



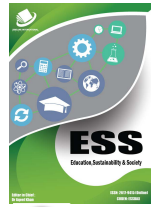
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MEANING MAKING IN LITERATURE READING: SELECTIVE ATTENTION BETWEEN GENDERS

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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Readers play a vital role in exploring meaning of a literary text. This case study examined the stances and types of personal responses of two teenagers, a male and a female, during the meaning making process of a short story entitled 'Fair's Fair' by Narinder Dhani. The objectives of this study are to identify the types of stances adopted by the two genders, to identify the types of personal responses made by the two genders and to analyze how the stances and personal responses are being adopted in relation to their meaning making process. Through the use of think-aloud protocol and personal interview, the participants revealed rich qualitative findings that were derived using thematic analysis. There were striking differences in the stances adopted and personal responses projected by the two genders. Male teenager elicited more critical response while female teenager elicited more aesthetic response. Interesting patterns of 'selective attention' were uncovered, where male did more inferring responses while female produced more personally connected responses. Nevertheless, both of them produced textual and moral responses. In conclusion, this shows that generally, male tend to associate the context of text critically in determining meaning, while female tend to associate themselves with the text to create meaning.

KEYWORDS

Meaning Making, Stances, Responses, Literature, Gender, Group Discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is embedded in the Malaysian English language curriculum as an extra component to enhance students' English language proficiency. Some goals of teaching literature include exposing students to the richness of English language in different genres of literature, introducing students to foreign cultures and instilling positive values in students [1]. To achieve these goals, meaning making is crucial. Meaning making is a critical thinking skill that students should acquire to fulfill the goal of education in secondary school. In literature, readers play an important role in exploring meaning of the text. Reader Response Theory highlights different continuum of reading which are efferent, aesthetic and critical stances [2-4]. Responses of readers also vary according to their textual, experiential, social, cultural and psychological context; hence, different types of responses can be produced [5]. Studies in gender have highlighted how male and female vary in various aspects because each gender has different traits in the human brain [6]. Indirectly, the differences in the traits and structure affect their way of interpretation and meaning making. They may have different tendencies on achieving a particular stance and producing any types of responses regarding their readings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Teaching of Literature in Malaysia

The teaching of literature has been introduced nationwide since the year 2000 to help ESL students in Malaysia to be proficient users of the English language. Several recent studies have identified that there are three main methods of teaching literature that has been practiced in Malaysia. They are teaching literature as structural unit, teaching literature as content and teaching literature for personal growth [7,8]. Each teaching method has its

own goal which serves different function and they may be integrated to make the lesson more fun and meaningful. The process of meaning making is ideally implemented in teaching literature as content and for personal growth, as the students would be able to be critical in understanding and analyzing the literary texts to learn from them.

Although there are researches on making literature lessons meaningful, there are several issues regarding literature teaching in Malaysia. Firstly, the teaching is mostly done using traditional method which is teacher-centred [9]. This method hinders students from participating actively in class as they were not given the opportunity to talk and discuss. Secondly, most students perceived the lesson as boring because of their low proficiency [10,11]. Therefore, a teacher's teaching should be adjusted according to the students' proficiency level so that the learning can be meaningful. Finally, during literature class, the teaching is focusing more on the text and author while neglecting the 'reader' who are the students [8]. The students were not given a chance to share their views and understanding towards the literature. Hence, the teaching would be dry and less meaningful for the students.

2.2 Reader Response Theory and The Stances in Meaning Making

The reader response theory was introduced to explain the process of how readers interact with a literary text to create meaning [2]. It was first introduced with the continuum of efferent and aesthetic stances. Later, the continuum has been expanded up to critical stance [3,4]. Efferent stance is a reader's literal understanding based on the text, literally. Some aspects of understanding under the efferent stance include understanding the plot, theme and characters of a literary text. Aesthetic stance, on the other hand, takes understanding on another level, where the reader does not only look

at the text literally, but also relates it with the reader. For example, it takes consideration of what the reader feels after reading the literary text and what they can learn from the text. The third and final stance discovered is the critical stance. This stance looks at the text literally, beyond it and also critically analyzing the text in relation to the author, reader and the content. A summary of these stances is shown in the figure below:

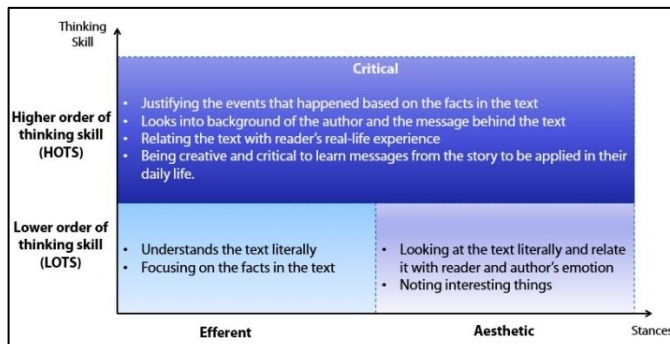


Figure 1: A Summary of Efferent, Aesthetic and Critical Stances [2-4]

2.3 Types of Responses in Meaning Making

According to a study, a reader responds variously according to their purpose while reading; whether to express their emotion, voice their opinion or share their views with others [5]. It is also stated that there are several factors which may affect the readers' response and this include their social, historical or cultural context. He then summarized five primary theoretical perspectives which are textual, experiential, social, cultural and psychological. These perspectives explained from where the readers got to produce their responses based on the literary text. Based on this explanation, several types of responses in literature reading were identified. They are literal thinking, inferring, moral response, personal connecting and background knowledge. The elaboration for each type of responses is as shown below:

Table 1: The Types of Responses [5]

Types of Responses	Description
Literal Thinking	Readers give concrete responses to events in story
Inferring	Readers explain characters' acts according to their traits, beliefs, goals and plans
Moral Response	Readers respond to moral dilemmas in text
Personal Connecting	Readers make personal links to their lives in direct or indirect way, offer personal assessment or evaluation
Background Knowledge	Readers provide factual information not found in text

2.4 Gender Differences in Meaning Making

Male and female have several different traits in the human brain [6]. This affects various things including personality, physical growth, way of thinking. According to a study, gender also affects the response elicited with regards to meaning making [5]. A study found that while most students do make literal interpretation on literary text, male students have higher tendency of making literal responses [12]. On the other hand, female students have higher tendency on making personal judgement on the literary text and personal connection with it. Hence, it was observed that female students made more higher stances than male students. Moreover, the genders may also have different theme during discussions as they may have their own gender-based interests. The researcher believes that both genders could achieve higher stance as long as the topic of focus is in accordance to their interests.

3. OBJECTIVES

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the types of stances adopted by the two genders

- To identify the types of personal responses made by the two genders
- To analyze how the stances and personal responses are being adopted in relation to their meaning making process

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design by using think-aloud protocol and an interview as a method to gather the data to be analyzed. Then, the data will be analyzed through thematic analysis to be interpreted.

4.1 Participants of Study

Two teenagers, one male and one female, aged 16 and 15 years old respectively, had participated in this study. Both of them are used to the same-gender environment because they are enrolled in a religious school where male and female students have less interaction between genders. Both possess good proficiency of English language. Subjects with good proficiency of English were chosen because they are expected to achieve all stances and rich responses of a literature.

4.2 Instrument

A Form 1 short story was used as the instrument. The short story is 'Fair's Fair' by Narinder Dhani. It is a story of three friends, Lee, Raj and Sam, on their journey to collect money to go to a funfair. The short story is illustrated and uses many simple sentences and vocabulary. This short story is chosen because of its simple language and colorful illustrations, hence, the participants would have no problem to make meaning while reading this. When their literal understanding has been catered, it is expected that they can get to higher stances and elicit more types of responses.

4.3 Data Collection

Two methods had been used to gather data in this study which are Think-aloud protocol and an interview. Both sessions were recorded under the consent of the participants. Think-aloud protocol is a method where the participants do the thinking process verbally by saying out their thoughts while performing a task [13,14]. In this study, this method was used while the participants were reading the short story. This was done to study what was in their thoughts while they were reading. This protocol was carried out individually. Before it was carried out, the participants were given a briefing on how it should be done. Then, they were given thinking prompts to help them expressing their thoughts during the protocol. Next, the thinking-aloud protocol was carried out for both participants, where they read the short story and do the think-aloud process during pauses in between the story.

The second method is an interview. After the think-aloud protocol, both participants underwent a semi-structured individual interview with regards of their reading and their meaning making process during the think-aloud protocol. During the interview, the researcher asked the participants six questions on their thinking process and their understanding towards the short story. Their thoughts, feeling and reaction were studied deeper. The recordings for both think-aloud protocol and interview sessions for both participants were transcribed and the transcriptions were analyzed.

4.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method which identifies, analyzes and interprets patterns in qualitative data [15]. In this study, thematic analysis was used to uncover the patterns of stances and responses made by the participants. The thoughts and responses of the participants from the data collection sessions were analyzed and the data was categorized according to their similar patterns and characteristics. They are then classified into the level of stances [2-5].

5. FINDINGS

Based on the objectives of this study, the findings are divided into two which are on stances and the types of response while reading literature

5.1 Stances

It was found that both teenagers had reached all stances which are efferent, aesthetic and critical stances. Nevertheless, their approach towards these stances were different. For the male participant, it can be observed that from reading the text, he first reached efferent stance. Then, from the efferent stance, he took off to critical stance throughout the story. Finally, from the efferent and critical stances, he reached aesthetic stance at the end of the story. It was also observed that the male participant tend to reach efferent and critical stances, rather than aesthetic stance. The table below shows some examples of each stance with their occurrence that were made by the male participant:

Table 2: The Stances and Their Occurrences Made by Male Participant

Stance	Occurrence	Example
Efferent	Throughout the short story	"so from page 1 of chapter 1 until page 5, it is talking about three people, Raj, Sam and Lee." "finished chapter 1. after knowing that their friend had no money, Raj and Sam thought of an idea."
Aesthetic	After the short story ends	"I feel..like, satisfied...."
Critical	After Efferent stance, throughout the short story	"from here, we know that Lee is like, not spoiled, he is someone who knows about his mother's condition, he knows that when his mother don't have money, he did not want to burden her more nor got angry with her, so he's not a spoiled kid." "so chapter 2 until page 19, it raises the issue of respecting the elders..like.. these kids are well-taught, that even when they had to bring the dog for a walk, although they just walk around their neighbourhood, they still asked their parents for permission."

Meanwhile, the female participant started off at efferent stance during reading. Then, from the efferent stance, she reached aesthetic stance and sometimes critical stance right away. She also did reach critical stance after going through efferent and aesthetic stances. It was also found that the female participant had higher tendency to make efferent and aesthetic stances than critical stance. The table below shows some examples of each stance with their occurrence that were made by the female participant:

Table 3: The Stances and Their Occurrences Made by Female Participant

Stance	Occurrence	Example
Efferent	Throughout the short story	"There are three characters in this book which are Raj, Sam and Lee. And at that time, there was a fair and they wanted to go to the fair." "After they went home, they come back to take Micky for a walk. So the friends took the dog for a walk to the park at the end of the street."
Aesthetic	After Efferent stance	"This is good because it has moral values. They were determined and do their best to get something."
	After the short story ends	"I think this story is OK, just like the title, fair is fair." "This short story is also interesting because it has colourful drawings."
Critical	After Efferent stance	"Because Micky was a dog, and he was so energetic, he went to the ball and got a hold of it."
	After Aesthetic stance	"so I think it was a really good thing for them to do, to help their friend in need. So it is something that we should apply in our daily lives, if we're with our friends. "

5.2 Types of Responses

As stated previously, the responses of the participants were classified into five types of literary responses which are literal thinking, inferring, moral response, personal connecting and background knowledge [5]. It was found that both participants had produced only four from the five types of responses which are literal thinking, inferring, moral response and personal connecting. No 'background knowledge' type of response was found from the data. Both genders tend to elicit literal thinking responses which are very textual and moral responses. Nevertheless, they also have different tendencies in producing other responses, where the male participant produced more inferring responses while the female participant did more personal connecting responses. The table below shows the examples of the different types of responses made by both participants:

Table 4: The Examples for Different Types of Responses Made by Male and Female Participant

Type of Responses	Male	Female
Literal Thinking	"He was walking, then he saw a purse where a lady dropped it and there was a lot of money in it."	"Lee saw a purse that was left by a woman. and give it back to the woman. so the woman rewarded him."
Inferring	"From here, they show the characteristics of kids who are still hardworking because they are still little, very...pure and...innocent."	"Because Micky was a dog, and he was so energetic, he went to the ball and got a hold of it."
Moral Response	"maybe it wants to teach the students that we can't have prejudice although we have different skin colour and are different in gender."	"I learn if you do something good, then you'll be rewarded for the good deeds that you have done."
Personal Connecting	"It reminds me of the Maze Runner book. Because in the last book, when the city was almost ruined, it had some friendship value."	"...So, at that time, I was going with my friends, which is my team. So, at that time, we had to have, like teamwork, like in this story"
Background Knowledge	-	-

6. DISCUSSION

The finding found that both participants had reached all three stances in the meaning making continuum which are efferent, aesthetic and critical. Nevertheless, there were differences in their tendencies of reaching the stances. In this study, it was found that while both mostly reached efferent stances, the male subject tends to reach critical stance and rarely reached aesthetic stance. On the other hand, the female subject tends to reach aesthetic stance after reaching efferent stance. This opposes the findings in which they found that both genders tend to go to efferent stance and did not reach aesthetic stance [12]. This may be due to the fact that the common literature learning environment in Malaysia is limiting students to reach up to efferent stance while neglecting aesthetic stance because of the exam-oriented system [16]. However, in this study, the learning context for both subjects encouraged them to reach any stances in the continuum. Therefore, they are able to reach all stances.

Furthermore, in this study, it is observed that the female subject reached aesthetic stance frequently, while the male subject rarely reached aesthetic stance. This may be due to the fact that in general, females enjoy reading more than males [17]. The female's interest in reading had caused her to produce aesthetic responses while reading the literature. Meanwhile, it is also observed that the male subject tend to reach critical stance more than the female subject. In a study on the gender differences

in the big five personality traits, in the traits of 'Openness/Intellect', it was stated that both genders scored high scores in the traits [18]. However, for the intellect domain, males scored higher than female. It means that men are more interested in ideas than females. This is why the male subject tend to reach critical stance after reaching efferent stance in his responses.

The findings had also presented the four types of responses produced by the participants. They had produced literal thinking, inferring, moral response and personal connecting responses without producing background knowledge response. Both of them produced literal thinking and moral responses the most. This may be because a common practice in literature teaching is where the teachers explained about the text and the literary devices in the literature, including moral values [16,19]. Nonetheless, in producing other types of responses, both genders showed striking difference in their responses. The male subject tend to make more inferring responses while the female subject tend to produce personal connecting responses. This is because according to males have more tendencies to talk about the events happening and how it happens more than about the people, which are actually, a reasoning and inferring processes [20]. Meanwhile, females tend to focus more on the people and the emotions occurring in an event; therefore, the female subject has more tendency to connect herself with the characters in the short story. This is also supported that males tend to focus more on the literal text and can be critical about it, while females tend to create personal responses [12,21].

7. CONCLUSION

In meaning making of literature, there are apparent differences between genders especially in terms of the continuum they reach and the types of responses produced. In this study, it has been proven that while both may have some similarities, where both can reach all stances in the meaning making continuum and can produce the various types of responses, there are differences in the way they projected their responses. The male participant has higher tendency to reach critical stance, while the female participant has higher tendency to teach aesthetic stance. Furthermore, both genders has a high tendency to produce literal and moral responses, but the male participant has higher tendency to produce inferring responses while the female participant has higher tendency to produce personal connecting responses.

For future researches, it is recommended that the study on gender differences in meaning making is done deeper by adding more participants or study the participants in the same-gender group. This will help the study in this area to make more generalization on the gender differences. It is also recommended that the meaning making process to be studied more to be implemented in the classroom so that the goal of teaching literature can be achieved. This is important because by learning the gender differences and the method of meaning making, teachers will have an idea on how to engage students of different genders in literature classes. This method of meaning making is also a student-centred method; hence it is in line with the methods in the 21st century learning.

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