Methods Used in Teaching and Learning of Literature in the ESL Classroom and Adult Learners' Attitude

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Abstract

The introduction of literature component in the Malaysian ESL context has brought much discussion on the importance of teaching the subject as part of the English Language syllabus in Malaysian primary, secondary and tertiary educational scenarios. This paper examines the findings of a study which investigated adult learners' attitude towards approaches used in teaching and learning literature in a tertiary ESL classroom. The focus of this paper is on attitude, responses, qualities and shortcomings of adult learners toward methodologies utilised as a part of instruction and learning of literature in a TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) programme. The findings of the study acquired by means of quantitative and qualitative approaches reveal that the learners appreciate learning literature in the ESL context and prefer an assortment of exercises and activities in the classroom despite being independent learners.

Keywords: methodology, teaching, learning, literature, ESL classroom

INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of literature in Malaysia is fast becoming a recognized force in acquiring language proficiency. Initially, content-based language teaching was introduced in the Malaysian Secondary schools which commenced in 2000 (Chittra, Rasaya, Angelina, Siti Norliana & Jeyamahla, 2011). In a recent development, the Education Ministry announced that literature will be reintroduced in schools as a single

subject to enhance language proficiency. However, literature has become a major course in the Teaching of English as Second Language (TESL) programs in Malaysia.

Learning literature in the context of these major courses objectively prepares students to read a text using active, focused reading habits; to develop an interest in literature and relate details within a text to a larger meaning. Learners also should be able to develop and enhance their English Language proficiency skills using among others, contemporary literature as the means to achieve this main objective, have knowledge of the conventions of Shakespeare poetry and drama and in the field of literature written for children and adolescents in order to become acquainted with the rich variety of both classic and contemporary texts. Learners should read and analyse the literary content as they need to acquire knowledge.

Teaching adult learners may not be the same as teaching children and adolescents or teenagers. Knowles as cited in Lieb (1991) identifies, "Adults are autonomous and self-directed, they need to be free to direct themselves" (p.1). Thus, teaching adult TESL learners in a part-time programme might need a special approach in order to enable them to move independently towards better mastery of the courses. Besides the depth of the syllabus, teaching methods too should be equally effective.

Teaching English could be fun if literature is taught as a part of the English subject whilst making learning exciting and exploratory. Unfortunately, most teachers claim that teaching literature is the most difficult thing to do. Teaching literature could be done in various ways but some of the teachers might not concern themselves with the best ways of teaching literature. Kee as cited in Tina, Mohammad Hassan, Fauziah, Wan Fara Adlina & Marzilah (2007) states that school teachers have expressed their worries of not knowing the methodologies most suited when teaching literature component in the English syllabus. It was mentioned that it would take a while for learners to be able to accept literature as part of learning the English language. Rosli (1995, cited in Chittra et al, 2011) claims that because of the renewed attention given to literature in second or foreign language teaching, it is therefore important to study some of the issues in relation to literature in the Malaysian context.

The main objectives of this study are to find out adult learners' attitudes towards studying literature, learners' reactions to the different approaches used to teach literature and to find out the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches used by the instructors to teach literature in the classroom. Since there is limited study on the attitude of adult learners and approaches used in teaching and learning among TESL learners, the researchers have decided to investigate learners' attitudes towards the approaches used in learning literature. It is imperative that TESL students experience the learning approaches so as to transfer their knowledge to their own teaching situations in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult Learners

An adult learner as stated in Voorhees and Lingenfelter (2003) is someone who is 25 years of age or older and is involved in learning activities while Tan (2006) explains that Malaysian adult learners are within 30 to 54 years old and have professional working experience while actively pursuing continual education. Knowles as cited in Peterson (n.d), a pioneer in the study of adult learning, observes that adults learn best when they understand why something is important and they have the freedom to learn in their own way. Arguably, adult learners need guidance during the learning session in which the instructor still has to come up with some effective methods in directing the literature classes. Recent studies on young adult learners have reported that students were seen to be passive and were unable to respond critically because the lessons were often too teacher-centered and they labelled teachers to be dull and less creative (Gurnam Kaur, 2003 & Siti Norliana, Roszainora, Chittra & Kamaruzzaman, 2009).

Knowles (1998) cited in Muhammad Madi, Francis, Muniapan, Parasuraman & Rathakrishnan (2008) opines that, underlying all attempts to engage adults in self-directed learning is the belief that self-directed adults will learn more, learn better and experience effective and creative self-guided learning. Instructors should allow learners to experience what they are learning as Peterson (n.d) emphasizes that experience can take many forms. It includes small group discussions, experiments, role playing, skits, building something, writing or drawing something specific. Houle (cited in Muhammad Madi et al, 2008) states that adult learners are goal oriented, activity oriented or learning oriented. Adult learners want to plan their own learning activities. They also want to have a full control of their personal learning and also choose the resources for their various learning activities. Adults have special needs and requirements as learners.

Instructor's Role in Teaching Adult Learners

For secondary schools, the role of teachers in the classroom has a significant influence on students' attitude and achievement in literature and foreign language studies. Muyskens as cited in Rosli (1995) discovers that the teachers tend to have greater influence on achievement and attitudinal outcomes. Qualities of an effective teacher of literature include an analytic knowledge of the language, appreciation of the nature of literature, and command of the techniques of teaching literature.

However, when teaching adult learners, instructors should allow learners to experience what they are learning as Peterson (n.d) states that "experience can take many forms. Any activity that gets your students involved makes learning experiential. This includes small group discussions, experiments, role playing, skits, building something in the classroom, writing or drawing something specific or any activity of any kind" (p.2). Classroom activities keep people energized and motivated, especially activities that are action orientated.

Approaches in Teaching and Learning Literature

Carter and Long (1991) identify three approaches or models in integrating literature in the language syllabus. They are the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model (cited in Hwang, 2007). The personal growth model bridges the language and the cultural model by focusing on the particular use of language in a text and placing it in its cultural context. Learners are encouraged to express their opinions, feelings and make connections between their own personal and cultural experience and those expressed in the text. Learning therefore is said to take place when readers are able to interpret a text and construct meaning on the basis of their experience. Elaborating on this, Rosli (1995) proposes three main approaches to literature teaching; information-based approaches, personal response-based approaches and language-based approaches. Information-based approach is used to teach knowledge about literature and treat literature mainly as a source of facts or information about a target culture. Teaching methodologies tend to be teacher-centred and reading is largely for information. While personal response-based approach is more student-centred. It focuses on eliciting individual response to a text. The approach is to motivate students to read by relating the themes and topics in the text to his or her-own personal experience. Savvidou, (2004) identifies personal growth model as reader-response approach. Its emphasis is on question-discussion methodologies. Language-based approach aims to be learner-centred, activity-based and pays particular attention to the way language is used. The approaches involve standard, widely-used and widely-known procedures for developing language competence and sensitivity. Language-based activities need to fulfil the criterion of being language-based, student-centred, activity-based and process-oriented (Ganakumaran, 2002) while Rosli (1995) suggests some teaching strategies that could represent some of the lead up activities for study skills in reading literature such as prediction, summary, forum or debate, retranslation and opinionative questions.

McGroarty as cited in Siti Norliana et al. (2009) asserts that "attitude has cognitive, affective and cognitive components; it involves beliefs, emotional reactions and behavioural tendencies related to the object of the attitudes" (p.1).Meanwhile Brown (2000) further illustrates that attitudes are often shaped by the social context developed early in childhood and are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes as well as contact with others from different cultures.

The suggested approaches or methods that can be used to teaching and learning literature for adult learners are very limited. In some particular aspects, the effectiveness in using the recommended approaches might not be suitable for adult TESL part-time learners. The approaches used in schools may differ from the adult learners' classroom. Therefore, when learning literature as major courses or the big "L", instructors need better understanding of the depth of the syllabus while teaching methods too should be effective.
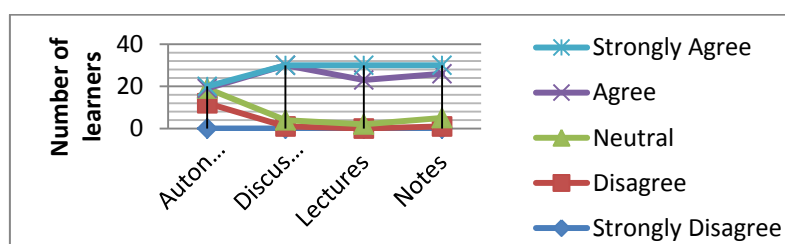
METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is a mixed design. A quantitative and qualitative data were used to determine the best methods or approaches that the instructors used when teaching literature which are deemed suitable for adult learners. A survey questionnaire and an interview were conducted to obtain the needed data. The subjects were 30 part-time learners of TESL -PLK (Distance Learning Programme) in UiTM Dungun, Terengganu. The learners have no experience in learning literature in English before they started their TESL programme and most of them do not have English education background. Almost all are working adults with hope that a degree in TESL will enable them better career opportunities specifically as English teachers. They have attended the literature courses for at least three years in fulfilment of their ED220 programme.

A set of questionnaire designed by one of the researchers was used as the primary instruments to obtain the needed information. The questionnaire consists of 29 items which students answered in the form of Likert scale. The scales are valued and rated as strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree. To enhance the findings, interviews were conducted with at least 10 selected learners in relation to their attitudes towards the approaches they experienced when learning literature. The questions were analyzed using SPSS version 17.0. Furthermore, through the interviews, qualitative data were collected and learners' opinions and feelings towards TESL instructors' approaches in teaching literature were revealed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

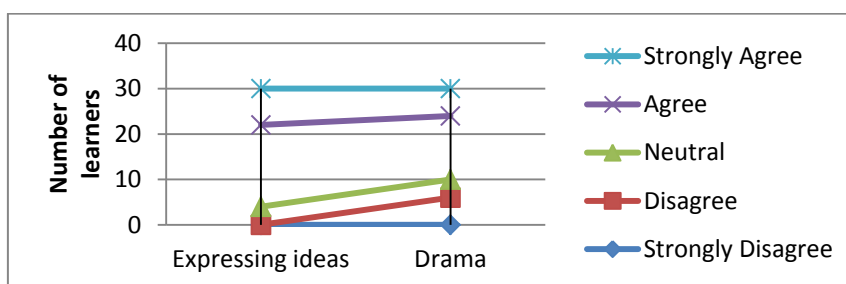### Adult learners' reactions to the different approaches used

Figure 1: Learner's ways of learning literature

As illustrated in Figure 1, 12 respondents disagreed that autonomous learning is more effective for them. 10 respondents thought that learning on their own is effective while it was strongly agreed by 1 respondent. 26 learners or 86.7% of the respondents agreed that they did a lot of discussions with peers during classes. This indicates that learners practiced discussions a lot and this learning approach is convenient for them rather than studying alone. Meanwhile 70% of the respondents agreed that they listened to lectures a lot during classes and it was strongly agreed by another 7 or 23.3% of the respondents. 70% or 21 of the respondents claimed that they got the information or notes mostly during lectures.
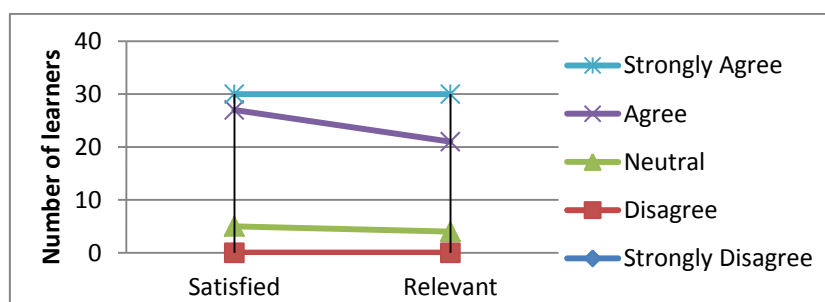
Muhammad Madi, Francis, Muniapan, Parasuraman & Rathakrishnan (2008) reviewed Knowles' (1980) theory that assumes adult learners are autonomous and self-directed. However, it is opposite to what has been found out in this study. The result shows that 40% of the learners claimed that they could not study by themselves while 33.3% of the respondents felt that autonomous learning is effective for them. There was only one student who strongly agreed that autonomous learning is more effective for him/her. Most of the learners preferred to do a lot of discussion in class but they listened to lectures a lot as well. They claimed that they got a lot of information and notes from the instructors during lectures which were really helpful.

Recent studies on young adult learners have reported that students were seen to be passive and were unable to respond critically because the lessons were often too teacher-centred and they labelled teachers to be dull and less creative (Gurnam Kaur, 2003; Siti Norliana, 2003 & Suriya Kumar, 2004). Most instructors focused on explanation and giving notes during literature classes and it is the most frequent way used in adult learners' classes. Adult learners need guidance in instruction during the learning session thus the instructor still has to come up with some effective methods in directing the literature class.

Meanwhile, Figure 2 below illustrates respondents' attitude towards instructors' method in teaching literature. 18 or 60% of the respondents agreed that their instructors gave them opportunity to express their ideas in class and it was strongly agreed by the other 8 respondents. 14 or 46.6% of the respondents claimed that they sometimes learned literature through role play, drama and games. More than half of the respondents shared their opinions and ideas during literature classes.

Figure 2: Instructors approaches and ways of teaching literature

Figure 3: Learners' reaction to approaches used in literature class

Figure 3 shows that 22 or 73.3% of the respondents agreed that they were fully satisfied with the learning session and instructors' techniques in class. Meanwhile 17 or 56.7% agree that it is relevant to have various activities in TESL literature classrooms and it is strongly agreed by 9 or 30.5% of the respondents. From the findings, it can be seen that the learners are satisfied with the approaches used by the instructors in their literature classes.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation for the nine research items.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Autonomous learning and discussions	30	6.83	1.206	.220
Lectures and notes	30	8.10	1.094	.200
Instructors approaches and way of teaching literature	30	7.80	1.584	.289
Reaction to approaches used by instructors	30	7.80	1.584	.289

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for selected research questions. From 29 research items, 5 items were selected to represent the areas of the findings. The table shows the summarized results in the form of mean and standard deviation. From the table, it shows that 'lectures and notes' recorded the highest mean value of 8.10 as compared to the rest of the items. The standard deviation is 1.094, the highest value for its category as well. It also indicates that it was the most practiced way when teaching and learning literature. While the instructors' approaches and way of teaching literature are considered very highly rated category because of the mean scale value of 7.80, this also indicates that instructors sometimes conduct the literature classes through role play, drama and games. With lectures and notes as still the most frequently used way, the instructors also practiced question and answer sessions in classes.

With the same ranking, learners' reaction to approaches used in literature classes is categorized as very high scale in mean scale value. The score is high especially the statement that indicates that learners were fully satisfied with the learning session and instructors' techniques in classes. However the respondents also opted to chose the statement that it is relevant to have various activities in TESL literature classes. The mean for 'autonomous learning and discussions' is 6.83 and this is considered to be a very high category in the scale. This shows that the learners also choose autonomous learning and discussion as the best way to learn literature.

The interview result - the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches used

When questioned about the strengths of the approaches used in literature classrooms, the respondents answered that they could enhance their knowledge and comprehension better through class discussions, presentations and notes given. The respondents agreed that they learnt best when they could share their ideas and opinions with each other in class. Based on the interviews, most of the respondents hardly showed any weaknesses of the approaches and ways of learning and teaching in the literature classroom. Lectures sometimes gave them a lot of information that they needed but at times such 'overwhelming kindness' distracted them and caused lack of focus. Furthermore, all of the ten respondents could not even think about the

weaknesses of the instructors' approaches instead they revealed that the lack of their own reading and preparation before class became the main reason for their poor performance.

CONCLUSION

From adult learners' perception, learning through lectures and sharing ideas are the best ways in teaching and learning literature for adult learners although they sought for various classroom learning activities. This study may serve as a reflection for instructors. It proposes that instructors understand the various teaching styles that motivate learners' evaluation. Feedback from learners will enable instructors to create teaching plans that will help learners achieve effective literature learning in the ESL classroom.

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