

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSES TO TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to investigate if boys and girls react differently to the same text. The conceptual theoretical construct used was the schema theory (Caroll, 1972). According to the schema concepts a reader brings to a text his own prior knowledge, cultural biases, preconceptions, viewpoints etc. The aim of the study was to examine and analyse if perceptual gender differences exist and to elicit if any, the salient differences of the interpretations of literary texts by male and female students. Two selected short stories namely "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant and "The Hitchhiker" by Ronald Dahl were chosen as the stimulus.

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Introduction

Tannen, (1990) states that men and women walk away from the same conversation, with completely different impressions. Though Tannen's study focuses on conversations, it is pertinent to our study. If in listening (a receptive skill) to the same conversation, men and women get different impressions and perceptions of the same incoming stimuli, is it not possible a similar result will occur in reading which is also a receptive skill?

The researchers wanted to investigate if boys and girls react differently to the same text. The conceptual theoretical construct we decided to use was the schema theory. (Caroll, 1972). The schema theoretical models of text processing posit a psychological view of reading as an interactive process involving a memory search on the part of the reader in an attempt to link the known with the unknown. According to the schema concepts a reader brings to a text his own prior knowledge, cultural biases, preconceptions, viewpoints etc. The schema theory presents a view of the reader as an active participant in a cognitive approach to reading. Meaning is produced by the interaction of the reader and

the text and the new information is integrated into the prior knowledge, experience, biases etc of readers.

Research on schema theory and its effect on reading and perception and reaction to the text read have focused primarily on cultural/minority groups (Steffenson and Joag-Dev 1984). The one known locally-based research in Malaysia on whether a specific text is preferred by one sex was carried out by Rosli Talif (1992) who questioned 20 teachers and concluded that the teachers' impressions and views based on experience in the reading class was that "The Sleeping Beauty" was not favoured by the boys. The gender variable and its effect on text do not appear to have been researched.

Aim and Methodology of the Study

The aim of the study was to examine and analyse if perceptual gender differences exist and to elicit if any, the salient differences of the interpretations of literary texts by male and female students. The subjects were identified on the basis of availability and easy administration. Three groups i.e. 40 students (twenty male and twenty female students) from three different institutions in Malaysia i.e. the University of Malaya, Universiti Putra, and Universiti Teknologi MARA, which all offer a Matriculation Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme, made up the sample. The subjects were controlled on the basis of proficiency, age and ethnicity and results. The majority of them scored distinctions in their English paper at SPM level.

Two selected short stories namely "*The Necklace*" (hereafter called the first text) by Guy de Maupassant and "*The Hitchhiker*" (referred to as Text 2) by Ronald Dahl were chosen as the stimulus as the researchers were of the view that the texts are gender biased. These texts were chosen because they formed part of the elective Literature in English programme for the upper secondary level in Malaysia.

The respondents were given an average of 40-50 minutes per session to work on each text at different time periods. Prior to reading each text, they were asked to predict the story based on the title and text. Then they were asked to read the texts and to state their reasons for liking or disliking the texts. Other literary-type questions related to theme, characters, realism, and suitability of the text were also asked. To ensure reliability in the assessment of responses a written response format was used rather than talk-aloud protocols. Frequency count of issues raised by the students were made for the purpose of determining gender variability.

Results and Discussion

I. PRE-READING

Titles can create interest or turn a student off the prescribed reading material. Subjects were asked in the pre-reading session :- Q1 “Based on the title would you be interested in reading this story?” *The Necklace* apparently, because of its feminine overtones, appears to interest the girls as 18/20 of the girl respondents stated that the title would interest them (see Table 1). However, only 12/20 of the male respondents held the same view. It appears therefore, that a specifically feminine title like “*The Necklace*” attracts the girls but not the boys as 7 of the boys said they would not be interested in reading a text with this title as contrasted with only 2 girls who were not attracted by the title.

However, strangely it does not necessarily follow that a masculine title would not attract the girls. The data indicates that the title “*Hitchhiker*” appeals to the same number of boys and girls 16:16 although at the same size a similar number of both sexes (4) reported that they did not find the title interesting.

Table 1: DO TITLES CREATE AN INTEREST IN READING?

	BOYS					GIRLS			
	YES	NO	U/C	N/R		YES	NO	U/C	N/R
TEXT 1 (N)	12	7	1			18	2		
TEXT 2 (H)	16	4				16	4		

N = 20

The reasons cited for liking “*The Hitchhiker*” in the pre-reading stage were as follows: seven of the boys identified with the character but none of the girls identified with the character. Thus, it was easier for the boys to identify with a title like “*The Hitchhiker*”.

II. THEME

After reading the text the subjects were asked: -“Did you like the theme?” This was to determine if subjects had changed their minds in the post-reading session. Four boys and one girl changed their minds after reading “*The Necklace*”, though 3 boys and 1 girl still did not enjoy the story (Table 2).

Table 2: DID SUBJECTS LIKE THE THEME?

		BOYS			GIRLS		
		YES	NO		YES	NO	UNCERTAIN
N		17	3		19	1	
H		20			17	1	2

The respondents were also asked why they enjoyed or liked the first story. Both the boy and girl respondents cited the following reasons: - morals, (5boys/9girls) amusing (4boys), unexpected ending/not as predicted (2boys and 2girls). As for the second story three girls liked it for the morals while five boys found it interesting.

All the boys liked the “*Hitchhiker*” whereas 17 of the girls liked it. Though not significantly different, the differing reactions of the respondents towards the first text must be noted. While, five boys found the first story mysterious/strange only one girl felt the same way. The same story therefore appears to trigger differing perceptual responses.

III. CHARACTERISATION

In order to determine if there was a difference in the responses of the subjects to the characters, the subjects were asked, “*Do you like the characters?*” About 57% of all the respondents liked the characters in “*The Necklace.*” However, on examining the breakdown of the male/female responses 65% (13) of the boy respondents liked the characters as contrasted to 50% (10) of the girls (Table 3).

Table 3: DID SUBJECTS LIKE THE CHARACTERS?

		BOYS			GIRLS		
		YES	NO		YES	NO	UNCERTAIN
Characters	N	13	7		10	9	1
	H	20			19	1	

Asked why they did not like the characters in the first text the boys were not as judgmental as the girls were. Only four of the boys, as contrasted with 17 girls described the wife as “careless, greedy/materialistic, hypocritical, impractical and demanding”. It must be

noted however, despite this harsh criticism three girls found her “interesting” and “realistic.”

The majority of the boys were more generous with their opinions of the couple in *The Necklace*. They perceived them as having “strong admirable features” and “a good couple fit for each other.” Two boys even said they could “identify with the characters.”

All the boys liked the characters in *The Hitchhiker* but one girl did not. She found the hitchhiker “disgusting”. Both the boys and the girls enjoyed the “well developed characters, the vivid descriptions” and the contrast in the characters in the second text but only one girl stated that she “can feel the emotions” in the first text.

IV. LANGUAGE AND STYLE

87% of the respondents enjoyed the first story. The reasons cited by both sexes for liking the language in both texts was that the simple vocabulary resulted in easy understanding of the texts. They saw the descriptions as vivid and “the suspense was built up.”

The girls were pragmatic and said the texts helped them to improve their vocabulary and grammar. The emotive language and the sequential flow of the first text also impressed the girls.

The single girl respondent who found the descriptions in the first text boring also did not enjoy the language. Reasons by those who did not enjoy the language included the following: - “language, especially vocabulary is difficult and too descriptive, too many details with the sentences being too long”. “Archaic language,” stated the boys, “made the story boring”. It is also interesting to note that the girls saw the new words as a positive factor (to learn) whereas the boys reported that it made for difficult reading.

V. REALISM

Subjects were asked *“Is the story realistic?”* 80% of the respondents found the first story realistic (Table 4). The reasons cited by the girls are that there exist “people like them (the characters in the novel) “ and it could happen to anyone” (13 girls); whereas the boys cited more reasons i.e. “it is common day event” (5 boys). The girls identified with Mathilda, the female character. Thus student response to text does depend, to what extent the students can identify with and empathize with the characters and also on students’ opinions of the qualities of the characters in the texts. One boy reader of *“The Necklace”* even said that he “would do the same thing” and another boy empathized with

the heroine and said sometimes people “do anything to be part of the group and this could happen to us”.

One boy who felt the story was not realistic felt that the ending was not fair and that it “does not reflect society.” The girls, who said the story was not realistic on the other hand, cited quite a different reason for saying the first story was not realistic. They could not believe that a friend could so easily lend anyone such an expensive necklace. The girls reacted: “How can a girl give up her possessions so easily?” It was clear that the boys and the girls had different reasons as to why they found the text realistic or not.

Table 4: DID SUBJECTS FIND THE STORY REALISTIC?

	BOYS				GIRLS		
	YES	NO	UNCERTAIN		YES	NO	UNCERTAIN
N	16	2	2		16	3	1
H	14	6	13		4	3	

VI. MORAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Subjects were asked: -” Are there any moral and social implications in the story?”

Table 5: DID SUBJECTS FIND MORAL/SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS?

	BOYS					GIRLS			
	YES	NO	N/R	U/C		YES	NO	N/R	U/C
N	18		1	1		19		1	
H	18	2				16	2	1	1

The majority of the respondents said there were moral and social implications to the stories. Although for the most part, the boys and girls agreed there were moral and social implications, again it is surprising that there were also differences in the kinds of implications seen. This is illustrated in the following tables

Table 6: SIMILAR RESPONSES TO “THE NECKLACE”

Moral responses to “ <i>The Necklace</i> ” - Similar	
Ω	<i>don't enjoy too much</i>
Ω	<i>don't be materialistic</i>
Ω	<i>don't be greedy/egoistic</i>
Ω	<i>don't be a hypocrite (accept one's position) be content</i>
Ω	<i>“stay appreciate what you where you are” / be yourself being rich is not everything</i>
Ω	<i>be content/grateful.</i>

Table 7: DISSIMILAR RESPONSES TO “THE NECKLACE”

Dissimilar Responses	
	Boys
Ω	<i>don't be taken in by appearance</i>
Ω	<i>beauty is from within</i>
Ω	<i>do anything to get a precious item back</i>
Ω	<i>a wife should not be too demanding</i>
Ω	<i>a husband should not be too soft</i>
Ω	<i>have to love each other/couple must help each other</i>
	Girls
Ω	<i>learn to be responsible</i>
Ω	<i>live within means</i>
Ω	<i>don't let stupidity affect your life</i>
Ω	<i>don't borrow</i>
Ω	<i>showing off is unethical</i>
Ω	<i>should explain when lend</i>
Ω	<i>small things change life</i>
Ω	<i>do not judge a book by cover (the necklace)</i>
Ω	<i>two sides to a coin</i>

The boys saw something positive in the first text whereas the girls appear to want to apportion blame. Where the boys felt that a couple should love and help each other the girls stated that one should not borrow and that lenders should inform borrowers of the value of the item borrowed.

The main moral lessons seen in the second text are listed in Table 8

Table 8: MORAL LESSONS from “THE HITCHHIKER”

The main moral lessons seen in “ <i>The Hitchhiker</i> ” are as follows:-	
∅	<i>don’t judge by appearance [2g 2b]</i>
∅	<i>don’t give lifts to strangers [2g 3b]</i>
∅	<i>don’t speed [1g 2b]</i>
∅	<i>“be nice to rotten people” [2g]</i>

It appears that although all respondents saw moral implications, the nature of the implications perceived varied.

VII. SUITABILITY OF TEXT

Respondents were asked :-*Is the story suitable for a classroom reading programme?* The majority of respondents found the texts suitable for classroom reading. Asked why, the reason given was “because of the good moral values” (9 girls, 6 boys). The girls cited morals as the main reason, why “*The Necklace*” would be selected as a classroom text whereas the main reason cited by the boys (9 boys) is because “it is interesting.” As for “*The Hitchhiker*”, 16 girls were of the view that it was suitable because of the moral values (Table 9).

Table 9: SUITABILITY OF TEXT

	BOYS			GIRLS			N/C
	YES	NO		YES	NO	N/R	
N	17	3		18	1	1	2
H	18	2		16	1	1	

Conclusions

Titles do have an effect on the reading interest of the respondents. Teachers need to be more sensitive in their selection of texts for classroom use especially if they are teaching in a single sex school. It seems that the male respondents do not want to be identified with titles, which suggest feminine tendencies, but the girls are comfortable with the idea of reading "*The Hitchhiker*."

The prominent factor that emerged in the reading was the portrayal of good moral values. The respondents' preoccupation with moral values could be associated with the implementation of the subject "*Pendidikan Moral*" (Moral Education) in Malaysian schools. A point worth noting here is that they might perceive that only stories with moral values are worth reading. Whether this is a positive development or not is debatable. Nevertheless, teachers may initially use stories with obvious moral issues in order to sustain interest in the reading material.

It is noted that both male and female respondents impose their own moral values on the characters. As such, it is not surprising that their reactions to the characters depend on their approval of the characters' behaviour. The female respondents' strong reactions against the characters could be due to their being more emotionally involved in the characterization. Their male counterparts however, are more tolerant.

It is quite apparent that language and style affect the outcome of the reading process. A variety of texts should be selected for classroom use to cater to both sexes. Among other things, the text should include dialogues, descriptions, and elements of common values, which the students can identify with. In addition, texts with varying degrees of realism and fantasies should be provided.

In conclusion, ideally both teacher and student response should be considered in the process of discovering suitable texts for the classroom reading programme. However, the norm has been for the teacher to make such choices. Preliminary field research focussing on students' preferences could provide valuable insights.

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