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ESL Students' Attitude towards Texts and Teaching Methods Used

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Abstract

One of Malaysia's long-term goals is to achieve complete national development by the year 2020. Making sure the next generation of workers is fluent in English is crucial if the country wants to be competitive on a global scale. The curriculum's return to literature is a direct outcome of the National Philosophy of Education's push to create well-rounded graduates with strong academic credentials and enhanced intercultural awareness. The scientific and mathematical disciplines also make use of English as their medium of education. The Literature in English Component was introduced to secondary schools in the year 2000, including literature into the English curriculum. In this study, we will look at how students felt about the program's reading materials, the difficulties they encountered, and the kinds of reading materials they liked the most. Additionally, it delves into the various teaching styles used in class, analysing their efficacy and identifying the preferred ways among the students. Participating in the research were 110 Form Five students from two schools in Kemaman, Terengganu. The study tool used was a questionnaire and interviews. The results indicated that students were generally pleased with the texts chosen for study, but less so with the instructors' pedagogical choices.

Keywords: Attitudes,Textselection,Teachingmethods,Literature

1. Introduction

A student's mentality is a major component in how well they learn a new language. Candlelin and Mercer (2001) found that students' attitudes towards the target language, native speakers, and the learning environment can contribute to their success or failure. Knowing that unfavourable attitudes may be modified has inspired several studies on the function of attitude in second language learning. A more positive classroom and social climate, as well as more effective teaching methods, may go a long way towards uplifting students' spirits. According to McGroarty (1996), there are three parts to an attitude: the beliefs, the emotional responses, and the behavioural inclinations that are connected to the object of the attitudes. In this context, "personal bias" is an individual's predispositions, thoughts, concerns, and beliefs on any given issue. Possessing a propensity to respond favourably or adversely, it also has an evaluative quality. To put it simply, it is an individual's thought process or behaviour. When considering why people learn a language, attitudes play a role. There are two broad types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. When people acquire a second language with the intention of fully engaging in the cultural practices of the target language group, this is known as an integrative purpose. Getting a better career or doing well on exams are examples of instrumental motivations for learning a language. Students that have a positive outlook on learning are more likely to put in the necessary effort by doing things like asking questions, offering to provide knowledge, and answering queries. Fortunately, attitudes are malleable and may be transformed throughout the learning process, for example, by using suitable resources and pedagogical approaches. Learning a new language also has a good effect on one's mood, as enthusiastic students tend to develop optimistic worldviews (Choy, 2002).

The book itself, including its language, presents a significant obstacle to students' literary education, particularly in cases when the texts chosen do not correspond to their current level of language proficiency. Educators disagree on whether books should be required reading in schools, but they may agree that they should encourage critical thinking and creativity in their students, be engaging for their age group, and adhere to certain cultural and aesthetic norms (Agee, 1998) Weak understanding, disinterest, and lack of confidence are common among struggling readers (Arvidson & Blanco, 2004). Because they spend so much time searching for definitions or making assumptions, they may have regressive eye movement and fail to grasp the story's overall trajectory by the time they get to the last page. It is critical to check that the text's language is appropriate for students' skill levels and that "between the linguistic expectations in the language syllabus with those of the literature component syllabus" (Ganakumaran, 2002, p.65) in order to prevent students from becoming frustrated and not participating.Students struggle to comprehend texts when they are unfamiliar with the language, syntax, and sentence structure. It is common for students to miss or misunderstand crucial terms, diverting their attention to irrelevant parts of a book (Fecteau, 1999). Instead of using higher-level reading skills like inferencing or depending on context to deduce a word's meaning, students resort to lower-level reading skills like looking at a sentence or phrase for clues when they encounter unfamiliar or difficult words, phrases, or sentences (Sarjit Kaur & Rosy Thiyagarajah 1999). According to Davis et al. (1992), students often struggle to understand literary works due to issues with style and organisation. When reading poetry, in particular works written by authors from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is important for students to understand the author's worldview in order to recognise linguistic deviations and the meaning behind them. To fully understand the text's choices and deviations, students must have a solid command of the target language. Students often struggle to understand poetry because of its heavy use of metaphor and imagery (Wan Kamariah, 2009). Problems with capitalisation, punctuation, and overall poetry structure may be particularly perplexing. When compared to other literary forms, including novels and short tales, students often believe that poetry doesn't help them strengthen their language skills very much. Unsuitable texts may generate distance between the text and readers, particularly culturally (Saraceni, 2003), even if literary writings provide circumstances in which ESL students can learn more about the L2 culture (McCafferty, 2002). Literary writings are created with the assumption that readers possess identical values, conventions, and prior information; hence, students need both language skills and background knowledge in order to completely understand these works (Horowitz, 2002). Inappropriate cultural representation may occur when pupils meet unknown cultural features and interpret them based on their own culture. As an example, the concept of autumn in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" is completely foreign to the Malaysian pupils since it has no equivalent in their own culture. On the other hand, there are instances when students see something that seems familiar but really represents something else in another culture. For example, in Western civilisation, the colour black is used to signify death, whereas in Muslim society, white is used. The values that impact people and their perspectives are not always shown in literary works, which further complicates the task of understanding culture. Teachers' ignorance of cultural norms, inadequate supplementary materials that deal with cultural concerns, and beginning courses that gloss over cultural aspects in texts are to blame for students' misunderstandings (Gurnam Kaur, 2002 &Ganakumaran et al, 2003). In addition to cultural values, the books' subjects might be far from the students' lives in terms of experience, geography, history, or socioeconomic status. Young people, relationships, and societal value shifts are popular topics for student reading lists. Texts that are well-written, organised, and include topics that make the reader think are more likely to be chosen. Adolescent literature is a good option since it is both accessible (thus offering more options) and written in modern English, making it easy to read (Wu, 2008). According to Davis et al. (1992), students are more likely to read literature if they have some say in selecting or negotiating the texts covered in literature courses. It is crucial to ensure that the texts align with students' interests, even when instructors may believe that pupils do not choose 'excellent' works. Despite widespread belief that literature courses are useless, elitist, and impractical, interest in literature as a teaching tool didn't emerge until the 1970s (Kramsch&Kramsch, 2000). There are a number of words used to describe different approaches to education. First, there is methodology, which is an umbrella term meaning "the study of pedagogical practice" (Brown 2000, p.171) or, more simply, "how to teach." Second, there are approaches, which are ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about the best ways to teach languages and other subjects. (c) Method - this phrase is used to describe the precise way in which a language is taught; it is not context-specific and has a wide definition. and (d) Techniques—things like classroom exercises, activities, and tools or tactics; the word is often (though not always) primarily focused on the dynamics between instructors and their pupils. In literature, there are three main methods of instruction. The first is dealing with literary works as subject matter; this is often left to college and university students who are seen to possess the linguistic and experiential background necessary to engage in meaningful discussions about literary works. Literary works, critical analyses, and supplementary readings on the text's sociocultural context are all required of students. In most cases, the time allotted determines the quantity of information supplied, regardless　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　of　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　whether

important to the material and, more importantly, to the interests of the students (Carter & Long, 1991). The second strategy is reading for one's own development. Literature as a tool for self-improvement encourages students to reflect on and share their thoughts and feelings about the works they read, as well as to draw connections to their own lives. Getting the class more invested in the lesson is the goal. Using strategies grounded on this approach, students' interests may guide the selection of course materials, which in turn encourages classroom engagement and group work. The third strategy for combining the language and literature curricula is the language-based approach. One of their primary goals is to raise students' linguistic sensitivity and awareness of the language and its linguistic aspects; another is to help students generate more meaningful interpretations and assessments via deeper analysis. Teachers help students develop their aesthetic judgement skills by building on their prior understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. The methods used include a focus on the texts' stylistic aspects, and the materials are selected for both their literary merit and their stylistic originality (Lazar, 1993). To be an effective literature teacher, one must have a solid grasp of both the subject matter and pedagogical principles, as well as an awareness of their students' individual interests and needs (Agee, 1998). Instead of concentrating on analysing linguistic minutiae and participating in class debates, students prefer instructional methods that allow them to react individually, provide their own opinions, and focus on the text's substance (Davis et al, 1992). The students had a great time acting out the narrative, writing letters from the perspective of a character, and envisioning themselves in different roles. According to research by Wan Kamariah (2009), students have a negative attitude towards activities that emphasisememorisation, such as multiple-choice tests, reading aloud, drilling, and teacher-centered classrooms where the instructor provides all of the explanations. Research on educational practices in Malaysia has yielded contradictory findings. A more conducive learning environment and enhanced students' perspective and passion towards literature were the results of instructors using more student-centered approaches in class as opposed to teacher-centered tactics (Fauziah & Jamaluddin, 2009). On the other hand, Daimah (2001) discovered that most literary class techniques are focued on the instructor. Educators generally agreed that their lessons consisted of three parts: first, teacher-led explanations; second, student-led or small-group discussions; and lastly, hands-on activities. In order to complete the curriculum in time for exams, a teacher-centered approach is essential. Teachers were unable to use student-centered strategies such as group discussion, debates, and role plays due to students' poor competence levels, which was another explanation given. It didn't help that students were nervous and hesitant to answer questions or speak out regarding the text for fear of giving the incorrect answers. Even among students with a high degree of competency, Gurnam Kaur (2003) discovered that the majority of students regarded their instructors' pedagogical approaches to be uninteresting and tedious since they relied so much on written assignments. Lessons in literature were dull for students whose competency levels were poor since they could not grasp the books. One possible explanation is that the instructors involved lacked enough training and expertise in the field of literary education. According to Ganakumaran et al. (2003), over half of the instructors polled admitted to having insufficient understanding of literature, but nearly half claimed to have sufficient knowledge of literature teaching approach. Because they believe they are only qualified to teach language, language instructors sometimes lack the self-assurance to teach literature as well (Katz, 2001). Students' perspectives on and experiences with the texts used in literature classes are, hence, the focus of this research. Its stated goal is to investigate literature instructors' pedagogical practices and their students' perceptions of those practices. Its secondary objective is to learn which pedagogical approaches and materials are most well-liked by ESL students.

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects

The subjects were 110 students from two co-educational schools in Kemaman, one locatedin a rural area while theother is in town. Form Five students were chosen as they had a longer experience in studying literature and had read allthe texts and genres chosen for the program. Students were from science and arts classes. A total of 32 studentsparticipatedinthe interview,eightfromeach class.

2.2 Researchinstrument

The questionnaire consisted of two parts; the first section focused on respondents' demographic profile such as theirgrade, gender and socio-economic status. The second part used a five points Likert scale to gauge students' attitudestowards text selection and teaching methods. The interview used open-ended questions aimed at gathering in-depthinformationconcerning students'reactions towardstextselectionand teachingstrategies.

3. Resultsanddiscussion

3.1 Students'attitudesandtextselection

Short stories seemed to be popular among students. A total of 80% of the students agreed that they enjoyed reading theshort stories chosen for the component. Interestingly, none of the students strongly disagreed with the statement.Students found them easiest to read as they were short and therefore not too time-consuming, which enabled them to doother homework and participated in co-curricular activities. Students also mentioned that the language was mostlymanageableandthereforequiteeasytounderstand.Theplotswereinteresting,"likeamovie".Students'responses

imply that there is a negative correlation between poetry reading and negative sentiments. "I find the poems difficult to understand" was agreed upon by 70% of the respondents. Particularly unpopular was Sonnet 18 among the class's poets. Some male students were turned off by the central theme—love—and the interviewees believed that the language used was too "archaic" and "classic" to be easily understood. The majority of students thought the poems' topics and subjects were dull. The fact that they thought "every word to have their own underlying meaning" made it much more challenging for them to comprehend poetry and decipher its hidden meanings. Two poems that take place in Malaysia— "sitenggang's homecoming" and "Monsoon History"—were also deemed "difficult" and "too long" by the students. Poems, according to two male pupils, were "okay" and "interesting," with Kipling's "If" standing out as particularly moving and significant. Students also did not like books as much as poetry. Sixteen percent of the pupils polled said they did not like reading books. The Pearl, the assigned book, tended to elicit unfavourable reactions from the students. For the most part, students thought it dragged on too long and had a boring plot. Additionally, students had trouble understanding the book due to the complicated narrative and characters. One student even went so far as to say that the "very little dialogue" was the thing that really turned them off. Some of the students who like the book remarked on how it depicted a different person's life experience and how the author used daily, straightforward language that was easy to grasp. A whopping 94% of those who took the survey would rather have some say in the books they are required to study. Additionally, students exhibited favourable views towards reading works of modern poetry and literature authored by authors from outside Malaysia. When asked whether they enjoyed reading about individuals from many cultures, eighty percent of pupils said they did. The majority of students(72%) felt that Malaysian writings were simpler to grasp and more familiar, even if they preferred reading international materials. When asked about the upper-level text choices, over 50% of students had good things to say. The chosen readings seemed to be appropriate for 67.3% of the pupils. The pupils' preferred story types were adventure and mystery/investigative. The storylines of these shows were popular because they were "suspenseful" and full of surprises. A love tale was proposed by five female pupils. They felt the subject matter was important because it offered hope that they may avoid the "negative" parts of love. Students of both sexes agreed that science fiction and fantasy stories took place "beyond their imagination" due to their fantastical settings and plots. Two pupils went on to say that they would want to read the Harry Potter series. Some non-fiction, such as National Geographic, was also proposed by two of the females. Other subjects covered were thrillers, adolescent experiences, and family. The majority of students seemed to believe that their limited command of the English language was the primary barrier to their ability to read and comprehend literary works. When asked whether they would like literature more if they were proficient in English, 86.4% of students said they would or strongly would. With the exception of the urban school science class, it seems that the vocabulary used in at least three of the four subjects was too advanced for them. Words and phrases that were unfamiliar, as well as the usage of outdated language in poetry, contributed to the linguistic issues. Students spent a lot of time on language problems because they had to look up definitions of terms in dictionaries, ask their parents or siblings for clarification, or consult their professors. Learning the writings' "true" meaning or message was another challenge for the kids. The majority of students (70.9%) said that although they could grasp the words on the page, they struggled to decipher the deeper meanings. Because of their difficulty comprehending these poems, students also found Monsoon History and Si Tenggang's Homecoming to be quite long (two or three pages). A number of students had trouble following the storyline. Curiously, only those students whose English proficiency was at its maximum level noted that they struggled to grasp the cultural aspects of the book, such as the characters' beliefs and way of life. It seemed as if this indicated that, maybe, only the top students could grasp the significance of cultural aspects in literary works, while the others struggled with more fundamental issues, such as interpreting the texts literally. This was shown by a student who, while discussing an African work, brought up the topic of Red Indians. In most cases, students stated that they were unable to complete the assigned reading by the due date. Due to other commitments, such as schoolwork and extracurricular activities, 58.2% of students said that they had little time to read literature.

3.2 Students' attitudesandteachingmethods

Most of the students thought that background information concerning a text such as the author's life or the setting wasvital to understanding a text. A total of 97% respondents agreed and strongly agreed that background information wouldmake it easier for students to comprehend a text. A large majority of students also reacted positively towards using avariety of activities during literature lessons, probably to reduce monotony and boredom in class. Students seemed to bein favor of working in group, with a total of 91.8% of the students supporting the idea of doing more group work.Interestingly, students were keen to voice their opinions and personal reactions concerning the texts that they read. Atotalof91%ofthestudentsagreedandstronglyagreedwiththestatement'Ithinkstudentsshouldbeencouragedtogivetheiropinionsandviewsconcerningthetext'.Thiscouldmeanthatstudentswerenotgivenenoughopportunitiestocontributeduring literaturelessons,perhapsdue totime constraint.

Teachers' explanation and notes was ranked as the fifth most important strategy in teaching literature, followed by using audio-visual in literature classes. A total of 86% of the students agreed with the statement 'I would enjoy watching a film or video about the text'. Results suggested that students did not get enough background information concerning the texts that they read. When asked, students stated that teachers usually explained "about the text", referring to the writer's life or his purpose for writing the text. Teachers did not seem to emphasize on the cultural elements of the texts, perhaps due to time constraint or the lack of supplementary materials. There did not seem to be a variety of activities during literature classes. Almost all the classes had similar sequence of activities during literature. For weaker classes, the teacher would read aloud and sometimes asked students to take turns to read. Teachers then asked questions and checked if students had any queries about the text. Then, there would be an explanation by the teacher, followed by note taking. For very weak classes, teacher apparently "always translated word by word" while for average class, teachers only translated unfamiliar words. Finally, students were given exercises and sometimes asked to do these in groups.

Not surprisingly, teachers spent a lot of time discussing plot, characters, themes, setting and moral values of the texts in class as indicated by 85.4% of the students. Malaysian students are generally known for their examination-oriented approach, so perhaps it was not surprising to find that 58.2% of the students surveyed admitted that they only read the texts to enable them to do well in examinations. When asked about using other languages to teach literature, 70% of the respondents said that it was acceptable for the teacher to do so in order to help them understand the texts better. Quite worryingly, more than half of the students said the teaching strategies used by their teachers were boring. 42.7% agreed while 13.6% strongly agreed, adding up to a total of 56.3% who reacted negatively towards the way literature classes were conducted. Students also didn't think that teachers were doing enough to prepare them for their examination. A total of 50.9% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'The way literature is taught is not very useful for examinations'. Interestingly, when asked if their teachers were good at teaching literature, students from rural schools showed positive attitudes towards their teachers' teaching methods compared to students from the urban school. Both classes from the rural school mentioned that their teachers used the overhead projector to show them diagrams and charts concerning the texts such as their plots and characters. Students from the science class were especially satisfied with their teachers' strategies. They said that their notes were mainly in visual form. After the teacher's explanation, they were divided into groups and allocated different parts of the text to work on. The teacher then asked students to write their own script for their drama which was later performed in front of the class. Students agreed that dramatization made it easier for them to understand and remember information concerning the texts.

When asked to give suggestions that can make literature more interesting, a lot of students suggested drama as they found it helpful and interesting. Students were also keen to watch films or videos related to the text which could help them appreciate and understand the texts better. Others said that teachers needed to explain elements of the texts especially the plot as it could be confusing. Science students from the town school said computers and internet should be incorporated into literature lessons. One student said he did not mind participating in any activity "as long as it was not reading". Other suggestions included using songs or outdoor activities, games and group work.

4. Conclusion

A way to motivate students to read literature is through better text selection. The most important criterion in text selection is probably students' interest. This does not mean that the texts have to be about teenagers' issues only. Students' response suggested that they would like to read about adventure, mysteries and life experience. As students come from different background, interest and abilities, the best option is to choose texts which vary in terms of genres, topics and language level. Data from this study suggested that students were generally satisfied with the short stories but were less enthusiastic about the poems and novels. Perhaps more contemporary poems can be included in the text selection and for novels, it is better if more choices are provided and students are allowed to choose those which suits their interest and language level.

Teachers play a big role in students' education. Not only do they impart knowledge to students but they also help shape students' attitudes towards education, school and more specifically, the subjects that they teach. To do this, teachers need to be properly trained and equipped with proper knowledge and skills to successfully accomplish their tasks. Firstly, teachers need to be taught how to read any text (not just those listed under the programme) independently and to be able to make their own interpretations of the texts by using critical thinking skills. They also need to address the cultural elements of texts, which if neglected might result in misunderstanding and limited participation from students. Perhaps another skill that teachers need to acquire is the ability to produce their own supplementary materials. Instead of relying on the Ministry of Education or reference books for materials, teachers can learn how to get information through the internet for example and adapt them to suit their students' proficiency level and interest. It is important to ensure that teachers are equipped with enough pedagogical content knowledge which influences classroom practices, which in turns affect students' learning outcomes and achievement.

Using a variety of attractive teaching strategies is another way to improve students' attitudes. For students with higher proficiency level, teachers can use activities where students get to practice their creative and critical thinking skills such as writing their own scripts, staging a drama or even creative writing. Teachers can encourage students to be more
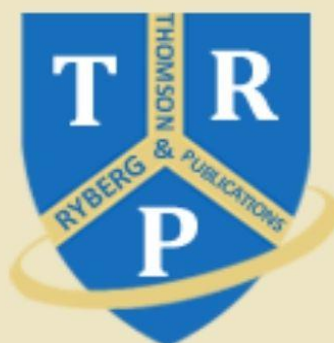
autonomousbyusingcomputersaswellastheinternetandguidingtheminactivitieslikeresearchinginformationonthe author's background or the historical elements of the texts. Using multitasking tasks in groups for large classesenablestudentstorotatetaskssothattheycantryavarietyofactivitiesandworkattheirownpace.

More research needs to be conducted on students' readingabilities as they seem to lack higher level reading skills.Other possible future research areas which can help improve the teaching of literature in ESL contexts are students'readinginterests and teacher training.

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