CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted over a span of six weeks, with a group of reluctant learners of poetry in a form four ESL class focusing on their interests and experiences with poetry. Various approaches were used to probe and gather information on aspects of teaching poetry to reluctant learners. This study was driven by three research questions which focused on teacher and student perceptions towards the teaching and learning of poetry, the use of various strategies to motivate and engage students in meaningful transactions with poems, as well as the student perceptions in learning poetry through the use of activities developed in the six-week programme.

As a preliminary, I will begin by discussing the findings in relation to teacher and student perceptions towards teaching and learning of poetry, in an attempt to probe their views and perceptions of poetry. Next, I will describe student responses to poems, the processes in which they interpret poems, and their experiences with these poems. Finally, I analyse and discuss the perceptions of the key participants in the classroom situation regarding learning of poetry through the use of various activities. Therefore, the core discussion in this chapter will be on the findings on student perceptions before and after implementing the prepared teaching and learning activities which were particularly designed to introduce my students to the pleasures of poetry.

Student and Teacher Perceptions of the Teaching and Learning of Poetry

In this section, my discussion will focus on how students and teachers in *SMK Aman Stesyen* perceived, experienced and understood poetry. Student perceptions were probed within three key dimensions: students' previous experiences with poetic forms, students perception of poetry as well as poetry texts taught in Form One; also their views on the teaching and learning of poetry. To sum, teachers perceptions of the teaching and learning of poetry were discussed based on information obtained through informal discussion with my colleagues and also from my own reflections as I involved myself as a participant-observer in the classroom process. By probing these voices, I hope to unravel areas of congruence and dissonance pertaining to the teaching and learning of poetry as experienced by the people in the classroom situation.

Hence, this section attempts to capture the insider view with the purpose of understanding how the people in the classroom situation experienced the genre of poetry. The final section of this chapter will describe how these reluctant learners experienced poetry through the teaching and learning activities that were carried out for the purpose of this study.

Student Experiences with Poetic Forms

These students have a natural affinity for poetry which began with their first exposure to poetic forms like nursery rhymes, chants, limericks and stories with repetitive lines. They could remember well their preschool and kindergarten days where much of the ritualistic "circle" or class "meeting" time was used in the recitation of finger plays such as "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and

seasonal chants such as "Five Little Pumpkins." When asked to describe their favourite play-time rhyme, most of the students remember their childhood 'famous and lively' chant like "B*om Bom Cha, Bom Bom Cha Cha*", which is accompanied by the clapping of hands to suit the rhythm of the words. Even the usual 'all-work-and-no-play' look of Mei Mei was transformed in the mere mention of those chants and it did not take long for the whole class to join in the activity. In light of this information, it is interesting to know that these students had some exposure to creative language as the chants and rhymes are actually poetic in nature. And the fact that they remember them shows that the teachers in nursery and kindergarten classes have managed to indulge them in poetry in a way that had made them receptive to it.

Student Perceptions of Poetry

There were varied perceptions regarding the genre of poetry. Students who felt poetry was relevant to them acknowledged their preference to dedicate poems to friends and listening to poetry being read aloud or performed (Table 2 in Appendix B). The remarks below exemplify their views about writing poems to dedicate to their loved ones.

> I like dedicating poems . . . it's the best way to relate your feelings . . . I am touched by the beautiful and enchanting words . . . it's meaningful to me. It brings out the creativity in people . . . makes me feel good.

My perceptions were in accordance with some of these views as I believe poetry has the power to evoke strong emotions and creativity among students as poetry is often described as the most intense form of literary expression. Another student echoed this view when she revealed that "poems

say things I have been trying to say". Ironically, students see a purpose in writing poems in this context. If they could write they would use them to delight others. The question that arises here is, "Why don't poems written by professionals delight them?"

However, students' responses to listening to poetry recitals were rather mixed (Table 3 in Appendix B). All the girls indicated that they would like to listen to poetry read aloud but none of the boys' responses were affirmative. Grace, for example, clearly remembers listening to a poetry recital in Chinese, which she claims "made her 'stand' in awe", however, this statement produced a ridicule from Ah Man, who exclaimed, "Girls .. (shaking his head) have weird sense of appreciation!" The difference in gender preference of poetry read aloud is could be due to the fact that girls have more aesthetic liking than boys.

However, there were students who viewed the learning of poetry negatively. They did it so because they felt that poetry to be redundant and irrelevant to them. They were of the opinion that, "Poetry doesn't have anything to do with my future . . . It doesn't teach me anything important". Upon further probing students held on to their beliefs that poetry has no place in today's high-tech world. Hence, they perceived the learning of poetry to be irrelevant, unimportant and thus unnecessary. Ah Man, one of the key participant's view exemplified this view: "Are we going to be famous poets someday? Uh?"

Hence it is understandable that one of the factors that contributed to the reluctance of these students in learning poetry is attributed to the simple fact

that they could not see the relevance and importance of learning it. If such perceptions persist, these learners may not invest time and effort in learning it.

Student Perceptions of Set Texts

Students' perception regarding poetry texts used in Form One revealed certain interesting insights. Table 1 (Appendix B), clearly shows that the students interest in a poem very much depends on the content subject and language used. An overwhelming majority (67.6%) expressed their dislike for the selected poems in Form One. When asked to elaborate on their preferences, the students (46%) felt poems like Shakespeare's *Life's Brief Candle* and W.B Yeats' *Lake Isle of Innisfree* were difficult to comprehend. Faisal, especially, voiced his strong opinion on the poem *Life's Brief Candle* as being difficult but found the other two poems "okay". Ah Man, another key participant, commented:

> Teachers should get our opinions before giving us such boring poems to read. No one asks what we like. It looks as if no one is interested in our choices. I think the students' choice will be the best.

This statement reflects on Gambrell's (1996) views that "self-selection of reading materials supports the notion that the books and stories that children find 'the most interesting' are those they have selected for their own purposes" (p. 21). Asked to comment on the prescribed texts, another student Mei Mei reflected:

> I like only the *Dead Crow. I dislike the other two [Lake Isle of Innisfree]* and *[Life's Brief Candle]* . . . because these poems are quite foreign and have more deeper meaning.

My perceptions regarding these texts is that the context in these poems may be unfamiliar and thus students may not be able to identify the relevance of the content and meaning to them specifically and Malaysian society as whole. Without making connections, students would not be able to see the relevance and universality of values projected in literary texts. With this in mind, it is hoped that the selection of texts need to be made based on assumptions about how students will interpret a work through the eyes of their own cultural values (Brooks, 1989).

The students' negative attitude to most of the set texts confirmed the view that "text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits" (Vincent & Carter, 1986, p. 214). Research has also showed that learners are most motivated, most open to language input, when their emotions, feelings, and attitudes are most engaged (Tomlinson, 1986, p. 34). From the views, it is evident that for meaningful learning of poetry, students must understand and interact with the texts as well as make connections to their own lives. Thus, it is vital that teachers know "that teaching young adults requires familiarity with the characteristics of this age group" (Bushman & Bushman, 1997, p. 2) and select texts which are "consistent with the young adults' experience, themes that are of interest to young people . . . and the language that parallels the language of young people" (p. 2).

Student Views on Poetry Lessons

Students' views on teaching and learning poetry were generally negative. From the data in Table 4 (Appendix C), it can be seen that 74.7%

responded poetry was boring. The negative feelings were expressed by students with the use of words such as "sad", "not interested", "bored", "feel terrible", "a drag", "hate" and "*tak seronok*" (Malay word meaning 'no fun').

When probed for more clarification on why poetry is so unpleasant, Faisal blantly recaptured what took place in his Form One classroom:

> We did 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree". I can't remember much what she [theteacher] did with it. She was very much into getting us to look for specific examples, like symbolism, and irony and what not. She got us to go through the poem looking for all these different things.... We did a lot of picking out of things like that, with that and other poems.

Faisal also added that he felt that these 'things' in the poem were not related to the rest of the poem and he "didn't understand why the teacher wanted them to do this". However, Faisal 'guessed one thing' - the teacher wanted them to do this because "the PMR examinations are coming ... probably the stuff in the *sukatan* (syllabus) that she has to teach, that's it".

These views aligned with my perceptions regarding the many teacher-fronted ESL literature classrooms where traditional methods of instruction dominate, leaving little room for students to make meaning out of their encounter with texts. It is my perception that many literature teachers believe that their role is to instruct and transmit knowledge about texts so that learners can comprehend them and thus answer public examinations. A key participant, Yan Xin, captured the essence of what learners want when she said that the teaching of poetry should be "made more fun and colourful. Then poetry lessons will be enjoyable". Mei Mei, on the other hand, felt that there should be

more "student participation" in the classroom and teachers should not "see our responses being silly but rather accept them". Yan Xin, added:

> I wish they [the teachers] wouldn't approach poetry like it's something you were going to hate.   It's almost like they tell you: Oh I know, you're going to hate this, but we've got   to do it, it's only going to be three weeks. And so many people have said that, so I don't think it can be just my school. You're sort of telling us: this is not to be liked, but bear with us, it'll soon be over.

Grace, clarified her friend's comments by giving an example, "learning poetry is like having a tooth extracted: painful and unpleasant, and you can't wait for it to be over", which set the whole class bursting with laughter.

This was indeed an eye-opener for me as a teacher-researcher as I saw how the entire experience of poetry enjoyment was destroyed for these students when its 'dismembered parts are thrown' unto them. I saw the relevance of these students' views pertaining to teacher behaviour and attitude as I believe that to get students to be enthusiastic in learning poetry, teachers need to internalize the subject and be interested in it as well. As explained by Buckley (1992), teachers should "explore their own reading habits before leading students through a reading journey" (p. 46).

It is evident that students want poetry learning to be enjoyable. Thus, classroom pedagogy should move from academic teacher-oriented instruction (Stern, 1987) to student involvement, participation and personal response. As postulated by Bushman and Bushman (1997), the classroom pedagogy that teachers choose can make or break a student's development in fostering reader response.

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Based on the overall feedback there are indications that students have not had enough exposure to poetry and the instructors have not put in enough effort to get students to indulge in poetry reading. One reason could be the limited time allocation for literature in class and the small percentage, in terms of marks, allotted in the PMR English paper. As one student attributed his resentment for poetry to the time of day it was taught. "Teacher always teaches poetry *masa nak balik. Saya tak faham apa-apa pun*" (translates as 'during the last period. I don't understand anything'). As an instructor I understand the problem of time constraints faced by teachers, however, teachers should be aware of students' receptive ability. This situation gives room for further investigations and probing to determine a better way to teach poetry to students.

However, most students said that they do not mind discussing and giving their opinions on poems in groups but not individually. It was clear here that the reason they are shying away from poetry is not because they do not like poetry but because they lack confidence. This could be due to their low language proficiency level which can contribute to language anxiety when it comes to giving personal responses to poems.

Mei Mei, one of the outspoken students said that, "Poetry has too many deep hidden meanings. I just don't get it!" Another student said that she hated poetry because her teacher always tells them to remember lots of terms and force them to identify certain literary devices every time she introduced a poem. Some students said that the teacher would never accept their interpretation and sometimes made them feel small by laughing at "our silly responses". "She

would make us copy answers to possible exam questions on the poem and make us memorise them", lamented another student.

Right from the responses to the questionnaire through the informal interviews, a majority of students have maintained that poetry is boring and uninteresting. Culminated with their strong stand that it is not important, these students have not been taking poetry seriously as a genre, through which one can widen his or her horizon of knowledge and look at life itself from various perspectives. They do not think that it can enhance language proficiency as well. They perceived poetry as something that confuses and makes understanding difficult. All the factors discussed above contributed to the fact that the majority of students of Form Four Berlian are generally, reluctant learners of poetry who need meaningful teaching-learning activities to provide them with a lived-through experience (Rosenblatt, 1978) so that their interests and motivation will be heightened.

Teacher Perceptions

In describing teacher perceptions, I focused my discussions on three key dimensions: teachers' personal perceptions, their views on pedagogical issues and their reactions to syllabus content, in relation to the teaching of literature, in general (Table 6, Appendix D).

Personal Perceptions

In probing teachers' personal perceptions in relation to teaching of literature, questions were ordered according to their perception based on their

knowledge about: the literature component; its relevance; the methodology; and also teacher needs in teaching literature.

Out of the four language teachers interviewed, three confessed that they themselves do not enjoy reading short stories or novels, let alone poetry. Coming to the specific question of whether they enjoy teaching literature, three of them, including the teacher trained in literature said that it was the last thing they would enjoy teaching and they cited students' lack of interest as the main reason. All four of them readily agreed that literature is not a must for language enhancement. One teacher exclaimed that she never read any literary text but got an A1 in her English for SPM. "And now I'm an English teacher", she quipped. One teacher, Alice, admitted, "I can't remember any of my own teachers of English who taught literature effectively. I have no models to emulate".

Perceptions of Pedagogical Issues

Three teachers readily admitted that they have difficulty in relating to the students while, one felt that she could relate to them some of the times only. Most of the time she says, "is a one way communication". Another colleague of mine, Sally described that

> Generally what happens in class is, a task is given with as much input as possible and then the answers are given towards the end of the lesson. This is the best way to save time and prepare my students for the exams.

From their responses to question two and three in this section, it is evident that group activities and open discussions are at the minimal too. As they have maintained earlier, time is a real problem – thirty minutes a week is far too short

a time to cover all the prescribed texts in the three genres. About having extended activities such as projects and group assignments based on a poem, one teacher said that she did try but does not plan to continue because "it is taking a lot of time and students do not seem too enthusiastic". The other three teachers never did any extended activities as they did not see a need for it and also because "students are already burdened with individual and group projects such as for Science, History and Geography. The following statement by one of the teachers simply sums up the whole issue of their pedagogical concerns, "Moreover, literature is just a minor component so why major on it".

Reactions to Syllabus Content

Teacher reaction to syllabus content was negative, as all three teachers maintained that the selection of texts were not good and that there should be a change. As a teacher myself, I saw the reality in what they were saying as they were seeing it from the students' perspective. Another teacher further added:

> Students at this age are full of life and what excites them will be fast moving stories packed with suspense and thrill or texts on the theme of love – 20th century love which involves modern settings and realistic issues.

However, all the four teachers views were divided if literature should be scrapped from the syllabus. One agreed while the other three felt that literature does have something tangible to offer to students. For question four it was unanimous that time allocation for literature is not sufficient, as they were aware that taking up more than one period of the five periods allocated for English is not practical.

Hence, from my observation as an English Language teacher, literature is a subject that most teachers in this school seem least comfortable with. This is evident from what one of my teaching colleagues told me:

> One reason I avoid teaching literature is the fear that my own lack of skilland confidence will result in students' boredom.

In this section, I have attempted to portray the insider view of the classroom experiences with poetry and the perceptions of the key players pertaining to issues related to the teaching and learning of the literary component. A sampling of the comments that emerged reveals important insights about student interests, attitudes and motivation for learning poetry as well as teacher beliefs and concerns regarding teaching of literature in general.

Teaching poetry to reluctant learners in the ESL classroom

Research supports the view that many less proficient readers or in this case, reluctant learners of poetry, "do not naturally and spontaneously experience literature as participants" (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 90). From my observations, my students' reluctance suggests that they lack involvement and thus, have negative attitude towards poetry because they could not relate to the poems taught to them. Studies also suggest that reluctant learners do not make use of strategies to consummate the reader-text relationship that allows for an 'aesthetic'(Rosenblatt, 1978) literary transaction and experience.

So, what I am exploring in this study is how these reluctant learners be helped to experience poetry as well as discover for themselves the power and reality of literary experience. In an attempt to find out how they read poetry, I examined their responses to three poems. Hence, in this section, I will firstly,

discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the teaching activities which are based on reader-response and Vygotskian theories. Then, a discussion on the criteria employed in text selection will follow. To sum this section, a description of the lessons that was carried out in the six-week programme of teaching poetry to reluctant learners of Form Four Berlian will be presented.

Teaching Approach

As discussed above, students' reluctance to indulge in poetry is not so much the genre itself but more on the way it was handled by the teachers. Although the students previous encounters with poetry may have an impact on their current attitude, the present teachers can avert the prolonging of such perceptions in them. To investigate the ability and interests of my students, very early in the literature class I prepared a student profile with information on their hobbies, types of movies they like to watch and other extra-curricular activities that they were involved in. This profile did contribute to the selection of texts and activities to suit my students.

As the heart of this study was to constitute effective and appropriate teaching of poetry, the teaching approach used in this study was based on reader-response theorists' notion that readers are vital in the process of making meaning of texts. Central tenets of the theories are the notion that learning is a constructive and dynamic process, in which students extract meaning from texts through experiencing, hypothesizing, exploring and synthesizing. Most importantly, reader-response encourages students to be aware of what they

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bring to texts as readers; it helps them to recognize the specificity of their own cultural background.

For this three-week study, a cluster of activities was planned around three texts. The texts used were Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Richard Cory*, Muhammad Haji Salleh's *Si Tenggang's Homecoming* and Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*. Students were taken through three stages during the teaching-learning activities. This was to scaffold or build on their understanding of the texts. Step One which comprised a pre-reading activity, was carried out to build students' schemata. Rumelhart (1980) called schemata "the building blocks of cognition – the 'pockets' or 'units of knowledge' that help students to understand the world" (p. 34). The purpose of this activity thus, was to tap into my students' mental scripts that helped me to foreshadow the enjoyment that will be gained by reading the poem. Thus by creating the mental landscape, students' were eased into the poem and given enough anticipatory pleasure to afford a natural glide into context (Hess, 2003, p. 21). This activity, therefore, used elements out of the poem that could readily touch the lives of students, and then be linked into the poem.

In the while-reading stage, the poem was introduced by relating to the pre-reading activity. Then, I did a dramatic reading of the entire poem while students listened and followed along in the text. At the conclusion of the reading, students who were already in groups, wrote down any ideas that occurred to them as they were listening. The procedure was repeated three times. At the conclusion of the third reading, students talked about their initial

impressions to their group members. Next, students returned to the poem and analysed its language as it pertained and added to the meaning of the poem. Kramsch (1993) makes a point that language teachers almost seem to subvert the literary context by using it only as a springboard for communicative activities, and omitting the essence of the language that contributes to the meaning of the work. Thus my students and I entered the linguistic level of the poems by studying the performatory contribution made by the vocabulary.

In the post-reading stage, students used elements from the poem and evolved in a real world activity from it. Through this activity students were encouraged to identify the relevance of the content and meaning to them specifically, and the Malaysian society on the whole. Through this act of making connections, it is hoped that learners could see the relevance and universality of values projected in literary texts.

The student-centred activities and strategies used in this study required students, rather than teachers, to play an important role contributing to their learning. As argued by Nunan (1996), listening to the 'voices' of learners is more likely to allow for a learning experience that is dynamic and active. The idea of sharing responses of poems in classroom allowed students to be more interactive and importantly, students perceived that they played an important part in their learning. This allowed the teacher to take the role of a facilitator rather than an authority figure in the classroom.

These teaching-learning activities were designed to help students organize and share their personal experiences and responses to poetry.

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Therefore, the activities both motivated and scaffolded students' understanding of poem in question, and through the presentation of it assisted their move from nonverbal to verbal expression.

Text Selection

This study revealed that the choice of poems was a deterrent factor to students' enjoyment and participation in the lesson, thus the right texts were needed to enhance participation. Coady (1979) aptly says that subject matter is perhaps one of the strongest factors in getting students to pick up a book and be stimulated to read on. Students therefore, will only develop an interest in literary text if they can relate to what they are reading. Through this act of making connections it is hoped that learners could see the relevance and universality of values projected in literary texts. With this in mind, three poems, namely Muhammad Haji Salleh's *Si Tenggang's Homecoming*, Edwin Arlington's *Richard Cory* and Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* were chosen.

The poems were selected taking into consideration students' linguistic level and their interests. The variety of themes present in these poems can be exploited for group activities, and this would be rewarding for my students. In this way, there is a greater chance of finding something to appeal to different individual tastes and interests. In addition, Muhammad Haji Salleh's poem was chosen because I believe that the works of local poets would be the best starting point in helping develop in Malaysian students this wider worldview. This is because local works would provide both familiarity as well as numerous possibilities of interpretation. Using Muhammad Haji Salleh's poem, the reader-

response approach would allow learners to explore and learn from the poet's own culturally wide collection of experiences which he projects in his works.

The activities were fitted into six teaching and learning sessions and administered to the selected class of 39 students. The ultimate aim of these activities were to create meaning-filled poetry lessons that integrated the four language skills, to allow for the cohesion of text with the life experiences of students, and heighten both interest and involvement in the lessons.

Following is a description of the poems and key activities highlighting aspects of student responses for each poem.

Lessons based on 'Richard Cory'

Activities on the poem *Richard Cory* by Edwin Arlington Robinson (Appendix E), were carried out over two lessons. This poem is about how a whole town made up its mind about a man. They all thought that they knew everything about him, yet they were all completely wrong. My students thoroughly enjoyed every part of the lesson. There was maximum participation right from the set induction to the activity proper. I managed to get the attention and capture their interest with the picture of faces in step one. Faces are something that students can relate to emotionally. Thus by connecting the face to a person, giving him a character and empathising with him and in this activity, students came up with a story based on the created character (Appendix H) . This will not only require imagination but also require students to pool together their own experiences and background knowledge to make the story and the character a 'real person'.

In the informal group interview that I had with the five students after the first lesson, the first thing they said was, "Teacher the lesson was so different". Even Faisal, the serious quiet one was grinning as he disclosed his group's story on the character. Mei Mei, said that she enjoyed the part on role-playing as a reporter in step four and Ah Man, the one who always has something to say, said 'Richard Cory' reminded him of his old neighbour who committed suicide mysteriously. It was so thrilling to see the students bubbling with excitement as they related their experiences on each of the steps they went through in the activity. Grace, the fun loving girl, did fail to create laughter when she quipped, "Teacher when you read the poem aloud, I thought you were going to cry".

Since all the four steps involved active group participation, no one was left out. Mei Mei shared how cooperative her group members were. She said that there was no 'side-talk', everyone was trying to say something to complete the task in the best possible way. It was also heart warming to see students take turns to present without any fuss when in came to voicing out the group opinions. Ah Man was one of the presenters for his group, he played the role of Richard Cory's housekeeper really well. He did code-switch in Malay a number of times to draw laughter from the class but the way he answered the 'reporter' packed with emotions was so real that he had the full attention of the class (Appendix I). He sent the class into stitches every time he coughed and gestured as an aging man.

I would rate this lesson a success as all the three objectives were realized. Students participated well, I myself enjoyed the class and the two

lessons were just right to complete the poem without taxing the students with too many tasks.

Lessons Based on 'Si Tenggang's Homecoming'

The students are familiar with Muhammad Haji Salleh's works.. They could relate to this poem comfortably because of the simple, rural setting, the theme of alienation and the use of straight forward language throughout the poem.

This activity (Appendix F), brought the students one step further into identifying with the persona and to make inferences and draw conclusions about the character and events in the poem. Students were encouraged to go beyond the poem and asked to infer and predict some of the information that was not in the poem like: reason the persona went on a journey, why he came back and why the people rejected him. After a meaningful open class discussions students were put in groups and instructed to come up with a character profile of Si Tenggang, based on information in the poem as well as their own imagination (Appendix J). The excitement here was, coming up with a picture of what Si Tenggang would look like. Ample time was given for this activity as students were required to use their imaginative faculties, exchange ideas and opinions and then come to a consensus of what he is and how he should look.

In the informal interview that followed at the end of the two lessons on Si Tenggang, students seem more pensive. They had begun to think and reflect on some of the core issues in the poem. Grace related an incident of her beloved uncle returning home after a disappearance for several years. She said she could

not relate to him like before. "He seemed like a stranger, although he tried to be his usual self, that 'thing' was not there anymore". Faizal said that it was the same with his brother who returned from studying overseas and "His friends never showed up and he too seemed uncomfortable when talking to them over the telephone....there was nothing much to talk really".

The fact that the students had started to bring the issues in the poem into their lives was a milestone in itself. I did not have to ask many questions this time around because the students began to talk to each other refuting and supporting each others claims about Si Tenggang. Ah Man said that the climax of the lesson was when each group had to present their picture of Si Tenggang and, "our own ideas about Si Tenggang". Truly the whole class was excited as they went around observing the various faces of Si Tenggang and reading the descriptions put up on the classroom walls.

My final question to them was "Did you enjoy the lesson?' The 'Yes' that they proclaimed in unison thrilled my heart so much. This, I noticed when they were actively involved in the various parts of the activity. Students were actually sitting back and listening to each others views attentively.

Lessons Based on 'The Road Not Taken'

This is a prescribed poem for Form Four so, this time around I decided to make the activities more challenging with extended activities from the poem. The lesson was begun with an open discussion on making choices in life by eliciting responses from students on important decisions they or their parents had to make and how they felt about the decisions now – whether it was a

correct decision or otherwise. Yan Xin, who is staying with her grandmother, as her parents are working in Singapore, related her feelings very strongly:

> "Mom made some difficult decisions and I used to be angry at her for making those decisions. But now I realize that they have been the best choice. I'm proud of my Mom and I look up unto her".

At the end of the discussion a handout (Appendix G), of the poem with a number of prying question was distributed to the students as an activity for group discussion. This is followed by an open discussion on the questions which the teacher goes through one by one, getting responses from the various groups. At this juncture students are allowed to rebut the responses of other groups which they think is not acceptable or irrelevant.

As a follow up activity students were asked to come up with a sketch on the theme of making decisions in life. They are free to express real-life experiences which they or others would have encountered in life such as, making important decisions to solve a problem, choosing a career, deciding on a life partner or an occupation (Appendix K).

By the fifth week students have got a hang of what it is to read and respond to poems. They have become a little more confident in expressing their views because throughout the lessons everyone's response and opinions were accepted as correct. I never said that anyone was wrong but rather encouraged them to think in terms of another perspective if I noticed that they were really 'off-course'. I did not have to do much of this though. One thing I discovered is that most students did come up with sound mature arguments and responses to issues raised in the poems used, contrary to what the teachers said that,

"students simply cannot understand a poem unless we tell them what it is about".

The third and final meeting with the five respondents was nostalgic in a sense because I felt a certain closeness to them after all those times of sharing experiences and ideas which I do not normally do in my English classes. Through these six-week sessions I too have opened up to my students my personal experiences, dreams and hopes so much so that they can look me in the eye and speak to me like a friend. Mei Mei asked, "Teacher these activities are only for your study is it?...after this back to the normal lesson is it?" Though this was a question that just came out of her – being a hyper-active student, I felt that it was something all teachers need to seriously rethink. Are creative and innovative activities going to be seasonal? Or is it going to be a once in a way trend. As for me I am going to do this until the students can independently read and enjoy poetry in its wholeness. This I'm determined to do because I will be following up with this class next year.

I did not intend to probe very much with the students this time but just wanted to see their responses against the responses that most of them gave prior to the six weeks of poetry lessons. I have used the same table but note the differences (Appendix L). This table in many ways answers the third research question.

Student and teacher perceptions of learning poetry through learner-centred activities

There has been a complete turn about in the responses given by the five respondents at the end of the session. Now they perceive poetry as piece of

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writing that has a world of experiences to offer as before this they would get weary at the sight of a poem with irregular stanzas and verses.

The learner-centred activities have evoked in students the right to speak their minds on several issues raised in the poems used. It had made them confident in interpreting certain lines in a poem without thinking about whether it is right or wrong as I have always maintained that there is no such thing as a right or wrong answer in responses to literary works. As long as they can substantiate according to their own understanding, it is acceptable.

Students did not find poetry boring as they could relate to the poems as one student, Faizal, said, "I see the connection of the poem by Robert Frost to my life...I didn't expect poetry to speak to me in such a way". Another student Grace, said that she was going to compile meaningful poems in a book and use them when writing to her friends. Due to time constraints I was not able to talk to all the students about the six week session but judging from the way they handled each activity is enough proof that they are not too far behind.

I would personally rate the results of the six-week programme as excellent. Credit should be given to my students who responded well and took active part through all the activities enthusiastically. The main criteria for the success of the discussions is knowing when to step in and when to step back and allow the students to express their opinions freely. Oyler (1991) aptly says that, "As teachers we must know when to step in as leader, and when to step back as follower and facilitator".

Conclusion

This study has attempted to uncover insights into the playing out of various meaning-making activities in order to facilitate reader response within the space of the ESL classroom. In this chapter, therefore, I have attempted to capture the mindsets of learners by way of their perceptions of poetry. However, what I sought to do here was to heighten students' interest and motivation in poetry through the use of various meaningful activities. In so doing, I have captured the voices of students and analyzed their views to look at the nature of the meaning-making in poetry-related classroom activities. In the next chapter, I will summarize the key findings that emerged in this study and discuss pedagogical implications for teaching literature in the ESL contexts.