The Significance of Building and Activating Background Knowledge in the Teaching of Shakespeare in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The most challenging task in the teaching of literature in the ESL context is getting students to comprehend what they need to read. Pedagogically, the teaching of reading comprehension is often carried out in a three-stage model of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. While it is often believed that the while-reading stage is the most important stage because it is at this stage that students get to read and interact with the text, actually what matters most is what students bring to and take away from the text because this cements comprehension at a deeper level. A study was carried out on the teaching of a literary text (Shakespeare's 'Macbeth') to Malaysian ESL students using a pre, while, post reading methodology and at the end of the study it was found that the most important stage is the pre-reading stage because what students bring to the text, to a large extent, determines what personal experiences students have with their readings. Thus, this paper reports how significant the scaffolding stage is in facilitating comprehension and bringing meaning to the text.

Key terms: background knowledge/schema, pre-reading, ESL, aesthetic, Shakespeare

1. Introduction

Education in Malaysia is based on the National Education Philosophy (NEP) which aims to bring about a holistic and integrated development of individuals. Thus, all primary and secondary education in Malaysia follows an Integrated Curriculum which aims to develop the potential of the individual in a holistic, balanced and integrated manner. It is also clearly stated in the Curriculum that the study of literature "allows students to engage with relationships, ideas, places, times and events" which in turn "will lead them to a better understanding of themselves, of the people around them and of the world at large" (Literature and English Language Curriculum for Secondary Schools, 2007). As one of the avenues to achieve this, the Literature in English Programme (LEP) offers literature as an elective subject at upper secondary school level in which students study literary works drawn from the genres of short stories, novels, poetry, and drama.

2. Statement of the problem

Among all the selected writers in the LEP paper, Shakespeare is the oldest and the most challenging to read and teach. In addition to the ESL students' problem of breaking the code and understanding the language of Shakespeare, teachers have to grapple with the practical problem of finding the best or most appropriate methodology to teach the plays so that the ESL students get the opportunity to develop an aesthetic-literary experience from the reading of the play.

As Culler (1975) explains, knowledge of language would enable a reader to understand phrases and sentences but to be able to read it as literature demands 'literary competence'. Culler defines literary competence as the ability to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings. Most works

of literature are accessible to the ESL reader in terms of plot and the relationships between characters but the acquisition of literary competence is an ongoing challenge for all literature readers, more so for ESL readers. The ESL reader does not possess the first language intuitions about the English language to understand the polysemic nature of individual words, let alone the nuances found in the target language (Kilfoil, 1994). In short, text in the ESL context is often constructed on direct literal meanings and grammatical constructions.

3. Theoretical Orientations

According to Carter and Long (1991), the study of literature involves a focus on the 'literariness' of the texts – on plot, characterization, motivation, value, psychology, background etc. Brumfit and Carter (1986) add "for any use of literature in any kind of teaching must presuppose some elements of literary response on the part of the reader." Rosli (1995) recommends that in the process of teaching literature in the ESL context, the creative and perceptive qualities of the students need to be developed from the very beginning. Accordingly, all literary studies, even at the most elementary levels, should stress the literary-aesthetic experience. Thus, developing aesthetic experiences in the ESL Shakespeare class may be a means to make the text accessible.

3.1 The Aesthetic Experience

In 1986, Rosenblatt characterized the literary experience as a transaction between the reader and the text. According to Rosenblatt (1988), reading is a two-way process where the reader's experience is operated on by the text while the text is simultaneously constructed according to the reader's understanding and assumptions. This Transactional Theory of the Literary Work bears important implication for the teaching of literature in the second language classroom. Firstly, in reading and interpreting literature, it is more appropriate to take an *aesthetic stance.* In an *efferent stance*, the reader analyses a text for information, in an aesthetic stance, readers explore the world of self and the worlds of the writer. In the efferent, we want students to give a clear answer about the text's meaning; in the aesthetic, we want them to explore a range of possible meanings (Purves, 1993). When the focus of the learner's attention is on the more personal, lived-through evocation of the literary work, the response to what is read is more aesthetic. Secondly, in the transaction between the reader and the text, readers create their own secondary world: a new element brought about by the merging of the *reader's past experiences* and the experiences gathered from the text. Hence, the *reader's background knowledge* comes into play in a more decisive dimension.
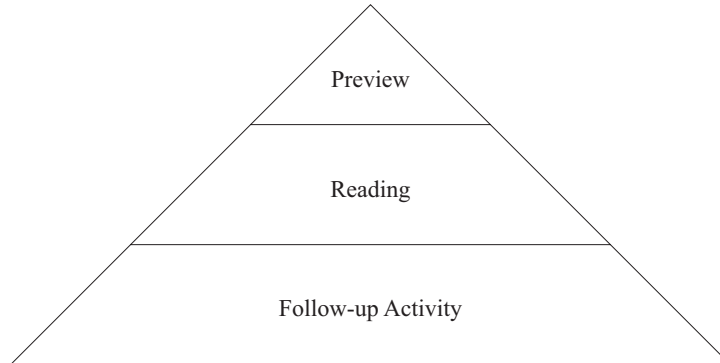
3.2 Building Background Knowledge

Bartlett (1932) theorizes that when readers read, they tend to interpret their texts according to their own background knowledge. A reader's background knowledge is previously acquired knowledge structures called schemata (Carell & Eisterhold, 1983). Basically, there are two types of *schema:* content and formal schemata. Content schemata is the background knowledge a reader brings to a text while formal schemata is background knowledge of the rhetorical structures of different types of texts (Carell, 1987). According to Rumelhart et al. (1997), the text does not in itself carry meaning but rather depends on the individual's pre-existing knowledge structures and interaction with the text to determine his/her level of understanding it. Thus, background familiarity is a most important factor of good comprehension because comprehension becomes easier if the text corresponds to *the student's prior knowledge* of language, rhetorical conventions and the world.

Most literature teachers often first assign a reading and then use many follow-up activities such as discussions, group work, papers, and tests. In order to connect the known (prior knowledge) with the unknown (new ideas), Peterson and Pignotti (1993: 402) suggest that teachers change their reading models:

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from

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        Preview

        Reading

     Follow-up Activity
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to

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        Preview

        Reading

      Follow-up
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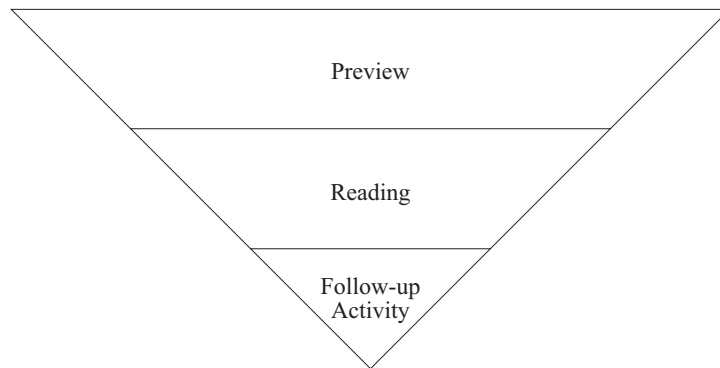
The desired reading model places high importance on the *activities before the reading* of the text, the phase where background knowledge is induced. Since background knowledge plays a significant role in text comprehension, *relevant knowledge should be tapped and shared* (Pearson & Fielding, 1992). During *pre-reading sessions,* students often share information that is relevant to the topic but which they are not aware of possessing until they need *the information to make connections.* Sometimes teachers can tap into students' relevant experiences to help them to connect and understand what they read; in multicultural societies, students have differing prior experiences due to their different cultural backgrounds but instead of despairing over the differences, teachers can work on universal values and commonalities across the differing backgrounds such as the triumph of good over evil in all religions and the quest for light over darkness, honesty over corruption, all to help students make connections with the text.

4. The Study

Thirty-seven Form Five ('O' level) students from a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur who chose to read literature as an elective for the LEP paper took part in the study. The prescribed Shakespeare play for their examination was Macbeth and the students were given a treatment framework which follows a three-stage reading strategy of Stage 1 (Pre-reading): Getting Acquainted, Stage 2 (While-reading): Getting into the play, Stage 3 (Post-reading): Responding to the play. Of the three stages, more than half (51.35%) of the students found the pre-reading stage as the most interesting and the most helpful (cf. Table 1) therefore this paper reports on the types of pre-reading that has helped the ESL students in their reading of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'.

4.1 Pre-reading input

Two types of pre-reading input were used in this study: pre-reading input before the reading of the play

'Macbeth' and pre-reading input prior to reading parts of the play. The former focuses on giving background knowledge on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan times, on Elizabethan beliefs, and about the type of play that Macbeth is likely to be while the latter attempts to introduce students to the concepts or themes in the play.

4.1.1 Pre-reading work prior to reading the play

Prior to reading the play, students were given pre-reading worksheets 1.1 – 1.3 which contain tasks that build background knowledge on Shakespeare, the Elizabethan times, Elizabethan beliefs and about the type of play they are going to read.

In pre-reading worksheet 1.1, students a) read about the life of Shakespeare, b) read about going to the theatre in Shakespeare's day, and c) view three different illustrations of the Globe playhouse. Following this, students fill in a worksheet about the playwright and about going to watch performances at the Globe theatre. In carrying out the tasks in this worksheet, students' background knowledge of Shakespeare's life and how plays were performed and watched at The Globe during Elizabethan times, is reinforced.

Pre-reading worksheet 1.2 contains a short explanation with illustrations on Witchcraft and a passage on the Elizabethan belief of divine order. After the brief explanations of witchcraft and divine order, students are invited to predict what they think the play is about – the tasks here train students to make predictions based on what they have read so far (about Elizabethan times and beliefs).

Pre-reading worksheet 1.3 introduces the two drama masks (Tragedy & Comedy) that are symbolic of theatre. The objective here is to use the mask visuals to help the class to conceptualize what the masks mean in theatre, which mask would categorize the play 'Macbeth' and what associations the class makes with the particular mask.

4.1.2 Pre-reading work prior to reading parts of the play

Act 1 starts the play with thunder, lightning, and three witches. It deals with spells, prophecies, and thoughts of murder. Thus, to prepare the ESL reader for the atmosphere, Elizabethan beliefs, and plot, the pre-reading input focuses on the supernatural and the characters' (Banquo and Macbeth) differing reactions and interest in the supernatural. By using pictures of witches and their familiars, the pre-reading input here sets the atmosphere and prepares the reader for the prophecies that they are going to read about in the opening act.

In Act Two the murder of Duncan takes place spurred by Lady Macbeth's taunting of her husband's manliness while the concept of conscience and guilt is emphasized. In order to make the reader feel the effect of the murder on Macbeth and the Elizabethan audience, the pre-reading work concentrates on the concept of order and disorder, the power relationship between Macbeth and his wife, and black comedy in the Porter's scene. In the worksheets the students are first reminded that people in Shakespeare's time believed that every person and thing (e.g. rulers and subjects) had a natural place decided by God but Macbeth's crime has upset this natural order of things. Students read the text and then find evidence of this order and disorder. Next the reader is asked to (i) speak Lady Macbeth's lines in which she chides her husband for faltering in his courage (ii) scrutinize the balance of power between Macbeth and his wife. To prepare the ESL student for the black comedy in the Porter's scene, the pre-reading work draws upon the students' own cultural background and religious beliefs - as most of the students are Chinese, the researcher uses Taoist Hell Bank Notes and questions on the use of such notes to initiate the ESL students to talk about Hell in the Taoist world. Following this discussion, the students read a brief explanation of the Porter's scene and then they read Act 2 Scene 3 and (i) discuss the similarities between Macbeth's castle and the hell gate that the porter is guarding, (ii) compare what Macbeth and his wife have in common with the sinners that the Porter is admitting into hell and (iii) decide whether the scene is funny,

In Act Three, Macbeth becomes suspicious and therefore adds more murders to his hand. As a result of this, Macbeth no longer sleeps well and is distant with his wife too. Macbeth wades deeper into guilt foreshadowing the reappearance of the supernatural. To get the ESL reader to focus on the thoughts of Macbeth, the pre-reading input highlights the use of the soliloquy – a drama technique – as an avenue in which a character in a play speaks directly to the audience and gives insight into his inner thoughts. The students then read Macbeth's soliloquy, identify his bitterness against Banquo and reasons why Macbeth calls upon the Night to conceal his evil thoughts. The images of light and darkness are further discussed in the context of the ESL students' religious and cultural background – in this particular case, the Indian students and the Malay (Muslim) students were asked to discuss the significance of lighted torches when they celebrate Deepavalli (Divali) and Hari Raya Puasa (Eid).

By the time the students reached Act Four, the readers have had a reservoir of schema about Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', the Elizabethan world and beliefs and how these themes and images impose on the actions in the play. Consequently, the students were asked to delve into the dramatization of the witches in Act Four Scene 1 to get the readers to feel the atmosphere and effect of this supernatural scene. Likewise in Act Five, in order to further develop their aesthetic experience of the play, the students were asked to first listen to Paul Anka's song " My Way" and then discuss the regrets (if any) that the singer had. Then the students read Macbeth's reflection of his life through his soliloquy "…I have lived long enough: my way of life…" and then discussed the regrets that Macbeth have of his life. Following this, the students compared Macbeth's reflection of life and Paul Anka's song and discussed the similarities and/or differences in Macbeth's and Paul Anka's reflections of their lives. Finally, to make the play more meaningful to their modern lives, the students were asked to role play as Macbeth and speak what they would have done differently if any of them were Macbeth.

5. Results of the study

After the 'experiment', students responded to a questionnaire which was designed to identify (i) which stage (pre/while/post) of the reading framework was most useful and effective in helping them to read the play; (ii) the types of pre/while/post-reading activities that the ESL students enjoyed and found most useful in helping them understand 'Macbeth'. As the majority of the students in class reported that the pre-reading sections have been most helpful in providing them with background knowledge which they needed to read the play (see Table 1), this paper discusses the pre-reading input and its effectiveness.

Table 1: Students' opinions on how interesting and helpful the reading sections are

Reading Stages	Students' responses
Pre-reading stage (Getting Acquainted)	19 (51.35%)
While-reading stage (Getting into the play)	13 (35.14%)
Post-reading stage (Responding to the play)	5 (13.51%)

5.1 The effectiveness of pre-reading work prior to reading the play

In order to gauge the usefulness of pre-reading work prior to reading the play, students were asked to identify which worksheet/activity helped them most in preparing them to read the play (cf. Table 2) and why (cf. Table 3).

Table 2 : Pre-reading worksheets/activities that students find most useful in preparing
them to read the play

Pre-reading Worksheets before reading the play	Students' responses
PR worksheet 1.1: About Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre	10
PR worksheet 1.2: About Elizabethan beliefs	11
PR worksheet 1.3: About the play 'Macbeth'	6
PR worksheets 1.1. and 1.2	6
PR worksheets 1.2, 1.2, 1.3	4

* The explanations in this table are in the students' own words

With reference to Table 2, of the three pre-reading worksheets prior to reading the play, students found pre-reading worksheet 1.2 (About Elizabethan beliefs) as the most useful in preparing them to read the play. Pre-reading worksheet 1.1 (About Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre) is almost equally useful followed by pre-reading worksheet 1.3 (About the play). 6 students found both pre-reading worksheet 1.1 and 1.2 most useful while 4 students found all the worksheets most useful.

Table 3 : Students' explanations for the usefulness of PR worksheet 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3

PR Worksheet 1.1
- It helped me to know about the writer and much easier to read the play after knowing Shakespeare's life
- Prepare us for the background of Macbeth
- With the worksheet I have been introduced to Shakespeare, get to know the Elizabethan times
- Knowing about Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre can help me see what happened in Shakespeare time

PR worksheet 1.2
- Got to know of some Elizabethan beliefs which I didn't know existed!
- Because I get to know what is important to the Elizabethans
- I get to understand about Elizabethan culture and divine order
- See how important the witches are at that time
- Because easier to understand why Shakespeare use such themes in his play
- Because I know more deeply about Macbeth and I find it more interesting
- Because its interesting and help me understand the play
- Because it's so interesting

PR reading worksheet 1.3
- Give me an idea what to associate with a tragedy or comedy mask
- Prepare me what to expect from a play like Macbeth
- The masks representing Macbeth sort of give us an idea that Macbeth will have a tragic end
- Prepare us and let us know about the type of play we are about to venture in

* The explanations in this table are in the students' own words

With reference to Table 3, according to the students, pre-reading input from worksheet 1.2 was of most help because students 'got to know what was important to the Elizabethans' and 'realized how important witches were at that time'. The input also helped students 'understand why Shakespeare used such themes in his play'. With reference to pre-reading input from worksheet 1.1, 'knowing about Shakespeare and Elizabethan times/ Elizabethan theatre' helps prepare the students for the reading of the play while worksheet 1.3 foreshadows the type of play 'Macbeth' is likely to be:

5.2 The effectiveness of pre-reading work prior to reading parts of the play

With reference to pre-reading prior to reading parts of the play, students found the pre-reading input to Act Three helped them the most to transact with the text because most of them found the pre-reading helped them understand why Shakespeare used the soliloquy in his play:

Table 4 : Students' comments on the helpfulness of the pre-reading work that helped
them transact with the text in Act 3

Pre-reading prior to reading Act 3
• I can understand the purpose of the soliloquy…   • I couldn't understand Act 3 but with the worksheet I can understand and enjoy the play   • I can feel what Macbeth is feeling towards Banquo   • I can understand the drama technique of using the soliloquy   • It helps me to understand Banquo's role and how it affects Macbeth which I don't understand last time we read   • I can understand the witches' prophecies and there is also a picture which makes me interested in the play   • It becomes clear to me what drama technique is and why we use it   • Soliloquy is a new thing to me but it's interesting because people still talk to themselves after 400 years from Shakespeare's time [people still talk to themselves in modern times]   • It's so in detail I can understand better   • When my class teacher was teaching this act I didn't understand this talking to himself but after I got the worksheet I could comprehend Act 3 better

* The explanations in this table are in the students' own words

5.3 Activating students' cultural background knowledge

The use of the Taoist Hell Bank Notes was successful in initiating the Chinese ESL students into the concept and discussion of Hell but since there is no pretence and humor in the Taoist Hell, students reported that they found the concept of black comedy most difficult to comprehend therefore they do not find the Porter's scene funny. This finding is not surprising as humor is relative and can be very culture-specific and from my own experiences in teaching other Shakespeare's plays such as Twelfth Night, the gulling of Malvolio is also not funny to most Malaysian ESL students.

The use of Hell Bank Notes also drew attention to the belief in materialistic possessions in the Taoist Hell which explains the 'sending' of money (the Hell Bank notes) and other 'material' possessions to dead relatives in the next world. The significance of activating this background knowledge is that the (Chinese) ESL students could talk about and compare the concept of Hell in the play with their own cultural beliefs and draw differences (the dead in the Taoist world can still acquire possessions unlike the dead in the Christian/

Elizabethan world) and commonalities - (i) Hell in both worlds have a gatekeeper – in the Christian world, it is Satan; in the play, it is the porter; in the Taoist world it is Yuen Wong (his picture is on the Hell note currency); (ii) in both worlds, there is a universal belief that wrongdoers go to Hell. Chinese students in this part of the world (South East Asia, especially Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia) often cite the Haw Par Gardens in Singapore as a visual illustration of the punishments meted to wrongdoers in the Taoist world.

Another relevant background knowledge tapped by the researcher and one which the Indian and Malay students could relate to was the symbolism of light and darkness in the Festival of Lights (Deepavalli/Divali) and Hari Raya Puasa (Eid). During these festivities, the Hindus and Muslims in Malaysia display lighted torches in their gardens to signify the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness and this imagery helped the ESL students to comprehend the recurring significance of light and darkness in the play 'Macbeth'.

6. Conclusion

This paper is an extract of a Masters thesis which investigated on the feasibility of using a Scaffolded Reading Experience (SRE) to make the reading of a Shakespeare play, 'Macbeth', reader-friendly and accessible in the ESL classroom (Lee, 1998). Due to the very positive feedback on the pre-reading stage, only data on the pre-reading work are used for analysis and discussion in this paper. The paper specifically focuses on the significance of building and activating the ESL students' background knowledge to find pathways into the reading of a Shakespearean play. The pedagogical implication of this study is clear: what students bring to the play (schema) not only helps them transact with the text but determines what personal aesthetic experiences they take away with them. To conclude, the significance of pre-reading work in text comprehension and literary appreciation cannot be underestimated, especially in the reading of a literary text such as a Shakespearean play in the ESL classroom.

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