READER RESPONSE THEORY: LINK TO YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of 'reader response' and young adult text in the reading classroom of secondary and tertiary level students. The focus on young adult issues through 'reader response' has resulted in overwhelming response at all levels of students in discussions in the classroom. Thus, interest in reading can be inculcated through this approach.

Introduction

The effectiveness of the prescribed texts in the Literature in English Component Programme is a major concern of ESL teachers in Malaysia. The focus on passing with good grades in the exam emasculates the intention of the programme which aims are to contribute to students' personal development and character building (KPM, 2000). Though McRae and Vethamani (1999) have suggested that through the process of reading an assortment of literary texts, students would hopefully develop their language and cultural awareness as well as become better readers of the world they live in, the underlying fact is generally students express a dislike for school reading because they find it boring and of little value. Gurnam Kaur Sidhu (2003) found that one of the major reasons for the lack of interest in reading among Malaysian students is that the prescribed reading materials are not of students' interest. In fact, studies have indicated that although most of the instructional materials are prepared for learners, learners themselves as individuals are not been given much attention (Vethamani, 2003). Thus, there should be a remedy for the above predicament and this paper suggests 'Reader Response'.

'Reader Response' involves focusing on the reader rather than the text, noting that interpretation emerges from the reader's interaction with the text. Those who work with children and young people inevitably concern themselves with readers' responses to literature. Three aspects commonly associated with reader response, namely, the reader, the text and the context, all influence the responses that students make. The reader responds based on his or her attitudes, knowledge , experiences that are brought to the text as well as ability to think and connect to the text. It recognises the reader as an active agent who imparts 'real existence' to the work by reading it and completing its meaning 'by applying codes and strategies.' It is

concerned with the reader's contribution to a text. On the other hand, the text connects the knowledge and experience of the reader to what is relevant in the story that matches the reader's preferences. To quote from Fish (Lee, 2002): "Meaning is an event, something that happens not on the page, where we are accustomed to look for it, but in the interaction between the flow of print (or sound) and the active mediating of the reader-hearer."

This means that however subjective a reader's response is to the text. It is continuous shaping of the events of the reader's mental process that slowly adjusts the thoughts to finally reach an understanding of the actual meaning of the text. According to Jauss (cited by Lee, 2002), it is wrong to say that a work is universal, the meaning is fixed forever. Thus, historical knowledge is of importance to the reader.

No one else can participate in that first act of meaning-making even if all are listening to a reading of the same story. If the teacher is reading aloud, the quality (tone, emphasis, enthusiasm, etc.) of the reading may influence young people's meaning-making (Trealease, 2006). Another view by Holland (1975 cited by Kelly, 2006) suggests that "identity is unity" where the reader arrives after having ex-plored the themes in a text. He says we can each have a different response from each text. Though, Rosenblatt's view on Reader Response Theory has its founda-tion on the reader rather than the text, we cannot deny the fact that reading is subjective by nature and the aesthetic experience of the reader always difficult to gauge unless we know the background of the reader. Thus, the view that meaning inheres not in the text but in the reader where the reader's activities are at the centre of attention. Lang (2006), disagrees with this view but I juxtapose her views as I am convinced that Reader Response Theory is fundamental to the practical use of literature in the classroom. Furthermore, Rosenblatt's shift to a balanced view in the 1980s shows that the process of literature is fundamentally a negotiation of mean-ings between reader and writer (Imtiaz, 2004). Hence, the relation between a reader and text is not linear but depends on situations of context .

The main crux of Reader Response Theory is the reaction or response of a reader to a text based on the reader's aesthetic experience. According to Wall (2005), Reader Response recognises that the reader has a significant role in bringing mean-ing to the interpretation of text. A fundamental principle of both Reader Response and Literary theories states that, "If readers are to have meaningful transactions with literary texts, they must make connections between their lives and the litera-ture" (Hamann *et al.*, 1991). Hirsch (cited by Lee, 2002), takes a referential view of the theory of meaning which differentiates between meaning and significance of the text.

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The meaning of text is what the text on the page represents and significance is the relationship of meaning and anything else. Iser argues that texts contain gaps that powerfully affect the reader, who must explain them. Wayne Booth uses the phrase the implied reader to mean the reader but substitutes the educated reader for what Fish calls the intended reader (Murfin *et al.*, 1998). In this predicament, the terminology used might differ form one advocate to another but the understanding of the text depends on the aesthetic experience of the reader.

Why Young Adult Literature ?

Young adult literature (YAL) can be defined as a literature that caters for adolescents or general audience that relates to the young adult's needs and interests. In short, it looks as if any literature that makes a young adult reader to read can be categorised as YAL but there are distinct characteristics that are mentioned by Vethamani (2003) to show the issues that are related to young adults which are (i) coming to terms with developing sexuality and with physiological changes, (ii) achieving 'proper' gender roles, (iii) issues relating personal choice and abilities, (iv) preparation for marriage family life or meaningful relationship, (v) personal ideology related to moral development, (vi) social a responsibilities, and to (vii) develop interpersonal skills and mass media, popular culture and other influences. YAL offers teenagers something that adult literature does not. And it is created especially for young adults, hoping to give them a more mature understanding of self and the world. In this context, I would like to suggest short stories that relate to these issues mentioned by Vethamani (2003) such as the stories in Chicken Soup for Teenage Soul II (Cavnfield *et al.*, 1998) can also be considered as YAL The stories tend to have a sense of immediacy, rather than nostalgia, and their focus is on the experience of an individual, usually a teenage protagonist. It does not always provide the answers, but rather portrays a young person in search of them (Jenkins, 1999 cited by Owen, 2003). Reader Response recognises that the reader has a significant role in bringing meaning to the interpretation. The type of text that students select also influences their responses. Although both aesthetic and efferent meaning-making are present, an expository text is usually read more efferently or outwardly, that is, for the information it contains, while a piece of literature usually is read more aesthetically, reflecting a personal expression of meaning. Therefore, text selection which reflects the readers' interests, personal experiences and maturity is important to assist meaning-making as well as to provide vicarious experiential guidance to the adolescent.

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All the characteristics of Young Adult Literature show that they relate to the issues of young adults, thus making them apt for reader response. As such, I believe YAL is a key to promote reader response in young adult readers.

Reader Response Theory; the Link to YAL in the Classroom?

Louise Rosenblatt was a pioneer in Reader Response Theory. She explains that each reader produces a "unique experience" as a result of reading because each reader brings his of her "personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations" as well as his or her psychological and physical conditions to the act of reading (Wright, 1995). In relation to this, YAL can be used in the classroom by encouraging response from the students in their own way

An advocate of the genre, Bushman argues that "you can teach young-adult novels in the classroom … and you can work with literature, language, and composition skills, and … you don't necessarily have to teach the classics (although the secondary school curriculum has continued to focus on the canon of approved classics, teenagers and adults predominately like to read texts that are considered by English teachers to be of lesser quality. Such alternative texts as young-adult novels in fact demonstrate the positive qualities which characterise the classics as not apt for teenagers as the main characters of the novels are usually adults" (Koch and Farrell, 1992).

Related Classroom Strategies

Two Reader Response strategies that can be implemented by teachers in class are "creating a climate conducive to learning" and exhibiting appropriate teacher's behaviour'(Bushman and Bushman, 1997). Teachers can create a conducive Reader-Response classroom atmosphere by arranging it in a way that enable students to easily see and hear one another. The key ingredient to the success or Reader Response is the teachers' receptiveness to students' responses which requires an atmosphere of trust so that students share openly and know their thoughts are valued (Rosenblat 1995).

Personal Experience with Young Adult Literature in the Classroom

One example that the writer personally can link Reader Response in teaching is by introducing a YAL text in my Pre Diploma classroom at UITM, Sabah by incorporating Beach's (1993) activities for eliciting responses.

In planning activities for the YAL text; *Hero* by S.L. Rotman, I asked myself the following questions :

Student Attributes
Will my students enjoy this story ?
What do they know about being a Hero ?

Teacher Attributes
How do my knowledge, interests, attitudes, beliefs, and stance shape my response to the text ?
How may my response differ from my students' responses ?

Thus the pre reading activities were generally asking the views of students about certain issues. Before reading the texts, I asked, "What is a Hero?" As usual the response started from the comic book heroes such as Batman, Superman, Kluang man (a local cartoon hero) to soldier and policeman.

After coming to generalisation of the above, the text was read by the teacher aloud with questions asked in between reading. This is to connect the students to their reading and encourage emotional experience by asking them to analyse the problems faced by the character. The characteristic that was unanimous was bravery or courageous. After reading the first chapter, the students were asked to state whether their opinions on being a Hero had changed. Some had changed their perceptions and agreed that there are no heroes now.

The task of the teacher in the classroom is to help develop and maintain the interpretive community and to ensure that each participant finds both private and public space within that community. An aesthetic approach to the YAL has a strong emotional appeal which also provides a specific type of intellectual activities.

A personal response based on a text may provide a useful basis for discussion. Such an approach invites the learner to have a specific relationship that the reader could share in a classroom discussion. The organisation of text discussion also requires some understanding of how students can be helped linguistically. This can be seen in the example of the response of my students to the novel, Hero. It is indeed a necessity for a teacher to be present at the discussion to rectify any errors made by students in speaking or how a point a should be put across in a discussion, for example, giving students cue phrases like 'in my opinion', 'well I think' and many more. Reader Response had made an impact on the students in general as they wanted to continue to read on to find out what happen to the character 'Sean' in the end.

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Once the process of meaning-making moves from the private to the public domain, the role of the teacher is both to keep the discussion going and make certain there is time for reflection, to encourage young people to share their own meanings and to listen to the meanings of others; and, finally, to refer readers back both to the text and to their own lives in an effort to track their own processes of meaning-making socially. The issues that provoke students participation in discussion will inevitably promote speaking especially in the writer's case with novel, 'Hero' where students even from limited proficiency level were able to contribute in the discussion of, 'what makes a hero?' The response was encouraging . Rosenblatt draws two conclusions about the reader and the text: (i) the text is a stimulus, activating the reader's past experiences with literature and with life: (ii) the text functions as a blueprint, a guide through which the reader selects, rejects, and orders responses during the reading (Kelly, 2006). Young Adult literature highlights the importance of young adults' response to a text or novel. Students will read if they have an opportunity to read material that is interesting and relevant to their lives (Brown and Stephens, 1995). Using YAL increases students' awareness of how reading leads to understanding. Nevertheless, in relation to limited time in the classroom, short stories (Carnfield, *et al,* 1998) would suffice.

Conclusion

We all come to a text with unique life and reading experiences that colour our perceptions of the literary worlds we enter. This reality becomes clear in our classes and in workshops. Responses are filtered through the grid of personal experiences; hence each response is unique (Kooy, and Wells, 1996). Thus, with that thought, Young Adult Literature is indeed linked to 'Reader Response' as I view that there are no 'sacred' texts that a student needs to read to be literate but student needs should be the top most priority. Thus, this paper edifies that YAL is a better bet for young adults in terms of response as it deals with young adults facing contemporary issues or problems and it speaks a 'language' that students easily understand.

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