

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The ultimate goal of the reader-response approach is to elicit a mature response from the reader. The reader response theory views the process of reading as a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader interacts with the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978).

By writing down their responses, students would be able to organise, clarify and refine their thoughts and they may be able to construct richer responses to literature with some form of guidance. This is supported by Vygotsky's theory that learners are capable of more competent performance when they have assistance from capable adults.

In this study, I have attempted to capture students' written response towards literary texts with guidance. My focus was on the development of students' responses towards literary texts using journal writing, the use of guided questions in shaping students' in-depth responses and the key participants' views regarding the use of journal writing as a technique in developing their responses to literary texts. This final chapter contains a summary of the key findings, their implications for the teaching of literary texts in the ESL context, recommendations for further research and a conclusion to the study.

Summary Of Key Findings

This section discusses the key findings in terms of these categories: the development of student's written responses to literary texts, journal writing as a technique in developing in-depth responses and perceptions about the use of journal writing in eliciting responses.

Development Of Students' Written Responses

Journal writing can be used as a stimulus in helping students' develop in-depth responses to literary texts. The findings indicated that by writing down their responses, students were able to engage in a variety of ways even with the same texts. There is a clear indication of progress in the development of the students' response when they were aided by the guided questions.

Based on Thomson's Developmental Model of the reader-response approach, both the low and high proficiency students were able to give Level 2 responses, where they were able to express their empathy towards the characters and events and make emotive connections, in their non-guided journal response. However, not all of them were able to connect between the literary texts and their lives or reflect on their reading experience and the texts. This was especially so with the low proficiency students.

In contrast, with the help of the guided questions, nearly all of these students were able to move to higher levels of responses. All three high proficiency students were able to connect literary texts to life and move into reflective thinking and evaluation of the texts. They were able to write highly personal responses by relating the texts to their personal experiences, other texts and social beliefs. At the same time they were also able to reflect and interpret the texts by recognising details and considering their significances.

Thus, with the help of the guided questions these high proficiency students were able to progress to Level 5 (where they began to recognise the forms of narration and evaluate the text) in their responses. This indicates that these students were able to engage and bond with the literary texts with the help of the guided questions.

As for the low proficiency students, only two of them were able to proceed to Level 3 (connecting the texts to their own lives) and Level 4 (reflecting on the significance of events and behaviour) in their responses with the help of the guided questions while one still exhibited inability to progress. Thus, this indicates that while some low proficiency students may be able to show progress in their response development with assistance, some may not. This may be due to their inability to engage and connect with the texts or just plain disinterest. Thus, there is a possibility that a number of low proficiency students may not be able to progress to higher levels of responses even if they are equipped with the guided questions.

Guided Journal Writing As A Technique In Developing In-Depth Responses

The findings showed that both the low and high proficiency students were able to write at least a brief response to the texts even without the guided questions. However, the depth of their responses was far greater when they were aided by the guided questions.

The process of meaning-making is dynamic and this can be observed in the way the guided questions helped these students make meaning. The questions that were provided helped them focus on the text, made them think critically and reflect on the issues and concerns, thus deepening their understanding of the texts. In short, these open-ended questions helped guide and develop their thinking skills. This allowed them to write longer and more meaningful responses and progress to higher levels in the Developmental Model of Reader-Response. Thus, as theorised by Vygotsky, with the help of the guided questions, the students were able to exceed their zone of proximal development and so respond better.

However, employing journal writing as an activity in eliciting response to literary texts may create certain issues. These include getting students' cooperation to participate meaningfully in this activity. There is a possibility that some students may not attempt to write more in-depth responses and just resort to writing brief answers to the guided questions as was done by Alex (low proficiency student) and this is a clear indication of non-interaction with the text.

Perceptions On the Use Of Journal Writing

The success or value of any new teaching method or technique depends on how the students view them. Thus, it is important to obtain the emic perspective. The findings in this study indicated that the majority of the students were positive towards the use of journal writing in developing in-depth responses to the literary texts.

However, they all expressed unanimously on the need for the guided questions to be included. They revealed that the guided journal writing activity improved their understanding of the literary texts and this helped enhance and facilitate their in-depth responses. By using the open-ended questions as a guideline, the participants were able to analyse, interpret, connect and reflect on the texts more deeply.

Thus, their critical thinking skills were developed and this enabled them to understand the issues and concerns in the literary texts better and so arrive at a deeper and richer understanding of the texts. Hence, the guided questions were beneficial in helping students towards transaction with the texts and make meaning in aesthetic terms and this enabled them to write mature and in-depth responses in their journals.

As this is a study on a small sample group using journal writing as a technique to develop students' response towards literary texts, one cannot generalise any conclusions beyond this study. However, certain implications for the ESL literature classroom can be drawn from these participants' experiences that may be applied to other ESL learners in different contexts.

Implications Of The Study

Firstly, the teacher's role in guiding and challenging the students' reading experience has to be realised. The teachers of literary texts need to recognize the fact that learners need to engage with the texts in order for the learning to be meaningful. Both the high and low proficiency students should be encouraged to make personal responses to texts without fear of the "right" or "wrong" answer. Students should be challenged to go beyond the literal meaning of the texts. They need to be guided towards understanding and appreciation of the texts in order for them to reflect on the ideas and issues that emerge from their reading. Hence, teachers need to adopt techniques such as journal writing in their literature classroom.

Journal writing would be a good tool in the literature classroom in order to increase students' understanding of the texts and promote their critical thinking so that they would be able to give a more matured and in-depth response to the texts. Also, by adopting this activity in the literature classroom, the students are also given an opportunity to practise their expressive writing skills in a non-threatening environment. Continuously writing in their journals would make students, especially those of low proficiency, become better writers, as slowly but surely their language proficiency will be better.

Finally, the students' journal is a place for them to express their feelings and opinion about the texts without fear of the examination. It allows them to create and discover their own individualistic voice. Thus, this learner-centered approach will encourage the students to take responsibility for their learning.

Recommendations For Future Research

According to Eisner (1991), the findings of a qualitative study can become "a prototype that can be used in the education of teachers or for the appraisal of teaching". In this study, I have attempted to trace the development of students' response to literary texts using journal writing.

As journal writing is a fairly new technique in Malaysia, and has not been explored much, it would be beneficial to replicate this study in other contexts in order to obtain new insights that can further convince teachers on the use of this technique in developing students' response to literary texts.

As some students may not favour the Ministry of Education's choice of literary texts, one suggestion would be to allow the students' to select the texts of their choice for this journal writing activity. Young Adult Literature (YAL) would be an interesting choice. Another suggestion would be to conduct this study over a longer period of time where the students are exposed to a wider variety of literary texts and write more often in their journals.

Conclusion

The findings in this study indicate that students' responses to the literary texts can be developed through the use of guided journal writing. Here, students were encouraged to make meaning of the texts in a non-threatening environment and without the pressure of examination.

By writing down their responses with the help of the guided questions, both the high and low proficiency were able to express their feelings, connect the text to their personal life and reflect on the issues and concerns raised in the texts. The students' rich and in-depth responses were a clear indication of students exceeding their zone of proximal development with the help of the guided questions. This in itself was a wonderful reward for me as a teacher-researcher. In short, this study was a truly an enriching experience for me.