

A Comparative Study between English Literature and Asian Literature Through the Perceptions of the TESL Foundation Programme Students

by

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ABSTRACT

This study is carried out to investigate the students' perceptions of the literature materials and to examine their views of the two types of literature materials, Asian literature and English Literature. The students concerned in this study are currently studying in the TESL Foundation Course in Gaya Teacher Training Institute in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and they appear to be weak in literature. 50 students are involved in this study. The study explores which materials the students prefer and what factors influence their choice of materials. This is an exploratory study which adopts a qualitative approach whereby the analysis of the data from journal writings and semi-structured interviews are used to answer the research questions. The findings of this study show that, in terms of understanding, Asian literature is the choice due to the similarity of the cultural background between the students and the materials, the familiarity of content and the relativity of the themes and settings. It was also raised, that in terms of appeal, English literature is their choice because English literature is different from what they are used to, therefore making it interesting.

INTRODUCTION

Walking along the corridor of my department, coming back from my class, I bumped into a colleague who had just registered the new intake of trainees for the Bachelor of Education (TESL) foundation course. Asking him what troubles lie ahead, he mentioned that most of them scored an 'A' for the English paper in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education) yet when he spoke to them he was surprised to find that quite a number of them are unable to string sentences together. Another colleague walked by and joined us in the conversation mentioning that he had spoken to some of the new trainees and said that he was certain the new trainees would have problems coping with all the major papers, especially literature. He added,

"Our trainees can't cope with the literature paper. The literature materials are too difficult for them to understand. They usually fall asleep during literature lessons. It is difficult for them to master the English Language in the first place. And, the Asian literature is already hard for them, let alone the English ones. They are not used to English literature".

(George Thomas, a lecturer in Gaya Teacher Training Institute)

The statement above inspired the idea of doing this study. The selection of materials for the literature paper in the teacher training institutes in Malaysia has always been a point of discussion among the lecturers of the institutes. The relevance, suitability and appropriateness

of material selected for the literature lessons have always been the aspects in question. In recent years, the issue of selection has become one of the major discussions since the introduction of the literature component in the English language syllabus in secondary schools in Malaysia which somehow affect the selection of materials for literature lessons in the teacher training institutes.

Teacher training institutes work hand in hand with schools, as the product, the trainee teachers, will be placed in various schools in various areas for teaching practice and then for placement as soon as they completed the training. Due to this, the trainees need to keep abreast with the changes in the curriculum and the syllabus. This includes the knowledge and the ability to teach the literature component to secondary school students.

The Foundation Course

The foundation course aims to equip secondary year five school leavers selected for this programme with the language and study skills essential for undergraduate study. It serves as a bridging course between secondary school education and tertiary education. Students on successful completion of this four-semester (year one and year two) course would gain entry into the B. Ed. Link degree programme specializing in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). This course also aims to develop a sound level of English proficiency, to broaden and deepen their knowledge in relevant content areas and to enhance their creative and critical thinking skills. This course recognizes the fact that students will undertake a critical part of their academic studies in a local tertiary institution and need to be adequately prepared for the demands of the new academic and social environment.

The Literature Component

This component aims to develop students' interest in the reading works in English and their abilities as readers, writers, speakers and listeners of the English Language. It also aims to help students read and appreciate literary as well as non-literary texts in English and to understand how language is used for different text purposes.

This component is designed to develop students' interest in English Literature and to deepen their understanding of language used for literary use and improve their understanding and skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening in English. It also provides a framework for students to enhance their interpersonal, informational and aesthetic domains.

This component involves the study of a wide range of works from the major literary genres – through written texts and other media, for example, audio-video recordings, CD ROMs and the Internet. The selected texts cover a variety of literary styles and trends, setting and themes. The selected texts will also vary in length and complexity, allowing students to gain confidence as the course proceeds.

The course is structured in two phases. In the first phase, students will be sensitized to the aesthetic aspects of language through a range of texts. The second phase involves a detailed study of literary texts. The texts chosen are seen as accessible to the students and will encourage independent reading. It also has socio cultural relevance to the students and the texts have sufficient variety of style to develop students' appreciation of and response to the diversity within literature. It is an eclectic selection which will evolve in response to students' interests and needs. Selected texts will be studied in class. In addition, students will also be

encouraged to read widely on an individual basis. Literary texts will be selected from the following list of authors. Students will also be required to study a range of non-literary texts.

The Statement of the Problem

Keeping in mind the importance of mastering literature among young learners especially those intending to pursue higher education in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), the current understanding of literature among some of these students keeps them from realising their fullest ability in the subject of literature itself. This can be clearly seen among the secondary five school leavers that have enrolled in the Foundation Course in Gaya Teacher Training Institute.

These students appear to be weak in literature compared to other papers and literature is seen as a scary subject. They lack the knowledge and understanding in literature especially English Literature. In the recent test that they had, there was a bigger number of failures for the literature component compared to the other components. Speaking to the lecturers teaching this subject, the students' essays for the literature paper start at any point of the title, they did not show clear understanding, lacked depth and their arguments and ideas are very superficial.

There is no doubt that there could be a number of factors involved in this phenomenon. One of them could be the selection of the materials that they used in the course. We need to realise that selection of materials is crucial towards students understanding and development in learning literature. In schools, literature is only a section in the SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education) English paper, a sort of introduction to literature. It is not in depth and more often than not, it is the language that is tested not the students' skills in literature. Due to this the students often see the literature materials as mere reading comprehension passages without actually understanding what makes the materials literary materials. While discussing this study with some of the teachers that came for in-service training in Gaya Teacher Training Institute, I found that many teachers often avoid teaching literature as they feel that their students would not be able to understand the content of the literature materials and that most of the teachers themselves have problems understanding literature in the first place (Conversation with Mr. Khairul Nizam Abdul Latif, Puan Vera Busing and Puan Elisyanti, 2nd February, 2007). Therefore the issue of literature materials is not limited to students of the teacher training institutes only since students in schools are facing the same problem. The fear of learning literature seems to develop from the students' schooling years and it is brought forward when they come into the teacher training institute.

The current literature materials employed by teachers in Malaysia is pre-determined and selected by the Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education Malaysia. Some of these materials have been adapted and simplified to make it easier for the Malaysian students to learn them. The question is, when the materials are simplified, will it still be original? The works intended to be literary pieces will not be literary pieces anymore. And, in the case of the students that come in the institute for the Foundation Course, they will be in for a surprise when they eventually see the original literature pieces.

Based on my experience mixing with teachers in rural and urban schools and lecturers in teacher training institutions, literature can even be difficult for proficient language users, let alone the students in the Foundation Course. This situation has made me realise that the selection of literature materials used in the course is very important for helping the students to master the subject. Hence, these thoughts have finally led me to find out the students' perceptions on the literature materials used in the Foundation Course.

Aims of the Study

The general aim of this study is to explore the students' perceptions of the literature materials used in the literature component in the Foundation Course. Since the literature materials in the literature component can be classified into two, namely English Literature and Asian literature, I aim to explore which materials, as seen through the student's perceptions, suit them best and to find out why one material suits them better than the other. I also would like to find out which materials that they can understand faster, which materials that they can relate to, which materials that they like, and which materials that they are comfortable with.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- study the students' perceptions of the literature materials used in the literature component in the Foundation Course in Gaya Teacher Training Institute
- compare and contrast the students' perceptions of the two different types of literature materials used in the literature component of the Foundation Course literature syllabus
- explore the students' views on which literature materials suit them better for literature lessons

Research questions

The study specifically addresses the following questions:

- Which literature materials can the students relate to and why?
- Which literature materials can the students understand better, faster and why?
- Which literature materials are the students comfortable with and why?

Significance of the Study

The main significance of this research is that it would enable me to identify the nature of the literature materials used in the literature component in the Foundation Course. This would help to gauge whether the literature materials play a significant role in the development of the students' understanding of literature.

In addition it would clearly identify the strengths and weaknesses of the two types of materials used in the literature component which could enhance my awareness of the practicality and effectiveness of the selected materials. Such awareness would enable me to rationalize my suggestions during selection of literature materials for the literature component for other courses.

Limitation of Study

One of the limitations of this research is that the samples are purposefully selected and are mainly the students from the Foundation Course in Gaya Teacher Training Institute which has its own organisational culture. Therefore the sample group may not represent the situation for Foundation Course students in the other eight Teacher Training Institutions all around Malaysia.

Another limitation of the research could be the inconsistency in the students' willingness to be truthful in writing their reflective journals and also during the interview sessions as this study greatly relies on the students' own views and opinions. The reflective journal and the interview

sessions could be seen as a heavy workload (if compared to questionnaires) and the students may find commitment to be the samples of this study an extra chore as they need to attend to other important curricular and extra-curricular activities as well. As this issue deals with human nature therefore it is beyond my control.

The research is also limited to the fact that this study is conducted within the working environment of the institute which is under the jurisdiction of the Director of the institute and their English Studies lecturers. Such limitation in the working environment may not allow the students to be straight forward in their reflective journal and sharing sessions during the interviews and discussions. They always seem to be concerned with what the director or I would think of them. This may cause some kind of inhibition in their reflective journal and interview sessions.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

(Alderson and Urquhart, 1984) described a study conducted by M. S. Steffensen and C. JoagDev in University of Wisconsin. The study which is called 'Cultural Knowledge and Reading' examined the way in which highly proficient readers of English process texts when reading. The subjects from India and the United States were given two parallel texts to be read; one, an Indian wedding and the other, American wedding. They were then asked to recall the texts. What they recalled was they analysed for the types of errors made and for the details that they remembered, in order to ascertain whether cultural background made a difference.

From this research, a conclusion was made that in reading, cultural background knowledge is extremely important in comprehension. If readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer, they can easily understand what is said in the text and also make the necessary inferences about what is implicit, rather than stated. Schemata is the abstract cognitive structures which incorporate generalized knowledge (as in the case of the two different weddings) about the roles of the bride and groom and other family members, what clothing is traditionally worn, who is invited, where the wedding is held, what rituals form part of the ceremony and so on. Obviously, these schemata will differ cross-culturally.

In another study by Abu-Rabia (1996), the Israeli-Druze students' reading comprehension in Hebrew was investigated. The sole purpose of this study was to look at the students' comprehension in Hebrew as a second language as related to their attitudes and cultural background and their interest in the material.

The Druze are especially unique in Israel because they are culturally and linguistically an Arab minority, but they are highly identified with the Israeli-Jewish destiny. In this study, seventy-six Druze were selected as the participants. They were given questionnaires on attitudes on learning Hebrew, questionnaires on individual interests, cultural stories of the Jews and Arabs and on each story, ten multiple-choice. It was found out that there is a high positive attitudes towards learning Hebrew and towards Israeli Society. However, the subjects revealed higher positive interest in reading the culturally Arab stories than the culturally Jewish stories, and their reading comprehension scores accorded with the preference. The conclusion is that cultural familiarity with the text and readers' individual interest in text are related and essential variables in second language learning.

METHOD

Participants

In this study, I will select purposive samples that are sufficient to provide maximum insight and understanding to what I am studying. As Guba and Lincoln (1981: 276) state:

“Sampling is almost never representative or random but purposive, intended to exploit competing views fresh perspectives as fully as possible. Sampling stops when information becomes redundant rather than when subjects are representatively sampled.”

The participants of this study were twenty one boys and twenty nine girls who were going through the Foundation Course in Gaya Teacher Training Institute. They had been selected for the course through written examination and interviews by the Teacher Education Division at the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. These students made up two classes whereby the first group (second year students) has fourteen boys and thirteen girls and the second (first year students) has sixteen girls and seven boys. The students come from various states throughout the country. All of them gained a minimum entry requirement which is Sijil Persekolahan Malaysia (SPM) also known as Malaysian Certificate of Education. Their SPM English language scores range from A1 to B. Although these students have excellent grades in the national examination, they can only be considered a high intermediate group. This is noticed through their performance in class activities and in their written assignments. Most of these students have almost the same level of proficiency.

At present, these students are attending a Foundation Course to prepare them for entry into one of the local universities for their Bachelor of Education degree in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). In the Foundation Course, the students are exposed to a variety of subjects but the core components are Social Studies, English Studies, Language Development and Language Description. One of the reasons that this group of students is chosen is because they are the only group in the institution that learns literature per se. They are learning literature as a subject in the full sense of the word. Another reason for this group of students to be selected for this study is because they are considered to be the most proficient group (in English) in the whole institution.

Instruments

Journal Writing

I have chosen journal writing as an instrument due to the fact that this study deals with adolescent education and adolescents. I believe that writing promotes thinking and understanding, therefore;

“Think of writing then not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message. Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn’t have started out thinking. Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive. You make available to yourself something better than what you’d be stuck with if you’d actually succeeded in making your meaning clear at the start”.

(Elbow, 1996: 25)

Here, I feel that through journal writing the students will be able to reflect on the literature materials that they have learnt in class and at the same time put into practice the language that they are learning in the Foundation Course. In addition, through journal writing, the students will be able to present me with data which may be useful for this study without any inhibitions of any kind that they might feel during the face to face interview sessions. These journals can also be used to study the students' understanding on the literature materials, their perceptions of certain types of materials and also to identify emerging issues in learning the literature materials in their literature lessons.

The journal writing element in this research has no fixed format with only the date need to be mentioned. The participants are encouraged to form their own creative way of presenting their thoughts, feelings and perceptions. These journals need not focus on spelling, punctuation, syntax, and usage, the students only need to focus 'cooking and growing' their ideas and insights. Writing a journal entry is a creative, intellectual, and an emotional process. There is also no word limit for their writing. However the journals need to be treated as public document whereby they need to share their journal entry at any moment with other students and me.

I have instructed the participants to write about which materials most interests, relates to and moves them in their literature lessons. I feel that assuming the questions, insights, feelings and imagination are exciting to them, journal writing need not be busywork or drudgery. Since everyone gets stuck now and then, I have introduced certain suggestions that may help the participants to jump out of a journal rut;

- Extend/Apply-grasp the ideas and pursue the implications of the ideas with regard to a specific situation or example.
- Connect/Compare-relate the support to what you have read, discussed, experienced and expect in the future.
- Agree/Disagree-to the ideas presented creatively
- Question-raise intelligent questions and speculate on them.
- Synthesize-pull together ideas and examples from diverse sources and pose a unifying idea, insight.
- Inform-share relevant information, evidence, facts, quotations, clippings, details and other data.

(Fulwiler, 1988:10)

The main limitation in using journal is that the students may find it difficult to write. They may need a long time in trying to compose their essays by looking for appropriate words and structures. Although I have insisted that correct grammar is not necessary, being students of TESL, they may go through the mill before passing up their journals so that they would not look less proficient.

In addition, the students may not really write what they truly feel as they fear it may offend some lecturers and me, thus they may only write what they expect I am trying to explore and discover. This would jeopardise the reliability and validity of the data.

Interviews

Interviewing is used widely by researchers as a means of gathering information. As a pointed out by Keats (1993), there are no restrictions in using interviews. It depends on certain objects.

Keats (1993) also pointed out that sociologist, social workers, welfare workers, anthropologist, and health researches are all frequent users of interviews as a method for gathering data.

Many researchers choose to use interviews as a research tool because the questions can be tailored to the requirements of the interviewer and devised to suit the experience of the respondents as well as the subject matter (Keats, 1993).

Interviewing has been used as the research tool for this study. Although it may sound simple, one has to bear in mind that there are a number of processes such as observation, memory, logical inference, concept acquisition, categorization, and reciprocity. It is important to decide whether the data obtained is reliable since there are several factors that influence the respondents such as the time of day the interview takes place, the place the interview is carried out and the subject of the interview.

Being a small scale research, I have limited the number of respondents to ten students. The interview is carried out on one-to-one basis. Their views and opinions are the main basis for this study. These students have been chosen as the respondents for this research because they are the people who are directly involved with learning literature per se. In spite of possible pitfalls, this instrument is used because it would be easier for me to clarify questions as well as asking the respondent to elaborate on their opinions and views. Having an interview on a one-to-one basis makes the interviewer and interviewee feel at ease and they are able to communicate more freely. I decided against group interviews because opinions and views from one respondent might influence the responses of the others. Group interviewing often tends to lead the session into a formal situation in which answers given will be restricted and there will be less chance for the respondents to elaborate on their points.

There are several advantages of using interviews as a research tool. Interviews are more direct than questionnaires because I can receive an instant response as well as gaining a variety of opinions. In interviews, respondents are not restricted when interpreting and answering question. Therefore, I am able to gather different opinions from them.

The response received in interviews is more personal when the interview is done on a one-to-one basis. I can get to know the respondents as opposed to questionnaires which tend to be anonymous and sometimes cannot be trusted to be true and honest. In interviews (one-to-one basis), the researcher can distinguish whether or not the responses given reflect the real views and opinions of the respondents by the speed, fluency and manner of delivery of the answer and external clues such as body language.

Interviews allow the respondents to provide the interviewer with more comprehensive answers since they are not restricted to short answers. In contrast to questionnaires that restrict respondents to short answers and provide little space for open-ended question, interviews allow the respondents to expand on their views and opinions and express their feelings on certain matters.

Often, it is quite difficult to gain a detailed view, especially when the researcher is using questionnaires. In contrast, interviews provide the opportunity for me to pursue the points discussed. The respondents can be asked or allowed to clarify their views and opinions on the subject involved.

Another advantage of using interviews as a research tool is that the questions can be rephrased or reworded during the interview session itself to suit the respondents. This also enables me to

clarify questions as well as guiding the respondents into giving expected and more explicit responses.

The *'semi structured interview'* (Wragg, 1995:10) is chosen mainly because only 10 students will be chosen at random and the time factor did not present it self as a problem. The semi-structured interview is also chosen because I *"could pursue any interesting new line of enquiry that develops, while at the same time having a planned agenda to refer to"* (Wragg, 1995:10). The flexibility factor gave the edge needed to probe for more specific answers as the journals would not have provided me with the opportunity to do so. Finally, the interview would give the opportunity for the use of complex questions, and questions can be clarified if necessary.

The interviews are scheduled to be carried after looking through the journals. The questions for the interviews come from the emerging issues and ideas in their journals. The questions in the interview sessions are designed to explore the students' perceptions of the literature materials used in their literature lessons. The questions are also designed to collect information on the different types of literature materials that they are learning, how they feel about them, the differences between them and which one they feel comfortable learning. This will also allow me to identify the problems they have learning these materials in their literature lessons. In addition these questions could also investigate the students' previous knowledge in learning literature and the cultural differences these materials may have and whether these differences affect the students' understanding of the literature materials. This information could then help to gauge whether cultural background and previous knowledge play a role in learning literature. Finally, the questions may be able to give a detailed picture of their perceptions of the literature materials that they are learning in the Foundation Course. Although there are many advantages to gathering information using this instrument, interviewing respondents has also a number of limitations and disadvantages.

As to avoid certain limitation that could occur due to the frailty of human memory (Wragg, 1995), participants are informed earlier and a list of probable questions is given to each of them. Questions which made the students feel uncomfortable would either be cancelled or reformulated, therefore increasing the reliability of the questions and answers.

The main limitation upon using this instrument could occur if the researcher did not record the information given by the participants of the study, when they did not wish to be recorded, as accurately as possible. However, I believe that I can record the views and I believe that I can keep the information accurate and retrievable (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Question in interviews which normally are the open-ended type can sometimes make it difficult for the researcher to analyze them. This is due to the variety of views and opinions from different respondents. The interviewer sometimes has no control over the response. One respondent might give a longer answer compared to the others. In this case, the interviewer has to be selective with the points which are to be taken into account and which are to be left out. Some respondents might get too personal in a certain subject and if they are not guided by the interviewer, the consequences will be the change of subject discussed or the interview going out of topic. Some of the responses might not even be related to the subject of the interview. Apart from being too personal, some respondents tend to get too emotional as well when expressing their views and opinions. The interviewer, in this situation, has to make a quick judgement about the way to handle such respondents (such as interrupting and repeating the main points mentioned and proceeding to the next question) (Berg, 2004).

Human factors such as and tiredness could invalidate interviewing as a suitable tool for the research. Information given by the respondents could be influenced by their conditions, resulting in incomplete information or lack of detail (Berg, 2004).

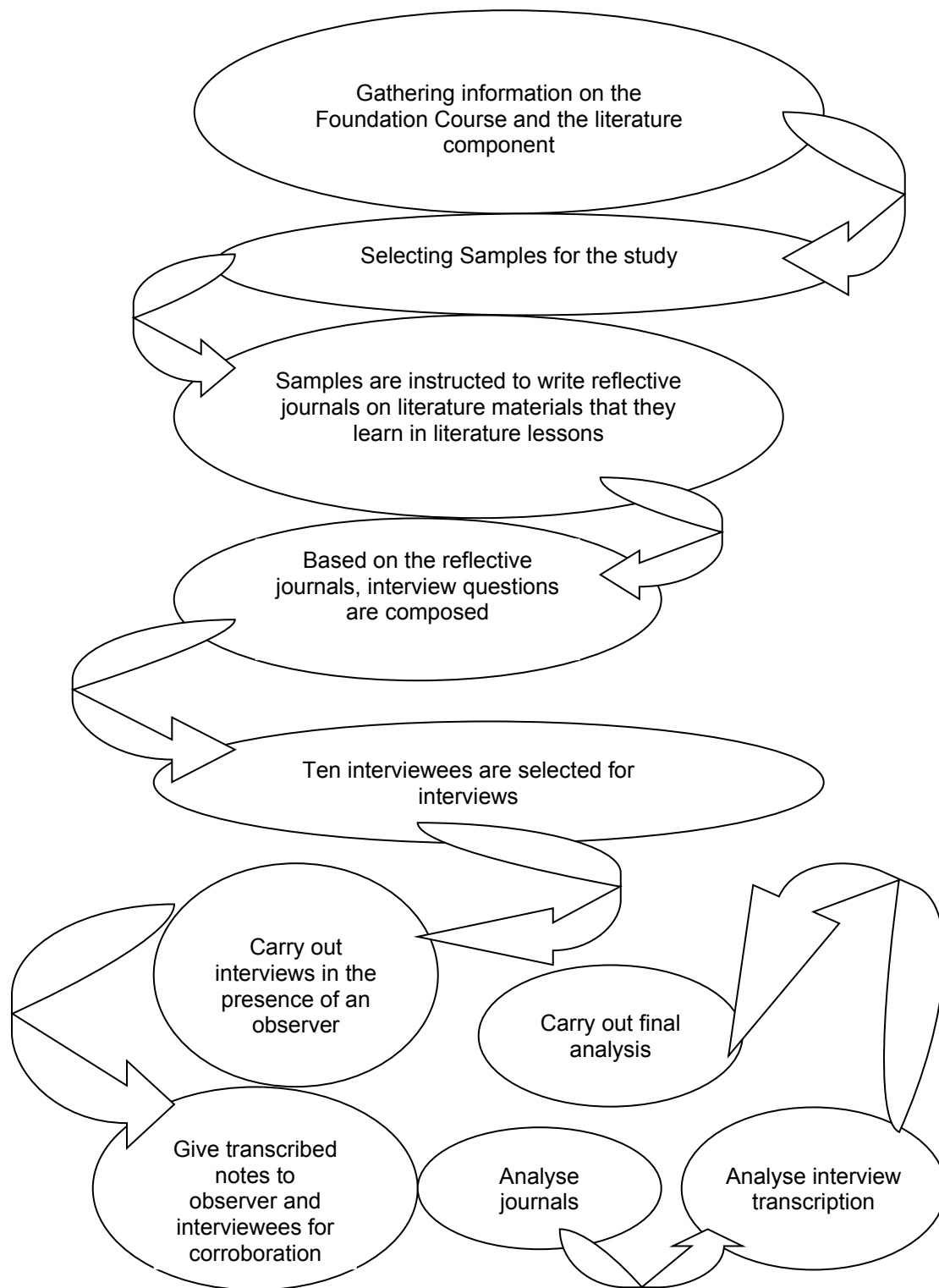
The interview should take place at a convenient time of the day for the respondents. If the interview is carried out, for example, at the end of the day, the respondents might rush through answering the questions. As a consequence, little information would then be gained from the interview session. In order to overcome this problem, the researcher should make exact appointments with the respondents (Berg, 2004)

A suitable place is required to carry out an interview session. Setting is important. A quiet room is very appropriate to ensure that there are no interruptions or noises to disturb the respondents. This also ensures privacy for any sensitive question or honest answers (Berg, 2004). The interviews were successful, however, there were some problems that had to be faced before and during the interview sessions.

Some students were not being very co-operative. They kept on changing the appointments dates and there were at times, they did not turn up for the interview sessions. I had to reschedule for another time. Often, they would suggest a time which was not very convenient for me. Of course, I could not blame them for this problem since they are fully occupied with their studies. Some students refused to be interviewed even though they have agreed earlier. They did not mention the reasons for refusing to be interviewed.

Another problem that I faced was finding a suitable place to interview the students. The institution is always noisy (students' voices and noises from lawnmowers) and the interview could only be done during college hours since the students were reluctant to have the interview sessions outside college hours and at their convenience. There was a place in the institute that was suitable for the interview sessions but it was always occupied by the students and I had to ask permission to have the place to my self and had to book it before hand. The students involved often changed the time for the interview at the very last minute. Having the room booked in advanced is preferable but, as in this case, it does not guarantee the interview will take place.

Research Procedures and Data Collection



The study is carried out based on the research objectives and research questions that I have designed. In order to do this effectively, the task of gathering information on the students' perception on literature materials is carried out for about two months. As the information was being gathered, the idea on the most appropriate research approach and method also began to take form. The idea was based on past studies and the research questions of this study. Thus the qualitative approach came to be the design of the study.

Since this study is looking at a certain component in a certain programme., the first step is to gather enough background information on the programme (Foundation Course) itself with an emphasis on the component to be studied (English Studies a.k.a. literature). The next step of the research procedure was to select the appropriate sample. This led to the selection of the purposive sample, the Bachelor of Education Foundation Course students in Gaya Teacher Training Institute, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The sample appeared to be suitable as they are the only group who studies literature as a subject.

This step was then followed by the decision on the instruments that would effectively present data that can be analysed to answer the research questions. The instruments decided were the journal writing and the semi-structured interviews.

The study then came into motion as the samples were instructed to write a reflective journal on the literature materials that they are learning in their literature lessons. The journals were then collected and analysed to identify emerging themes and pattern of the students' perceptions of the literature materials. Issues are then drawn out from these themes and patterns that would enable to aid me in answering the research questions. Some of the prominent themes are then used as the basis for the questions for the interviews. Interviews were then carried out with the presence of an observer to ensure that questions and questioning techniques were not biased. The recorded interviews were then transcribed. Before the analysis of the interviews was carried out, the transcriptions were presented to the observer and the interviewees to make sure that what they had said was transcribed correctly.

Data Analysis

In this research the data collected from the two instruments are analysed simultaneously. In order to validate and increase the trustworthiness of the data, I use the data gathered from these two sources to check the credibility of the data being gathered.

The data from the interviews and journals are analysed the moment it comes in so that I can continue to reflect on the meaning of what I have heard and seen, develop hunches about what it means and seek to confirm or reject those hunches. This process of data analysis is inductive. I would continue to reduce and reconstruct the data through the process of categorization.

All of these analyses will then be used to answer the research questions designed at the beginning of the study.

The triangulation of all the data would then be used to enhance the probability that the interpretations are credible. In order to increase the dependability of the study, I would maintain an audit trail of materials that documents how the study was conducted, including what was done, when and why. Through this method other researchers could attest to the dependability of procedures employed and to examine whether the findings are confirmable. The diagram below illustrates the process of analysis of data.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Culture in literature materials and how it affects understanding

Students find it easier to understand Asian literature because of the similarities of the cultural background that they have between them and the materials. They also believe that the shared culture between them and the Asian literature materials is one of the prominent factors to aid understanding at a speedy rate. It is also found that the understanding of the overall culture of materials, regardless of the language, helps the students to understand the materials better.

Materials students can relate to due to familiarity of content

Apart from culture, familiarity of content in the Asian literature materials also helps the students in understanding the materials that they are learning better. Something which is familiar to them does not need a lot of time to understand or to figure out.

Materials students are interested in

It is found out that the students are very much interested in English literature because it is different from what they are used to.

Language in literature materials and how it affects understanding

The language used in Asian literature is one of the factors mentioned by the students as to why they find Asian literature materials easier to understand compared to English literature. The use of everyday words, uncomplicated sentence structures and simple language in most Asian literature materials are some of the aspects mentioned in the students' reflective journals and also in the interviews.

Materials students are comfortable with

It is found out that, although English literature is interesting to them, they are comfortable with Asian literature due to combination of factors such as culture, familiarity of content, relativity (things they can relate to), style and the language used in the materials.

How previous knowledge affects understanding of literature materials

In the interviews, it is identified that previous knowledge is another factor that makes Asian literature the materials that the students understand quicker. It is said that previous knowledge helps them understand the Asian literature materials because their past experiences and knowledge for example, things such as the weather (a whole year round of summer in Malaysia makes it hard from the start to imagine the cold of winter).

DISCUSSION

Cultural background of the literature materials plays an important role in contributing to the utmost understanding and awareness of students. With the cultural background, the students can easily predict and guess the content of the literature materials that they are reading. 'Participants better comprehended and remembered passages that were similar in some way to their native culture' (Ammon, 1987; Carrell, 1981; Johnson, 1981, 1982; Langer, Barolome, Vasquez & Lucas, 1990; Shimoda, 1989). It was found out readers comprehended texts about their own cultures more accurately than the other' (Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984). Apart from that, familiarity is also significant to guarantee students' understanding of literature materials. The story that depicts familiar culture and customs, beliefs and social settings is easily comprehended by students because it concerns of something that they are familiar with. So, in one way or another, it accelerates their understanding of the particular literature materials.

'Results of recall protocols suggested that prior cultural experience prepared readers for comprehension of the familiar information about Halloween on the passage' (Johnson, 1982). Also, the scope discussed in literature materials are utterly wide. Thus, this variation may attract students to explore the materials. A good literature materials should be able to bring new things to the students so that they can explore it deeper. The material should not be complicated to be comprehended. However, some students prefer challenges in understanding literature materials because as mentioned above, the various scope depicted in literature materials attract certain students. 'By encouraging students to use the good reader strategy of "touching as a few bases as necessary", they may "apply meaning to a text regardless of the degree to which they successfully utilize syntactic, semantic or discourse constraints' (Hudson, 1982:186).

As we all know, Asian students use English as a second language. Therefore, it comes to our minds whether literature helps us to teach our students learn a foreign language. Cook (1997) defines the concept as 'a mental representation of a typical instance' which helps people (in this context, students) to make sense of the world more quickly because 'people understand new experiences by activating relevant schemes in their mind' (p.86). In certain cases of language in our daily life, we tend to misheard or misread something. Therefore, there is influence of schemata on language processing and memory. When we're talking about Foreign Language Literacy [FLL] that believed to be difficult, it goes to Goodman (1967), who posited that it is like 'psycholinguistic guessing game,' Widowson (1983) and Carnell and Esiterhold (1983, 1984). Students are comfortable with the materials that has similar background of their own. Some schemata are said to be culturally specific, presumably such cultural schemata could be either of the formal or content type. For example, much has been made of the way different cultures organise language into meaningful written texts. However, the approach of different members from different cultures may vary through reading, interpreting, and using these texts. What if those things are non-existence in their cultures? Oller (1995) argues that relatively unknown abstract types are logically necessary for the theory to be completed. There is no smooth, complete, complementary synthesis processing. Schema theory approaches in the classroom may well boost comprehension, but they may not boost linguistic processing the way well distract students from actually trying to fluently read or listen to the whole text. Somehow, the difference of what the writer tries to convey and what had been understood become a major problem and uncomfotability. Readers sometimes also feel that they comprehend a text, but have a different interpretation to the author (See Hudson 1982: 187). Humour is particularly lead to misinterpretation as was discovered when a text entitled 'It's a Muggler's Game in Manhattan' (Greenall and Siman 1986: 197-8) was given to advanced L2 readers (Japanese). Although the text appeared humourous to the native-speaker teacher, it was found 'scary' and 'shocking' by the Japanese students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the experience gained carrying out this study, I feel strongly feels that selection of literature materials should be made a talking point and focus for analysis in the secondary classrooms and in institutions of higher learning. It is a general fact that Malaysian students are exposed to three types of literature, English, American and Asian literature. By doing so, teachers, tutors and lecturers can sensitize the students as to the variation of texts and the differences that they have in them. This means teachers and their students would need to carry out comparative and critical analysis and reflect on the similarities and differences in the texts that they are teaching and learning in the literature lessons. This would be very useful as an added advantage in teaching and learning experience.

A similar study to this can be carried out in a different context for example in a secondary school. It would be interesting to find out if similar findings would result bearing in mind that literature is only a small section in the English language paper and it is not taught per se.

I also would like to recommend further studies in the cultural aspects of the literature materials. A different approach can be carried out to further understand the role of culture in literature materials. Students can be given materials laced with two different types of cultural background; one similar to their own, another, foreign. These students could be tested on these materials. The results of these tests can then be compared as to figure out whether cultural background plays a big role in comprehension.

A correlational study would also be an interesting activity to be carried out. It would be interesting to see if cultural background in texts affects performance in a test or an examination. This would help to figure out whether cultural background in literature materials enhances or hinders performance in examinations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study I have conducted, it is clear that Asian literature materials is the students' choice in terms of comprehension. They feel Asian literature materials are easily understood and they can also relate to them. This study has revealed certain factors contributing towards understanding their choice of materials. Cultural background, familiarity of content, and previous knowledge are some of the major factors identified that led the students to choose Asian literature as their choice.

The students are purposefully selected and are mainly from the two already intact classes of the B. Ed Foundation Course in Gaya Teacher Training Institute in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Therefore the sample group may not represent the Foundation Course students in the other eight Teacher Training Institutions all around Malaysia who are twinning with other local universities in the country. I feel that the findings of this study are significant for my students, as they are the ones who are learning these two types of materials. The students participating in this study would have realized the importance of literature and its benefits. I myself feel that I have equally benefited from the exposure of this study, as I would be able to suggest the types of literature materials that could cater for the needs of and suitable for the students.

In the Malaysian context, where exposure to English is limited let alone literature, more thinking is needed especially in terms of the selection of materials.

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