

ENGINEERING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE INFLUENCE OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE ON DEVELOPING APPRECIATION FOR READING

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the perception of engineering students on the inclusion of literary texts in their English language programme for the purpose of developing their appreciation for reading. Student perceptions were gauged on the following dimensions: importance of literature in developing reading skills, text and genre inclination for reading, and the use of short stories and young adult literature in English to develop interest for reading. Findings from the feedback obtained via a questionnaire are discussed with the hope of giving educators a foretaste of the potential use of young adult literary materials in developing appreciation for reading among engineering students.

Introduction

Literature has been an essential and popular component of language courses in the academic setting. The inclusion of literary materials in the curriculum of English Language Teaching (ELT) specifically in the context of a second language or a foreign language has been significant over the last twenty years. Although there was a distinct reaction against the use of any literary English in the 60s and 70s, the teaching of literature was nevertheless well received. The reaction against its use in the 60s and 70s may well have been due to the impact of teaching and learning approaches that were practiced in the decades prior to the 60s and 70s, and prevailing ideas on language teaching and methodology (O'Sullivan, 1991). With the revival of a literature enhanced curriculum in the 80s, there has been much discussion on the significance of teaching literature as part of the English language syllabus.

Like many countries in which English is used as a second or foreign language, Malaysia relies on the use of literary materials in ELT. In the year 2000, literature

was officially initiated in the Malaysian ELT syllabus, further acknowledging the function of literature in Malaysian ELT. The philosophy behind the inclusion of literature in Malaysian ELT is to benefit students in terms of language development, cultural enrichment and personal growth. The significance of literary materials in language development in Malaysia is apparent as it has been widely used in primary, secondary and even tertiary level reading programmes. Literature in Malaysian tertiary institutions is not only offered as programmes or subjects for students to major in, but is also incorporated as a component in English language proficiency programmes with the aim of honing and developing English language proficiency amongst students. The university in which this research was undertaken is one such university that offers literature as a component of the English language proficiency course.

The Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, in its National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010 recognizes the importance of producing confident students who are well balanced. Outlined in the action plan is the introduction of holistic programmes that cut across all disciplines, exposing students to subjects beyond their fields of study. Students pursuing degrees in the sciences such as medicine, engineering and chemistry will thus be given the opportunity to experience courses covering literature and philosophy and vice versa (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). While this initiative is much lauded, the contention that literature is irrelevant to those pursuing science based courses serves to make literature an unpopular subject amongst students. This perception will inevitably lead to setbacks for the language learner in terms of the fortification of language skills, one of them being reading skills.

Teaching of Literature: Approaches, Practices and Research

It is commonly recognized that literature has an essential association with life and gains some of its vital characteristics from language. According to O'Sullivan (1991), due to the ability of literature to develop creativity in language and imagination, its inclusion is pertinent in any education system that places significance on discovery as vital attributes of the learning process. The three prominent areas in which the use of literature as a language teaching and learning resource can be beneficial are language improvement, cultural fortification as well as personal growth (Collie & Slater, 1987).

The teaching of literature has been sculpted along Carter and Long's literature teaching models i.e. the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model. Carter and Long (1991) note that the cultural model represents the traditional approach to teaching literature. Such a model involves learners exploring

and interpreting the social, political, literary and historical context of a specific text. This particular model also aims at providing the students' with input in the form of collective insights, in which the most noteworthy thoughts of individuals are expressed (Carter & Long, 1991). The most common approach to the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom is what Carter and Long refer to as the language-based approach. Such an approach permits learners to enter a text in a systematic way to exemplify specific linguistic features, for instance, literal and figurative language or even direct and indirect speech (Savvidou, 2004). The personal growth model on the other hand endeavours to merge the cultural model and the language model by focusing on the particular use of language in a text and at the same time placing it in specific cultural contexts. Learners are encouraged to express their opinions and ideas and make links between their own personal and cultural experiences as opposed to those articulated in the text. Carter and Long also note that another feature of this model is that it assists learners to expand comprehension of ideas and language through diverse themes and subject matter.

Langer (1997) in a study on the acquisition of literacy through literature indicates that the use of literature in the language classroom is beneficial. "Because it taps what they know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy" (Langer, 1997:607). Langer further notes that literature provides students with the opportunity to reflect on three important elements, namely language, learning and their lives. Fitzgerald (1993) also contends that literature is an apt means of improving the language learner's overall language skills. Erkaya's (2005) research on the benefits of using short stories in the EFL context notes that through the integration of literature in the curriculum, students will be able to learn reading, writing, speaking and listening skills more effectively due to the motivation, literary, cultural and high-order thinking advantages it provides.

Despite the apparent advantages of the infusion of literature in developing language proficiency, research indicates that there still are several setbacks towards a successful acceptance of this area of study. In a study conducted by O' Sullivan (1991), it was discovered that there is a constant contention that literature has no specific purpose in terms of objectives. Such notions serve to make literature an unpopular subject. Linguistic difficulty has also been cited as yet another argument against literature. This is due to the reason that there has been a common presumption that to learn literature, one required an understanding of the mechanics of language as well as the ability to obtain the message of the author. In a study conducted by Or (1995), it was revealed that there is a general perception that literature is complex and inaccessible for the foreign language learner. This inaccessibility can impede the learners' capability to infer, predict and discuss meaning from within the text.

Studies indicate that there are several hurdles towards a successful acceptance of this area of study in Malaysia as well. Studies carried out on investigating the process of teaching and learning literature in Malaysia indicate both teachers and learners experience difficulties in terms of teaching and learning literature. A study conducted by Ganakumaran, Shahiza and Koo (2003) reveals challenges faced by curriculum planners and teachers of literature at secondary level. Their research revealed holistic education, participant readiness, readability, cultural accessibility, societal understanding and postcolonialism as the challenges faced towards a successful acceptance of literature in the ESL classroom. Also focused on literature at secondary level, a study conducted by Gurnam (2003) investigated the challenges faced by literature learners. Her research reveals several problems with regard to the use of literature in the language classroom namely literary texts that did not fit the interest of learners, linguistic difficulty and cultural alienation. These hindrances can most certainly be disadvantageous to the process of language learning, one of them being the reading process.

In the Malaysian context, most research carried out on the teaching and learning of literature has tended to focus more on literature at secondary level. Research in relation to the teaching and learning of literature at tertiary level has mostly delved into approaches or methods that can be used by educators to enhance existing methods of teaching literature, be it 'L' and 'I'. It is felt that more research should be focused upon the perceptions of tertiary students on the infusion of literature in their ESL classroom for the development of language skills. Research should also be centered upon the use of appropriate literary materials in tertiary literature classes for students to improve on their language proficiency and enthusiasm to learn literature.

As such, this study set out to gauge the perceptions of students on the types of literary materials that can be integrated in their literature programme in developing their sense of appreciation for reading. In meeting the aims of this study, student perceptions were gauged upon the following dimensions: importance of literature to develop reading ability, texts and genre inclination for reading and the use of short stories and young adult literature in English to develop interest in reading. Findings from the feedback obtained via a questionnaire are discussed with the hope of giving educators a foretaste of the potential of the use of young adult literary materials in developing a sense of appreciation for reading among engineering students. For the purpose of this study, 'appreciation' is defined as the understanding, comprehension, passion and enthusiasm that the young adult literature (YAL) genre in English can instil in language learners towards reading.

Methodology

Before delving into the analysis, it is first essential to understand the background of the teaching and learning of literature in the university this research was undertaken in. Students enrolled in this private technical university are enrolled in engineering and technology courses. These students, who comprise local as well as international students, are of mixed language abilities and of diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Literature is taught as *literate* with a small 'l' during the lecture component of the Foundation English courses. Prior knowledge of literature is not a prerequisite of the said courses. As such, students comprise a combination of those who have been exposed to literature and those who have not. A combination of Malaysian, British and American adult and young adult literature is used in the literature classroom.

An 85-item questionnaire was developed to meet the objectives of the research. The questionnaire contained items encompassing perceptions on the *importance of literature to improve reading ability, texts and genre preferences for reading, the use of YAL in English to develop interest for reading* and perceptions on the *use of short stories to develop reading interest*. The SPSS version 11.5 was used to run analysis of frequencies and cross tabulations of the data for this study. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires, a pilot study involving 50 engineering students was carried out to determine the reliability of the instrument. The questionnaires were then disseminated to 300 engineering students. The respondents indicated their agreement or disagreement to each statement on a 5-point likert scale. Of the 300 questionnaires sent out, 248 were returned, denoting an 82.7% response rate. The alpha values for the dimensions are as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Alpha values for dimensions (n= 248)

Dimension	Alpha value
Literature to improve reading ability	0.83
Texts and genre preferences for reading	0.75
YAL to develop reading interest	0.91
Short stories to develop reading interest	0.91

Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability coefficient that assesses the consistency of the entire scale. Hair et al. (1998) state that the generally agreed upon lower limit for Cronbach's alpha is .70. The alpha values obtained in this study indicate that the scale is highly reliable. The respondents (n=248) were adolescent engineering students aged between 17-19 years and consisted of 58.1%

male and 41.9% female. This proportion of gender grouping of the sample was as expected as the number of male students pursuing engineering programmes in the Foundation programme of the private university in which this research was undertaken is higher than the females. Of the 248 respondents, 12.9% were from Electric and Electronic Engineering (EE), 34.7% were from Chemical Engineering (CE), 10.1% from Civil Engineering (CV), 22.2% from Mechanical Engineering (ME) and 20.2% from Petroleum Engineering (PE). The majority of the respondents were made up Malaysians (94.4%). International students made up the balance of the respondents. Racially, the respondents were made up of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, Indigenous races as well as those hailing from Thailand, Egypt, Turkmenistan, Mozambique and Myanmar.

The importance of literature to develop reading ability

Illustrated in Figure 1 is the perception of engineering students of the importance of literature to develop their reading ability. Our findings indicate that 71.7% of the respondents hold a positive view towards the importance of literature to develop reading. 17.3% are neutral in their stand, while the remaining 10.9% perceive literature as unimportant towards the development of reading. 65.7% of EE students perceive literature as important to develop reading. 79% and 76% of CE and CV students respectively feel literature is important in developing reading ability. 70.9% of ME and 62% of PE students also agree that literature can help them develop their ability to read. The findings indicate a largely favourable response regarding engineering students' perception as to the role that literature plays in aiding them to develop their ability to read.

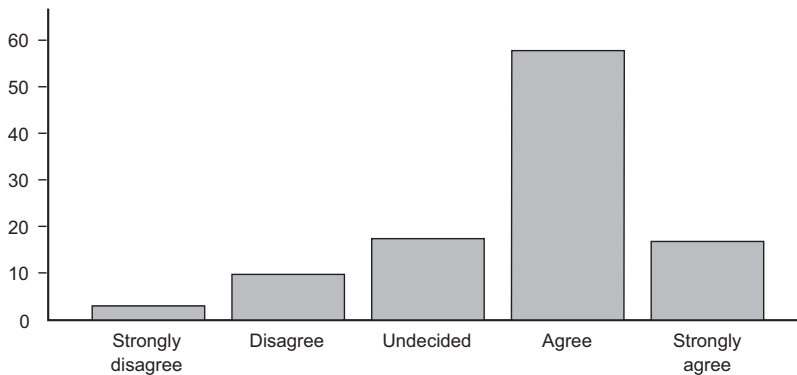


Figure 1: Perception of importance of literature to develop reading ability

The researchers were also interested to find out if engineering students perceived the act of reading literature to be enjoyable. 42% of the respondents perceive the act of reading literature as enjoyable. While 34.3% are undecided, 23.8% of them disagree that they enjoy reading literature. On the act of literary reading, i.e. reading literary texts for leisure purposes, our findings indicate that only 48% of engineering students read literary texts during their spare time. This lack of literary reading during leisure time could be due to the fact that engineering students find the reading of literary texts time consuming. Furthermore, there is a possibility that they find literary reading difficult due to the unavailability of the lecturer to help them with the interpretation of the text. They are unable to make interpretations of the content on their own as they are reliant on the lecturer to aid them in their understanding of the text.

The use of YAL in English to develop reading interest

On the use of YAL in English to develop interest in reading, the findings indicate that 61.7% of engineering students perceive that they are more enthusiastic about reading literary texts after reading YAL. 62.1% of the respondents perceive YAL stories as more interesting than adult stories. 56.3% of male respondents and 75% of female respondents perceive that YAL in English helps them understand themselves better in comparison to adult fiction. The findings also indicate that 64.1% of engineering students perceive that it is easier to interpret young adult literature than adult literature. The findings of this study suggest that engineering students perceive YAL as more appealing in comparison to adult fiction.

Engineering students' text preference for reading

In addition to gauging the perception of engineering students of the importance of literature and YAL to develop reading interest and reading ability, the type of texts engineering students choose to read is equally pertinent to be investigated when considering appropriate reading materials for engineering students to help them develop appreciation for reading. The findings indicate that 74.2% of engineering students prefer to read young adult or teenage fiction instead of adult fiction. These findings are in tandem with the finding on their perceptions on the use of YAL to develop interest in reading. The findings show that 64.6% of males and 87.5% of females are more inclined towards reading young adult or teenage fiction. There could be several reasons for engineering students' preference for the young adult literature genre. Their inclination towards this genre could be due to the fact that young adult literature contains themes, characters and issues that are closely related to the concerns adolescents face in daily life.

Figure 2 illustrates engineering students' preference for contemporary texts to classic texts. 63.7% of engineering students find classic texts less interesting than contemporary texts. For the 12.5% who find classic texts interesting, it is likely that they have a good command of the English language and are not intimidated by the linguistic challenges often found in classic texts.

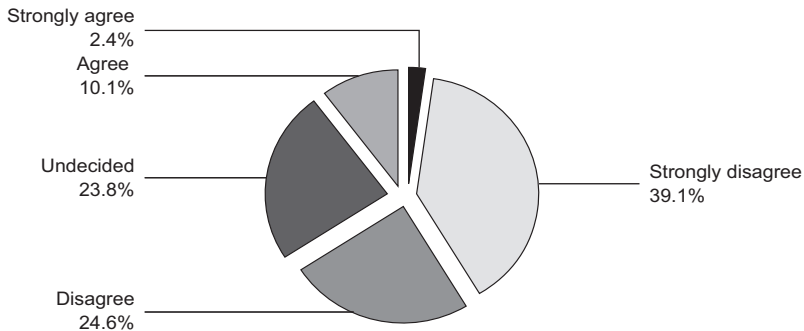


Figure 2: Classic texts vs. contemporary texts

The findings also indicate that engineering students rank short stories the highest with 59.6% indicating they like reading this literary genre. Second in rank is the reading of novels accounting for 42.7%. Plays account for 24.6% while poems rank last in terms of reading choice with only 16.5%. The preference for short stories over the novel as a literary reading material could be due to the factor of time. 47.9% of the respondents indicated that it was more time consuming to read literary texts in comparison to engineering texts. As short stories are relatively shorter than novels, it is less time consuming to read, making the short story genre the most favoured literary genre.

The use of short stories to develop reading interest

The findings of this study also suggest that engineering students perceive short stories as beneficial towards developing their interest for reading. 52.8% of the respondents perceive short stories as a platform to help them develop their passion for reading. 28.2% were undecided, while 18.9% perceived that short stories did not help them develop reading interest. Engineering students' perception on the use of short stories to develop reading ability was also sought. On the ability of short stories to improve engineering students reading skills, 70.2% positively view short stories as a conduit to improve reading ability. 56.9% of the male and 55.8% of the female respondents also indicated that short stories are better than novels to evoke and increase interest in reading among adolescent readers. The researchers were

also interested to investigate if the reading of short stories assisted engineering students in improving language skills such as writing, grammar and vocabulary. Table 2 indicates the breakdown of the manner in which engineering students view the role of short stories in improving their language skills.

Table 2: Role of short stories in improving language skills

Language skills	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	81.6
Reading	70.2
Grammar	69.6
Writing	65.4

The findings presented in Table 2 suggests that engineering students' perceive vocabulary as the most improved language skill when reading short stories, with 81.6% of them indicating its benefit towards improving their vocabulary. The researchers feel that the new vocabulary students attain from their readings of short stories is pertinent as it will assist them further in their comprehension of the text. Following vocabulary is reading with 70.2%, grammar 69.6%, and writing with 65.4%.

Implications

This study aimed to gauge the perception of engineering students towards the types of literary materials that can be integrated in their literature programme in developing their sense of appreciation for reading. Student perceptions were gauged upon the dimensions of importance of literature to develop reading ability, texts and genre inclination for reading and the use of short stories and young adult literature in English to develop interest for reading. Quantitative feedback obtained is discussed in this section with the hope of giving educators a foretaste of the potential of young adult literary materials in developing a sense of appreciation for reading among engineering students.

The findings of this study seem to indicate that adolescent engineering students perceive that literature is important in developing their reading ability. As such, one manner in which the reading experience can be made more pleasurable to engineering students is through the utilization of texts that they can relate to, in this case, the use of young adult literary texts. This is in line with the personal growth approach postulated by Carter and Long (1991) as one of the fundamental concepts in the teaching and learning of literature, i.e. the creation of a conducive learning

environment in which learners are able to interpret texts and construct meaning on the basis of their own experience.

The findings further suggest that young adult literature is the preferred literary genre of adolescent engineering students in helping them develop a sense of appreciation for reading. In Malaysian institutions of higher learning where the composition of engineering students is largely made up of adolescents or young adults, it would thus be beneficial to introduce the YAL genre in English language courses for engineering students to maximize their engagement in the act of reading. Since YAL provides readers with stories about adolescent characters from a variety of ethnic and cultural groups (Donelson & Nilsen, 1997; Ericson, 1995), adolescent English learners are given the added opportunity of exploring and reflecting upon characters, themes, settings, and actions they find in YAL which often mirror scenarios they face in their daily life. Experts in multicultural education recurrently accentuate the importance of using literature to increase cultural awareness (Piper, 1986; Tway, 1989). The text used, assert Piper and Tway, should precisely portray the history, customs, values, and language of a particular cultural group. As such, introducing readers to the literature of various countries is one of the strategies that can be employed to encourage a more significant reading experience.

The findings also seem to indicate that engineering students prefer reading short stories rather than novels, plays or poems. The length of the text plays a part in the preference of engineering students for short stories rather than novels. To encourage engineering students to develop their appreciation for reading further, educators could even introduce literary essays which are also comparatively short in length. Findings from this study also seem to suggest that engineering students prefer reading contemporary texts rather than classic texts. Although the findings indicate that engineering students prefer contemporary texts to classic texts, educators should not be afraid to experiment with the use of classic texts in the literature classroom. For instance, educators could introduce abridged versions of classic texts in the literature classroom to promote the reading of classic literary texts among engineering students.

The researchers would like to assert that the selection of YAL English texts must be appropriate to entice adolescent engineering students to read and to make the reading experience more significant for them. In ensuring proper selection of texts, educators must consider the quality, variety and themes during the selection of texts to help develop a sense of appreciation and passion for reading in engineering students. For instance, educators should consider using texts with themes like friendship, family or even relationships as these themes appeal to adolescents within and outside a given culture. The researchers feel that through appropriate

selection of texts, students could learn to understand and to appreciate a literary heritage that comes from many diverse backgrounds, further enabling adolescent engineering students to develop their appreciation for reading.

The inclusion of YAL in the literature learning process requires two-way interaction to make it successful. Although students have more responsibility for their own learning with the advent of the outcome based education (OBE), the role of the educator is equally pertinent. Thus, in making the literature reading experience more relevant and meaningful for engineering students, it is necessary to break away from the traditional teacher-centered approach, which induces boredom and impedes student creativity and active participation in the literature classroom. Educators should embark upon a student-centered focus in the teaching and learning of literature. The researchers would like to emphasize the importance of stimulating interest and discussion as well as creating a participatory learning environment to further encourage the development and appreciation for reading literary texts amongst engineering students.

Conclusion

As indicated from the findings of this study, the inclusion of literature in the English language programme of engineering students is beneficial, contradicting the notion that literature is irrelevant for science based students. The findings also suggest that engineering students acknowledge the importance of literary texts in developing language skills, specifically reading skills. The study further suggests that young adult literature in English as well as short stories can be used in developing appreciation for reading for engineering students.

In the Asian context, particularly in Malaysia, where much emphasis is placed upon the advancement and progress of its young adults, more effort should be placed on making the role of YAL in English more prominent, specifically in the language and literature classroom. Future research can probably be conducted to gauge the perception of students on the potential of young adult literature in developing other language skills such as writing and speaking. Further research can also be conducted to investigate language and literature educators' perceptions on the benefits of using young adult literature in the language classroom. Comparisons between student and lecturer perceptions on the use of young adult literature to develop appreciation for reading could also be probed into.

It is hoped that the findings from this study will give educators an insight into improving the management and delivery of tertiary level English language programmes which include literature in language proficiency programmes for engineering students.

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