the students who sat for this paper were from the urban schools and were proficient in the English Language.

According to Marckwardt (1978), the study of literary texts in the target language is the best approach to a total mastery of the language. The decline in the standard of English among Malaysian students brought about the realization on the importance of exposing students' to more literary texts in order to promote language acquisition and expand their language awareness, thus increasing their proficiency in the language. In view of this, the Ministry realised the need to expose students to a variety of literary texts, which would in turn increase the English proficiency level. However, although the use of literary texts in the English classroom as a resource for language teaching was recommended in the Malaysian ESL syllabus (KBSM), its use was almost nil.

Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education, through the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), introduced various programmes in order to encourage the utilization of literary texts in the classroom. Among the programmes were the English Language Reading Programme (ELRP) which was limited to certain privileged schools and the Nilam Project which was carried out by the school's Resource Centre (library). A larger and more pervasive step in exposing students to English literary texts was the Class Readers Programme (CRP) in 1989 which was implemented in all schools.

Here, students were exposed to simplified literary texts in English such as prose, poetry and plays. The ministry supplied the abridged texts and teachers were provided with supporting materials such as teaching files. One lesson, which is forty minutes, out of the five periods alloted per week for English was to be used for the Class Readers programme. As it was a supplementary programme, it was not a tested component in the examinations and so it was deemed unimportant and time-consuming. As such, these books became white elephants that collected dust in the cupboards. Hence, to a large extent, this programme failed (Subramaniam, 2002).

Based on these measures taken by the ministry, one cannot say that Malaysian students have no exposure to literary texts at all. However, all these programmes only use literary texts as a reading material for comprehension purposes. Rosenblatt defines this as efferent reading, which focuses on the factual information the students are expected to gain during or after reading. None of these programmes encouraged aesthetic reading, which is the transaction between the reader and the text.

This is where the focus keys into what the reader experiences, thinks and feels during reading. These programmes placed more emphasis on the understanding of the text and not on the students' meaning-making process. Thus, these literary texts were not used to develop students' responses but more as an extensive reading programme.

This, however, changed in July 1999 when the Ministry of Education took a bold step and announced that literature in English would be incorporated and examined as a component in the English Language syllabus.

The Literature in English Component in the ESL Curriculum

In the year 2000, the literature component was introduced into the English Language syllabus for all secondary schools and was categorized as Language for Aesthetic Purposes. This component was introduced in stages, starting from Forms One and Four followed by Forms Three and Five. According to the English Language Syllabus, the aim of the component is to enhance students' proficiency in English language through the study of prescribed literary texts, contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and worldviews (Ministry of Education, 2000).

In order to ensure that it will be carried out effectively and successfully, the ministry took a bold step in making the decision that this component would be tested in the major public examinations; that is the PMR and SPM from the year 2001. Thus, the literature component now forms 20% of the PMR and SPM English Language paper and students' would be evaluated on their understanding and appreciation of literary texts.

It was felt that exposing students to various literary materials such as poems, short stories, and novels could help promote language development, which in turn would enhance students' proficiency in the English Language. Also, it was hoped that in the long term, literary awareness would motivate students to read not only for information but also for enjoyment.

More specifically, the rationale in the introduction of this component in the English Secondary School Syllabus (2001) is to "...encourage learners to express ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively in written and spoken form...". One of the objectives is that the students should be able to "give a personal response to texts" and "relate them to one's life".

Thus, the syllabus outlines an intention to enable and empower students to give personal responses to texts, by encouraging them to reflect upon and draw valuable moral lessons from issues and concerns of life as portrayed in the literary works, and relate them to their own lives. As such, the new literature component gives importance to the aesthetic response where the students are encouraged to relive, predict, evaluate, connect and link the text with their own lives.

Statement of the Problem

Education is quintessentially about change. These changes in the education system are due to the change in the needs of the learners and the society at large. In language teaching, methods and approaches have varied over the last century. From an approach where the teacher plays an active and central role in the classroom the focus has now shifted to the learner.

The Malaysian education system has adopted the Communicative Language Teaching approach, which places importance on the learners' role and their learning outcomes. This is clearly evident in the new Malaysian English Language Syllabus For Secondary Schools, 2003. In this learner-centered approach, meaning is paramount and one of the features of this approach is the enhancement of the learners' own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

In accordance to the change in language teaching, there is a need to keep up with these changes even in the literature classroom. Spiegel (1996) states that the teaching of literature has undergone a radical change over the past decade. Instead of focusing primarily in helping students learn about literature, the shift is now on helping students respond to literature. Thus, the teaching of literature has also adopted the learner-centered approach.

Unfortunately, this is not so in the Malaysian literature classroom, which is very teacher-centered. Most often, it is the teacher who dominates classroom talk while the students remain passive and reticent. One of the reasons for this is the belief that the teacher is the expert with the correct answers. The teacher is seen as that of an instructor and knowledge-transmitter. In such a scenario, the students' potentials and resources are overlooked.

Another problem is the Malaysian school system itself, which is very examination-oriented. As the literature component is tested in the major examinations, most teachers and students place more emphasis on the importance of knowing/learning the correct answer in order to score an A in this section. Thus, the teachers focus more on preparing the learners for the examination by drilling them with the correct/accepted answers.

Time is also another important factor. Both the teachers' and students' main concern is more on giving the correct/acceptable answer in the examination. In order to ensure that the students' are well prepared for the major examinations, teachers rush through the text, and so do not have the time to encourage students to cultivate their creative expressions. Thus, students' do not have thoughtful personal engagement with the text, and they are not encouraged to respond to the texts aesthetically.

These students end up 'studying' and 'learning' the literary texts to gather information as how they would study for subjects such as History and Geography. They study the text at face value and thus are unable to go in-depth into the text. As they plough their way through the text, their main focus is not on the experience that they have while reading, but on what facts they can retain for use after reading is over. Thus, these students are not encouraged to experience the text in personal meaningful ways. In this situation, the aim of literature, which is to empower students to give their personal responses to texts, cannot be realised.

Probst (1987) argues that "literature is experience, not information". As such, the reading of literature should be a pleasurable experience. Students must be invited to participate in it and not simply observe it from the outside. He further states that the student is very important - "not simply a recipient of information, but rather a maker of knowledge out of meetings with literary texts".

Thus, there is a need for teachers to encourage students' responses to literary texts. Once students are able to connect with the text, they would be able to respond to the text aesthetically. The teacher should assume the role of a facilitator and negotiator of meaning and not just as a provider of information.

Teaching, as Rosenblatt (1978) states, "becomes a matter of improving the individual's capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him/her to reflect self-critically on this process" (p. 26). Students should not be seen as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in the meaning-making process. By encouraging students to develop and express their personal responses, a learner-centered pedagogy would be adopted.

Teaching and learning of literature based on the reader-response theory would help students develop better understanding of the literary texts, as it encourages them to draw upon their own lives and experiences to engage with the text. Once these students have engagement with the text, they would be able to produce mature and in-depth responses.

There is a need to encourage students' responses to literary texts. According to Noe (1999), writing in response to literary texts can be a "great way for students to organize their thoughts, explore what they think, and even generate ideas". Written responses would give teachers a clear and powerful insight into how these students are developing in their fluency and expression of ideas, as well as higher levels of thinking. As students get into the habit of writing in response to reading, they would learn to clarify and refine their thoughts.

This study, therefore, aims to capture the students' voice and their response to literary texts through journal writing. It is felt that the use of journal writing in the Malaysian literature classroom would help to generate more interest among the students towards literature and thus make literature learning more engaging.

Research Questions

In attempting to assess the development of students' responses towards literary texts through the use of journal writing, answers to the following research questions are sought:

(1) How is the development of students' responses towards literary texts helped by the use of journal writing?

(2) How does the use of guided questions help students in giving in-depth responses in their journals?

(3) What are the students' perceptions regarding the use of journal writing in helping them develop in-depth responses towards literary texts?

In order to answer the above-stated research questions, certain theories are referred to. Among them would be the transactional theory of reading and Rosenblatt's (1978) reader-response theory. This is because in order for students to be truly engaged in meaning-making, it is vital that there is a transaction between the reader and the text. This, in return, will allow students to develop and give their multiple and unique responses to the literary texts.

Also, in order to answer the second research question. Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory of learning is applied. This is due to the use of scaffolding as a strategy to enable students to perform a task more competently under adult guidance. Thus, learning becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and the teacher.

Definition Of Terms

The Oxford Study Dictionary (1992) defines response as "an act, feeling or movement produced by a stimulus or by another's actions" (pg. 585). In this study, response refers to the students' reflection on the literary text that they have read, and their thoughts and feelings regarding what they read. This personal response is presented in the written form.

Webster's New Dictionary (1990) defines a journal as a "book of original entry for recording transactions"(p. 171). Based on this definition, journal writing can be described as an activity where an individual keeps a written record of transactions in a book of original entry. In this study, the entry in the journal refers to the student's personal responses while and after reading a literary text. Thus, the written record in the journal is the product of the transaction between the reader and the text.

"Develop" is defined as to bring to a more advanced or matured stage. In this study, the students' responses to the literary texts are analysed to see if there is progress from the simple to the more matured or advanced stage.

Literary texts are printed or written work that are characteristic of literature. These texts can be divide into different genres. The term 'genre' refers to the various forms of literature such as poems, short stories and novels.

Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the findings from this study will give a better understanding on how students' responses towards literary texts can be developed through the use of journal writing. The findings could also provide an insight on how journal writing will encourage both high and low proficiency students to develop their personal,

aesthetic responses towards literary texts. By writing journals, students are further developing their critical and creative thinking skills.

Moreover, the findings may also signify how guided journal writing may help students in responding better towards the literary texts. Thus, with clear guidance and encouragement, students may be able to respond to literary texts aesthetically and not just efferently.

Limitations Of The Study

This study contains the following limitations. Firstly, the duration used to carry out this study is very short; i.e. six weeks. As such, students wrote their responses based on only two literary texts. There is a possibility that the study may have yielded more interesting findings if there had been more time to study the students' development over a longer period of time, and if they had been asked to respond to a wider variety of literary texts.

Due to time constrain, there was also subject constrain. The small sample size for this study, which is six learners, makes it difficult to make generalizations of the findings, as it does not represent a complete investigation of all students. Also, this study only focused on three high-proficiency learners and three low-proficiency learners from one particular urban school. As such, the proficiency level of the learners may differ when compared to other schools.

Finally, as this is a qualitative study, the findings of this study may be unique to the context in which it was carried out. As such, the procedure used for this study may have to be modified to suit students from other contexts.