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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF LITERATURE CIRCLE AS A TECHNIQUE TO TEACH CREATIVE WRITING USING LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights findings of a workshop based on responses given by practicing teachers on the use of Literature Circles (LC) as a technique to develop students' creative writing skills. It uncovers teaching techniques that have been used by teachers to promote and enhance students' writing skill using literature as a resource. The other issue initiated in this paper is the teachers' opinion on the suitability and practicality of applying Literature Circles in their classroom. The overall response shows that, prior to the workshop session, the teachers have used conventional methods in their classroom. Interestingly, it is discovered that they are very receptive of the idea of using the technique introduced in the workshop despite the challenges they may face in their classes.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the workshop

This paper describes a 3 hour workshop that was designed to help teachers improve their students' writings in English using English literature as a learning resource. It was conducted based on a request made by the head panel of the English Language Unit of SMTP (Teknik Perdagangan Johor). The request was based on three (3) prior meetings between members of the English Language Unit of Sekolah Menengah Teknik Perdagangan (SMTP) and lecturers from a public university in the southern region of Malaysia. The aim of the meetings was to identify a suitable topic for a workshop focusing on creative writing and how it can be directly linked to English Literature.

The workshop was conducted by an instructor and two facilitators who are very much interested in promoting the teaching of English Literature as part of language learning. The instructor has a doctoral degree in Education from Western Australia and has been teaching English language proficiency courses as well as literature in the university. One of the facilitators who has a Masters degree from the United States of America had taught literature and also methodology course for Literature in ELT for more than 10 years and is currently pursuing her doctoral degree focusing on the teaching of literature among the Malaysian language learners. The second facilitator has been trained to teach literature at Nottingham University and had taught in Malaysian schools before joining the public university as an English language teacher. As a newly appointed lecturer at the university, she is required to teach proficiency courses as well as her area of expertise, which is English Literature.

The purpose of the proposed workshop was to have collaborations between teachers and the workshop facilitators to explore in depth current practices in the teaching of literature as an English learning resource specifically aimed at enhancing students' creative writing skills. The information exchanged between the two parties served as valuable information in identifying the current methods used by the teachers and the effectiveness of the methods employed. The other aim was to seek the teachers' opinions on a more innovative technique called literature's circles that was introduced by the instructor. Furthermore, the workshop was also used to obtain

teachers' perspectives on using this technique and their willingness or reluctance to adopt the technique in their classrooms in the near future.

The workshop was initiated, supported and approved by the SMTP principal. The permission granted by the principal has allowed the English Language Unit of SMTP to organise the workshop at a large scale involving all technical schools in Johor, Malaysia. The unit had invited all English language teachers from technical schools in the southern region to attend the workshop. Incentives were given to these teachers such as travelling allowance and meals to encourage their commitment and participation in the workshop. There were 23 of them. The workshop was held at SMTP's Bilik Gerakan which was equipped with individual microphone for participants, flip chart, white board, LCD projectors and air-conditioning. The workshop was conducted on a Saturday, which was a non working day for the teachers. Turnout was encouraging as all technical schools in the southern region had sent a representative each to attend this workshop. The schools and the teachers had shown support to the organizers and most importantly, their preconceived idea was that the workshop would be very relevant for the teachers. The workshop had indeed fulfilled their needs to be creative in their teaching, and their positive responses to the workshop will be discussed further in the post-workshop section of this paper.

The initial concern of the discussion expressed by the organisers of the workshop was on how to develop creative writing skill among technical schools. They highlighted the key issue that this skill is very much needed as creative writing is one of the tested components for the English language paper. The importance of this paper is due to the fact that it is one of the components of a very prestigious public examination, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) for all Form Five secondary school students in Malaysia. The main worry of the English language unit of SMTP members was that the students lack creative writing skills and this has caused consistent disappointing performances in the English language paper. The chain reaction of doing badly in the paper has resulted in a drop in the overall SPM

performance for students studying in these technical schools. The other concern was mainly that the poor results of their English paper could reduce the students' chances of studying courses of their choice such as engineering, architecture etc and getting a place to study in established higher learning institutions. During these discussions the organisers and the workshop presenters decided on introducing a practical technique to merge teaching creative writing with English Literature to help resolve this predicament.

As part of the preparation for the workshop, the materials on using literature for teaching writing, techniques of using literature circle and teachers perceptions about the workshop were prepared. The preparation included preparing Power Point slides about how and why it is necessary to engage learners to write using literary texts. In addition, two sets of questionnaire were used for this survey, namely the pre and post workshop survey. For the pre workshop survey, questions were designed to find out the teachers' current opinions on using literature as a tool to develop creative skills among students. As for the post workshop survey, the aim was to find out their opinion on the idea of using literature as a tool to develop creative skills among students using a literature circle technique introduced by the workshop instructor.

The organisers and workshop presenters intended for the session to be an enjoyable and practical experience, thus the workshop was more of a sharing session rather than a theoretical-based discussion. The main aim was for the teachers to interact positively and present constructive criticisms about their personal experience in teaching literature aimed at improving writing skills. As teachers' readiness was the prime factor in making them share their experience, the workshop was conducted in a non threatening manner whereby the teachers were treated as colleagues and comments were always welcom. They were also asked to have group discussions and make notes about their feelings being negative or positive with reference to the use of literature circle while their identity remained anonymous. The workshop has served as an effective sharing platform for teacher to voice their concern on the technique introduced in the workshop.

They were also encouraged to respond to the instructors at any point of time should they have opinions, doubts and enquiries on related issues. The facilitators monitored the discussion from a distant while at the same time encouraged the teachers to reflect on their normal classroom practice when teaching literature. This strategy allows the teachers to express freely about sensitive issues such as the suitability of the technique introduced by the instructor in relation to the students' ability and school expectation if they were to apply the technique in their class.

WHAT IS LITERATURE CIRCLE?

The Literature Circle was developed by Harvey Daniels (1994). It began when a team of teachers and researchers in Chicago started to develop a model with a concept based on the centuries-old tradition of adult 'book clubs' or 'reading groups.' This model, however, was developed for native speakers of the language (L1) who are either in the elementary secondary schools. The concept was finally developed after Daniels (2002) and his colleagues experienced difficulty in teaching literature to L1 students in schools in the United States. They claimed that the students would rate the literature courses as the least favourite, most difficult or most hated courses in school.

While Daniels (2002) and his colleagues were launching the Literature Circle in their classrooms in Chicago, a talk-show host named Oprah Winfrey had also attempted to host and publicise literature discussion groups comprising of selected authors and members of the public on television. As a result of the publicity, Furr (2004) believed that "Suddenly, it was once again cool to read literature and talk about it with friends."

Presently, the Literature Circles model is not only adapted for the teaching and learning of literature in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. In fact, it has expanded and is now part of many programmes and classrooms in other countries like Australia

(Bales, 2002), Finland (Kankaanranta, 2007) and Canada (Daniel, 2004). It has also been established at university level to train students majoring in literature, English, and the Teaching of the English Language as a Second or Foreign Language in other countries like Japan (Furr, 2004) and Taiwan (Hsu, 2004).

The Literature Circle model was originally designed for native language elementary and secondary school learners (Daniels, 2000) and was developed based on small reading groups that will contain most of these features (Daniels, 2000):-

1. Students choose their own materials.
2. Small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice.
3. Different groups read different books.
4. When books are finished, readers share with their classmates and then form new groups for new reading.
5. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.
6. Students use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and their discussion.
7. Discussion topics come from the students.
8. Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions and open-ended questions are welcome.
9. The teacher serves as the facilitator, not a group member or an instructor.
10. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student-self evaluation
11. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.

On the contrary, based on Furr's (2004) own experience using Literature Circles in Japan, for Literature Circles to work among non-native speakers of the language such as those English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, the model needed to be altered.

Furr (2004: 3) suggested that,

to conduct successful Literature Circles in the EFL classroom, I have replaced the first four of Daniel's Key Ingredients with the following:

1. Instructors select materials appropriate for their student population.
2. Small temporary groups are formed, based on students' choice or the Instructor's direction.
3. Different groups are usually reading the same text.
4. When books are finished, readers may prepare a group project and/or the Instructor may provide additional information to fill in some of the gaps in student understanding – I call this step back loading the instruction. After the group projects or additional instruction, new groups are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion.

The changes made to the original Literature Circle model was basically crucial to allow teachers to choose appropriate literary texts based on their students' language proficiency level (Furr, 2004). Apart from that, he recommended that for Literature Circle to work well for EFL students, teachers should ask students to read and discuss several stories within the Literature Circle before positive results can be achieved.

Literature Circle promotes group work that would foster rapport and team effort among members as well as providing an opportunity for everyone to converse in a more natural environment (Day et al., 2002). This is especially useful compared to class discussions since language learners may learn to collaborate and cooperate with one another to enhance learning in a non-intimidating context. The interdependence of members in the LC could be formed by assigning specific roles and tasks related to the literary text which requires the contribution of each member to develop an in-depth understanding of the given literary text.

The process of forming a LC includes the identification of literary texts, forming groups of 4-6 students, an overview of the working dynamics of a LC, designing role sheets suitable for the text, which are interchangeable roles for every member in the group dealing with different types of literary texts, such as discussion director, vocabulary enricher, literary luminary, connector, illustrator, cultural expert and checker. Each role is assigned to each member and to be used as a guide during the learning process as well as references for the next literary circle task. Orientation of behaviour and expectations of group members must be explained and members must adhere to the etiquette of giving equal opportunity to every member to participate in the group. This can be viewed as a jigsaw puzzle and each member in the group hold an important piece and without their contribution, the jigsaw puzzle could not be completed.

PRE-WORKSHOP SURVEY

While the initial goal of incorporating the literature component into the English language syllabus for secondary school was to assist language acquisition through the cultivation of aesthetic appreciation (Subramaniam, 2003), the teachers also hoped that through literature, they could generate and promote creative writing skills among students from technical schools. On that note, the responses given by the teachers for the pre workshop survey suggested that the teachers have used varied techniques to teach literature in the classroom. The responses were as follows:

- “through video watching for short stories and novels”
- “introduce the poems stanza by stanza”
- “encourage students to brainstorm the title for a starting”
- “story telling, predicting, recalling, reporting the incident, -different genre – directed writing, newspaper report/article, role-play/drama”

- “news paper cutting and article”
- “QA sessions, chalk and talk”
- “chalk and talk, using LCD, handouts”
- “bottom-up approach-cover the literature bit by bit”
- “rote learning-students read, understand,
later memorise the plot”
- “using mind-maps, using drill questions,
using CD-Roms that provide visuals”

The above findings demonstrate that the teachers have employed teaching techniques that were very much influenced by the ELT pedagogy where activities are centered on overall comprehension attainment or recognition of specific information from the literary texts and not techniques that would cultivate their engagement in meaning making or their aesthetic appreciation of the language used. Apart from that, the techniques used appeared to be more teacher-centred, providing little opportunity for students to delve into their personal engagement and individual responses to literature. Habsah (2006:2) argued that,

Although it is stated in the national Curriculum Specification that the classroom should be a place for nurturing young minds in which students are expected to acquire knowledge that can elevate their levels of thinking... teachers' knowledge and beliefs about their teaching and their students' needs and abilities influence the way they implement national educational policies in their teaching

This may result in teachers having difficulty getting students to treat literature as a means of expressing their imagination and creativity. The findings also suggest that the focus of the literature lesson was more on mastering the literature content rather than using literature as a tool to develop language acquisition. For example, during the discussion, some of the teachers revealed the fact that they

preferred to employ techniques that best prepare students to answer the literature paper for public examination (SPM). Evidently the findings reveal that, “The teaching of literature has lacked a consistent methodology for presentation” (Long, 2000). According to Brumfit & Carter (2000),

The literary syllabus itself should have two broad stages, with the second one an option for those who wish to go on to become self-conscious about the process. The first stage will be concerned with enabling students to ‘experience’ literature; the second will enable them to describe, explain or otherwise ‘account for’ the experience. But in our view, the error of much literature teaching is that, in practice, it reverses this process.

As for the responses given by the teachers in the pre workshop survey on how they developed students’ creative writing skills through literature, the responses are as follows:

- “by asking them to make simple sentences out of the text/ poem learnt to come out with something similar, drilling”
- “ask students to use the plot of the story to write an essay”
- “give them ‘fill the blanks’ exercises”
- “composing a short passage by using brainstormed points being discussed in the class
- “discuss the questions, do the outline with them. They will develop the outline into an essay”
- “by asking students to answer situation questions and discuss the outline with them
- making use lit. works in writing class”
- “introducing outline, training students to differentiate main ideas and elaboration
- “parallel writing, expansion of notes”
- “by asking students to read a lot of sample answers and then try”

Although Day et al. (2002) and Langer (1990) claimed that when students are given the opportunity to write about what they read; they will not be merely recalling information read but will also be able to remember, analyse and synthesise better, the findings on the other hand confirm that the teachers have favoured low-order thinking activities in their attempt to develop their students' writing skills through the use of literature. In doing so, they have not fully utilised literature as a learning resource. The richness of the language as well as the humanistic and cultural craftsmanship portrayed in the literary texts have not been fully exploited by the teachers thus lessening the chance to develop their students' intellectual capacity as well as creativity in the target language. The appreciation of contents and language use in literary texts are the two needed elements for creative writing.

POST – WORKSHOP SURVEY

In this workshop, participants were requested to answer a simple questionnaire in relation to their perceptions about the workshop and how they would rank the workshop in terms of its usefulness. The focus of the workshop is to share different experiences in teaching English literature among teachers who indicated that they wanted to use literature as a means to teach students writing in the context of learning. Issues regarding the different techniques that can help students write creatively, develop confidence in writing and techniques for group discussions specifically for teaching literature were discussed during the workshop. Besides techniques for teaching, practical techniques used by teachers such as monitoring activities, selections of texts and introduction to writing were also shared during the workshop.

The participants ranked highly the technique discussed to develop creative writing skills using literature as a learning source. Only one participant ranked the workshop as average whereas in the

other teachers ranked the workshop as very good. The questionnaire was aimed at finding out if the workshop about using literature circles could be very useful for the teachers of English to use in the classroom. The results discussed above indicated that the workshop has provided some constructive methods to assist teachers in improving their teaching techniques and attract more students to be interested in English Literature by making the lessons “user-friendly”.

The majority of these teachers said that the techniques introduced during the workshop were useful. Some of the comments given were as follows:

“Yes, because it provided me with other techniques to approach teaching literature”

“Yes, because it is an interesting technique. It is useful to practice in our teaching.”

“Yes, I do but they are only suitable for good students...’

“Yes, they will progress in the lesson.”

“They are useful because they are learner centred.

“Certainly yes! I will apply this method.”

“Yes... it sounds and looks manageable. The possibility of its workability is high.”

“...because it engages each and every student.”

“Yes, an alternative way of teaching.”

“It’s good. However, it’s not really applicable in the real classroom. Teachers are too confined to the syllabus.”

“But it is useful in upgrading their skills in writing.”

“Useful if there’s not much problems with the student’s attitude.”

“It is useful..., but for the weaker students, it may need some changes here and there, perhaps.”

“Yes, it is very useful. But depends of the student’s proficiency in English.”

“Absolutely very useful. This technique will give a second chance to my students (next year especially) to see “Literature and Writing as interesting worlds of experience.”

The overall response to the technique was very positive and the teachers said that using literature circle would be a very useful technique for teaching writing and linking it to the literature lessons. The technique discussed in the workshop has provided teachers with a different perspective of using writing specifically drawing from the students own literature exposure. In the workshop a gradual introduction to literature in terms of developing skills in reading in context and beyond, building vocabulary, engaging personal experience and culture related to the literature in use as well as focusing on the specifics used for literature are introduced to the students. Basically, the use of literature circle is a dynamics of team work whereby each student is assigned a role and their contribution is important and needed in order to complete a given task.

In terms of practicality, the teachers felt that the issues of students' proficiency, time, syllabus requirements and exam oriented objectives were the reason that may prevent them from using literature in their teaching. A common perception among these teachers is that the technique is practical for advanced and average students but the weaker ones would not be able to do so because one of the teachers mentioned "They can't even read in English". One teacher disagreed with the technique because "...we have to follow the syllabus provided," while another said that "The school system in Malaysia is exam-oriented ..." and these are valid arguments. However, another teacher felt that "...they are really up to the teachers' creativity." which shows that the pros and cons of using the technique can be resolved by individual teachers who are willing to make changes within the constraints that they have. There is also a preoccupation with time factor because one teacher said that it was "practical but very time consuming to do it in class." and a request for more time by saying "Yes. But ample time is needed." Some of the reasons listed above show that these teachers are receptive to the literature circle as a technique to teach writing but they will need to make improvements and changes during preparation before and after the lessons.

The next part of the post-workshop questionnaire asked about ideas on improvements to be made to the technique and one of the

responses highlighted that the focus is to find an ideal technique for teaching literature to weak learners and having more workshops specifically for this purpose. There was a suggestion by a teacher about introducing more visuals using cartoons, movies, pictures and comics as part of the technique. Another good suggestion was to have group presentations and discussions as well as feedback sessions as a way to increase interactions between teachers and their students. There were suggestions to do a longer workshop instead of three hours because the teachers wanted to learn more techniques with hands on experience as many commented that they have never tried this technique before. Some of the statements reflecting this view such as "...haven't tried the techniques." and "Two hours is not sufficient." One interesting comment was that a teacher requested that the techniques introduced should be "...more school-friendly instead of college friendly." This statement showed that the teacher thought the technique was not meant for schools because the creativity and flexibility in institutions of higher learning allows changes to be made to the syllabus without conforming to the national syllabus. This is supported by another comment made by a teacher saying "Make it more suitable with the school syllabus." which highlighted the fact that the actual classroom practice needs to be taken into account prior to implementing literature circle in the classroom.

The final section in the questionnaire sought to identify the different challenges if the teachers were to implement the literature circle technique in the classroom. The common worries faced by these teachers are related to time issues, syllabus, number of students in a class, students' commitments and interaction, lack of participation, teacher-dependent, changing the mindset of students, management policies and need for a step by step guide in the initial learning and issues of other administrative works delegated to these teachers. The challenges are issues that should be used as the basis for further research leading to improvements in use of literature circle in the classroom. These constraints listed by the participants of the workshop showed that they are committed to improve teaching and learning of literature in school but are voicing their needs for support in order to

help them help students learn and appreciate English literature so as to improve the current situation with regards to teaching and learning this subject in schools.

CONCLUSION

The workshop presenters have managed to show teachers of English how to incorporate literature texts as part of teaching creative writing. The responses given by them show that many are not aware of Literature Circles (LC) and its potential as a powerful and practical technique for teaching a language. They have indicated that they are willing to try LC in their classes and are looking forward to have more sessions similar to the workshop.

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