

Cultural Familiarity in Literary Texts: Consideration for Text-selection

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Abstract

Cultural familiarity in literary texts is a variable seldom explored in the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom. In Malaysia a wide range of texts, both by local as well as foreign writers are used side by side. The language difficulty level of these texts may be almost equal but the cultural factors varied. This study explored the perceptions of teachers and students regarding selection of literary texts for the ESL classroom with emphasis on the role of cultural familiarity in facilitating students' comprehension and enjoyment of literary texts. The findings of this study unearthed their perceptions and actual responses towards four literary texts. Cultural familiarity with aspects in the text such as with the character, subject matter or language use did play a role in facilitating students' comprehension and enhancing transaction with the text. A more interesting finding was that there was a notion of cultural 'nearness' and 'farness'. Some considerations for text-selection for teaching literature in the ESL classroom would be the use of culturally 'familiar' texts that have themes and subject-matter fitting to the students' general age group and interests so that a more meaningful transaction with the texts would take place.

An observation

S1 : It's so weird-*lah*, I know it is talking about death because the title says so but...

S2 : ...so different. If it is talking about death where's the *kemenyan* (a kind of incense often burnt at Malay funerals) or people helping to bathe the body. What's the minister doing in the house?

S1 : Not minister like in Malaysia-*lah*. I think it is like the *Tok Imam* (religious leader) who take care of the ...you know after people die they have to be prepared for the burial.

S3 : Milliner in my dictionary means *orang yang membuat atau menjual topi wanita* (person who makes or sells women's hats). Ha? I don't understand this... no connection at all to death.

(Journal Entry 6)

Is this a common scenario in your literature classroom? The subtle nuances of the culture portrayed in the literary text is lost on these students who was observed responding to

There's Been a Death in the Opposite House by Emily Dickinson. Deviations and differences of the culture in the text to their own culture hampered these students' understanding. As a result, students' comprehension and motivation to read the text will decline because the 'text might remain a 'mystery' to the reader' (Delaney, 1991) in spite of the teacher's attempts at foregrounding the cultural background of the text. This may prove to be a heavy burden on the teachers whom themselves may find the culture of the text alien to them. Would it not be much simpler and more practical to select literary texts that depicted the students own culture?

Introduction

Literature in the language classroom is useful in encouraging students to develop their critical thinking skills as well as personal response towards texts read in context of their life experiences. Proponents of literature for the language classroom emphasised the potential of literature as a resource to “ encourage greater sensitivity and self-awareness of the world around [them]” (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 3), apart from “ exposing students to different styles of writing” (Shanahan, 1997, p. 165) through the use of authentic texts. Moral, cultural and social values could also be inculcated in language classrooms through the use of literary texts which ‘is a source of qualitatively demanding authentic language with an unmistakably individual human voice behind it [that] deals with everyday life occurrences (Hall, 1999, p. 11). In the ESL classroom, these factors are applicable as long as the teacher scaffolds through appropriate teaching especially when dealing with culturally unfamiliar

texts (Isenberg, 1990). If the text was culturally familiar, the teacher could draw on the students' cultural background as a resource.

Using literature as a resource in the ESL classroom has to take several factors into consideration, such as learner's language proficiency and the specialized manner in which language is used in many literary texts. Apart from that, another factor that has to be considered is the culture that is embedded in the text. With a variety of texts drawn from a diversity of cultures, cultural unfamiliarity of the texts may be a problem to the learners. Thus ways have to be found to alleviate problems and enhance the potential of literature in ESL classrooms. Ali (1994) suggests that literature could be made accessible to ESL learners through accurate selection of texts and classroom activities, which allowed learners to "view literature as an experience that enriches [their] life" (p. 289). The question now should be: Do we stick to the canons or select more culturally familiar texts? Rosenblatt (1976) indicated that the reader brings to the text, "past experiences, prior knowledge, social, [cultural] and psychological assumptions, surrounding circumstances, [which] may play an important role in the making of meaning" (p.79) of the text read. Thus if we were able to select texts that match this, wouldn't the transaction when reading these literary texts be a more meaningful one for the ESL learner?

What are culturally familiar texts?

Before I explain what I mean by culturally familiar texts, let us first be clear of what I mean when I refer to the word culture. A definition that I will be using here is a whole way of life;

distinguishing people of one group from another may be shaped by the place as well as the historical period in which they live. Culture goes beyond distinguishing race, religion or colour to include distinct patterns of behaviour, perceptions, interpretations, ways of thinking and feeling which are simultaneously shared by and yet unique to the group of people who share the same culture. Culture influences people's perceptions, responses and reactions towards things or issues in life. Thus, it is assumed that Malaysians will share a general culture regardless of ethnicity or age. Culturally familiar texts are then literary texts that depict aspects of the readers' culture such as way of life, way of dressing, food, artefacts and others, that are unique to the readers' culture and are familiar to them. Brock (1990) explains that culturally familiar texts or what he calls as "localized literature" are texts that contain content, settings, cultural assumptions, situations, characters, language, and historical references that are familiar to the second language reader"(p. 23). Lazar (1993) suggests that there are many categories of cultural dimensions that can be portrayed in a literary text such as language, objects, customs, rituals, beliefs, political, historical or economic background, humour, role and relationships. Three of these dimensions; language, objects and customs will be discussed in more detail here.

Language pertains to the use of the ESL readers' mother tongue or colloquial language that the reader is familiar with. In the case of Malaysians, using *lallang* instead of tall grass conjures a picture of abandoned, unused land thick with undergrowth while if the latter description is used it gives a connotation of an English meadow in the peak of summer. Samuel (1997) says that although this is considered a deviation from 'correct' English use,

it is accepted and used in many Malaysian texts because of the emotions that the word evokes in the reader. Other than that, the use of the word *Kakak* or *Abang* to show respect for an older person is unique to the Malaysian culture that only Malaysians share this language use. If the words were translated into English it would bring an entirely different connotation than the intended meaning.

Objects that are specific to a culture would be those that exist in one society but not in another, such as reference to the *sarong* worn by *Baba* and *Nyonya* in Shirley Geok-Lim's *Monsoon History* only exists within the Malaysian setting because firstly, such dress code is only traditionally worn by Chinese of the *Baba and Nyonya* descendants and not by other Chinese in Malaysia. Secondly, the *Baba and Nyonya* heritage is uniquely Malaysian and people from outside the culture may not understand the subtle differences between them and other Chinese communities in the country.

The final category that will be discussed here is beliefs and this includes rituals, customs, traditions, superstitions, festivals, roles and relationships. It may be difficult to talk about the Malaysian celebration of festivals to a person not from a multi-ethnic culture. The thought of visiting neighbours during these festivals – without a prior 'appointment' – may be foreign to people of the Western culture but it is part of Malaysian culture. The use of culture-specific language, objects and beliefs in literary texts may engage a different but more familiar schema than a culturally unfamiliar text that may work to the advantage of the reader. Many studies have shown that the comprehension (Gatbonton & Tucker, 1971,

Johnson , 1981, Brozo, Valerio & Salazar, 1996) and response (Jimenez & Gamez, 1996) of ESL learners showed a marked improvement when reading culturally familiar texts in comparison to culturally unfamiliar ones. The learners' ability to identify with and immerse in the culture that is portrayed in the text enhances their engagement and understanding of it. This familiarity for the ESL learner may overcome some of the linguistic complexity – syntactic or vocabulary - of such texts. Brock (1990) emphasizes that linguistic complexity should be less of a concern than cultural familiarity when choosing literature texts for the use of ESL learners.

Literary text-selection

Text selection for the ESL literature classroom is and should be a delicate process. Certain factors pertaining to the text and to the readers need to be taken into consideration. Important factors such as the language level, subject matter, prior knowledge of learners and interest level should be guidelines for literary text selection. This may prove to be helpful for the teacher when teaching the texts because through such a selection it combines what is to be read and what is known about learners' life worlds to achieve maximum comprehension. Cultural familiarity may have its place in text selection. Familiarity with the subject matter of the text, certain language use or reference to objects unique of the readers' culture may help activate the reader's existing prior knowledge, which in turn may work to aid reading and comprehension. Through the activation of the readers' prior knowledge and conceptual abilities, they may be able to process what is read even if they have low language ability because their ability to relate what is read to the theories of the

world in [their] heads” (Smith, 1978b, p.69) can compensate for it. As a result, comprehension of the text read may be achieved.

Apart from this, because enjoyment of a text read would stem from the readers’ comprehension of it, it is important for comprehension to be achieved by readers. If readers were able to understand what is read, they would subsequently be able to respond to it at a personal level and perhaps enjoy it. Enjoyment of the text may also be enhanced through appropriate selection of texts that initiate interest in readers. The subject matter of the text alongside the setting and message that could be derived from the text may affect readers’ interest in reading the text. Often socially or culturally familiar texts would initiate more interest in readers than culturally unfamiliar texts. Thus, because cultural familiarity may aid reading, comprehension and enjoyment of a literary text in the ESL classroom, it is perhaps a factor to be considered in text selection for the ESL literature classroom.

The Study

The main objective of this study was to probe into the ESL classroom in Malaysia and explored learners’ responses and transaction with selected literary texts with emphasis on the role of cultural familiarity in comprehension, enjoyment and responses to literary texts. In this study 97 participants were randomly selected to answer questionnaires administered, while 5 participants were key informants. Out of the 5; 2 were female and 2 male student participants, and 1 teacher participant. They were selected based on their gender, ethnicity, language ability and home background. All these participants were avid readers, which was

another criteria deemed important for the purpose of this study. As the study aimed at looking at the cultural dimensions in literary texts, these criteria were considered important to the study as the culture and life-worlds of each participant might provide insights into their responses. In addition, enjoying reading would give them the ability to compare and contrast different reading materials more effectively. The key teacher participant was the teacher teaching the four key student participants' class. I felt it would be more pertinent if the teaching and learning within a classroom was also observed.

Apart from answering the questionnaires to gauge their perceptions towards the selection of texts being used, key participants were also interviewed and asked to keep response journals. In these journals, the students were asked to respond to 4 literary texts that were in use in their ESL classroom: *The Necklace* by Guy de Mapaussant (French), *Looking for a Rain God* by Bessie Head (South African), *Si Tenggang's Homecoming* by Muhamad Haji Salleh (Malaysian) and *Monsoon History* by Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Malaysian). The texts were specifically chosen to represent culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. 'Think-questions' (Appendix 1) were given as guidelines for them to write in their response journals. Participants' level of comprehension and enjoyment of each text were interpreted using the Taxonomy of Aesthetic Response adapted from Sebesta, Monson and Senn, 1995. (Appendix 2). I also observed several of the lessons.

Cultural Familiarity and Comprehension of Literary Texts

Findings of this study showed that cultural familiarity to a certain extent did play a role in participants' comprehension of literary texts. In the participants' actual responses to the literary texts selected for this study, it was evident that culturally familiar setting did not enhance students' comprehension of literary texts. The participants were better able to decipher the meaning of texts that depicted culturally unfamiliar setting such as *Looking for a Rain God* and *The Necklace*, than *Monsoon History* which was set in Malaysia because they were able to relate to the characters and subject matter of the two texts. For example, *The Necklace*, although was set in a culturally unfamiliar setting, had a universal theme of love and sacrifice that the participants could relate to. Brozo, Valerio and Salazar (1996) reported that when the students in their study were culturally familiar with the character or subject matter portrayed in the text they "would intimately identify with the characters, [issues] and conflicts"(p. 169) in the text and responded in a more personal manner than if the text was culturally unfamiliar. This was also how the participants responded to *Si Tenggang's Homecoming*. They showed a high level of comprehension and were able to make analogies to their own life, evaluate and hypothesize what could happen in the future based on and contrasted with their understanding of Tenggang the character in the infamous Malaysian folk-tale. Responses portrayed their familiarity with Tenggang the folk-tale and their life world experiences of how Tenggang was valued in their society enhanced their comprehension and enjoyment of the text.

In contrast, the participants' level of comprehension and enjoyment of *Monsoon History* which was set in Malacca was very low. The 'mundane' portrayal of an everyday life and the animal imagery used did not interest the participants. They indicated that they wanted texts which had a strong underlying meaning with conflict, crime or sacrifice as the subject matter, for example as portrayed in the three other texts selected for this study. To the students, *Monsoon History* was a text that had a familiar setting but is culturally unfamiliar to them. They knew of the *Baba and Nyonya* heritage but the subtle cultural nuances were lost to them. This was added by the fact that the writer had used 'difficult' language. Key student participants also said that the imagery used was a factor that significantly hindered their comprehension of the text.

Cultural familiarity to a certain extent did facilitate the participants' comprehension. Culturally familiar characters and subject matter allowed students to relate and respond to the texts at a more intimate and meaningful level based on their life and cultural experiences.

Cultural Familiarity and Students' Enjoyment of Literary Texts

Comprehension played a greater role in students' enjoyment of literary texts than cultural familiarity. Apart from this the theme and message underlying the text was seen to have enhanced students' enjoyment. Participants indicated that they found texts that had a powerful message and familiar themes such as love and sacrifice, more enjoyable to read than texts that to them had an insignificant message that could not be related to their lives.

Again *Monsoon History* was an example of a text that key informants found 'trivial' and insignificant to their lives, which was not a joy to read.

Gender culture too played a role in influencing students' engagement with the literary texts. In the case of *The Necklace*, the two female participants seemed to have enjoyed the text and said that they could relate to the main character very closely. One male participant however found the text 'illogical'; partly because of the way the main male character was portrayed. We may infer from this that the male participant found it hard to relate to the male character because he was overtly tolerant of his wife and her vanity. In the traditional Malaysian values, the husband is the dominant leader of the household and the person who normally had the last word. So in the case of Loisel's character in *The Necklace* he was regarded as being hen-pecked and this would undermine his strength in the eyes of the male participant in this study. As a result, this influenced his engagement with the text as he could not relate to the main character and this consequently affected his enjoyment of the text.

Cultural familiarity played a very important role when students understood the text and found the character or subject matter familiar to them. For example, students' ability to deeply understand *Si Tenggang's Homecoming* and relate to the character, setting and subject matter to their own life resulted in students' enjoyment of the text. Furthermore, Tenggang is a Malaysian folk-tale known to many people in the country. This could be because the tale had been made into a film and books which were used in school. In all of

the journal entries students wrote, this text's entry was the longest and most profound. This implies that if students were familiar with most of the cultural aspects in the text and were able to relate them to their life and cultural experiences, familiarity could enhance students' enjoyment as long as the students understood the text first.

Cultural familiarity could facilitate enjoyment of literary texts as long as the students had some level of comprehension first. If the initial stage of comprehending the text was achieved students would enjoy reading about culturally familiar characters or subject matter because they were better able to relate to and evaluate the text. This encouraged more profound engagements and responses to the literary texts.

Conclusion

Familiarity cannot be seen in generic terms. This study suggests that there are distinctions between cultural "nearness" and "farness". Familiarity with the values, themes and issues portrayed in literary texts affected the participants' comprehension and enjoyment of the texts more than concrete specifics or a cultural locality such as setting, or time. A text with a Malaysian setting could well be culturally unfamiliar in comparison to a text set in another culture, country or time because the subject-matter or characters in the text did not evoke any familiarity for the reader. However, if the subject-matter and characters are relevant to the life-worlds of the participants, concrete specifics and locality further enhanced comprehension and enjoyment of literary texts.

Cultural factors should have a place in text selection for the ESL literature classroom. Students may explore culturally familiar texts more 'intimately' than culturally unfamiliar texts, because the culture embedded in the text is not an alien culture. However students' interests, relevance of the subject matter, theme, characters and values portrayed in the literary texts to the students' life-worlds are important factors that should be considered in text selection. Perhaps ESL curriculum developers and teachers could select texts and tailor classroom activities which take into consideration the cultural factors in literary texts to suit the culture and life-worlds of the intended readers.

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This paper was presented and submitted for publication at the Fifth Malaysian International Conference on English Language Teaching at Hotel Equatorial Malacca on May 10 – 12, 2004

