

## **Teacher Support Materials in the Treatment of Cultural Elements for the Malaysian Class Reader Program**

**JAYAKARAN MUKUNDAN**

*Universiti Pertanian Malaysia*

Researchers involved in cross-cultural experiments have found that people from different cultures respond differently to culturally sensitive materials. Zawiah Yahya (1991) explains that this is because of "differences in the cultural schemata that a reader brings to the text."

Cultural Schema Theory proposes that a 'schema' or 'frame' is the reader's organised knowledge of the world that provides the basis for comprehending, learning and remembering ideas in a story. The schema theory assumes that the text by itself only provides 'directions' for the reader to construct meaning. But these directions heavily rely upon a framework of knowledge "acquired prior to reading". The reader has to 'fill out' a skeleton in the process of meaning production. The 'fillers' (Zawiah Yahya, 1991) are within the reader, not the text. Readers who bring in different schemata would give different interpretations to the same text:

To push the point further, a reader who uses the schemata of a foreign culture will comprehend differently from a native. The hypothesis underlying all this is that culture influences knowledge, beliefs and values which in turn influence comprehension processes.

(Zawiah Yahya, 1991: 93)

There are several studies which have been conducted to show that readers of different cultures react differently to texts. Singer and Ruddle (1985) in their 'sounding experiment' found that Black and White subjects reacted differently to the text. Blacks comprehended well because the passage on sounding (a ritual in black communities) was familiar to them. Safiah Osman (1988) in her experiment in Malaysia found that her subjects (160 Malay native speakers from two secondary schools) performed better in familiar topics and this proved that prior knowledge more than proficiency determined comprehension performance.

The importance of prior knowledge and how it may affect reading comprehension may be observed through the Class Reader Program. This paper examines problems encountered in implementing the Class Reader Program, which was initiated by the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 1990. The main objective of the reading program was to introduce literature in the ESL classroom, and at the same time increase the reading load of students in school.

The program started in 1990 with Form 1 students. There are six English lessons a week for each class. One lesson is allocated for the use of the reader. Each class has to finish 3 Readers each year.

The Malaysian Class Reader Program is a well-planned program which has very strong 'support' features. Each reader is supported by a teaching file which provides teachers with ideas on how to approach the book. The teaching file also provides assistance on material production.

Most of the 24 books selected for the Reader Program (Year One) are books written by Western writers. More than 90% of the books had stories which were foreign in nature. Some of the books were simplified and abridged versions:

<b>Journey to the Centre of the Earth</b>	Elementary
<b>The Prisoner of Zenda</b>	Elementary
<b>Great Expectations</b>	Elementary
<b>Wuthering Heights</b>	Intermediate
<b>Man of Everest</b>	Intermediate
<b>The Red Badge of Courage</b>	Intermediate
<b>The Diary of Ann Frank</b>	Intermediate
<b>King Solomon's Mines</b>	Intermediate

The file writers involved in writing the teaching files over-looked the possibility of teachers facing problems in 'cultural elements' in the Class Readers. Such cultural elements affect students' reading comprehension. None of the teaching files written for the 24 books in Year One made any serious attempt to enable teachers to be consciously aware of comprehension problems related to cultural differences. This was probably because file writers assumed that in the process of converting the original book to its simplified, abridged version, the cultural problems became non-existent.

This paper exposes some of the comprehension problems related to culture. The writer observed classroom teaching in selected semi-urban secondary schools. The in-service teachers who were observed, used the class readers specified by the Ministry Of Education. During the observations, the problems related to culture were identified. Generally the problems were categorized as:

1. Problems related to lack of support material needed in the treatment of culture.
2. Problems encountered by teachers who have not had conscious awareness of the importance of cultural schemata in reading.
3. Problems faced by students in comprehending texts loaded with foreign culture.

Five in-service teachers of the B.Ed programme, Agriculture University of Malaysia, serving in five different schools (4 day schools and 1 fully residential school), were observed at teaching practice. The teacher spent one hour each week doing class readers. All the classes observed were Form 1 classes (Average age of students being 13 years). The level of the students in all the classes was intermediate. All the five teachers observed were using Rider Haggard's **King Solomon's Mines**, the abridged and simplified version. The discussion in this paper is based on the observations of the presenter in classrooms and the conferences with supervisees after their lessons. The observations were carried out for 9 weeks (the duration of the use of the reader). All the five teachers under observation followed the guidelines specified by the teaching file:

WEEK 1	LESSON 1	INTRODUCTION
WEEK 2	LESSON 2	CHAPTERS 1, 2, 3
WEEK 3	LESSON 3	CHAPTERS 4, 5, 6
WEEK 4	LESSON 4	CHAPTERS 7, 8, 9
WEEK 5	LESSON 5	CHAPTERS 10, 11
WEEK 8	LESSON 6	CHAPTERS 12, 13
WEEK 7	LESSON 7	CHAPTERS 14, 15
WEEK8	LESSON 8	CHAPTERS 16, 17, 18
WEEK 9	LESSON 9	WRAP-UP

The observations in the classrooms showed that the main problems related to culture can be attributed to several factors:

## Problems related to weak Introductory Lessons

Only one of the five teachers under observation actually attempted to provide students with the background to the theme - the cruelest motive: - the search for treasure. The other four merely introduced the author (listening activity) and provided prediction tasks, where they made their students predict the plot of the story. The only teacher who attempted giving background knowledge to the quest motive (in particular the adventures of the White man in Dark Africa) was the teacher who was dealing with students in the fully residential school. This teacher was in an advantaged situation because his students were in school throughout the day and he could arrange for a few extra hours for his students to view **Raiders of the Lost Ark** and **The Gods must be Crazy**. Then when his excited and highly motivated students were in class for Lesson 1, he made them talk about the two films, especially the theme, plot, characterization and setting. He also induced further discussion by probing students' background knowledge of the attitudes and mannerisms of White (European) men and Black (African) men.

The differences in approaches produced different results for the teachers under observation. The teacher who prepared the students with extensive pre-reading activities with the use of films and in-depth discussions, actually managed to have a more responsive class when dealing with the first three chapters of **King Solomon's Mines**. The other four teachers faced great difficulties with their classes, which were rather quiet when the teacher tried to elicit responses.

Many of the problems encountered by the students were due to problems related with culture. The book actually introduces two distinct cultures - White (European) and Black (African). Chapter One of **King Solomon's Mines** introduces, in quick succession, all the main White characters; Allan Quatermain, Sir Henry Curtis, Captain Good, Neville and Jose da Silvestra. The teachers observed in all the five schools used the matching (character description) task set in the teaching file. Feedback revealed that 90 per cent of the students in all five schools scored 50 per cent and below for the tasks. This revealed that most of the students could not differentiate one white character from another, as the descriptions of the white men were unusual:

Sir Henry Curtis had yellow hair, a yellow beard, unusually fine features and large grey eyes set deep in his head.

(page 1)

His brother, Neville was very different in appearance:

His brother - as I remembered him - was much smaller and darker, with black hair and a black beard...

(page 4)

Most of the students were also not familiar with the mannerisms of the white men who were often "muttering something into their beards" (if they had one) or "peacefully smoking pipes over glasses of whisky".

Apart from characterization, the other problem which was apparent in the first lesson was the problem students faced in visualizing the setting introduced in the first three chapters of the book. None of the teachers explained what "tse-tse country was, where no animals but donkeys live" and why donkeys featured so prominently in the first part of the journey to King Solomon's Mines. Donkeys, asses and oxen which were widely mentioned in the book were unfamiliar to these students. The teachers, unaware of this difficulty faced by the students just moved on with the text. Many students resorted to dictionary meanings of the words.

The problems related to weak introductory lessons, affected the reading comprehension of students in the chapters to follow. In Lesson 2, all the teachers observed faced classes ignorant of the concept of elephant hunting. One particular paragraph in Chapter 4 posed comprehension problems for students:

Then we cut the tusks from the nine elephants that we had killed and buried them in the sand under a tree tall enough to be seen for miles. It took us two days to do this and on the third day we continued our journey, hoping that we might live to return and dig up our buried ivory.

(page 17)

All the five teachers in the study found that their students misunderstood the concept of elephant hunting. In fact, the readers did not possess the schemata assumed by the writer and so they attempted to accommodate the writer's propositions to their own pre-existing knowledge structures. This led to distortion in meaning. The responses from the students in all the five classes showed that most students assumed that the elephants were hunted for meat. In two of the classes students when asked to explain why they thought the elephants were hunted for meat, rationalised by saying that it was only logical as the men in the story took "two days to do this...". Many of the students also said that the hunting party spent two days to cut up and process the meat ('biltong' or dried meat was earlier mentioned). The students did not realise that the dried meat (biltong) which was mentioned earlier was not in any way linked to processed elephant meat! None of the students linked 'ivory' in the text to the tusks of the elephant, which was really all that the white men were interested in.

### **Problems related to poor set-induction strategies**

Students generally had problems dealing with foreign cultural elements in the text (especially in the middle chapters), which introduced a lot of African tribal culture. This was due to the weak set-induction strategies that the teachers had in their lesson plans. A review of all the 24 teaching files showed that none of the files provided suggestions on approaches to set induction for each of the nine lessons.

Observations of Lessons 4 (covering Chapters 7,8,9) and 5 (covering Chapters 10 and 11) again showed that students frantically tried using their own pre-existing knowledge structures into the text. Most of these students, when asked to role-play the 'Witch-hunt scene' (Chapter 10), seemed to have the impression that there existed similarities between the African tribal witch (a monkey-like figure creeping on all fours, with the face of a sun-dried corpse and a head that resembled a cobra's) and the witch they were familiar with in the English fairy tales. One probable way, teachers could have overcome this problem would have been to provide tasks (see Appendix A, B) as specified in the teaching file. None of the teachers used these tasks as they felt that the tasks were too simple for intermediate-level classes.

### **Problems related to lack of awareness in teachers in highlighting cultural differences which would create an appreciation of the differences.**

Some of the students, in their evaluation of characters were rather biased. They resorted to stereo-typing. All the White men were good and almost all the Blacks deserved no sympathy. Students, obviously influenced by films (and other forms of cultural indoctrination through media) depicting the White men as liberators of Dark Africa and Africans as savages and cannibals who needed to be forced into submission, failed to see that each culture had its own value system and that nothing was totally good or totally bad. The writer of **King Solomon's Mines** did imply, although not explicitly, that the White man's greed actually drove most of the White men to death. Lack of a wider awareness of foreign culture and the existence of pre-existing structures that were prejudiced to Africa and the culture of Africans prevented the students from comprehending deeper meaning in the text. Most of the students failed to sense the greed of the White

men as presented in the text, taking note only of the antics of Gagool, the tribal witch. The file writer did not exploit this part of the text. A task which would have invited critical thinking could have been devised. There are after all some aspects of Gagool's nature which could be exploited to teach the 'moral aspects' which are highlighted by educationists in Malaysia:

Hee! hee! hee! laughed old Gagool as she fluttered about like a bat behind us. "There are the bright stones you love so much, white men. Take as many as you like. Eat them, hee! hee!! Drink them, hee! hee! hee! "Open the other chests, white men," croaked Gagool. 'The bright stones are even bigger there. Take them all!"

(page 83)

In the above lines Gagool ridicules the White Men who show endless greed. The students failed to see this. The teachers did not spend very much time in developing an awareness in students that they cannot be overly judgemental, that even Gagool the cruel and extremely ugly tribal witch could teach a few universal moral lessons.

The problems related to the treatment of cultural elements in class readers can be minimised. First of all teachers and material designers (teaching file writers) have to be aware of the existence of such problems. Lesson plans have to identify portions of the text that are linked to cultural problems. Then teachers have to design activities and materials that would slowly immerse the students into an awareness of the problems.

At the same time teachers have to pay particular attention to students at group work, preparing for role-play, impersonations, and mimes. Teachers can play a very effective role as facilitators by helping students learn culture that is presented in the text.

Teachers should also be more sensible in their approach towards reading. They should not just rush through the book to finish it on time. Whenever they are faced with texts which can pose 'cultural difficulties' in comprehension, they should 'try and bring into the classroom that world belonging to that culture'. None of the classes observed for the nine weeks were prepared to look like Africa. It would have been very good if there were posters of White men on elephant-hunting trips, wearing khaki safari clothes. It would have been equally wonderful if the classes had large maps of Africa, and there were pictures of black Africans and the common animals that they used mounted on the soft boards.

Teachers and Teaching File writers cannot afford to ignore the influence of culture in the reading comprehension of young readers. The very aim of the class reader programme to motivate students to read may be in jeopardy if students feel burdened by texts in which they are given no assistance, and of which they cannot make any sense. Culture is one of the "clues" (Zaliha Mustapha, 1988) "related to reading in L2". ESL reading teachers need to help students piece together all the clues for successful reading to take place.

Problems related to treatment of culture in class readers should not be an excuse to deny readers a taste of culture that is foreign. Although there is now concern among Malaysians as to the lack of use of local material (Malachi, 1992) it must be remembered that the reasons for using local texts should not be to avoid the 'culture problem'. In fact, in the long run? an attempt at addressing this problem might produce a generation of young readers with wide cultural exposure and a wider world-view.

## References

Haggard, R. (1990) *King Solomon's Mines*. Simplified and abridged by S.E. Paces, Kuala Lumpur: Vinpress.

Jayakaran Mukundan. 1990. *Teaching File: King Solomon's Mines*. Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Education Malaysia.

Malachi, Edwin (1992). Using Local Works in English Literature Lessons. *Sunday Star*, 2 February, 1992.

Safiah Osman. 1988. The Effects of Content Familiarity on the Comprehension of Text by Learners of English as a Second Language. Paper Delivered at the National Seminar of Language Centre, UKM, Bangi.

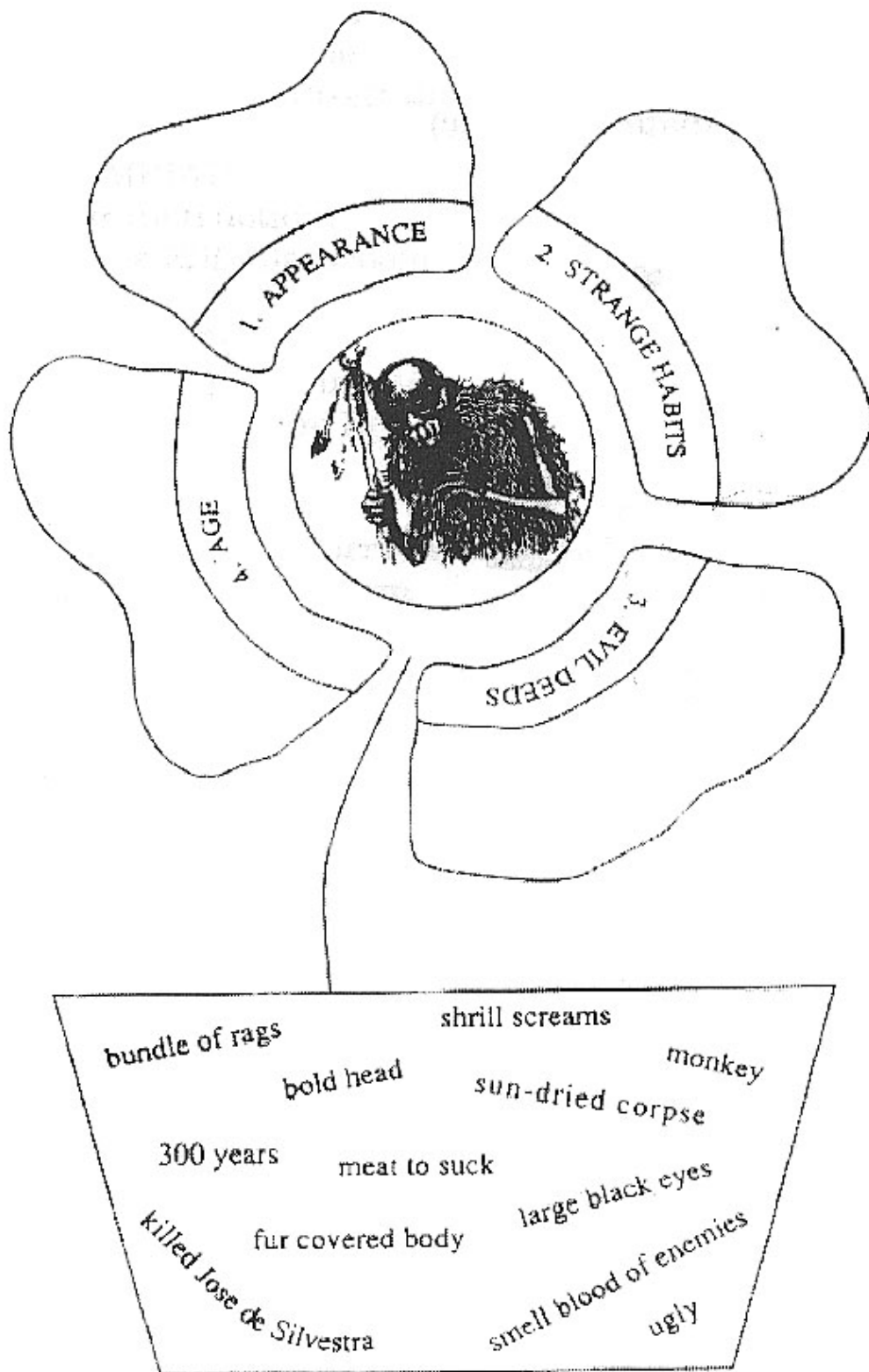
Zawiah Yahya. 1991. Cultural Differences as a Strategy for Reading Colonialist Discourse. *Journal of Language Teaching, Linguistics and Literature*, 1. Penerbit UKM.

Zaliha Mustapha. (1988). "Schemata as a Reading Strategy." ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Indiana. ED295 130.

## APPENDIX A

### Activity 5 (Intermediate to Higher Levels)

Fill in the "PETALS" with appropriate information from the "POT".



## APPENDIX B

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

(Wrap Up)

### Activity 1

Level: (Intermediate to Higher)



#### Task:

Gagool, the tribal witch whom you read about is different from the witches in the English fairy tales (like the witch in **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**). Why is this so?

#### Teachers Note:

A variation of this exercise would be to have students view the scene where the witches appear in **Macbeth** and then make them draw comparisons.

© Copyright 2001 MELTA