Developing Students' Creative Response to Literary Texts in the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the literature component as a compulsory tested component of the Malaysian ESL syllabus for secondary schools is one of the most significant developments in ESL learning in recent years. One of the general aims of incorporating literature in an ESL classroom is to enhance students' proficiency and enjoyment of the English language through literature. One of the biggest challenges in the ESL classroom is making learning meaningful, and project-based learning is but one of many ways to achieve this goal. The main focus of the Literature component in the Malaysian English curriculum is to fulfil academic requirements, but this does not preclude students' enjoyment of the texts or the experience of engaging with literary texts. Literary texts are wonderful materials that can be explored and exploited in the ESL classroom, for instance, for the development of writing skills. This study is based on the precepts of Project-Based Learning, which hinges on Constructivist ideals looking towards long-term student centred, activity-based learning framed by sequential acquisition of discrete skills through holistic and realistic learning. This study will be exploring the acquisition of skills and language as part of holistic learning through the staging of a play. The most pertinent findings are that PBL as it is applied here allowed the students to focus on the impending stage production as both an outcome and a motivation to acquire skills. It found that as the curriculum requirements of reading, writing, listening and speaking were no longer abstract personal choices but rather skills the students were acquiring in the pursuit of completing the project, the students significantly improved in their commitment to acquiring and in the practice of language skills and holistic values such as self-confidence, team work and perseverance. The findings were most eloquently supported in the students' own words in their journals as they tracked their progress and setbacks from the

beginning of the year until the end of the project and the release of the results of their final exams. As writing is a difficult skill to master, this study supports both the concept of language acquisition in practice as well as fulfilling the school-based assessment skill building requirement in a cohesive construct that provides focus and reward for the students as well as breaks the monotony of conventional classroom teaching. At the very least, it offers teachers some of the possible strategies or activities using literary texts used in schools to develop English communication in the four areas, with special focus on writing skills. It also examines the students' learning process in producing pieces of writing in response to reading a literary text, their response to performing as a post-writing activity, and the implications of using drama and plays as a post-writing activity. The ready-made year-end school performance for teachers provided in this paper is also a bonus.

Keywords: Project based learning, teaching writing, facultative teaching and learning, performance learning, fun with literature teaching approach

INTRODUCTION

The Education Ministry of Malaysia continues to initiate changes in mitigating the pressures facing the nation after the policy of Teaching Mathematics and Science in English or PPSMI was reversed. In an effort to address concerns over declining English proficiency among the population, the "Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening Command of English"

(MBMMBI) policy was instituted. In 2012, in an effort to ensure that no Malaysian child is left behind in the education system, the English Language Curriculum was designed to be more skills-based, ensuring that each child in Malaysian government schools would acquire the minimum level of skills specified in the standard for that year under the new school curriculum standards respectively termed KSSR for primary schools and KSSM for secondary schools. The fundamental concern was to get learners to be more involved in and have a sense of ownership and accountability over their learning. One challenge ESL teachers face is trying to make the English language seem less foreign or arduous for students to learn, and where possible, to ensure the process of learning the language is more natural and fun. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia takes this so seriously that a special module termed Language Arts has been incorporated in the English language curriculum and decided that the Literature Component would be tested. The proviso for teachers was that implementation of Language Arts would still have to provide augmentation for the actual skills needed for the students fulfil their academic requirements.

Project Based Learning as an Authentic Language Learning Experience

Authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that advocates a less regimented style of learning that promotes multidimensional learning where several core subjects (or areas within a subject) simultaneously work together towards incorporating the

acquisition of technical skills, research skills and communication skills (Mims, 2003). If one were to accept the three core principles towards ensuring lasting learning as discussed in Hooper and Rieber's article "Learning for the 21st Century" (Hooper, 1995) then presenting information from multiple perspectives increases the durability of instruction and effective instruction that should build upon students' knowledge and experiences. It would be grounded in meaningful contexts, which teachers could then extrapolate to create a situation or condition which incorporates both the former by Mims (2003) and the latter by Hooper (1995), and could be instrumental in achieving the objectives of KSSR and KSSM set by the Malaysian Education Curriculum.

Proponents of Authentic Learning believe it contributes significantly to making learning more effective and helps learners acquire skills applicable in real life (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996). Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an approach that encapsulates these principles on a scale that can be incorporated in Malaysian classrooms. It is based in constructivism and constructionism, which takes the notion of individuals constructing knowledge one step further by positing that they (the learners) learn best when doing so by sharing the process with others and reflecting upon the process as well as the outcome (Grant, 2002). Project-based learning also addresses the 10 key characteristics of authentic learning activities as defined by Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) as having real

world relevance, requiring the learners to define smaller tasks and subtasks needed to complete the activity. PBL comprises complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time, which subsequently provides the opportunity for students to examine the tasks from different perspectives, using a variety of resources. Aside from providing the opportunity to collaborate, it also provides the learners with the opportunity to reflect; thus, it is able to be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes. It is able to be seamlessly integrated with assessment, creating polished products valuable in their own right (rather than a preparation for something else in a vacuum such as the traditional pen and paper examination) as well as allowing for competing solutions and diverse outcomes. Grant (2002) continues that an important element to constructionism is that it must be personally meaningful: it should be more likely for individuals to become engaged in learning, which is central to the PBL process as well as its outcome.

However, integrating PBL in the Malaysian English Language classroom is a challenge on multiple levels of preparation, logistics, resources and the teachers themselves as it requires teachers to relinquish a certain degree of control to free the learners to experiment and explore. According to Grant (2002, p. 3) each model of successful project-based learning shares these features:

1. An introduction to "set the stage" or anchor the activity;

2. A task, guiding question or driving question;

3. A process or investigation that results in the creation of one or more shareable artifacts;

4. Resources, such as subject-matter experts, textbooks and hypertext links;

5. Scaffolding, such as teacher consultation to help learners assess their progress, project templates, conferences to redirect efforts, mediate issues, and even to motivate flagging spirits;

6. Collaborations, including teams, peer reviews and external content specialists; and

7. Opportunities for reflection and transfer, such as classroom debriefing sessions, journal entries and extension activities.

Addressing the pivotal roles of the teacher in this process, Mims (2003, p. 2) delineated these practical implementation tips:

1. *You must think like a coach.* Authentic instruction calls upon you to take on a different role than traditional (Asian) teaching methods. Students need to be given control over their learning and it is important that the teacher does not micro-manage or take away that sense of empowerment.

2. *Bring earplugs.* Teachers must accept that the classroom environment will change drastically. Students will be actively working, participating in discussions, hunting for information as well as resources and they would be enjoying the freedom of the entire process. It will become very important that teachers help students to be responsible in managing the new energetic and flexible dimensions of learning.

3. *Ease your way into it.* Perhaps undertaking a two-week authentic experience in the beginning may not be a good idea, both for the teacher as well as the learner. It is imperative for all to become acclimatised positively and constructively to this process.

4. *Get some help.* There are quality examples and resources to help with the design of authentic instruction. It may also be a good idea to start off with more than one adult in the process, get another teacher or volunteer parent to help in the beginning.

5. *YOU are learning too.* Think of the first attempt as a learning experience for you (Mims, 2003).

It is essential to note and prepare for the likelihood that most teachers and learners who were products of the traditional classroom especially teacher-orientated cultures may exhibit significant resistance to the sudden change of practice (Grant, 2002). There will also be a period of mutual adjustment and negotiation of responsibility and/or accountability on the part of the learners themselves (Mims, 2003). In the interest of addressing these concerns,

this study investigates the possibility and reality of implementing PBL as an authentic learning experience for the ESL classroom in Malaysia, specifically in the teaching and learning of the literature component under Language Arts.

The following is a case study of PBL implementation in an English classroom of a Malaysian secondary school in the Klang Valley. The researcher is their English Language teacher who is currently enrolled in PhD research in this field. In the process of conducting the study, the following research questions were posed

1. Does PBL affect students' willingness to engage with the literary text?

   • Do script writing and drama activities enhance the students' creative and critical writing skills?

2. How do the activities they engage in, which are associated with the process of performing, help students comprehend the literary text?

   The objectives of this study are to:

   • Examine students' learning processes in writing and performing a script in response to a literary text.

   • Evaluate the implications of using dramas and plays as a Literature component in the ESL classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a case study approach to explore the development of creative responses to literature texts in the ESL classroom. A qualitative design is selected

as it allows the researcher to interpret, explain and decode the meaning of the social process in context-bound language (Merriam, 1998). It allows the researcher to explore PBL as a catalyst to the development of *creative response* to the literature texts in the ESL classroom. A qualitative case study research as defined by Merriam (1998) is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon" (p. xiii). Yin (2003) provides more specific boundaries for case study. It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

The case study approach is selected for this study because it can provide a vivid and full description of a single case. In the case of implementing a PBL approach, it provides depth to the specific stages in the process involved. According to Salkind (1997), it allows for close examination and scrutiny of the collection of a great deal of detailed data. In addition, it is convenient in exploring the subjects' thoughts, learning experiences through group work, peer conferencing and learning outcomes, which would not be possible through quantitative methods.

Therefore, multiple measures to collect data common in case studies such as reflective journals, drafts of the script and the edited script enabled the researcher to examine closely the thought processes of the subjects in relation to the process of script writing to the presentation of the drama. In order to encourage students to be at ease

with the journal-writing process, minimal restrictions and requirements imposed upon them. The reflective journals enabled the researcher to keep a record of the development of the study over time. It gave the researcher insight into their reading, writing, feelings, strengths and weaknesses.

Selection of Subjects

The subjects for this study consisted of 37 Form Three students from a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur as the researcher taught only Form Three classes, and these were the only classes she had access to in order to implement PBL. These students had read three short stories and three poems in Form One and one novel each in the Form Two and Form Three as part of the Literature Component of the English Language Curriculum. As their previous teachers had completed the syllabus requirement, they were assumed to be accustomed to reading and discussing literary texts. The students were, in general, of intermediate level of proficiency in the English language, with the exception of 13 students who were of a higher level. This classification is based on their scores in the Literature section of the Final Year examination the year before. The section consisted of multiple-choice questions based on one of the poems studied in Form Two as well as an open-ended question based on the novel studied in the same year.

The ethical considerations were addressed on three levels; the Principal of the school involved had agreed to allow the study to be carried out in the school and the students involved had been informed of the nature of this research and that it was also part of their literature component lessons. Permission slips to parents were later given to students who wished to stay back after school to discuss their work with their teacher or with their own group members. However, they were not allowed to do so without the presence of their teacher.

The process of script writing to the presentation of the drama was carried out in three stages over the period of 12 weeks. The students were divided into groups of eight, with each group preparing a script for two chapters of the novel. The students would use samples of scripts written for plays and dramas, either provided by the teacher or sourced themselves. The researcher met the students twice a week during their Literature lessons where she advised them on the mechanics of script writing. Permission slips from parents were collected beforehand from students who wanted to stay after school to continue their work with the teacher to check on their progress. Many of the students' queries were on choice of words and use of phrases and expressions to express the narrative in dialogue form. Data to track their progress were collected in the form of the students' drafts of their scripts and their journals.

Stage one - text selection and script writing
The first step was to allow the students to choose their own story, as it would give

them the feeling of control over their reading. Gambrell (1996) asserts that the self-selection of reading materials supports the notion that the books and stories that children find 'most interesting' are those they have selected for their own reasons and purposes. The students had unanimously agreed to prepare their drama based on the abridged version of the novel 'Phantom of the Opera' by Gaston Leroux which they had studied in Form Two.

The script-writing process was carried out in two weeks where the team of writers would meet with their teacher twice a week to discuss their draft. It is thought that the process of adapting text to script encourages students to synthesise what they know about the characters and authors by placing them in new situations. It aims to help students to discover a need to express what is important to them as a personal and creative response, and not to repeat learned responses. The writers would use samples of scripts written for plays and dramas. They were also advised on the mechanics of script writing appropriate to their level by their teacher. The drafts were collected as data once the final script was done.

Stage two - preparation and rehearsals
At this stage, the students had now formed groups to handle backstage work (back drop and props, costume and sound effects) as the written scripts were being compiled by the director of the drama, who was one of the students picked by the class. Once the script was completed, every student received a copy. Facilitated by their teacher (the researcher), a simple audition was carried out to decide on the actors. Then, the students read and discussed the script with the director as well as their teacher. Working in small groups, the students were briefed by the director and then started preparing for the presentation of the drama. Backdrop and costumes were made and sound effects were set. Students who had roles in the drama had the task of remembering their lines and rehearsing the drama presentation.

Each group was required to keep a journal throughout the preparation process. The journals would include:

- Dates of entries

- Changes made in the script

- Suggestions initiated by team members

- Comments made by the team members

The purpose of the journals was to provide a record of the group discussions, images and ideas projected during the meetings and rehearsals. It is a method of tracking students' input and output that is permanent and equitable as it allows for the shy, quiet or introverted students to 'have a say' as they tend not to speak up in a shared verbal forum. It also needs to be noted that as they gained ownership over their specified tasks and roles, the students were more confident in verbalising and defending their views or choices.

The researcher's role was that of facilitator, who ensured that the students were supported throughout the process as well as in their interactions. To do so, the researcher closely monitored their progress,

discussed or refereed when the need arose. All this was recorded in the students' journals.

Stage three - the performance

The final stage of the performance process required the students to vacillate from script writing to drama presentation. Their performance during rehearsals would have been continuously amended as their vision and understanding deepened, requiring the class to work together at all levels and in all areas of responsibility so that their final product would be cohesive, coherent and ultimately entertaining as well as enlightening. The drama was performed in front of an audience that consisted of other Form Three students as well as the English Language teachers. The performance was recorded and later viewed by the students.

Students' reflections

At the end of the whole process, the students were required to write a reflective journal. The journals would assist the students to clarify, evaluate and reframe their thoughts, feelings and actions in light of their own experience as well as the information encountered in the study.

The reflective journal served as a mechanism to:

• Gain deeper insight particularly into the subjects' thoughts and feelings about the project they were involved in

• Probe further into the subjects' views on the process of script writing to the presentation of the drama and discuss issues that may have been missed out in the group journals and

• Help the subjects become more aware of the skills they have acquired as they reflect on the experience derived from their participation in the study.

In the beginning stages, the students displayed the basic ability of describing and reporting their views of how they came to choose the novel 'Phantom of the Opera', which they had studied the year before, over 'Dr Jekyll and My Hyde' read in the current year. They were aware of the thoughts and feelings of the rest of their classmates in making their choice.

> *When my teacher asked us to put up a play, she gave us two choices, 'Phantom of the Opera' or 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'. The whole class chose 'Phantom of the Opera' because they liked the kissing scene. – Deepah*

Students also expressed their enthusiasm about the performance, stating that they could not wait for the script to be ready so that they could start practising.

> *I was very excited because I played the role of La Carlotta in our class play 'Phantom of the Opera'. …I was really nervous on the first day of practice… I've never been in a play before. – Sharifah Shazlina*

The students who were not comfortable performing on stage volunteered to work backstage and preparing the props needed for the performance.

> *I was so relieved that I was not chosen to be one of the actors! I just want to be the props guy. – Yusof*

The freedom to make those changes during the script-writing activity allowed the students to have a certain amount of control over what would be performed, giving them a purpose for writing.

> *... everyone sudden has tons of ideas to give now that the script has been written. Rayme suggests we change the notes from the phantom to emails. Adli thinks that instead of Madame Giry talking face to face with the directors, she should speak to them on her handphone…-- Farng Hui*

The entries reflected their engagement with the story on a level beyond superficial memorisation. Allowing them to take the text and adapt the story as they felt appropriate throughout the process ensured that the students completed the final process of meaningful learning as previously discussed by Grant (2002) on the need for the learner to share in the experience of knowledge discovery and reflect upon his/her journey throughout the process.

The researcher also found that the project fulfilled the academic requirement of the curriculum as evidenced from the clearly improved personal-response answers in the Literature Component of their test by the students involved. These were echoes of the same students' feedback regarding the experience in their journals.

> *Yusuff let go of the chandelier a little too soon but we managed to carry on with our performance without stopping. – Iangran*

> *I can't begin to describe how I feel right now. All I can say right now is, I LOVE MY CLASS! –Aqilah*

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the observable improvement in several areas of the students' abilities, it would seem that engaging in PBL has helped in this particular instance. Based on evidence seen in terms of the students' general enthusiasm for the material, increased participation in the activities they engaged in relation to the process; which in the study was demonstrated by their more organic responses (in the sense that they are able to show growing understanding during the course of the study) in the journal instead of regurgitation of the memorized answers from their textbooks or workbooks, in their ability to contribute to the performance of the play whether technically using sound, lights, props and various other means or artistically in the writing of the script, directing the play or performing it. There is evidence from other studies that

would support the value of using PBL as authentic-learning classroom practice. Frank and Barzilai (2006) have stated that the importance of student engagement is widely accepted, and numerous researchers have provided considerable evidence to support the effectiveness of student engagement on a broad range of learning outcomes and skills acquisition (Prince, 2004; Hake, 1998; Redish, Saul, & Steinberg, 1997; Laws, Sokoloff, & Thornton, 1999). Bonwell and Eison (1991) summarised the literature on active learning and concluded that it leads to better student attitudes and improvements in students' thinking and writing. This conclusion is supported by the subjects in this study, who were from the lower-proficiency classes and who, although previously resistant to using English, managed to put up a play organised by them. According to Hill and Smith (1998), given the complexity of student abilities in relation to their demographics, students must be guided through the process. Green (1998) noted that project-based learning increases motivation to study and helps students to develop long-term learning skills. Students know that they are full partners in this learning environment and share the responsibility for the learning process. In some studies, a positive correlation was found between self-esteem and receiving a positive assessment (Battle, 1991). Hill and Smith (1998) also found that the PBL environment in their courses increased students' self-confidence, motivation to learn, creative abilities and self-esteem. Given that a large proportion of English teachers in Malaysian schools may

not be familiar with PBL, a possible issue would be to recognise how a project may be an opportunity for PBL. The introduction of school-based assessment policy in Malaysian schools may be the opportunity to integrate PBL in the language-learning experience of Malaysian students.

PBL projects are focused on questions or problems that 'drive' students to encounter (and struggle with) the central concepts and principles of a discipline. This criterion is a subtle one. The definition of the project (for students) must "be crafted in order to make a connection between activities and the underlying conceptual knowledge that one might hope to foster" (Barron, Schwartz, Vye et al, 1998, p. 274). This is usually done with a "driving question" (Blumenfeld et al., 1991) or an ill-defined problem (Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). PBL projects may be built around thematic units or the intersection of topics from two or more disciplines, but that is not sufficient to define a project. Every aspect such as the questions that students pursue, as well as the activities, products and performances that occupy their time, must be "orchestrated in the service of an important intellectual purpose" (Blumenfeld et al., 1991, p. 373). It is also important to impress upon teachers that PBL requires projects that involve students in a constructive investigation. An investigation is a goal-directed process that involves inquiry, knowledge building and resolution. Investigations may be design, decision-making, problem-finding, problem-solving, discovery or model-building processes. But, in order to be considered as

a PBL project, the central activities of the project must involve the transformation and construction of knowledge (by definition: new understandings, new skills) on the part of students (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1999). If the central activities of the project represent no difficulty to the student or can be carried out with the application of already-learned information or skills, the project is an exercise, not a PBL project. This criterion means that straightforward service projects such as planting a garden or cleaning a stream bed are projects, but may not be PBL projects. In the context of an ESL classroom, planning the execution of the adaptation of the play, including the writing of the script, casting and organising the play provided the students an opportunity to manifest skills in all four areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking in addition to calling upon them to merge technological know-how, real life problem-solving and social negotiation skills with English language use in fulfilling their tasks as part of the various production teams.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to implement PBL in the ESL classroom as an effort to generate a creative response in an authentic learning opportunity which calls on learners to manifest their use of the English language as a natural progression from their learning in different areas at the different stages of the project. This particular study afforded an example of how PBL provided authentic learning in the process of putting up a play. To reiterate what was mentioned in

the implications section of this paper, that exercise also provided opportunities for learners to acquire and manifest a host of real-life social and technological skills with the culmination of the final performance as the central goal. The question now is whether teachers in Malaysian schools would be doing so with the opportunity afforded in the newly-implemented school-based assessment policy.

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