

FACES OF LITERATURE INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Literature has time and again been integrated across different curricula ranging from as early as in literacy programmes for preschool children to more advanced specialised courses offered for graduates at tertiary level. Its reputation as a cultured and prestigious subject matter has often been unreservedly understood or questioned. Through growing empirical discovery however, a more thorough understanding of its practices as well as the actual challenges in its implementation has evidently been discovered and used to support efforts in exploring, advancing and reshaping its role within different curricula. To complement empirical efforts, an understanding of the fundamental factors that have influenced the shaping of literature instruction is indispensable. Among the various factors that have contributed to the way literature has been explicated and taught are the outcome of the developments in the modern literary theories, the marriage between literature and language instruction and the influence of the evolution in educational theories and practices. Therefore, an overview of these factors and their contributions towards the shaping of faces in the literature instruction will be addressed in this paper. The awareness of these factors and how they have influenced the way literature has been taught and explicated may not only be used to understand and analyse evidence found through empirical investigation but could also be used to make vital decisions about the general pedagogical needs and practises of the literature instruction in the future.

1.0 Introduction

Literature has survived to become part of many cultural heritage as well as social tradition that ranges from any informal domestic past time activity for amusement purposes to more structured subject matter that is offered across different curricula all over the world. For instance, at an early age, a child regardless of his difference in cultural, language or social background would naturally be introduced to literature through nursery rhymes and folklores which occupy part of his play time as well as the informal learning process at home before being introduced to the formal convention of learning literature at preschool, kindergarten or elementary school. The informal exposure attained at home actually marks the beginning of an exploration into aesthetic appreciation as well as language acquisition through literature.

When a child is introduced to literature, it would normally be the parent or caregiver who would either tell or read a story to the child. The child would first experience the aesthetic pleasure of being read to. This can easily be recognized when the child would request for another round of his favourite story or would sing to the tune of a happy and catchy nursery rhyme song. While enjoying the aesthetic moment, the child should be able to make his own meaning of the story by listening, feeling and picturing the story told in his mind and would naturally want to act out the lines from a nursery rhyme while singing to the tune (Alexander, Miller and Sapient, 2002).

Later, when the child begins his quest to acquire his own reading skills, he would again be reintroduced to the world of narrative texts such as fairytales or children's short stories. He would normally begin by learning to recognize and associate the symbols to

the sounds of different letters that are combined to make words that are written on pages of the storybook. Slowly after much exposure and practice, the child would have said to have begun learning to read. However, unlike the time that he was being read to, now the child not only has to learn to read on his own, he would also need to learn to understand and make meaning of what he reads. In addition, by this time, he should have acquired the basis in the aesthetics as well as in the language aptitudes that would provide assistance in his attempt to create meaning as well as savour the reading activity.

To assist the child in this early stage of learning to read, simple illustrated books in the form of children's short stories and nursery rhymes are popular in assisting the child in his attempt to learn how to read while expressing his aesthetic mind and also comprehending and digesting the language being absorbed. In the long run, through activities that indulge him in the world of literature, he would be introduced to reading skills and still be taught to appreciate aesthetic exploration. This is further complemented with the help of attractive picture illustrations that normally accompany the text. The early exposure to story telling and learning to read and understand narrative stories are rudimentary experiences that would facilitate a child's literacy foundation for later years when he enters formal schooling.

As he starts his schooling years, he will be introduced to other types of texts besides the narrative stories that he has become accustomed to. That is when he will explore other reading strategies that would enable him to deal with and comprehend the other types of text. Gradually, as the child gets older, he would be exposed to all sorts of reading materials that would require more sophisticated reading skills that could help him through his readings.

To illustrate, when he is exposed to longer and more difficult reading materials in different academic areas such as those in the sciences and in business, he would probably be required to turn to various strategies in reading to assist him when he has to read to understand different types of reading materials. In addition, the whole process of learning how to read doesn't actually end in the child's school growing age. Even after he has entered the tertiary level he will still be challenged to do a lot more reading.

The constant exposure to different types of text and skills required in reading to understand these texts would eventually make him rely heavily on strategies learned during the formal schooling to understand a text rather than the initial encounter with reading for pleasure that he experienced early during his initial attempt in learning how to read. The change may be the result of factors such as the texts that the learner are now exposed to are academic texts that require him to read, understand and remember broad and complicated concepts that would have to be understood, learned by heart and applied to serve for academic excellence through assessments, for example. Besides that, the purpose for reading may also become another vital factor that would cause the child to choose strategies that enable him to accomplish his purpose which would most likely be to understand, gather or use information. As he ventures into more demanding academic instruction, obviously the reading skills needed would require him to read in search for specific content and not for aesthetic appreciation.

At this point, while a few may still continue reading literature in the form of novels, short stories, plays or even poetry for leisure, others may choose to spend time doing what other children would enjoy doing most besides reading literature. Obviously, what has been described here is a phenomenon that begins as children are introduced to formal education in school (Rosenblatt, 1938 & 2005). That is when their aesthetic abilities in exploring and appreciating the abstracts become limitedly applied to only matters that involve art or music, while the rest would limit his ability in applying his aesthetic skills to the fullest. Even if literature is ever included as part of a curriculum, either as a subject matter on its own, like art or music, or is incorporated into the language syllabus, it may not be recognised or perceived as one of the key subjects within the curriculum.

This situation is a common phenomenon across curricula around the world. In fact, because of the constant exposure to and practice in reading academic texts, some learners may either face difficulty or show limited interest in engaging with literature when they are expected to read and express their personal response. Others who do see the value of making literature as part of their academic endeavour may attempt to explore literature according to the norms acquired through the training of reading academic texts. This means that the learners may strive to approach a literary text as if they were about to explore an academic text. When this happens they would be reading in search of specific information rather than to endure the pleasure of aesthetic meaning making as they transact with the text.

This according to Rosenblatt (1938: 32) is 'efferent' reading and the term originates from a Latin word 'effere' which means 'to carry away.' She asserted that when a reader reads a literary text in search for factual information than he would adopt the 'efferent stance.' This stance is 'predominantly nonliterary' and is also used to assist a reader in making sense of a literary text based on its 'public meaning' (Rosenblatt, 1938: 292). Apart from that, it would normally be adopted when a reader chooses to read a literary text "primarily for the information provided" (Beach, 1993: 163).

On the other hand, the type of reading experience that is acquired early during childhood as described earlier is referred to as the aesthetic reading. According to Rosenblatt (1938), when reading a literary text aesthetically, the reader would choose to adopt the 'aesthetic stance' that would enable him to engage himself in a more personal meaning making level. Meanwhile, the aesthetic stance would permit focus on 'private meaning making' of the text. This is when the reader would be able to live through the meaning making process by relating it to personal associations, feelings and ideas.

To her it is possible for a reader to choose the efferent or aesthetic stance or to employ both interchangeably as one reads a literary text. However, she believed that it would be possible to ask anyone to read the newspaper or any academic text and to summarize or rephrase the original text into something more comprehensible for the layman to understand. In fact, she asserted that if the same text is summarised by different readers, then all the summaries would generally contain similar information that has been lifted or taken from the original text read. To extend this concept of information transfer into literary text, she believed that when a reader decides to adopt the efferent stance in reading a literary text, he would be reading in search for the overall idea of what the text is all about or in search for specific information which he

may be able to use in describing his understanding of the plot, for example, in a summary.

Nonetheless, Rosenblatt (1938: 24) claimed that when it comes to reading a literary text “there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work.” She argued that “no one can read a poem for us. If there is indeed to be a poem and not simply a literal statement, the reader must have the experience, must ‘live through’ what is being created during the reading.” (1938: 33)

In other words, as described earlier, although during the early years of learning, a child may have been exposed to the aesthetics informally, where he is able to use his imagination, creativity and personal ideas in understanding and enriching his ability to create meaning of the stories told to or read by him using the aesthetic stance, later through formal training in school he may eventually become more accustomed to the efferent stance which is more suitable when reading other types of reading materials. At this point, when he reads any literary text he may either choose to use the efferent or aesthetic stance when making sense of the literary text or to adopt both stances together interchangeably. The circumstance described so far is one of the factors that have instigated complex issues that surround the literature instruction and how it is generally viewed and taught across different curricula. For that matter, the following section will address and elaborate on three other fundamental factors that have profoundly influenced the shaping of faces of literature and how it has been explicated, taught and learned for a very long time. The exploration and discovery of these fundamental factors would generate a deeper understanding of issues and challenges that have become apparent as a consequence.

2.0 Factors Influencing the Shaping of Faces of the Literature Instruction

The choice of stance that has been introduced by Rosenblatt (1938) may be one of the contributing factors that may influence how literary texts are explicated which may also lead to how literature instruction is shaped. However, there are other powerful factors that have influenced the general pedagogical development as well as the meaning making process of literary texts. Among them, three major factors that have played a insightful role in the way literature is understood and interpreted are the development in modern literary theories, the marriage between literature and language teaching and learning and how the evolution in educational theories and practices have influenced the pedagogical development in the general literature instruction.

In her final publication, Rosenblatt (2005: 68) stated that:

“It is much easier in the classroom to deal with ideas and information about literature than it is with literature itself, as it resides in the myriad transactions between individuals and books. To help a young reader to reflect critically on his own response is indeed challenging to him and to the teacher. Naturally, the tendency is to concentrate on the easily checked “facts” of the story or play, or to present information about literary history, or to discuss the often entertaining items about the life of the author. Hence it is that in many classrooms pupils learn to ignore or even distrust their own responses to literature. They may therefore reject literature altogether as irrelevant to themselves. Or they may divert their original interest in literature to studies around and about

literature. The student comes to substitute these for the kind of reflection on his response that would enable him to approach the text work in a sounder way."

Generally what has been described here is a common occurrence in classrooms that attempt to study or read a piece of literary work whether a short story, novel, play or even a poem. In fact, Langer (1990: 812) believed that, "The teaching of literature is often misunderstood."

Most of the time lessons will focus on information gathered about the text to enable them to discover the 'correct answer' rather than their own perception or personal response to the text. For example, lessons in literature would most likely evolve around matters that require students to recall or state information read, to give a general précis of the student's understanding of the text or to identify and discuss literary devices or elements used. The most that would be expected of the student is his ability to argue or criticise about the text or its relationship to its author or other works based on various theories of modern literary criticisms. These activities demand students to read the text in search for information rather than to enjoy or savour the reading experience or the transaction that should naturally take place between the reader and the text. The free association into the aesthetics is overshadowed by an in depth explication analysis of literature either using literary criticisms or by analysing the stylistic features of the texts.

The situation described may very much be the repercussion of different contributing factors. Among them, three compelling factors mentioned earlier namely the development in modern literary theories (Probst, 1992; Seldon, 1989; Beach, 1993), the evolving relationship between literature and language teaching and learning and the advancement of theories and practices in the educational area have certainly influenced the way literature is explicated and taught which ultimately have an effect on the meaning making process.

3.0 The Relationship between Modern Literary Theories and Literature

Figure 1 below shows the well-known 'triangle' of author, work and reader introduced by M.H. Abrams. It illustrates the characterization of the development in modern literary theories that has transpired in three distinct stages namely the Romantics, The New Critics and the Reader Response (Beach, 1993).

Traditionally, during the Romantics period, when reading a literary text, it was customary for readers to be expected to focus on the writer and to find the meaning of the text based on the message that the writer desires to convey. Seldon (1989: 4) explained that the "romantic theories emphasise the writer's mind and life." In other words, the focus of meaning lies in the hands of the writer of the text.

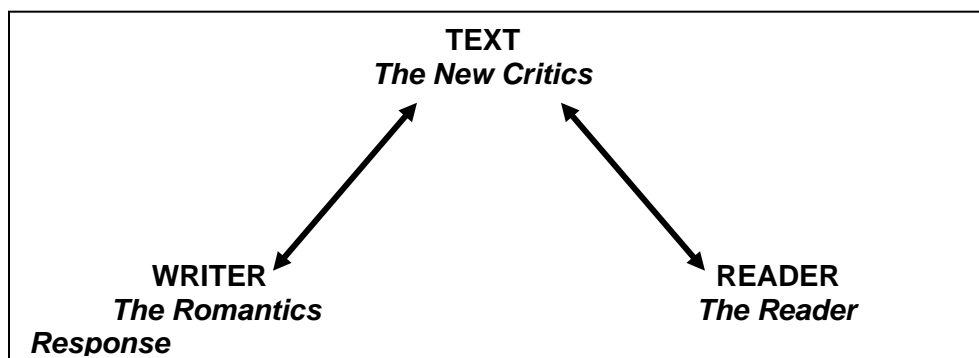




Figure 1 “Triangle” of author, work and reader

Readers are supposed to read and speculate the intentions that the writer tries to communicate through the text written. Readers are not supposed to rely on their own thoughts, feelings or personal experience when making sense or responding to the text read. Understanding, meaning making as well as critical analysis of the literary work would normally centre on who the writer was, what sort of educational training and background experiences did he have and the particular issues, themes or style of writing that the writer would usually employ in his work. The practice would be expanded to include a comparison or/and contrast of other literary works written by the same author or an exploration of other kinds of meaning that was common to literary works of the certain period, genre or tradition.

In comparison to the Romantics, the New Critics have a different set of views about how literary texts should be understood and valued. Instead of searching for the true meaning or message that the writer wishes to express, they believe that meaning and message are subjected to be based on the text itself and is influenced by different modern literary theories such as the Marxists, the Formalists and the Structuralists. According to Seldon (1989: 4), “Formalist theories concentrate on the nature of writing itself in isolation; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical context as fundamental...and the Structuralist poetics draws attention to the codes we used to construct meaning.” As claimed by Beach (1993: 1), “While literary criticism is equally concerned with making meaning, the focus is generally more on extracting meaning from the text rather than making explicit the processes by which readers, or the critic, make meaning.” In other words, the New Critics suggest an extension to the way readers should make meaning by not only focusing on the writer’s message but also using theories in criticism to explain or make meaning out of the text read. Both the Romantics and the New Critics prioritise tangible evidence that is either based on the writer’s intentions and lives or information presented in the literary text when explicating or analysing the meaning rather than allowing the reader to express and rely on his or her own personal reasoning or presuppositions about the text.

However, when the reader oriented or phenomenological criticism that emerged when the Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1938) was popularised, readers’ viewpoint has since become a significant part of the meaning making process (Beach, 1993). This has further been reinforced when the Transactional Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) was later established. Based on these reader oriented theories, meaning resides within the transaction between the reader and the literary work. The reader plays a vital role in shaping meaning where background knowledge and experiences are central in making sense of the text.

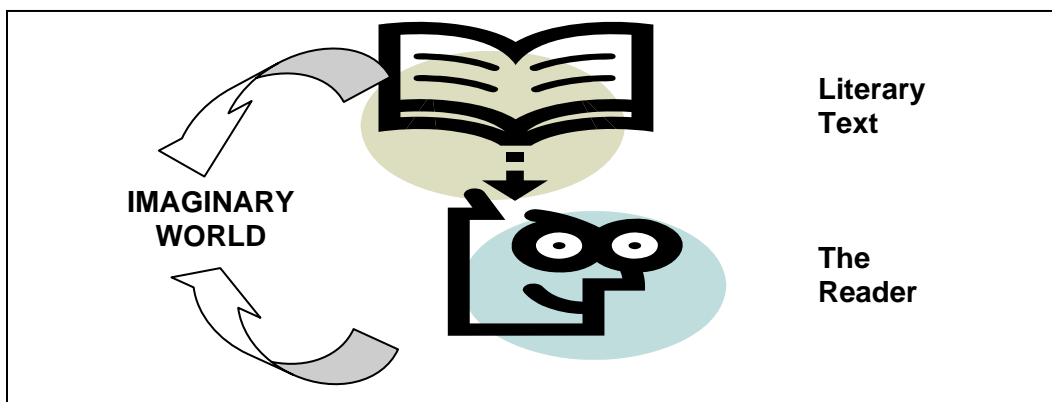


Figure 2 The transactional process in reading literary texts

Chitravelu et al. (2005) described the transaction as a process that is illustrated in Figure 2. Like Rosenblatt (1938, 1978), she believed that meaning making will take place while the reader is engaged in reading a literary text. The transactional process that engages the reader in meaning making will lure the reader into an imaginary world that would depend on various factors such as the state of mind or the mood that the reader is in, his or her background knowledge and previous experiences and his or her familiarity with the culture of the text, the purpose of reading the literary text, time and interest in reading. In other words, in reading literary texts, meaning would reside on many factors that would originate from who the reader is and when he is reading the literary text. Each time a reader engages in reading a literary text, the creation of meaning will be unique to that particular situation in time.

Based on the discussion presented so far, literature has indeed been read and explicated differently according to the different focus disclosed. At the beginning, emphasis was given to the role of the writer by the Romantics. Later, the development in modern literary criticism has influenced the way people read, judge or analyse any literary text. The focus on meaning making which once resided on the writer and the message that he wishes to convey through his work of art, has been shifted by the New Critics to the meaning that is readily presented in the literary text. This has been done with the help of different modern literary theories that have emerged after the 1920's. However, the later period has been slowly influenced by the significant role of the reader to project meaning in the imagined world through the transactional process that takes place when the reader is engaged with the text.

Obviously based on the evidence presented literature has indeed been read and viewed differently across time and this is very much the outcome of the general development of the modern literary theories. Meanwhile, the strong influence in the development of modern literary movements could also be observed in the relationship that has been established between literature and language teaching and learning.

The situation described earlier by Rosenblatt (2005) about how learners and instructors thought literature should be taught and learned may have also been as a consequence of the transformations in the relationship between language and literature.

4.0 The Marriage between Language and Literature Instruction

Figure 3 depicts the overall evolution in the relationship between literature and language teaching and learning. Evidently, the relationship between the two related but distinct areas have gone through considerable transformations (Delanoy, 1997). At the beginning, under the influence of the Formalists and the Structuralists, much attention was given to the use of literature in language teaching. According to Thakur (2003), before the world war, the teaching of the English language was synonymous with the

teaching of literature. It was treated as a source of high moral value and a model of excellent language use that emphasized on the study of literary canon of the target language. In this situation, literature was taught as the body of knowledge or the subject matter that dominated the language syllabus (Carroli, 2002).

The situation however, changed after the British colonization period ended (Thakur, 2003). This was due the fact that the status of the English language in many of the colonized countries changed to become a second or a foreign language. As a result of the change of the English language status, literature which was once treated as a source of high moral value no longer held its special status.

Meanwhile, literature became more divorced from language teaching when advocates of the Functional Approach argued to eliminate literature from language teaching (Delanoy, 1997). They disputed that the use of literature in language teaching was a long way from meeting the needs of the language learners. The trend to disengage and at the same time to unite literature with language teaching and learning continued when the Communicative Approach to language teaching was established in the 1970s. Although initially through the Communicative language teaching method, authentic literary texts were regarded to supply learners with 'representational uses of the language' (Carter, 2007: 6), many materials and textbooks that are designed using the method focused on specific language features and functions minimally make use of the authenticity of literary language in the teaching and learning of a language (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000; Newman & Pujol, 1996).

Nevertheless, starting in the 1980s, literature has slowly reestablished its grounds in the language teaching and learning environment (Carter, 2007) through the new evolution of Applied Linguistics and Literary Theory (Thakur, 2003). From then on, literature has once again made its way into the language instruction. This time however, it does not dominate the language instruction instead its function has changed to become a resource for language teaching and learning (Lazar, 2005) and a genre for linguistic exploration into stylistic or discourse analysis (Carter, 2007).

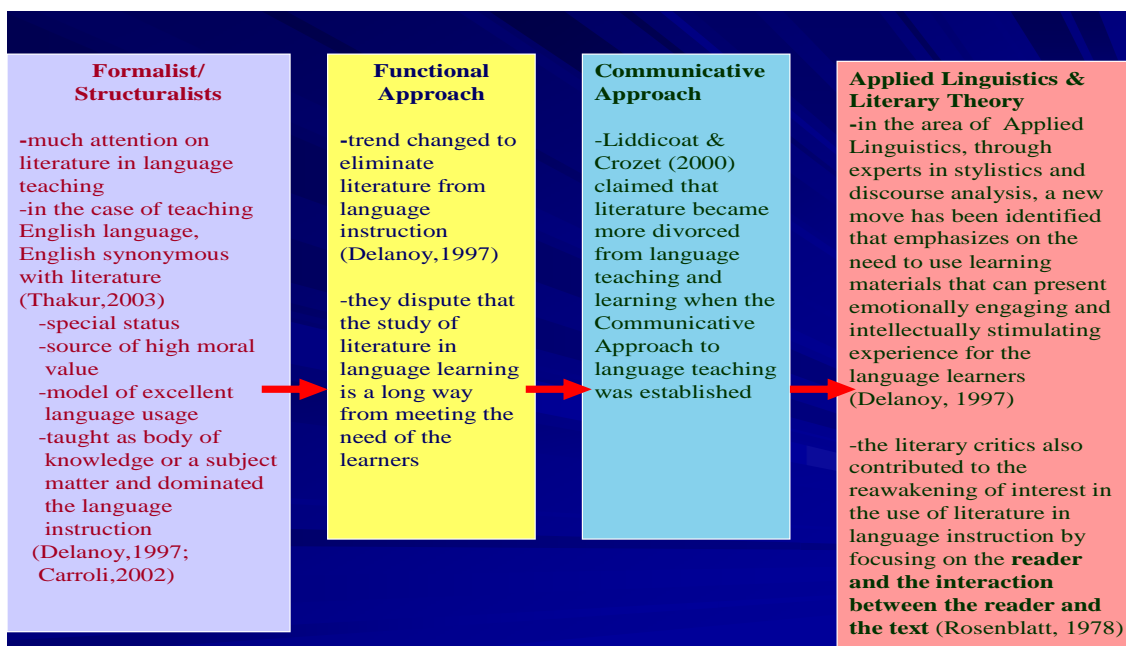


Figure 3 Transformation in the relationship between literature and language learning

Thus far, the progress in the marriage between literature and language instruction has indeed played its unique role within the actual teaching and learning processes of literature. Since literature has once again become a significant part of language instruction and linguistics, the meaning making process of literary texts has been extended not only to include focus on either the writer or the reader but detailed stylistics analysis of the text structures, style of writing and choice of words that are employed to bring meaning to literary texts. The current development in the relationship between literature and language instruction has resulted in the formation of three teaching models designed especially when using literature within any general language instruction. The models will be described and discussed in detail in the section on the effects of the factors discussed on the overall pedagogical practices in the literature instruction.

5.0 The Influence of Educational Theory

The discussion on faces of literature instruction started with how developments in the modern literary theories and the progress in the relationship between literature and language instruction have affected the way meaning is explicated in literary texts. Following that, it should also be noted that theories within the area of education such as constructivism and active learning have also lent their hand in varying the faces of the overall literature instruction.

For example, in 1990, a revolution in literature instruction was established in American educational institutions. The revolt was as a consequence of the influence of the constructivism theory in education. In the meantime, ample empirical evidence has also shown that many literature lessons have often been taught and tested in a nonliterary manner. Learners are normally expected to arrive at the correct

interpretation or adopt a particular right answer (Langer, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978 & 2005) especially for assessment purposes. Apart from that, researchers in the area of education, discourse analysis and literature instruction such as Tharp & Gallimore (1988), Cazden (2000) and Nystrand (1997) found that highly scripted lessons of recitation, where teacher controls the discourse and there is minimal interaction in the class is the predominant mode in many literature classrooms.

In other words, the growing concern about the pedagogical tradition within the literature instruction together with the growing influence of theories that support learner centered learning environment have facilitated the establishment of a more vibrant approach into the faces of the literature instruction. According to Langer (1992: 35),

“The need to reexamine the role of literature in the educational experience of young people is particularly acute at this time, when the nation as a whole is attempting to redefine its educational goals and objectives...educators have turned to generic problem-solving approaches as the focus of reform, with identified “critical thinking” strategies applied in similar ways across the different academic subjects.”

For that matter, Applebee (1992) mentioned that the language arts has adopted the constructivism theory for the teaching and learning of literature where emphasis has shifted from content knowledge to process of understanding. In other words, if the focus of literature instruction has been on dealing with ideas and information about literature (Rosenblatt, 2005), the revolution is supposed to alter literature instruction to centre on the process of meaning making and responding to the works of art. Through constructivism, learners are given the opportunity to become active participants in the learning process where they are encouraged to use prior knowledge, personal and cultural experiences in their attempt to explicate the literary texts read individually or together through group work.

Generally, the factors described have indeed greatly influenced the overall literature pedagogical trends. As a consequence, a couple of examples of how these factors have contributed to the different faces of the literature instruction are discussed in the following section.

6.0 The Effects on Pedagogical Practices

The influence of the theory of constructivism that brought about ideas like the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1987) and Scaffolding theory (Bruner, 1975) together with the introduction of active learning theories such as cooperative and collaborative learning have supported empirical findings in pointing to the need to replace the traditional recitation patterns of discourse in most literature classrooms with those that actively engage students in meaning making through group work. As a consequence, some educationists such as Daniels (2004) through Literature Circles or Furr (2006) through the Bookworm Club Reading Circles have developed frameworks for promising instructional ideas that have extended the faces of literature instruction using theories within the educational area.

With regards to the evolutions in the literary movements, obviously the current perception of the role of literature in language teaching and learning has also been influenced by the evolution of the movements. For example, Applebee (1992) discussed how the movements in literary theories have affected the teaching of the English Language Arts in the United States in the 1970s. As a result of the movement, a report which was published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Commission, presented three teaching models (Mandel, 1980) that could be applied for the teaching of literature in the English Language Arts curriculum.

According to Applebee (1992: 10)

“The three models represent long-standing traditions in the English language arts: one was student centered, emphasizing ‘personal growth’; one was content centered, emphasizing the preservation of a cultural heritage; and one was skill centered, emphasizing the development of language competencies.”

The same model has been used as a basis for a book *entitled Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers* written by Lazar (2005). Taking a closer look at the three models, it can be seen that they are directly influenced by the literary criticism movement discussed earlier.

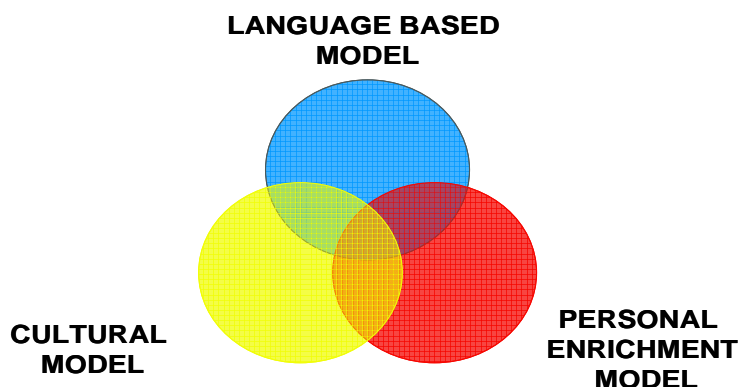


Figure 4 Models for Literature in Language Teaching and Learning

To illustrate, the Language Based Model which explores the choice and style of language used by the writer is directly influenced by the Romantics that focus on the writer's way of writing and choice of words. This is further explored through the area of Linguistics through stylistics and semantic analysis using corpus (Carter, 2007), for example. Meanwhile, the Cultural Model which is also referred to as the Content Based Approach (Lazar, 2005) is very much influenced by theories in literary criticism. For example, within the Cultural Model, explication of texts would be based on close reading of the texts and analysis of literary devices or elements used in the texts. Finally, the Personal Enrichment Model which is directly related to the Reader

Response theory emphasizes the role of the reader and his transaction with literary texts.

7.0 Conclusion

In short, developments in modern literary theories, the relationship between literature and language teaching and learning, and also the evolution of theories within the area of education have indeed facilitated the shaping of faces of literature instruction in general. There are of course other factors besides the ones discussed in this paper that have contributed to the way faces of literature instruction are shaped. For instance, Rogers (2006: 50) said that through literature, "Students are not only invited to express their responses in talk and writing, but also through movement, drama, art, and most recently, through multi-media such as digital filmmaking."

In short, to facilitate efforts to enhance the teaching and learning of literature, attempts in exploring and understanding what and how different factors have affected the shaping of literature instruction is necessary. Obviously the identification and understanding of the factors and how they have influenced the shaping of literature instruction can be used to assist more research efforts that lead to the discoveries and understanding of practices as well as real challenges in the teaching of literature which ultimately will affect the future pedagogical development of literature instruction in the future.

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