

**THE EFFECTS OF TEACHING POETRY THROUGH
DRAMATIC ACTIVITIES ON THE STUDENTS'
COMPREHENSION AND APPRECIATION**

By

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**Final Year Project Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
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APRIL 2004

Abstract

The Effects of Using Dramatic Activities to Teach Poetry on Students' Comprehension and Appreciation

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This study investigates the effects of teaching poetry through dramatic activities on comprehension and appreciation of Form Four students of Kolej Datuk Patinggi Abang Haji Abdillah and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tun Abang Haji Openg. For the purpose of this study, the researcher had selected a poem entitled “si tenggang homecoming” by Muhammad Haji Salleh. The researcher had administered a 4-day lesson plan that is divided into two separate sets of modules. Each of the modules was administered to four classes of controlled and four classes of treatment groups from both schools. The instruments of this study, which comprised of comprehension exercises, student’s journal and observation were designed based on three main issues, to find out “the effects of using dramatic activities on the students’ comprehension and appreciation of a poem”, “the extent to which dramatic activities are effective to increase the students’ comprehension and appreciation of the poem” and to determine “the strengths and weaknesses of using dramatic activities to teach poetry”. The study revealed that dramatic activities such as role-play, simulation and improvisation had positive effects on the students’ comprehension and appreciation of a poem “si tenggang homecoming”.

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**Kesan Penggunaan Aktiviti Dramatik Dalam Pengajaran Sajak ke atas
Pemahaman dan Apresiasi Pelajar**

Jamali Mohammad

Kajian ini dilakukan untuk mengetahui kesan penggunaan aktiviti dramatik ke atas pemahaman dan apresiasi pelajar Tingkatan Empat dari Kolej Datuk Patinggi Abang Haji Abdillah and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tun Abang Haji Openg tentang sajak. Oleh itu, penyelidik telah memilih sajak yang bertajuk “si tenggang homecoming” oleh Muhammad Haji Salleh. Penyelidik telah menghasilkan dua buah modul yang berbeza untuk menjalankan sesi pengajaran selama 4 hari di sekolah-sekolah berkenaan. Setiap modul ini digunakan ke atas empat kumpulan kawalan dan empat kumpulan rawatan. Instrumen kajian pula merangkumi soalan-soalan pemahaman, jurnal pelajar dan pemerhatian. Melalui instrumen berkenaan, penyelidik dapat mengetahui apakah kesan – kesan penggunaan aktiviti dramatik ke atas pemahaman dan apresiasi pelajar terhadap sajak, sejauhmanakah keberkesanan penggunaan aktiviti tersebut boleh membantu pelajar dalam meningkatkan pemahaman mereka dan apakah kekuatan dan kelemahan aktiviti-aktiviti tersebut. Berdasarkan kajian yang telah dijalankan, penyelidik mendapati bahawa penggunaan aktiviti-aktiviti dramatik mendatangkan kesan yang positif terhadap pemahaman dan apresiasi pelajar tentang sajak “si tenggang homecoming”.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Madam Ruth, Miss Kathleen Duncan, Miss Diana and Colin... Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will look into the basis of this study. It puts forward the background of teaching poetry in English in Malaysian Secondary schools by focussing on the objectives of the revised syllabus and the expected learning outcomes, and is followed by an elaborate discussion on dramatic activities. In this discussion, the researcher has included the statement of the problem, three research questions in relation to the research objectives, the significance of the study that rationalizes the importance of his research and its limitation, and finally the definition of technical terms used throughout his study.

1.1 Background to the study

In 1999, the Ministry Of Education has announced the change in the syllabus and public examination papers by including the literature component in its curriculum and evaluation. Effective from this move, the literature component that includes novel, short story and poetry has officially been included in the Lower Secondary Assessment (Penilaian Menengah Rendah) and Malaysia School Certificate (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia).

This component forms 20% of the total marks in both public examinations (Ganakumaran Subramaniam, 2003). The aim of this component is “to enhance students’ proficiency in the English language through the study of a set of prescribed literary texts, contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students’ outlook through reading about other cultures and world views” (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan 4, 1999). The revised curriculum for Malaysian secondary schools states that “language for aesthetic purposes enables learners to enjoy literary texts at a level suited to their language proficiency and develops in them the ability to express themselves creatively” (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan 4, 2003).

The move indicates that the policy makers along with curriculum planners acknowledge the significance of literature components, particularly poetry, as a resource to develop the students’ linguistic competencies. Based on this move, it is implied that the ministry hopes that the literature components will serve as the catalyst to develop an interest in the students to express their creativity through the appreciation of literary works across various genres such as the novel, short stories, poems and others.

In addition, the literature components emphasize on exposing the students to both functions of the language, namely referential and representational which are crucial in developing the students’ comprehension skills. Chan, K. W. (2003) believes that at the referential function of language the students are exposed to how language works “in terms of information sought or given, or of a social situation being handled”. Meanwhile, at the representational function of language, the students are exposed to

how language “opens up, calls upon, stimulates and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion”. In essence, the pedagogical implication of the revised curriculum focuses on the importance of the teachers’ role on developing the students’ competencies in comprehending and appreciating the literary texts.

However, teachers do not share the same enthusiasm with regards to the teaching of poetry. Jayakaran, Hie, T. S. and Ali Abdul Ghani (1998) cite McRae (1991:80) claiming that teachers do not want to expose themselves to the risk of teaching what is unfamiliar to them. This is due to the notion that poetry is seen as “Literature as its most literary” (Jayakaran, Hie, T. S. and Ali Abdul Ghani, 1998). A recent study conducted by Gunakumaran Subramaniam, Shahizah Ismail Hamdan, Lie, K. Y. (2003) on five hundred English as a Second Language (ESL) secondary schools’ teachers confirms this claim. According to their findings “forty nine percent of the teachers researched still lack any knowledge or sincere concern” in relation to the teaching of the literature component including poetry. As a result, the feeling of insecurity may arise from this limitation. Meanwhile, Metin Timucin (2003) extends this belief by stating that for most teachers, poetry “is the most dreadful genre to teach” due to “its deviant usage of language”. In other words, poetry often breaks the rules of grammar and does not conform to what is acknowledged as “correct grammar” by the prescriptivist.

In consequence, this belief may deprive the students from the opportunity to comprehend and appreciate poetry in a more personalized manner. In fact, the students “need to be encouraged and supported as they respond to texts drawing on their experiences” thus “create personal meaning of issues” (Saratha Sithamparam,

2002). Dramatic activities such as improvisation, simulation and role-play offer a new dimension to the teaching of poetry. Through these activities, the students may feel empowered and they are free to discuss, negotiate and effectively communicate with their peers. It is evident that “such explorations help students develop empathy and an understanding of the human condition” (Saratha Sithamparam, 2002).

Reading poetry without understanding what has been read is meaningless. In fact, comprehending such literary work does not only require the ability to understand what is stated in the text. It requires the readers to go beyond what is clearly written. The readers have to read between the lines to discover the hidden meaning of the poem. In this light, dramatic activities offer a new dimension to develop a concrete understanding and appreciation of a poem. Through improvisation, simulation and role-play, the students will be exposed to poetry in terms of “beauty”, “taste”, “imagination” and “judgment” (Nesamalar Chitravelu, Saratha Sithamparam & Choon, T. S., 1996).

Hence, this study seeks to verify the possibility of dramatic activities in increasing the students’ comprehension and appreciation of poetry. It also explores the other potential effects of improvisation, simulation and role-play on the students’ understanding of the poem. This study is specifically meant for the English teachers of form 4, which is also beneficial for other classes, in providing a more effective way to teach poetry.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The practice of language teaching has often deviated from its intended purpose. The emphasis on academic performance and testing has launched the notion of learning for the sake of passing the examination. This examination-based learning is much practised in many schools where good results are prioritized (Development of Education, National Report Malaysia).

In 1999, the Ministry Of Education has announced the change in the syllabus and public examination papers. Poetry has been included in the Lower Secondary Assessment and Malaysia School Certificate. The effect of this move has forced most teachers to rely on “literature component examination paper as a benchmark of what to teach and how to teach it” (Gunakumaran Subramaniam, Shahizah Ismail Hamdan, Lie, K. Y., 2003). As a result, this gives the impression that the learning of poetry is meant for examination purpose.

Meanwhile, from the students’ perspective, the activities conducted during the lessons are seen as “not challenging”, “boring”, “dull” and “uninteresting” (Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, 2003). Therefore, teachers should vary their teaching methods and techniques in order to address these undesirable perceptions on learning.

Thus, this study is carried out to investigate the effects of teaching poetry through dramatic activities on comprehension and appreciation. It explores the potential of dramatic activities such as improvisation, simulation and role-play in enhancing students’ comprehension and appreciation.

1.3 Research objectives

This study focuses on the following objectives:

1. The effects of using dramatic activities on students' comprehension and appreciation.
2. The extent to which dramatic activities are effective to increase the students' comprehension and appreciation of a poem.
3. The strengths and weaknesses of using dramatic activities to teach poetry.

1.4 Research questions

1. What are the effects of using dramatic activities on the students' comprehension and appreciation?
2. To what extent are dramatic activities effective in increasing the students' comprehension and appreciation of a poem?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of using dramatic activities to teach poetry?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study hopes to find out the effects of using dramatic activities in teaching poetry and the extent to which these activities would be effective to increase the students' comprehension and appreciation of the poem. The findings will provide useful insights and assist teachers in helping their students to comprehend and appreciate poetry better.

It is also hoped that upon completing this study, the findings will support these teachers in their effort to improve their students' comprehension skills and appreciation of the poems. The findings will be beneficial to the teachers as they reveal the important competencies for the students to achieve in order to continually improve their comprehension skills by exploring both the referential and representational function of the language. In addition, the findings will facilitate teachers who are practically new to the field to resolve their uncertainties in teaching poetry.

1.6 Limitations

The subjects for this study involve Form Four students from Kolej Datuk Patinggi Abang Haji Abdillah and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tun Abang Haji Openg with four classes from each school. These four classes are then divided into two groups, with two classes serve as the treatment groups while the remaining two classes will serve as the controlled groups. The researcher will administer two different sets of modules, each of which consists of a 4-day lesson plan. The modules will be administered to the controlled and treatment groups within 280 minutes, which includes 40 minutes for **Day 1**, 80 minutes for **Day 2** to **Day 4** for each of the groups. Overall, the researcher has to conduct a total of 32 lessons, which is equivalent with 2,240 minutes.

However, the 4-day lesson will not be sufficient to determine the effect of teaching poetry through dramatic activities on comprehension and appreciation in the long run.

Moreover, other factors such as the researcher's presentation skills and the students' behaviour will also affect the teaching and learning process. Also, the findings from this study will not be representative of the whole population of students in Kuching.

1.7 Definition of key terms

Throughout this study, the researcher will employ the following terms;

1.7.1 Comprehension is the process by which a person understands a meaning of written or spoken language. The measurement of listening and reading comprehension abilities is an important part of an assessment of a person proficiency in second or foreign language learning.

a) **Literal comprehension** – reading in order to understand, remember or recall the information explicitly contained in the passage;

literal (reading and understanding exactly what is written down);

b) **Inferential comprehension** – reading in order to find information which is not explicitly stated in a passage, using the reader's experience and intuition, and by inferring (inferencing).

inferential (reading between the lines);

c) **Critical or evaluative comprehension** – reading in order to gain an emotional or other kind of valued response from a passage.

critical or appreciative (appreciating and understanding an author's use of parody, irony, humour and satire, metaphor, allusion and imagery);

1.7.2 Deviant is used to describe any pronunciation, word, or sentence structure which does not conform to a norm.

- 1.7.3 **Referential language** communicates on only one level, usually in terms of information sought or given, or of a social situation being handled.
- 1.7.4 **Representational language** opens up, calls upon, stimulates and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion.
- 1.7.5 **Schemata** is often used in its singular form - schema - that refers to an organized chunk of knowledge or experience, often accompanied by feelings or emotions associated with experience at the time the information was stored. When students have little or no schema (background knowledge or prior experience) for a subject, comprehension is greatly impaired.

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This literature review will discuss the theoretical aspects of teaching poetry through dramatic activities in relation with comprehension and appreciation. It encompasses four topics and is organized in a comprehensive manner to give a clear picture of what this study is all about and how it benefits learners of English as a second language.

2.1 The theoretical aspects of teaching poetry

Poetry is a unique, distinct, imaginative and creative form of art. In other words, it is a manifestation of a particular experience or even an imagination. The language, particularly the choice of words, and the use of imagery, metaphor, simile and other literary conventions, conjure the effects that would invite the readers to respond to it.

However, Metin Timucin (2003) claims that “the deviant usage of language” has caused most teachers regard poetry as “the most dreadful genre to teach”. That means, “poetry frequently breaks the rules”, thus challenges the teachers’ own confidence and linguistic competencies. Since English is a second language, these teachers may not have the nuances or approximate understanding when it comes to interpreting the underlying meaning of the poem. Also, these teachers may not have adequate training

in teaching poetry thus refrain themselves from exploring the language through poetry.

On the contrary, Lazar (1993) believes that poetry “communicates with us in a fresh, original way”. She adds, when a teacher decides to teach poetry, it should not be seen as “an activity done for its own sake, but a way of improving the knowledge of the language”. Meanwhile, Carter, R. and Long, M. N., (1991) believe that poems can function as “a special resource for personal development and growth” and “encourages greater sensitivity and self-awareness and greater understanding of the world around us”. They see that poetry should be taught “in terms of pleasure and enjoyment rather than in terms of the accumulation of facts”.

2.2 Poetry in Malaysian secondary schools

Students’ are expected to understand and respond to literary text (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran, KPM 2003). Understanding literary text means the ability to create personal meaning out of the text read. This includes comprehending the text both at the referential and representational level of the text. According to Chan, K. W. (2003) “referential language communicates on only one level, usually in terms of information sought or given, or of a social situation being handled” while representational level of the text “opens up, calls upon, stimulates and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion”.

Shahizah Ismail Hamdan and Nakeeran Sivapuniam (2003) elaborate this by stating that in responding to the literary text, the students’ response would be “based

on sensitivity to text” and the extent to which they connect it to their “own experience and value system” would facilitate deeper understanding. Moreover, the students need to discover the significance of the text to their life experience and assign appropriate meaning to it based on their “assumptions and expectations” (Shahizah Ismail Hamdan and Nakeeran Sivapuniam, 2003). In other words, the students are unconsciously turning the text into an experience rather than just a printed matter by connecting it to their experience.

However, experiencing poetry requires the readers to appreciate poetry to an extent that they would strategically utilize their background knowledge as their foundation to formulate assumptions and expectations in order to arrive at the meaning of the text. Learners at this stage are actively involved in the process of meaning making by drawing from their “experience, knowledge and cultural origin” (Shahizah Ismail Hamdan and Nakeeran Sivapuniam (2003)).

Carrel, P. L. & Eisterhold, J. C. (1987) quote schema theory, which emphasizes the role of pre-existing knowledge. They acknowledge this by pointing out what Anderson et. al. (1997) posits, “every act of comprehension involves one’s knowledge of the world”. That means, when the students interact with the text they would “naturally seek the values that are apparent in the poem” (Saratha Sithamparam, 2002). Distinctively, these values would be different to different readers. The fact that “the readers take with them their own worldview would bring a varied interpretation even with the same poem” (Saratha Sithamparam, 2002).

In the context of Malaysian secondary school students, they are expected to see “the relevance and universality of values projected in literary text” (Shahizah Ismail Hamdan and Nakeeran Sivapuniam, 2003). In addition, the revised syllabus expects the students to understand the poem and tell it in their own word and give opinion of the text. (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan 4, 2003). In relation with this issue, Lazar, G. (1993) states that this move is “a way of improving language knowledge”. Thus, the inclusion of poetry in the syllabus “is a helpful step towards enabling students to make confident interpretations of a poem”.

Lazar, G. (1993) has also suggested that through poetry, a teacher can exploit the “unusual language features” and at the same time “exposing students to more creative uses of language”. She also claims that poetry could be exploited “to develop oral skills” through choral reading. However, in this study, the researcher is motivated to experiment on whether the use of dramatic activities such as role-play, simulation and improvisation would have any effects on the students’ comprehension and appreciation of a poem. In doing so, the researcher has decided to conduct the study on form four classes from Kolej Datuk Patinggi Abang Haji Abdillah and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tun Abang Haji Openg that are now taught under the revised syllabus.

According to Hayes, S. K. (1984), drama means “using mime and movement, games, role-play and improvisation to develop language and social skills”. She cited Way, B. by substantiating that “drama is concerned with the individuality of individuals, with the uniqueness of each human essence”. According to Chan, K. W. (2003), “drama is written to be read and performed”. He substantiates that “it

exemplifies how language is enacted to formulate experiences and evoke imagination”. However, different people in different context may interpret drama in different ways. For the purpose of this study, specific reference will be made to drama as in the context of education. Smith, S. (2000) cites Holden, S. (1981) in explaining drama in the context of education;

“Drama is applied to classroom activities where the focus is on the doing rather than on the presentation. In other words, the students work on dramatic themes, and it is this exploration of the ideas and characters of their target language which is important, for it entails interacting in English and making full use of the various features of oral communication. The students have the opportunity to experiment with the language they have learnt”

Therefore, the research shall explore drama with a specific reference to English as a Second Language teaching.

2.3 Teaching poetry through dramatic activities

Poetry can be approached by getting the students to read it closely. That means poetry can be analysed by looking at the language and the literary devices that are used in order to arrive at the meaning. This is because poems are a representation of abstract ideas, which are derived from experiences and imagination and being projected by the use of extremely condensed words. In other words, each poem records different experiences or imagination and is written with a very economical use of language. Nonetheless, the context depends on the students’ worldview and what knowledge of the world they bring to the text in order to interpret such experiences and imagination. By analysing the language and the context that the text creates, the learners will understand the poem better.

An alternative way to approach a poem is to provide explicit context through dramatic activities. Dramatic activities such as improvisation, simulation and role-play offer a new dimension to the teaching of poetry. Through these activities, the students are given the opportunity to experience the poem and they are free to discuss, negotiate the meaning and would exercise real communication. This will become a platform for increasing comprehension and appreciation of a poem. In short, the main issue here is to learn through poetry and not to learn about it.

2.4 Dramatic activities

In terms of differences, Hyacinth Gaudart (2003) admits that “a clear line cannot be drawn between role-play and simulation”. In fact “these two dramatic activities overlap” and have significant effects to the learners. However, she points out what Livingstone (1983:1) response with regards to this issue, “the main concern for the teacher is the opportunities role-play and simulations provide”.

2.4.1 Role-play

Sang, M. S. (2003) looks at role-play as “a teaching technique that sometimes used for classroom activities”. He adds that role-play “is a spontaneous act which involves a group of pupils without the use of any script”. Both Hyacinth Gaudart (2003) and Sang, M. S. (2003) agree that role-play opens up an opportunity to “strengthen their skill of conversation”. Simultaneously, the learners would be able to “train themselves to think spontaneously so as to solve a problem as soon as possible under a controlled

situation”. Sang, M. S. (2003) also claims that role-play “enables pupils to understand better regarding the reason and attitude of the behaviour of other people in real situation similar to the role-play”.

2.4.2 Simulation

Meanwhile, Hyacinth Gaudart (2003) refers to Jones (1980:4) who calls simulation “a case study where learners become participants in an event and shape the course of the event”. She defines the learners’ roles in terms of “functions, duties, and responsibilities within a structured situation involving problem solving” by clarifying the fact that simulation allows “the participants the opportunity to practise taking on specific roles and improvising within specific situations”. Significantly, this leads to “the assumption that with practice the participants will play their roles effectively when situations involving similar skills occur in real life”.

2.4.3 Improvisation

According to Griffiths, J. (1991), improvisation is “the skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps, a text)”. She emphasizes on the students’ spontaneity “in response to the immediate stimuli”. In other words, in improvisation the students spontaneously pretend to be either someone else or in a situation other than the one they are physically in.