Developing Soft Skills using 'Literature Circles'

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of the implementation of 'Literature Circles' in an Active Learning classroom in relations to developing soft skills among university students. The use of Literature Circles is a well-known strategy in teaching the students to be more creative, independent and think out of the box. A group of thirty three students was involved in this seven weeks teaching and learning session. Towards the end of the period of implementation, the researcher found a gradually positive impact in developing soft skills and also linguistic skills. This action research has given a huge impact not only to the language teaching and learning session but also in molding a better curriculum design for a betterment of the education system. .

Keywords: *Soft Skills using, Literature Circles*

INTRODUCTION

This action research combines one of the methods in Reader Response Theory (RRT), which is called 'Literature circles' (LC) with Active Learning (AL) in learning literature in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The research is to investigate the roles and effects of implementing LC in developing soft skills among university students.

Traditionally, literature in ESL classroom in schools only focuses on interpretation of the literary text called 'The Story Grammar' where students are trained to explain how the piece works and what it says (Basiga, 2009). Students are taught to tell what an author means by a particular line, phrase, stanza, sentence or what something in the piece might symbolize or what the underlying meaning of a scene or occurrence might be. For advanced or high proficiency class, sometimes, students are asked to interpret images and events created by the author. However, in RRT students are trained to appreciate the literary texts, comment about their own responses to the piece and about how these responses affect their thinking or feelings. Furthermore, students are taught to evaluate the text and identify what they consider to be good and not based on well-accepted-views. In RRT, students are given wide opportunity in giving reasons of their personal likes or dislikes and set up specific criteria of their perception using non-stereotyped ways.

AL is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. It requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing. For examples class discussion, small group discussion, debate, posing questions to the class, think-pair-share activities, and short written exercises and polling the class in which methods in AL are applied such as solving problems, answering and formulating questions of their own, discussing, explaining, debating, or brainstorming during class (Mills, 2007).

Meanwhile, LC are group meetings in which students are asked to get together to read, recollect, reflect, and analyze the assigned reading materials. The true intent of LC is "to allow students to practice and develop the skills and strategies of good readers" (Hismanoglu, 2005).

In LC, each student is responsible in carrying out his role and also abides by the group's expectation. The common roles in LC are:

1. Discussion Facilitator who develops a list of questions that the group might discuss about the section of the literary text to be discussed for that meeting

2. Passage Finder who locates a few significant passages or stanza of text those are thought-provoking, funny, interesting, disturbing, or powerful.

3. Illustrator who draws, sketches or paints a picture, portrait or scene relating to the appropriate section of the novel.

4. Connector is a person who locates several significant passages or stanza in the novel or poem and connecting these passages to real life.

5. Summarizer is in charge of preparing a brief summary of the reading that was assigned for that day's meeting. The summary should include the main ideas or events to remember, major characters, symbols or other significant highlights of the text.

6. Vocabulary Enricher who is also called the Word Master or Word Wizard, records important words for that day's reading. Words that are unusual, unknown, or that stand out in some way are usually chosen by the student.

7. Travel Tracer records where the major shifts in action or location take place in the novel or poem. Keeping track of shifts in place, time, and characters helps students keep track of important shifts in the text.

8. Investigator works where background information needs to be found on any topic relating to the book. Historical, geographical, cultural, musical or other information that would help readers connect to the text is often researched and shared with the group

9. Figurative Language Finder who identifies various types of figurative language, including but not limited to simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and idiom.

Obviously, LC trains the students not only to be independent and active in ESL classroom but also give freedom to the students to explore their creativity, ideas and perception without any boundary or negative perceptions toward literature or language learning.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Teaching literature for ESLs might be a challenging task if the teaching technique is outdated or predictable (Siti Norliana, (2008). It follows a very monotonous process especially if the teacher only uses the same outdated texts where students might have been exposed before by their teachers. Commonly practiced, the teacher reads aloud the chapter or the poem and translates it in native language. Then, the students are asked to answer the questions given at the back of every chapter or stanza. The questions are usually information based. In the process students start losing interest in literature and the language itself. Thus, literature has been made merely a story of the social studies, or a body of documents illustrating moral points or sociological generalizations. Eventually, the result will give a bad impact on student's personality, social adjustments and language development. Gunakumaran (2003) points out that literature should be meant for enjoyment of the students, so students should be exposed to wide forms of literature and various flavors of genres.

In any teaching situation, teacher's aim is to help students receive the full sensuous, intellectual and emotional impact of the work (Davis, 1992 and Ghosn, 2001). The classroom environment should be conducive so that students can bring forth their own interpretations of a given work based on their understanding, and the teacher should avoid putting the implication in the minds of young readers. Hence, the aesthetic sense of the readers will be developed. The teacher should encourage students to read independently and while providing students the reading material, their level of understanding should be kept in mind (Basiga, 2009).

Hismanoglu, M (2005) stresses that failure in a learning process of students is a result of them being excluded from active participation. On the other hand, when students are active participants in the processes of learning rather than passive recipients of transferred knowledge, learning is optimized. All in all, this research relates to three major elements in university education which are literature (language), active learning and soft skills.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the effectiveness of using literature circles in a second language class from TWO linguistic aspects in learning literature: linguistics determinism and linguistics relativity in developing student's soft skills.

2. To explore the relationship between literature circles and active learning in ESL classroom.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. On developing student's soft skills, what is the impact of implementing 'Literature Circles' on the students' active learning from the aspect of

    1.1 Linguistic determinism?

    1.2 Linguistic relativity?

    2. How do Literature Circles contribute in active learning of ESL classroom?

According to Gumperz (1996) linguistic determinism is the idea that language and its structures limit and determine human knowledge or thought. Determinism itself refers to the viewpoint that all events are caused by previous events, and linguistic determinism can be used broadly to refer to a number of specific views.

Whereas, he also points out that the principle of linguistic relativity holds that the structure of a language affects the ways in which its learner or speakers are able to conceptualize their world, i.e. their world view.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ghosn (2001) and Davis (1992) literature is a good medium for critical thinking enhancement among language learners. Siti Norliana (2008) also stresses that literature can bring about changes in the attitudes of the learners. She highlights that literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Meanwhile Vethamani. (2003) concludes that literature can open wider horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore. Teacher plays very significant roles in developing higher-order thinking skills.

A literature-enriched curriculum not only helps learners improve their reading and writing skills but more importantly helps them internalize grammar and vocabulary. The many benefits of literature saw the implementation of the Contemporary Children's Literature (CCL) program in all upper primary ESL classrooms in Malaysia (Vethamani, 2003). Preliminary findings on the CCL program revealed that teachers spent a lot of time on individual comprehension work with little emphasis given to comprehension instruction and higher order thinking skills. The integration of literary elements in the literature classrooms was also minimal and teachers lacked creativity as far as organizing learning tasks were concerned. Nevertheless, the CCL program offers great potential for English language enhancement skills among students.

The new paradigm of RRT which is quite old in west is still very new to our country. An attempt should be made by all language teachers to make literature teaching interesting and exploratory by using the implications from this new paradigm which is based on constructivism. In the words of Rosenblatt, through literature, the reader seeks to enter into another's experience, to glimpse the beauty and intensity that the world offers, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible and to find molds into which to pour his own seemingly chaotic experiences(Siti Norliana, 2008).

To summarize, RRT stresses on the importance of teaching literature to students and provide them

opportunities to explore various facets of literature. The beauty, fascination and aestheticism involved in literature should not be lost during student-teacher transactions. The main aim of education is to prepare students directly for living; he must be able to live a happy life by developing emotional and intellectual capabilities. As language teachers, this is our prime responsibility and objective for which literature can be used as a tool.

Soft skills are vital for all graduates to acquire, regardless of their field of study. These skills such as communication skills, analytical, critical and problem solving skills, lifelong learning ability, entrepreneurship and management skills are the ones that employers value as important skills for potential employees to possess. In Malaysia in 2007, an estimated number of 100,000 students graduated from public universities only, not counting the thousands completing their studies at private institutions and overseas (Hariati, 2007). Acquiring soft skills has been acknowledged as important amidst the stiff competition for jobs in the industry today and the large number of graduates produced locally and abroad (Abang Abdullah, 2005).

Hence, the research focuses on how students deal with relationships; understanding of human behaviour; facilitating the reduction of social barriers in working together; and building capacity for people to deal with complex, dynamic, and often conflicting group or community processes. This requires a deep understanding of what motivates people, of their aspirations, their values, and their principles in life, and how development is linked to the personal and collective potentials of people. In the practice of development, it is about unblocking and creating social energy through facilitation. Founding development in social energy generated through participation can be considered a theory of bottom-up development. Therefore, LC which encompasses all important elements in teaching and learning environment is expected to be able to develop student's soft skills. This is because the classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form.

FINDINGS

Based on the 4 open-ended-questions, all of the students agreed that LC helped break the cycle of silence and talk in the classroom where once they used to be quiet (during secondary school experience), provided an opportunity for second language learners and students who do not read or write well to participate actively. They also felt that LC encourages engagement with course materials especially with the materials that are hard to be digested such as Shakespeare's sonnets. It is also regarded as 100% student-centered-learning where the literature class has become livelier and exciting.

From other point of view, weak students did not feel they were left out because everybody had been given a special task and the most important thing was there was no right or wrong answer in viewing the ideas! Therefore, language for genuine purposes of communication within the ESL class had been achieved.

Below are the summary of the themes of the findings:

Open-ended-questionnaire

Question 1: Students responded that Literature Circles

1. It is very motivating because it does not stress on right or wrong answers.

2. It is authentic material because it is taken from well-established literary texts.

3. It has general educational value (based on student's perceptions)

4. It is found in many themes.

5. It helps students to understand another culture.

6. It is a stimulus for language acquisition.

7. It develops students' critical thinking

8. Students enjoy it

9. It is fun because student has his own role.

10. It is highly valued as everybody has his own reasoning.

11. It expands students' language awareness.

12. They feel like they are rewriting/reevaluating the text

13. It encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings.

Generally, the highly positive findings of the questionnaire were in line with Vethamani, (2003) where she advocates the use of literature will produce "a wide range of mature ESL students." In her article, Vethamani examines literature "in terms of current ESL theory (discourse analysis, context and contextualization, schema theory, and class-cultural awareness)."

Question 2: Roles in LC explore student's proficiency in:

1. Reading activities: essential background information and vocabulary

2. Analyzing views related to WH questions

3. Analyzing aspects of structure, theme and style

4. Extending activities: in-class activities that extend the ideas or situations encountered in the text. Almost all of the students agreed that LC helped them have a deep understanding on the text where it was one of the major purposes of learning literature in ESL.

Question 3: Students agree that LC integrates language and their thinking skills by

1. recognizing the importance or linguistic and non-linguistic criteria in text selection

2. using 'language-based approaches' as prior to stylistic analysis

3. recognizing that some areas of language organization can create greater problems than others, especially in the case of second language learners

4. better understanding, due to contextualization to social, historical, biographical, and political background to text study

5. recognizing the contrasting methodological problems this can produce.

By developing student's thinking skills, the findings show that LC has an alternative technique in promoting AC strategies in a classroom (Bornwell, 1991).

Question 4: Students agree that

1. Learning literature contributes to the EFL/ESL students' intellectual, social and moral development.

2. Reading a genuine, imaginative work assists the students' internalization of the linguistic points already learned.

3. Literature increases the level of motivation and interest in students' linguistic acquisition.

4. Employment of a genuine text contributes to the students' efforts at natural communication and enhances their degree of linguistic competence.

5. constant exposure and re-reading of literary texts provide the students with the necessary intuitive awareness about language in use and can promote relevant oral and written responses.

This question has reaffirmed the previous findings where besides exploring student's linguistic understanding, LC has also increased student's awareness on exploring his or her own intelligence based on his or her knowledge of the world.

The findings show that the incremental development of soft skills using LC has improved the mechanisms at cognitive, emotional, and behavioural level. The idea in LC was to use consultancy as the 'engine' since everybody would like to become a better consultant. Many consultancy skills that are in high demand are related to facilitation skills, e.g. supporting change in discussions; introducing ideas in discussions through learning processes rather than through external recommendations. Most of these skills are also required when carrying out action research geared towards problem solving. Therefore, the set of skills required is similar in action research, consultancy, and teaching/learning in an interactive way. In order to acquire these, one needs to have a good learning platform, where one can make mistakes without losing face and losing the next job. The classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form. Using the classroom as a learning ground for these skills is greatly improving the quality of teaching as well as interaction with students – a typical win-win solution.

ANALYZING PROGRESS TEST

The first part of the test which dealt with linguistic determinism shows that 27 students managed to answer correctly and 6 got partly correct answers. This part focused on the Linguistic Determinism where students need to explain his linguistic knowledge in analyzing the text. Linguistic determinism is the idea that language and its structures limit and determine human knowledge or thought. Determinism itself refers to the viewpoint that all events are caused by previous events, and linguistic determinism can be used broadly to refer to a number of specific views.

From an advanced linguistic, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis argues that individuals experience the world based on the grammatical structures they habitually use. For example, students were able to evaluate Shakespeare's Sonnet 5 in critical ways and also connected the Sonnets with the male's body description. Although the discussions were quite controversial, students' ability to connect the linguistic items was amazing. From another point of view, even though neither Edward Sapir nor his student Benjamin Lee Whorf ever wrote a "hypothesis" of this nature, writings such as Whorf's The Relation of Thought and Behavior to Language (1956), students were able to make arguments based on a version of linguistic determinism. Thus, students managed to link the text with theory.

The second part of the test which related to linguistic relativity shows that almost all of the students were able to relate the content of the literary text with 'real world situation'. For example, students were able to interpret and evaluate characters in Golding's Lord of the Flies with political leaders during World War II and also in Malaysian politics. All in all, due to the effectiveness of LC in the AL strategies, students were able to connect the text with their daily lives and real or current situations.

In conclusion, it is clear that students were able to explore their linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity according their responses in answering the test questions. 30 of the students managed to relate the two linguistic elements with good examples and reasons. The other three, had also successfully answered the test even though they did not give clear examples. In other words, the students were highly motivated to relate the texts assigned to them and intelligently linked them to linguistic aspects.

A TWELVE-HOUR-OBSERVATION

The researcher found that students were actively involved in 'doing' more than 'listening or writing'. This was because the roles in LC need the students to transmit the information in active ways of acquiring and inquiring the facts and engaging in higher order thinking skills. The 'minds-on' activities develop meaningful interaction among students and also in discovering their own potential of intelligence. Students were also integrating their critical thinking skills and collaborative learning methods in their group explanation where they were questioned by other groups.

CONCLUSION

This action research investigates and supports that literature in a second language classroom provides enough space for the students to comment, justify and mirror themselves by using a technique called 'literature circles'. Such a class can enhance the critical thinking abilities of the learners and at the same time maintain a learner centre environment, eventually produce an AL environment. It was found that the use of literature circles gave a great positive impact not only in developing student's linguistic understanding but also in active learning strategies of the second language learning.

However, a few students shared their opinions in improving the approach of using LC where they felt that to get a better result, smaller class sizes were more suitable in terms of class management, that is, if the classes were smaller, student's participation could have been better monitored. In addition, students might be more inclined to ask questions to the teacher if they did not hear her or if they were confused; and the teacher could give more attention to each student.

The students even suggested that LC were also appropriate to be implemented in any courses if the teacher is creative. Eventually, English will not be a 'boring and difficult' course anymore especially in ESL class.

According to Mills (2003), the strength of the action research approach to professional development rests upon a creative and critical dialogue between members of a community, which includes teachers, academics, parents, industrialists, and politicians. We move ahead through creative leaps of imagination. We learn from our mistakes from criticisms. So as it is, students suggested that more teaching strategies such LC should be implemented in ESL classroom. This highly positive response from the students really motivated the teacher/researcher.

The researcher found that LC which focuses on putting the reader's role as an active participant in the creation of meaning while reading a text, and describing the intricacies of the reader's involvement with the text is undoubtedly in line with AL where the reader/learner is given more freedom to gain knowledge.

This study, therefore, proposes that there is a strong case for using literature as a part of language teaching syllabus using both LC and AL in developing student's soft skills. Both approaches (LC and AL) can facilitate the use of literary texts in language classroom at optimum level. These approaches concern text selection, text organization, directives for presenting material in class, assessment process, student's active participation and teacher's facilitation. The components of soft skills which were successfully achieved by the implementation of LC in AL classroom with group dynamics and facilitation techniques; interactive training/teaching concepts and methods/techniques; interdisciplinary – a conceptual and team perspective; systems thinking with a view to changing perspectives; management of change (processes, leadership, roles, and functions); organizational development; process management, planning, and quality assurance; knowledge management (concepts and practice); solution-oriented and appreciative approaches and models (theory and practice); facilitating learning processes among multiple stakeholders and groups; 'emotional intelligence' in personal development: self-awareness, empathy, critical self-reflection, social skills; process consultation and coaching skills; team skills, team management, team building, feedback culture, learning culture; negotiation and conflict management (concepts and practice/skills) and communication skills.

ACTION PLAN

Since the final stage of an action research is having an action plan or indicating the implications of the research, the researcher found that LC was more suitable to be carried out in small groups; and the teacher should be a part of the group to offer support or monitor the discussion; the teacher should encourage the student to talk especially those who are quiet or inactive,; the teacher should provide a clear rubric so that students will not spend much time

in understanding the rubrics; students need explicit instruction on how to share and deliver their ideas and if it involves assessment, teachers need to have a clear guidelines or format of score to avoid controversy.

Lastly, analyzing poem might create problems to a majority of the students due to the difficulty of the text, the suitability of the content and the exploitability of the text, so the teacher must make sure that the poem selection is suitable to the LC activity.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework
(Language Arts Teacher, Christenbury, 2000)

TEXT

The Matter   Personal Reality   EXPERIENCE

External Reality

WORLD BEYOND TEXT