

EXPLORING TEACHER ROLES IN TEACHER LITERATURE CIRCLES

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ABSTRACT

This article reports a part of a study conducted among in-service teachers in a Malaysian secondary school. The focus of the main study was on teacher learning in teacher literature circles. However, this article focuses on the roles played by teachers during teacher literature circles. The roles are described and identified as they emerged from the data. Three teachers and the researcher met informally in the school library and discussed the new text once a week over a period of seven weeks. The teacher literature circle discussions were recorded and transcribed. The study found that the emergent roles facilitated the teachers' meaning making processes, as the teachers tried to understand the text, which they had to teach to their students.

Keywords: teacher roles, teacher literature circles, TESL

Introduction

This paper examines in-service teacher roles in teacher literature circle (TLC) discussions. TLCs are informal gatherings of teachers, to discuss a common text on a regular basis. The teachers in this TLC met during a period of change, that is, a mandatory change in literature texts in the English language syllabus for Malaysian secondary schools.

In 2000, the Ministry of Education included a section referred to as the 'literature component' into the English Language Syllabus. The literature component (Forms 4 and 5) consisted of poems, short stories and a novel to choose from a selection of three novels (Appendix C) and was first examined in the 2001 SPM (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* or 'O' level equivalent) examination. The purpose for the inclusion and testing of the literature component was to inculcate the love for the language and an appreciation for literature among Malaysian secondary school students.

The second cycle of literature texts were introduced in 2010 (short stories and poems) and 2011 (novels), after the old cycle had been used for ten years. It is

the practice to change texts after a period of time. During times of change, especially where examinations are involved, teachers feel anxious as they need to prepare students for the examinations. Teachers also feel the anxiety to acquire the new knowledge of the new texts in order to be ready to teach it. Another contributory factor to teacher anxiety was the fact that accessibility to notes and references for the new texts, in comparison to the old cycle, was limited. Added to these anxieties (testing and accessibility to references), was the concern of time because the teachers had to teach the novel in a matter of months and they had no immediate access to the novels at the announcement of the new texts.

This brought urgency to the situation. Some teachers tried to learn more by looking for guidebooks which writers and publishers had rushed to publish; this rush to write and publish was a response to the demand from teachers for materials to help them cope with the text change. Using guidebooks and notes made the teachers feel more secure and was one way for them to equip themselves to cope, and perhaps to learn more about the new texts.

As an alternative to published guidebooks, the teachers in this study met over a period of six weeks to discuss one of the new literature texts, in a TLC. While literature circles and book clubs have been extensively investigated (George, 2001, 2004; Marshall et al., 1999; Reilly, 2008; Reischl, 1999) and have provided insights into how readers collectively make sense of texts, this study focuses, instead, on a specific type of literature circle, namely, teacher literature circles.

Literature circles are also known as reading circles, literature discussion groups, readers' workshops or book clubs (Raphael & McMachon, 1997; Cullinan, 1993; Daniels, 1994). These terms refer to informal gatherings of people to discuss a common text on a regular basis. Literature circles began to grow in popularity as a mode for student discussions in classrooms, guided and facilitated by teachers. Research on literature circles has shown benefits to both students and teachers. Leal (1993) stated that literature discussion in small groups offers a window for reading teachers to hear students' voices, to understand students' thoughts about books and to monitor their reading progress, as well as to assess their textual comprehension, which may facilitate classroom teaching and enrich literacy learning in order to meet learners' complex needs of reading. Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson (1999) suggested that teachers should value the differences in students' dynamic responses to literature and facilitate a critical dialogue by encouraging them to share experiences and think thoughtfully through storytelling. Thus far, most research has concentrated on literature circles in which students are the members. However, this study shows a TLC, with a solely

teacher composition, and has provided some insights into how these teachers have tried to make sense of the new text through the roles they play. Participation in teacher literature circles can be seen as a part of teacher professional development

A key concept in this article is thus the roles played by teacher-participants in teacher literature circles. A close investigation of roles will help in the understanding of the ways in which teachers tried and made sense of a new text. This study is part of a larger on-going dissertation and the current focus is on teacher roles, which sets the stage for the next step – sense making. However, the links between teacher roles and their sense-making have been included in the analysis and conclusion sections of this paper.

It is in this context – that of isolation, text changes, the need for teachers to learn and be able to teach students - that this study took place. The focus of the study was on the roles that the teachers played in the TLC, in order to make meaning of the text to be able to teach it to students.

Past research

The existing cultures and discourse communities in many schools do not support a critical and reflective examination of the practice of teaching (Putnam & Borko, 2000). However, it has been established that group work or team work, can be a viable means of promoting positive change and accomplishing tasks (Hulse- Killacky, Kraus, & Shumaker, 1999; Jacobs, Harvill, & Masson, 1994). Past work on teacher roles have been limited and confined to teacher roles in *student literature circles*. These roles revolved around the ways in which the teachers guided students in *student literature circles*. In student literature circles, teacher roles went through phases from teacher controlled leader roles to lesser teacher-centred roles, to more student centred roles (Maloch et al., 2004; Scharer & Lehman, 1992; Short et al., 1999; Townsend & Race, 2005). While past research has focused on teacher roles in *student literature circles*, this paper moves the focus to teacher roles in teacher literature circles, within a specific context.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of communities of practice was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 2000) as a basis of social learning theory. A community of practice is a collection of people who engage on an on- going basis in some common endeavour, for example, a bowling team, a book club or even a nuclear family.

Two conditions are crucial to sustain a community of practice: shared experience over time and a commitment to shared understanding. A community of practice engages people in mutual sense making about the enterprise they are engaged in. In the context of this study, the teachers belonged to a community of experienced teachers, who met regularly over a period of time. They shared their experiences and their interpretations of the new literature text through the roles they played in the process of making sense of the text.

Methodology

This section provides information on the site, participants, the new text, and the sources of data.

Site and Participants

The school in which the teacher participants came from was an urban secondary school. However, the school was not the site as it was the interaction of the teachers in teacher literature circles that was the site of this study. Three teachers and the researcher participated in the study. All three teachers had at least twenty years of teaching experience and degrees in TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) with one having a Masters degree in TESL. All three teachers held posts as heads of the English Department at some point in their teaching careers and were actively involved in student activities and school administration. This selection was to ensure the focus of the study was on in-service teachers. In-service teachers moreover, are generally less researched and have less access to formal learning opportunities than pre-service and novice teachers.

The teachers in this study had also been teaching English since the inception of the literature component into the Malaysian English Language Syllabus in 2000. They were willing to participate in the study and showed enthusiasm.

The Text

The text was the new novel introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2011, *Catch Us If You Can* by Catherine Macphail, which replaced the *The Pearl*, which had a life cycle of ten years. A brief summary of the text is provided in Appendix A so that the excerpts, when read, will make more sense to the readers.

Sources of Data

The sources of data included both, the transcripts of the teacher literature circle (TLC) discussions and interviews. Researcher field notes were also made by the researcher after every TLC session and these notes were drawn upon during the analysis of the transcript data.

Procedures

Before the TLC discussions began, the intent of the research was explained to the teachers. That is, to see how teachers could learn from TLC discussions. The participants were given forms of consent to study and sign, if they wanted to participate in the study. A questionnaire was also given to the teachers to ascertain their years of teaching experience and the learning opportunities open to them.

The TLC discussions took place in a room in the school library over seven sessions. Each session comprised discussions of five chapters, with three chapters in the last session (the book has 33 chapters). The sessions lasted between one and a half to two and a half hours each, and took place weekly, except for session seven. Session seven took place in week six, after session six, with a break of two hours in between.

The teacher participants and the researcher sat around a table and every discussion was recorded and the transcribing took place soon after the sessions. Transcript references of the excerpts used in this article are quoted according to the Sessions [S] and line references in the original transcripts. (An overall context of the excerpts of transcripts, as exemplified in this paper, is found in Appendix B).

Analysis

The roles played by the teacher-participants in TLCs emerged from an analysis of the transcripts of the teacher interactions. Two main roles were identified, that of reader and teacher roles. The reader role was when the participant's talk focused on areas pertaining to the understanding and appreciation of the text. The teacher role was when the participant's talk focused on classroom-based concerns which included helping students to understand the text better.

The teachers began in the reader role and then moved to the teacher role. As the TLC discussions progressed, the teachers weaved in and out of both roles as they made meaning of the text as readers, and shared student responses and plans for their classroom activities, as teachers.

Interactions relating to either of the reader or teacher roles are given in Table 1 and have been broadly categorized accordingly. This part of the analysis helped in establishing the two main roles: reader role and teacher role. This paper describes and exemplifies the two main roles, and also examines role transitions from one role to the other.

Table 1: Role Description

Role	Description
Reader Role	Participant played a reader role when his/ her talk focused on areas pertaining to the understanding and appreciation of the text.
Teacher Role	Participant played a teacher role when his/her talk focused on classroom concerns.

The following are sample excerpts that exemplify the two main roles. In Excerpt 1, Di and Anne are two of the participants of the TLC discussion while Angie is the researcher.

Reader Role Exemplified

Excerpt 1: Granda [S1 lines 3-6]

- Angie: I really like it [it-refers to the text].
Anne: Especially the character “Rory” ah, the kid, the Granda... [draws on the text].
Angie: Oh ya... ya, what a fine relationship you know. [draws on the text]. I didn’t have such a relationship with my grandfather you know. He was so strict and always scolding [draws on prior knowledge and personal experience].
Anne: Exactly
Di: My grandfather was something like that [referring to Granda].

In the above excerpt, Angie, Anne and Di talked about the intense personal relationship that bonded Rory and his grandfather, Granda. All three participants played the reader role because they (Angie, Anne and Di), referred to the text, that is, the characters in the text, and tried to understand the text by relating the relationship between Granda and Rory to their own personal experiences with their own grandfathers, as readers of the text. This part of the interaction was categorized as coming from the reader role.

The reader role helped Angie, Anne and Di to understand the text better as they made personal connections to their own lives. Where Di had a similar relationship with her grandfather as Rory’s, Angie’s relationship with her

grandfather was a contrast. Anne, who did not contribute directly later commented during the subsequent interview that she "...was amazed that Di had a good relationship with her grandfather..." and was 'jealous' of Di. This also assumed that Anne could not have had an informal and buddy-like relationship with her grandfather. In the researcher field notes, Angie wrote, "...Anne has the same experience as me. Strict no nonsense grandfathers, disciplinarians". The next line read, "Saty [another participant] was nodding her head. Must be same story as Angie's and Anne's".

This episode entitled *Granda* showed up the participants' meaning making process in terms of making connections between prior knowledge and experiences with the text situation on relationships. As the participants made such connections through their reader roles, their comprehension and engagement of the text increased. It is this greater comprehension and engagement that resulted in them becoming better readers, capable of making more informed interpretations.

Teacher Role Exemplified

Excerpt 2: They [the students] laughed...[S 1 lines 65-69]

Excerpt 2 illustrates the teacher role involving another participant, Di, of the TLC. Di narrated her students' responses to a part of the text, where Granda was described in a humorous way, in all that he said and did.

Di: *They pay ... they pay so much of attention and they laughed at every single thing that the Granda did... you know... and some of them (student responses) ... I told them that we do this chapter in class (teacher's experience in the classroom) and some of them actually went back home and finished the book... you know... so this is one of the... (a combination of teacher's classroom experiences and students' responses).*

In the above excerpt, Di played the teacher role because her concern was her students' responses. Throughout the excerpt, Di used the pronouns *they* and *them* to refer to her students. Excerpt 2 is a personal response as in Excerpt 1. However, in excerpt 2, the personal response belonged to the students while in Excerpt 1, the personal responses were the teacher-participants' personal responses. Basically, the vantage points of response differed, from participants' personal responses [Excerpt 1] to the students' personal responses [Excerpt 2]. It is this shift of response from self to students, which distinguished Excerpt 2 as coming from a teacher role.

This episode showed up the participants' meaning making process through the lenses of their students and the sharing of their students' responses. During the interview, Saty said that, "I would begin the text with this part...er...to...to engage my students." For Saty, Di's experience with her students gave her the idea to begin with a humorous part of the text in order to engage her students.

This was the meaning making process for Saty based on Di's sharing, and in the teacher role. Di herself responded during the interview by saying, "I got to know students better... that they could appreciate humour and... and have fun with the text. Later I asked them about their own grandfathers...Wah... what a fun discussion". Anne said during the interview that "it is very encouraging to know that our students are capable of enjoying the humour in the literature text." Anne had not begun teaching the text and in the researcher field notes, Angie had written, "Anne seemed happy and excited about Di's students' responses, something like Saty but Anne showed more excitement. She probably hopes for a similar response from her students when she gets to the part."

All these interactions formed the meaning making process from a teacher role with the focus on the students' responses, and what could be implied about the students and ideas on teaching strategies that could be used in classrooms. Using these two excerpts as a basis to show the two main roles, the next section proceeds with the transitions between the two main roles.

Transitions between Main Roles

The main roles did not occur in isolation or in rigid segments. The teachers shifted between the reader and teacher roles, as in the study by Short et al. (1999), but this time, not in response to students, but in response to their own teacher interactions.

Excerpt 3: *A Spoilt Kid* [S 1 lines 128-145]

- Saty: This is I think so it's individual, like the father, the grandfather, when he was 45 years old, the son was born.... Because after so long maybe a child is there, so they really spoil him. You see whatever he asked the parents got it for the kid, but then day after day, and after seeing him behave like that, they knew they had already... [Reader role]
- Angie: Made a mistake.
- Saty: Mistake...and they couldn't make it... make it right.
- Angie: Ya, it was too late.

- Saty: Ya, that is what he realized. Both father and mother, they spoil the son, you see.
- Angie: Ehm...
- Saty: They admit their mistake and Granda admits that to the grandson.
- Di: Anything he wanted he got and when he got tired of it, he threw it aside.
- Angie: Ya [in between]
- Anne: Just threw it [low voice]
Toys when he was a boy and people when he grew up [Reader role].
Must point (X2)...out to the students when they are young must be loyal and stay loyal when older too... [Teacher role]

In Excerpt 3, Saty, another participant of the TLC began in the reader role and used her prior knowledge to talk about the circumstances in which Granda spoil his son. That is, having a son at the age of 45, caused Granda to spoil the child. The conversation continued on the topic until Anne, another participant took on a teacher role and changed the vantage point to a teacher stance as indicated by “Must point...out to the students...” She stated the need, to point out to the students, that it was important to be loyal whether one’s young or old. She was referring to Rory’s father, who was not loyal and stated that he was no role model to follow (taken from the interview data). In a way, Anne, in her *teacherly* role, was also moralising and felt the need to impart certain values to the students.

It is through the transitioning from one role to the other, from the reader to teacher role, that the teachers in the study were able to voice their concerns while making meaning of the text.

Conclusions and Implications

The paper highlights and exemplifies the two main roles that emerged from the data, namely, the reader role and the teacher role. However, the two roles did not appear in isolation but were woven into the interactions. The two roles represented where the teachers were coming from: First, they were readers like any other readers and second, they were teachers. In being readers, they explored the text in ways that extended their individual understanding and appreciation of the text to a social level. The readers negotiated the meaning process through their shared past personal experiences which helped them to make connections between their own lives and the text. This was how the text became more meaningful to the teachers.

The teacher role brought to the forefront the teachers' main concerns – their students. This time the teacher participants negotiated meaning through the lenses of their students in order to understand them (their students) better in more ways than one. First, Di was able to explore her students' relationships with their own grandparents, giving them the opportunity to make connections with the text, just the way Di did with her colleagues and teacher –participants in the reader role. Di had extended her own individual reader role experience with her colleagues. What was amazing was the fact that Di recognized what engaged her as a reader and wanted that engagement for her students as well. Secondly, in the process, she discovered more about her students. Such knowledge was useful as she could draw on it whenever she found it meaningful as 'this will surely help me in not only getting to know my students but maybe...maybe help me to provide activities...ah ah classroom activities that would engage them... you know... to have fun in class lah'. Thirdly, when Anne found Di's students responses enlightening, it was an eye opener for her (and the others) as to students' abilities, that is, students were capable of appreciating the humour found in the text. Fourthly, Saty got ideas on how to begin the text – with that particular humorous part in order to engage her students. Thus, the teacher role also led teachers to negotiate strategies for classroom teaching as well as guiding students towards certain moral values which the teachers thought were important to impart to their students (excerpt 3). As can be seen, some interpretations and ideas were totally new and not considered before the TLC discussion, giving room for new thoughts and reflections.

Next, the two roles transitioned from one to the other and the significance of this was to show and understand the concerns teachers had while facilitating their meaning making process. This involved trying to make sense of the text on the one hand and enabling teachers to organize knowledge in a presentable and more comprehensible way for students, while making new discoveries during their classroom experience, on the other hand. The roles weaved in and out of the TLC interactions.

The context of teacher literature circles needs to be highlighted, apart from the main roles played by the teachers. The teacher-participants were in an organized group within a teacher literature circle context. Being in a teacher literature circle enabled them to bring their concerns, both from a reader and teacher perspective, to the group. The teacher literature circle served as a vehicle for the teachers to make meaning of the new text, which was initially a source of uncertainty and anxiety. The TLC allowed the teachers to exchange interpretations, clear doubts

and uncertainties, while leaving spaces for possibilities and providing opportunities for reflection and explorations of both new and existing ideas.

Thus, one of the implications is to consider TLCs as a mode for in-service teachers to meet, discuss and learn informally. TLCs could be one of many avenues or opportunities to learn, without teachers having to live in ‘isolation,’ being uncertain “again after we’ve been teaching for years” (Carico, 2001, p. 518). Secondly, the emergent dual roles – the reader and teacher roles help us to understand how teachers make meaning of new texts. Teachers working together in TLCs should be considered as another avenue, apart from guidebooks and notes from the MOE, for greater meaning making opportunities.

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