

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study rooted in the transactional theory of literary reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), was embarked on to investigate certain issues on student reluctance in reading poetry that could be useful to teachers of poetry. It was evident throughout the study that the perceptions of reluctant learners when confronting the learning of poetry, stem from a basic 'literary inadequacy' and their inability to make meaning out of a poem.

Throughout my teaching career I have observed that some readers immediately take to reading poetry and enjoy it, but for many a love of poetry needs to be developed through progressive systematic methods that take into consideration the learner. I have seen in recent years, the number of reluctant students doubling and tripling, judging from the lamentations of fellow teachers and a vast majority of the students concerning the teaching and learning of poetry. Hence, the present study examined how poetry could be taught to a class of reluctant learners in a semi-rural Malaysian community.

In this six-week study, I observed and probed to produce a multi-voiced (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), word-picture (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) of one form four ESL class by portraying the voices of the key participants, teacher and other peripheral students of Form Four Berlian.

In this chapter I provide a summary of the key findings to my research questions, and discuss their implications for the teaching and learning of poetry in the larger ESL context.

## Summary of Key Findings

In this summary I will highlight key findings of students' and teacher perceptions of poetry, teaching-learning activities to encourage reluctant learners to be more receptive to poetry, and perceptions about poetry learnt through student-centred activities.

### *Student Perceptions of Poetry*

The aim of the literature component in the ESL syllabus is to enhance students' proficiency in the English language, contribute to personal development and character building as well as broaden one's outlook about other cultures. In this study, the participants' perceptions of poetry produced valuable insights to me as a teacher-researcher. Almost all the students interviewed perceived that poetry never had an impact in their lives and that they never took poetry seriously. One student, Mei Mei, thus said, "I used to like poetry when I was in tadika (means kindergarten), but now ... I just can't stand it", while Grace added, "I have written a few poems for my friends but I can't get myself to like the poems taught in school". What is interesting in these findings is that there is an ambivalence in how these students felt about poetry and their perception of poetry that was taught in school. Thus the problem here is not the genre of poetry but the pedagogy itself, as many of my students had shown keen interest in poetic forms in their preschool and early primary (as discussed in Chapter 4). Basically the findings suggested that there were three main reasons for the students present negative perceptions of poetry.

Firstly, the way poetry has been presented to them in English Language classes. Many said that there was nothing to exciting and fun in poetry classes. Faisal's remarks, "It can't help myself from falling asleep whenever teacher talks about the poems", helped in painting the scenario well. According to the participants, it was so often a comprehension class where teacher told students to read the poem, explained some difficult vocabulary and instructed them to answer the given questions. At the end of the lesson, the questions are discussed and the teacher gives the 'correct' answers. Yet another version was that the teacher tediously explained each word in the poem and insisted on the way the questions should be answered. The class then ended with taking down notes. Ah Man confessed, "I would silently thank the bell for saving us yet another time", expressing his relief when the lesson was over. The teacher, on the other hand, is satisfied that she did her best and both parties go home happy, for different reasons.

Within the Malaysian school system, students are taught using set texts determined by the Ministry of Education. Findings indicated that students of Form Four Berlian generally found the standardized set texts less than satisfactory as these literary texts were not appealing to them, difficult to understand and uninteresting subject. For example, one student lamented that the "words used in Shakespeare's *Life's Brief Candle* was difficult to understand because most of the students were weak in English". According to Faisal, he could not understand why the persona in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* longed to be in a peaceful and quiet environment. From my own observation

this could be because these students, who are already living in a peaceful and calm environment, could not see the need to desire for it. Thus they could not relate or understand the persona's feelings of this particular poem. Furthermore, according to these students, the teachers themselves did not show much interest or keenness in teaching poetry. Ah Man elaborated that "Teacher cakap, tak apa kalau tak faham kerana tak penting" (meaning teacher said that it was alright if they do not understand the poem as it was not important). Another student continued by saying that when it came to poetry lessons, the teacher gave the answers to the questions and focused on the other genres.

These findings revealed that the pedagogy in this ESL classroom has neglected learners and texts as co-constructors of meaning. Consequently students went along with poetry classes as passive participants. Another important finding revealed that my students wanted to be actively involved in the learning process. They felt that pedagogy in the poetry classroom should allow room for reader-response and hence the opportunity for them to create meaning rather than be consumers of pre-digested interpretations to literary texts. Learning will be meaningful only if learners value their roles in the process of meaning-making.

#### Teacher Perception on Teaching Poetry

While the study examined the processes in my poetry classes, as a preliminary, I also explored the perceptions of my colleagues in SMK Aman Stesyen. The teachers, themselves, acknowledged a discomfort with teaching poetry. One of my colleagues, Marina admitted, "I don't enjoy reading poems. I

read only poems that I have to teach". Others said that they do like poetry, but just do not know what to do with it in the classroom.

My observation showed that most of the teachers do not like to teach poetry because students are least interested and there are fewer activities. Sally, for example, said, "I feel like I'm talking to the four walls whenever I teach poetry. Most of them would be clutching their bags all ready to go home". Another teacher lamented that she does not know how to keep students engaged during poetry lessons.

Teaching poetry to these teachers was seen as a monotonous routine for the purpose of preparing students for the exam, as one teacher exclaimed, "If not for the exams, I will not bother about teaching poetry to these students". Poetry was taught as a content based subject focusing on identifying literary elements and pursuing literal comprehension. All the teachers confessed that they gave prepared model answer to students to memorize and reproduce in examinations.

The findings revealed that the perceptions of students and teachers were generally negative, as both parties were more involved in extracting meaning from the text rather than interacting with the text.

#### Teaching Poetry to Reluctant Learners

Based on the reader-response perspective, a cluster of student-centred activities on three poems was carried out with my students. Activities like role-playing, dramatizing, group discussion and visual representation of poems were

aimed to create a meaningful and useful learning environment for these students.

By role-playing students put themselves in the shoes of the persona in the poem. This was seen as “connecting and relating literature to life” (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 72), as students dramatized scenes in which they found themselves, in the context of their own lives, in a similar situation to the persona. By role-playing students also had the opportunity to share and create response collectively, by comparing responses and learning from each other about the poems. Thus, role-play used in this study created avenues for students to naturally make meaning of the poems.

Group discussion, on the other hand, enhanced not only individual response but also responses of the other members of a group (Fish, 1980). This also promoted collaboration where students shared personal stories, experiences and worldviews. My students who basically lack confidence in relating their personal views and responses did not feel threatened in such a learning environment.

Research has shown that visualizing a text has helped students, to monitor their comprehension (Gambrel & Jawittz, 1993). As most of my students are generally less proficient in the language, it helped them to build a relationship with the characters by visualizing the characters (Purcell-Gates, 1991). Thus this activity created an interest in them to participate more actively in class.

The student-centred activities used in this programme, evoked in students a renewed confidence which enabled them to generalize various aspects of personal and social significances outside literature from the literary texts they read. In other words, my students were be able to “connect, compare, contrast and recreate the text for themselves from their own stock of resources” (Brown, 1987, p. 105), making the whole process of learning meaningful, purposeful but most of all, filled with fun and enjoyment.

#### Student Perceptions of the Poetry Lessons in the Programme

To encourage student interaction and engagement in poetry lessons, a six week teaching and learning programme with student-centred, interactive activities using three texts was carried out with the students of Form Four Berlian.

The findings in this study revealed that the majority of the students perceived the use of student-centred activities like group discussions, role-playing, visual interpretation and dramatizing to be positive. Throughout the duration of the lessons, none of the students were absent and this was indeed unusual as this class normally had a high number of absenteeism. Furthermore, the usual practice of students seeking permission to go out of the class during lessons, was also reduced. It was indeed a motivating factor to me as a teacher to see students’ renewed interest in poetry.

I also observed students’ willingness and enthusiasm to participate in lessons as these activities contributed in increasing students’ confidence in working with peers. The discussion groups too, they said gave them the freedom

to work in a non-threatening environment. The most favourable aspect, according to the participants, was sharing of ideas, as one student said, “I discovered the many new ways of looking at the same thing”.

All five participants, Mei Mei, Grace, Yan Xin, Faisal and Ah Man, said that they enjoyed learning poetry this way. Yan Xin reminisced, “This was how it was in the primary school days. I remember acting as Cinderella. It was fun”. Students also voiced that it was effective because every student’s opinion or response was deemed important and acceptable. Another student said that they are now capable of sitting down and confidently working on the interpretation of the given poem. They also liked the idea of the teacher being a facilitator rather than an instructor who imposes her interpretation without giving a chance for the students to derive meaning from the text. A majority of the student didn’t like poetry because they were not given the chance to reflect and talk about their feelings about the poems freely. A common complaint was that the teacher did all the talking and the students’ job was taking down notes and memorizing. Thus, the student-centred activities, derived from reader-response theories, that were used in this programme had made the difference.

As this case study was conducted on one particular classroom using student-centred activities in exploring students’ responses to poetry, I offer a tentative framework with which to view other classrooms. Hence, any conclusions offered are not generisable beyond this study. However, it is my hope that the experiences of these particular students may serve to provide insights into possible experiences of other ESL learners in different learning



contexts when teachers make room for students to construct their understandings of poetry.

### Implications of the Study

The enthusiastic manner in which the students of Form Four Berlian responded to poetry suggests that student-centred activities create opportunities for students to react to texts in a collaborative fashion and also serve as a catalyst in facilitating student responses to poetry. The findings of the study, therefore, have implications for teachers of poetry in the ESL classroom as well as curriculum designers.

#### *Implications for Teaching Poetry in the ESL classroom*

The pedagogy of teaching poetry observed in this semi-rural community suggested that teacher was taking the central figure in the classrooms, as a body of perceived knowledge to be learnt largely through 'teacher talk' mode. This method was too product oriented because of its tendency to impose the meaning of the texts on the students. Students in my school are rarely receptive to such instructions on something that they cannot develop a liking. They would rather not listen then listen and get confused.

In placing students at the centre of classroom activities, students saw a purpose in every stage of the lesson as they were given the opportunity to speak and express their opinions freely. Thus in a poetry class, reading and meaning making should be an transaction between the text, the learner and the teacher (Rosenblatt, 1978). Meaning making should be a collaborative effort where both teacher and students are contented with the process as well as the meaning that

they derived at. Student responses should be given due respect and recognition so that they will develop a keen interest in sharing their ideas openly.

Based on the findings of this study, I wish to present here some guidelines that focus on student-centred, activity-based and process-oriented instruction that poetry teachers need to consider.

- a. Tasks should allow students to work with and discover things as this would make learning more meaningful.
- b. Tasks need to be challenging and goals must be achievable. A challenging activity is always a motivating factor for students at this age and once they achieve the goal, a sense of contentment and pride would urge them on.
- c. Use a variety of activity and methods so that the lesson does not become a mundane routine. An activity may be a success with one group but a failure with another likewise, although the tasks may differ the same mode of activity would kill most of the enthusiasm they had in earlier lessons.
- d. Teacher should always take a facilitators role rather than a know-all instructor. Give ideas and prompt in a casual way, do not dictate.
- e. Always consider cultural implications and student interests so that lessons are appealing to them. Introducing material of foreign culture without background exposure may not be a good idea.
- f. Make it a point to always be aware of the students strengths and limitations.  
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- g. Maintain a collaborative and cooperative learning environment. This would

Do not get carried away by your own plans and desires but rather put yourself in the students' shoes and see it from their side as well.

- g. Maintain a collaborative and cooperative learning environment. This would allow students who are hampered by language proficiency and low self esteem to open up and give their share of ideas.
- h. Be enthusiastic yourself. Teacher enthusiasm rubs off on learners. Students are very observant and they can tell when the teacher is not interested.
- i. Be creative, confident and never afraid to learn even if it comes from your students. There may be times when the students notice something the teacher overlooks or misrepresents but once pointed out the teacher must be willing to listen and not be threatened by creativity.

It is always useful to keep a checklist (Appendix M) to evaluate one's lessons before and after each session so that subsequent lessons can be improved. Success stories should be recorded in a journal for future use.

#### Implications for Curriculum Designers

One of the issues raised in student as well as teacher interviews in this study, was the selection of texts. The findings of this study suggest that set texts may not favour the learning of poetry as such texts fail to cater to the diversity of student interests and language needs. Selection of appropriate texts is crucial as readability is likely to be hindered not only by linguistic complexity but also

that curriculum designers be sensitive to the needs and interest of adolescents in the Malaysian context so that ultimately literary texts can get these young people excited about reading.

### Conclusion

In helping students develop an appreciation and understanding of poetry, there are two fundamental principles to keep in mind. First, poetry must be read aloud. Second, poetry should be enjoyed (Elliot, 1996). Therefore the selection of poetry texts should be done keeping these two principles in mind. Responses to poetry are personal and will vary from reader to reader. Sometimes one line, or even one word, of a poem is all that a reader relates to, but at other times the reader will want to memorize the poem in its entirety. Some poems will make the students laugh and some will make them cry, some poems will confuse them, and some will be crystal clear. Teachers should forget about the pressure for the "right" responses from students and allow spontaneity and freedom for them to express their emotional reaction and response to the poem. At the upper secondary level, students are mature and it is only natural for them to want to have their say and speak their minds on the things that they see and read. In sharing their insights, understandings and questions about poetry, Mei Mei, Grace, Yan Xin, Ah Man and Faisal proved that the state of reluctance in learning poetry is not permanent and can be changed to enjoyment and engagement through conducive student-centred teaching and learning environment.

To conclude, here is a poem by Jean Little which clearly expresses the danger of teaching poetry where students get so 'bogged down' in the mechanics of poetry writing and predetermined interpretations, that they lose the sense of wonder and enthusiasm that should be the forefront in enjoying poetry.

After English Class

I used to like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening",  
I like the coming darkness,  
The jingle of harness bells, breaking – and adding to  
-- the stillness,  
The gentle drift of snow . . . .  
But today, the teacher told us what everything stood for.  
The woods, the horse, the miles to go, the sleep --  
They all have "hidden meanings".  
It's grown so complicated now that,  
Next time I drive by,  
I don't think I'll bother to stop.

(Little, 1986, p.1)