

WINNOWER SHORT STORY THROUGH SCAFFOLDING AMONG PEERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of focusing on the learner's verbal discourse in the literature classroom. Using reader response theory, this study advocates scaffolding as an important learning strategy among peers in understanding literary texts. The findings of this study lend support to the effectiveness of scaffolding among weak students in the literature classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of literature to secondary students is a challenging task since the act of understanding literary texts is subjective. This occurs because literary texts consist of riddles in the form of blanks or gaps which will be filled by the readers as they try to comprehend the text (Iser, 1978). This distinguishes the study of literature with other subjects where the focus is on memorizing facts or formulas.

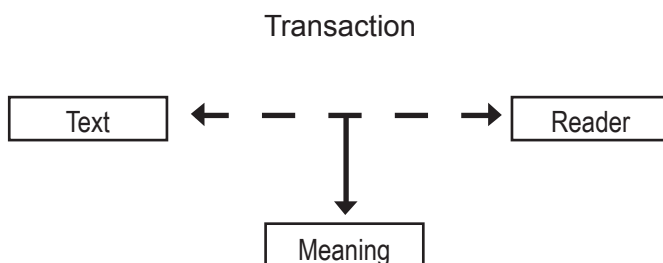
The pivot of literary study is basically divided into four (Boulton, 1980). First, literature is a form of recreation that gives entertainment, relaxation or amusement. Second, is recognition where the learner recognizes the truth of the fiction representation compared to everyday observation. Third, literature deals with revelation where one's experience is extended by seeing one's experience through the lens of another mind (Boulton, 1980). Fourth, is redemption where the reader sees glimpses of one's undeveloped self and of the possibility to better oneself. As such, understanding literary texts is crucial but is not given importance in the literature classroom. The emphasis is primarily given on learning for examination purposes (efferent reading) and quite often meaning is made by the teacher. These lead students to accept the meaning rendered by the teacher or experienced critics. Aesthetic reading is also seen as lacking in the teaching of literature where it deals with stirring personal feelings, ideas and attitudes that leads to new experiences. The assumption that meaning resides on the page of the text further hampers students from being critical and judgmental.

This paper views the need for learners to have intellectual engagement with literary texts. This can be achieved through the reader response theory. This theory focuses on the role of the reader and individual interpretations. Various studies have been conducted in relation to how students comprehend literary

texts (Purves & Beach, 1972; Richards, 1929; Rosenblatt, 1994). However, these studies focus mainly on native speakers and university students. There is a lack of study on how weak learners attempt to understand literary texts through peer discussion. Therefore, this paper discusses on the importance of scaffolding as a learning strategy among weak students in a literature classroom.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Two views of learning are prevalent in the study of language; the transmission model where skills and knowledge are deposited in the empty memory banks of the students and the progressive model where students are placed in the centre of educational process that promotes intelligent inquiry and thought (Gibbons, 2002). Similarly, in the study of literature, the progressive model is apt where there is a need for students to be critical thinkers and life-long learners. This is crucial since literature is viewed as a negotiation of meanings between the reader and the writer under the reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1982, 1994).



The reader response theory views the study of literature as the transaction between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt sees transaction as a situation of mutuality during reading where the reader and the text mutually act on each other where each affect and condition the other (Karolidis, 2000). Therefore, each reader views the text differently due to one's cultural background, background knowledge and experiences. These factors will give emotional and intellectual engagement with the text which are seen as necessary for the evolution of a literary work (Karolidis, 2000).

Meaning lies in the shared ground where the reader and the text meet. The meaning is created by the reader as they bring the text to bear upon their own experiences and histories (Probst, 1986). The uniqueness of this theory is that it does not search for one right meaning. Instead, meaning is shaped by the ideas, beliefs and values that each reader brings. However, in the process of understanding literary texts, studies conducted by researchers have identified several problems among learners. Among them, Purves and Beach (1972) conducted a study among undergraduates and identified three main factors that hamper students understanding. They are insufficient information,

cognitive failure and psychological problems. Similar study was also conducted by Richards (1929) and identified 10 factors that hamper correct understanding of poems. Therefore, employing appropriate strategy for learning is crucial in the comprehension of literary texts.

With reference to sociocultural theory, one form of learning strategy that derives from Vygotsky's theory is called scaffolding. Scaffolding in relation to learning refers to different forms of assistance given in any learning situation (Topa, 2003). At the initial stage, a tutor or a more knowledgeable person guides the learner. At the later stage, the learner will take the lead without any assistance from the more knowledgeable person. This form of assistance is said to lead the development of new understanding, skills, concepts or abilities (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Therefore, this study focuses on how students scaffold each other in understanding a selected short story.

THE STUDY

This qualitative study was carried out using five dyads of low proficiency students from one literature classroom. The students were from a Form 4 secondary school in Kuala Lumpur. Using the short story "Looking for a Rain God" by Bessie Head, the dyads were asked to read the story on their own and discuss with their respective partners the following week. Their conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were analyzed to identify the types of scaffolding utilized by the students based on types of scaffolding proposed by Tharp and Gallimore (1988) and Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the dyads' transcripts yielded five types of scaffolding. They were used by students to assist them in gaining understandings.

1. Cognitive Structuring

Cognitive structuring is a form of explanation that organizes and justifies new learning and perceptions that allows the creation of new or modified schemata (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). For example, when one dyad is having difficulty with English words, his/her partner helps by supplying the correct word. This form of scaffolding is prevalent among all the dyads.

B Idea thinglah. This story I do like lah. It give me the pengajaran
A moral value
B moral value ya.

However there is a possibility of regression where both partners are not able to give the correct answer to the appropriate word. For example, respondent B is having difficulty to come up with the word "drought". However, respondent A is unable to give the appropriate answer.

B I like Mokgobja

A Why?

B Because they try to solve this problem they all tak putus asa looking for apa untuk selesaikan masalah inilah. The problem penduduk kampung in Africa no 'kemarau apa?

B No rain

A No rain jadi they want the rainlah

B Because no rain.

Giving explanation through justification and reasoning can also be seen in the transcripts. These serve to help students to arrive at a new situation definition and establish a new state of intersubjectivity with partner (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). One example is when dyad B assumed that the rain did come in the story. This was corrected by dyad A and thus a new understanding was developed by dyad B.

B But in the book the rain did come

A No

B No?

A Mula mula tak jadi. The rain didn't come. Mokgobja did a silly thing killing children.

B Oh I see, I see. No rainlah.

2. Giving personal opinion

It is surprising to see all the dyads are able to give personal opinion regarding the short story. For example, respondent A is able to associate the difficulty of life without rain.

B Did you learn discover something new from the text?

A Oh I learn about the life of the Africa. No rain come drought very long and they have no water. I pity about them. So that's what I learn save water.

All four dyads are seen to associate themselves with young characters. When asked on which character they prefer, seven respondents chose the children as their favourite character. Dyad A is able to justify why he/she prefers the children compared to Ramadi (the children's father).

- B *You say you don't like him, ok. But you don't know the story ok. His grandfather bring out the story. Ramadi's father and then ah... then ah...*
- A *I say I don't like , I don't like Ramadi because he kill the person his own child his own blood. Even though there's no water for 7 years but he can do anything else, move around or shift out from the place. But why should he kill his daughter? That's why I said why I don't like Ramadi and I like the children.*

3. Rationalizing / viewpoint

Dyads are also seen to make critical judgment on certain issues. For example, dyad B questioned on why the father killed both children instead of one to be sacrificed. Dyad A also voiced out his/her dissatisfaction over the villagers' decision to stay behind when there is no rain.

- A *Mokgobja*
- B *Go on.*
- A *Because he bring out the old culture and explained to his son when...*
- A *If there's no rain you have to sacrifice one of your children.*
- B *Now you are saying ah Mokgobja says that those culture believes there is the Something something that they believe in like sacrifice one of the daughter but why kill one of his daughter?*
- A *You I he was desperate.*
- B *You said his father is the only one, sacrifice one of the children but he sacrificed 2.*
- A *He desperate he needs water to survive ok?*
- B *In this story, in this story most of the villagers they went out, shift out.*
- A *Went out. Why others all stayed?*

Dyad B gives a different view of the children's mother. He/She sympathizes with the mother and rationalizes the reason for the killing of the two children.

- A *Why his wife support him?*
- B *Because I am not so sure why the mother of the children support her husband. Maybe because she knows one day they will die they will suffer because there's no water at all.*
- A *Okay but did she have feelings for the children or not?*
- B *I think she have feelings but what to do if she don't want the children to suffer the day after or the future what's going on she don't know. Now she prefer they die first because there's no food there's no water.*
- A *Betul juga.*

4. Make reference / relate to self

Making references to text, everyday life and to self can be seen in the transcriptions. For example, respondents are seen referring to the text during discussion and relating certain incidents from the text to one's culture. These aspects are crucial in the study of literature where readers bring own individual histories to the experience of the work (Corcoran, 1987).

A *Are they able to solve the problem?*

B *No for them no*

A *Why do you say no?*

B *Because it is written in the text because of ... after he kills the girls there's no rain at all only the blood spilt on the land. There's no rain come down even one small sip of water at all because there's no rain.*

B *...for an example like some of the Indians. But I'm not so sure about the Indians because I'm not sure but I think Kadazan Dusun what they believe what do?*

A *What do they believe in?*

B *They believe in mitos something like..*

A *Such as*

B *something like they believe after people die the soul or spirit will be in Kinabalu or they believe there is some kind of mystic 'believeness' because their planting something and they know there is people there is soul for their plant, they believe in that. There is soul in the plants. They believe the plants they pray to god to give them harmony. That's what we done. That's what I know.*

A *They believe in the culture*

B *My culture not so sure. I don't believe in my culture. I believe somethings. But not in this case until there's murder.*

A *I believe in my culture because some are true. See they believe in a...*

B *Horoscope.*

A *Horoscope, Indian such as seeing the hand and the*

B *they want to know about their future and what's going on, like that is it?*

A *Ya like that and then ah*

B *Do they use to go and meet the witch or bomoh?*

A *No no no this one only you see in temple you see. This is the Indian culturelah where you see in the temple when the child was born you see all that what might happen in the future you see then.*

5. Use of mother-tongue

The use of mother-tongue is prominent when it deals with language problems. For example, the use of mother-tongue is widely used by all the dyads to ask for meaning of words or phrases.

- B *So how do they try to solve this problem?*
A *Solve this problem? Mengatasi ya?*
B *Ya.*
A *Oh, so are they able to solve the problem?*

CONCLUSION

Rosenblatt (1982) views literature as an “endangered species” (p. 277) where it is said to have lost its aesthetic capacity. This notion is brought forward with the claim that current learning of literature does not produce many learners who are capable of handling their initial responses in relating them to literary texts. This is said to occur because learners place emphasis on efferent reading where they focus on seeking information for examination purposes. Instead, aesthetic reading is also required for the study of literature where it deals with stirring personal feelings, ideas and attitudes that leads to new experiences. Through discussion, students are able to help built new information to existing knowledge and ideas. Since the act of comprehension is intersubjective, scaffolding among peers is one form of strategy that should be carried out in a literature classroom.

Note: *This research was also presented at Seminar Penyelidikan Pendidikan IPBA 2005*

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