

READING COMPREHENSION OF MULTI-ETHNIC LITERATURE IN A MULTIETHNIC CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: *Teaching reading comprehension in a classroom with multiethnic students needs teachers who understand the differences in cultural background that the students brought from home. Teachers need to provide reading experiences that reflect their student's cultural beliefs, behaviors and experiences to enhance students' comprehension ability of the texts that they read in classroom. This paper presents findings of a study on the effects of multiethnic literature toward students reading comprehension. Using multiethnic literacy materials in English as a second language, classroom is a step in bridging the gap between the language and the students. At the same time, multiethnic literacy materials will give the student opportunity to foster appreciation of their culture and the culture of people from other ethnic who live in the country. Comprehension of readers in the study to multiethnic literature were significantly effected by the cultural backgrounds from which they come. The study suggests that students should be provided with opportunity improve their reading comprehension by reading literacy materials that reflect their own ethnic background.*

KEY WORDS: *reading comprehension, multiethnic literature, multicultural education, ethnic background, and reading in English as a second language.*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching reading comprehension in a classroom with multiethnic students needs teachers who understand the differences in cultural background that the students brought from home. Teachers need to provide reading experiences that reflect their student's cultural beliefs, behaviors and experiences to enhance students' comprehension ability of the texts that they read in classroom. In other words, to facilitate learning to read and acquiring the skill of comprehension, teachers need

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to use reading materials that help students think and learn about their own culture and language learning experiences within their own homes and communities.

This paper discusses the effects of reading materials to reading comprehension process of students who come from different ethnic in Malaysia undergraduate English classroom.

MULTIETHNIC EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN MULTIETHNIC CLASSROOM

Education was seen as important for the nation in order to bring together the children who come from diverse cultural and ethnic background. In Malaysia, children go to school under the national education system which was geared toward a common Malaysian outlook through a common curriculum for all types of schools. From the time of its independence, the multiracial Malay state declared that it would use the education system to foster national unity and bring about national development in the Malaysia Five Year Plans, 1966-1970 (Puteh, 2006:23). The Education Ordinance of 1957 requires the system to introduce the study of national language (Malay) in every type of school and all the major subjects such as science, mathematics, history and geography also have to be taught in this language after 1982 (Ministry of Education in Malaysia, 1989).

However, English still plays important roles in the educational system of this country. The ordinance decreed that English to be taught as a compulsory subject in schools at all primary and secondary levels and to be used as the medium of instruction in certain courses at the public higher learning institutions. However the turn around of the policy happened in 2001, when English was made the medium of instruction in the process of teaching and learning science and mathematics in Malaysia. This situation has caused concern to many educationist, academics, politicians, leaders in the society and parents (Asmah Omar, 2002).

Back to the root cause of the sudden implementation policy was the deterioration of English among the young Malaysian who have gone through national education curriculum for eleven years before they enter college. English language curriculums, classroom instructions and materials development at all levels of schooling are some of the important issues which need to be addressed by Ministry of Education's officers who are involved in curriculum development, teachers who play the role of implementing the curriculum in the classroom, and school texts book authors who prepare materials for students in classroom.

Using multiethnic materials in English classroom is a step in bridging the gap between the language and the students (Jacobson, 2002). At the same time multiethnic materials will give the student opportunity to foster appreciation of their culture and the culture of people from other ethnic who live in the country. While recognizing the importance of English as an international language, this issue becomes more complicated as people fear losing their culture and language. Multiethnic literature that teachers bring into the classroom will somehow helps to eradicate this fear.

READING MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Multiethnic literature can be defined as literary writing that reflects the customs, beliefs and experiences of people of differing ethnic or sub-ethnic in a country with population who comes from various cultural backgrounds. It can be the work of the author originally in the mainstream language or the translation of the work of the author who wrote in their own native language to the mainstream language (Chew, 2007:10). In Malaysia, quite a number of literary works from the Malay, Chinese and Indian author being published and available in the book store. However, not many of these texts were being used in classroom as the text in reading comprehension classroom.

Literary texts were often being used in reading comprehension lesson, both primary and secondary school curricula. Literary works contribute to students' literary appreciation and language skills across the school years. The literary works that were often being used in teaching reading have been justified as a means of inculcating moral and social attitudes. However, the history of the teaching of English reports dissatisfactions with the lack of success in achieving the humanistic goals of literature teaching that schools profess. Teachers also failed to understand that those aims are in conflict with the continuing emphasis on specific knowledge or content of the language (Applebee, 1974). In teaching English, the emphasis on communicative skills is no doubt, the most suitable approach to meet the objectives to impart basic skills and knowledge with two specific aims. The first aim is to give opportunity to the students to use the language in their classroom tasks and in specific activities. The second is to enable them to improve their skills and increase their proficiency of the language to be used for specific needs.

The body of literature regarding students' cultural backgrounds and reading ability indicates significant relationships exist between a reader's culture and the way he or she responds (Baker, 1994). Since reading is one of the effective ways to learn and acquire a language, teachers should put more emphasis on the reading materials that they use and the activities that they carry out in the classroom. Using multiethnic literature, especially when accompanied by reacting and dialoging with the text, could provide a significant impact on readers' interaction with texts. The use of literary texts from various cultures may act as a tool for enjoyment and motivate students to participate in classroom discussion, and help teachers to probe a particular cultural background of the authors whose works are examined. It also "pulls in" students' cultural background and experiences (Reissman, 1994). Such an interactive reading activity will not only enhance literacy but also promote empathy and inter-group respect among students in a classroom.

Most studies on culture in reading and language education looked at the relationship between readers' culture and interpretation of text or response to materials (Walker-Dalhouse, 1992; and Sinha, 1996). While Reynolds et al. (1982) in their study examined the relationship between a reader's culture and comprehension of or recall of information from a literary text. R.C. Reissman (1994) explored the awareness of cultural response to stimulate multiethnic

understanding among ethnically diverse students. These studies support the relationship that exists between readers' culture and comprehension and recall of information from literary texts. Therefore, it is important for the English teacher to use multiethnic materials in the classroom to enhance students' understanding and interest in reading and interest in learning the language.

Responding to multiethnic literature is one of the activities that can be practiced in the English language arts classroom. Students could talk about the books that they have read, discussing with peers about the characters, the events and the settings of the story. They can express their ideas, whether they like the books or dislike certain parts of the story, and they can write to the author, share their feeling about characters and share their real life experience with the others in relation to the text that they have read. With such activity, students are given opportunities to develop a sense of ownership, pride and respect for learning (Hansen, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to discover how readers in learning of English as a second language respond to multiethnic literature. Two questions are to be answered in this study. The questions are: (1) What are the reading comprehension scores of readers reading literary texts written by an author of their own ethnic and literary texts written by authors of other ethnics?; and (2) Is there any significant difference in the reading comprehension scores among readers who read a literary text written by an author of their own ethnic and literary texts written by authors of other ethnic?

METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study were drawn from students who are enrolled in Bachelor degree program at a public university in Malaysia. Specifically, they are enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program in the Teaching of English as a Second Language at the Faculty of Education. There were 164 student teachers participated in this study.

Four texts were chosen for the study. These texts were taken from four novels by different authors: *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan's (Chinese); *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya (Indian); *Caught in the Middle* by Shahnnon Ahmad (Malay); and *The Wedding* by Grace Lumpkin (European). These texts were chosen because they have a common theme, the wedding customs that are being practiced by the four different ethnic groups. The theme was chosen because weddings have a lot of significance in the customs and traditions of all the ethnic groups in this country. It is a common experience to every participant in this study regardless of gender or ethnic backgrounds. They might have experienced their own wedding day or they may have attended the wedding ceremony of families or friends.

Each text was followed by seven comprehension questions. The emphasis of the questions was on how readers will respond to the text that they have read and they were given opportunity to respond in any way they like. The questions were arranged in an order to elicit participants' responses from general idea to texts' specific. Responses given by participants to the questions will provide the data to answer

research questions. The scoring of reading comprehension was given according to the depth of the response for each question. Each response was given a scoring between 0 to 4 points.

The analysis of data provides empirical evidences to answer each research question posed in this study. It provides the percentage of reading comprehension scores for each ethnic group. The Chi-square tests were used to look at the relationship between the readers' responses and their cultural background in regard to reading multicultural literature. One-way analysis of variance and the Tukey HSD multiple comparison tests were used to look at the differences between the mean of readers scores and their cultural background in reading multicultural literary texts.

FINDINGS: **A. READING COMPREHENSION**

Analysis of data in this section provides empirical evidence to test four null hypotheses, H : 1a, H : 1b, H : 1c, and H : 1d, each noted that there is no significant relationship between the reading comprehension scores of the readers and their ethnic backgrounds in reading multiethnic literature written by a Malay, Chinese, Indian and European author.

Table 1
 Score Levels of Readers Reading Multiethnic Literary Text Written by a Malay, Chinese, Indian and European Author

	Malay % (N)	Chinese % (N)	Indian % (N)	Row Total % (N)
<i>Malay Author:</i>				
Not Satisfactory	4.7 (4)	8.6 (3)	15.2 (5)	7.8 (12)
Satisfactory	34.9 (30)	42.9 (15)	57.6 (19)	41.6 (64)
Good	54.7 (47)	48.6 (17)	24.2 (8)	46.8 (72)
Excellent	5.8 (5)	----	3.0 (1)	3.8 (6)
<i>Chinese Author:</i>				
Not Satisfactory	39.5 (34)	----	24.2 (8)	27.3 (42)
Satisfactory	48.8 (42)	25.7 (9)	60.0 (20)	46.1 (71)
Good	11.6 (10)	60.0 (21)	15.2 (5)	23.4 (36)
Excellent	----	4.3 (5)	----	3.2 (5)
<i>Indian Author:</i>				
Not Satisfactory	43.0 (37)	20.0 (7)	----	28.6 (44)
Satisfactory	45.3 (39)	57.1 (20)	27.3 (9)	44.1 (68)
Good	11.6 (10)	20.0 (7)	51.5 (17)	22.1 (34)
Excellent	----	2.9 (1)	21.2 (7)	5.2 (8)
<i>European Author:</i>				
Not Satisfactory	75.6 (65)	54.3 (19)	42.4 (14)	63.6 (98)
Satisfactory	22.1 (19)	40.0 (14)	48.5 (16)	31.9 (49)
Good	2.3 (2)	5.7 (2)	9.1 (3)	4.5 (7)

Table 1 depicted the summary of the scores of reader's responses to four literary texts written by authors of different ethnic. The summary of the scores of readers' responses to multiethnic literature written by a Malay author shows that the largest percentage of Malay readers scored at the *Good* and *Excellent* levels in reading multiethnic literature written by a Malay author. The results from the Chi-square test show that there is a significant relationship at $p < .01$ between the comprehension scores of the readers and their cultural background in reading a text written by a Malay author.

The comprehension scores levels of readers' responses to multiethnic literature written by a Chinese author shows that the greatest percentage of Chinese readers scored at the *Good* and *Excellent* levels. The results from the Chi-square test show that there is a significant relationship at $p < .001$ between the comprehension scores of the readers and their cultural background in reading a text written by a Chinese author. The score levels of student teachers' responses to multiethnic literature written by an Indian author shows that the greatest percentage of the Indian student teachers scored at the *Good* and *Excellent* levels. The results from the Chi-square test show that there is a significant relationship at $p < .001$ between the scores of the readers and their cultural background in reading a text written by an Indian author.

The summary of the score levels of readers responses to multiethnic literature written by a European author shows that the greatest percentage of the Indian readers scored at the *Satisfactory* level. The results from the Chi-square test show that there is a significant relationship at $p < .05$ between the scores of the readers and their cultural background in reading a text written by a European author. These findings provide enough evidence to reject $H : 1a$, $H : 1b$, $H : 1c$ and $H : 1d$.

B. MEAN OF COMPREHENSION SCORES

Analysis of data in the second section provides empirical evidence to test four null hypotheses, $H : 2a$, $H : 2b$, $H : 2c$ and $H : 2d$, each noted that there is no significant difference between the mean comprehension scores of the readers and their cultural background in reading multiethnic literature written by a Malay, Chinese, Indian and European author.

Table 2 depicted a one-way ANOVA to compare the mean of scores of three groups of readers in reading a multiethnic literature written by a Malay, Chinese, Indian and European author. The table shows that there is a significant difference in the mean scores of the three groups at $p < .05$. It shows that the mean score of the Malay readers is the highest in reading a text written by a Malay author compared to the mean scores for the Chinese and Indian readers. The mean score of the Chinese readers was the highest in reading a text written by a Chinese author compared to the mean scores of the Malay and Indian readers. The mean score of the Indian readers was the highest in reading a text written by an Indian author compared to the mean scores of the Malay and Chinese readers. The mean score of the Indian readers was the highest in reading a text written by a European author compared to the mean scores of the Malay and Chinese readers. The Multiple

Range Tukey HSD test also shows that there is a significant difference between group means at $p < .05$ for all texts. These findings provide evidence to reject H : 2a, H : 2b, H : 2c and H : 2d.

Table 2
 One-Way ANOVA for Scores of Readers Responding to Multiethnic Literature
 Written by a Malay, Chinese, Indian and European Author

Source	p	DF	SS	MS	F
<i>Malay Author:</i>					
Between groups	2	5.3580	2.6790	5.8645	.0035
Within groups		151	68.9796	.45678	
Total		153	74.3377		
<i>Chinese Author:</i>					
Between groups	2	34.3236	17.1618	40.763	.0000
Within groups		151	63.5725	.4210	
Total		153	97.8961		
<i>Indian Author:</i>					
Between groups	2	37.4785	18.7392	39.1439	.0000
Within groups		151	72.2878	.4787	
Total		153	109.7662		
<i>European Author:</i>					
Between groups	2	4.3022	2.1511	6.9221	.0013
Within groups		151	46.9250	.3108	
Total		153	51.2273		

DISCUSSION

The results of statistical analysis to test H : 1a, H : 1b, H : 1c and H : 1d answered research question 1 in this study. The results of Chi-square test revealed that there is a significant relationship between the scores of readers and their cultural background in reading multiethnic literature. The Malay readers scored significantly higher than the Chinese and Indian readers in reading multiethnic literature written by a Malay author were. The Chinese readers scored significantly higher than the Malay and Indian readers in reading a text written by a Chinese author. The Indian readers scored significantly higher than the Malay and Chinese in reading a multiethnic text written by an Indian author. The scores of Indian readers were also significantly higher than the Malay and Chinese in reading a text written by a European author. This is possibly due to the Indian readers being more familiar with the Christian wedding ceremony that was depicted in the “Wedding” text. In their responses to this text, some of the Indian readers were making connection between the wedding in the text and their own or their family wedding experience in the church.

Analysis of variance to test H : 2a, H : 2b, H : 2c and H : 2d also showed that there is a significant difference in the mean scores of comprehension and their cultural backgrounds in reading texts written by different authors. These findings answered

research question 2 in this study. The mean score of Malay readers was significantly higher than that of the Chinese and Indian readers in reading multiethnic literary text written by a Malay author. The mean score of the Chinese readers was also significantly higher than that of the Malay and Indian readers in reading multiethnic literature written by a Chinese author. The mean score of Indian readers responding to multiethnic literature written by an Indian and a European author was also found to be significantly higher than that of the Malay and the Chinese readers. The results of the Tukey HSD tests revealed a significant difference between the mean scores of readers and their cultural background in reading all the four texts. These findings confirmed the previous findings that showed there is a significant relationship between the responses of readers in reading multiethnic literature written by author of their own ethnic and multiethnic literature written by authors of different cultural backgrounds.

The results of analysis of data in this section confirmed the results of previous research that examined the relationship between readers' culture and their interpretation of texts and responses to materials. Studies in this area have examined the relationship between readers' cultures and comprehension of or recall of information from literary texts (Reynolds *et al.*, 1982), and used the awareness of cultural response to stimulate multiethnic understanding among ethnically diverse students (Reissman, 1994). These studies support the relationship that exists between readers' culture and comprehension of /or recall of information from literary texts.

This study also demonstrated that reading material portraying different cultural backgrounds significantly affects the pattern of level of responses of readers. Reading material that is reflective of one's cultural background enhances the likelihood or probability of a higher level of comprehension. Those reader who read material about their own culture, demonstrated their ability to use synthesis of literal contents, their personal knowledge, their intuition and their imagination as the basis for conjectures or hypothesis. This study found that most readers scored at the inferential and evaluation levels when they interacted with text written by an author who came from their own ethnic backgrounds. This implied that reading materials that reflect readers' background helped to stimulate more divergent and creative conjecture and demanded their thinking at a higher level of judgment. It also helped them to make comparisons between the content of the text and the internal criteria, their experiences, knowledge or values that they have.

In many studies, students proved to be remarkably poor at reading between lines and drawing appropriate generalizations and extrapolations from what they read (Perkins, 1992). They seem puzzled at the request to explain or defend their points of view. As a result, responses to assessment items requiring explanation of criteria, analysis of text or defending judgment or point of view in general disappointing (National Assessment of Education Progress, 1981). Therefore it is important for teachers to diversify the use of reading materials in the teaching of English as a second language. Using multiethnic literature, especially when accompanied by reacting and dialoging with texts can have significant impact on readers' interaction with texts. The recent study has shown that the reader response

approach may serve as a tool to enjoyment and motivate classroom discussion in the teaching of English as a second language. It also helps teachers to overcome the problems faced by readers in reading second language reading materials, especially when making inferences, evaluations and appreciation of literary texts.

This study found that readers were making more intra textual link and extra textual link in their responses while reading text written by authors of their own culture compared to texts that were written by authors of other cultures. This finding provides a valuable indicator for understanding how readers process information that they gathered while reading different texts. This study also confirmed the role of readers in developing meaning from texts as an extension of their prior experience, past knowledge, past reading and listening, and more importantly their cultural pattern. This study suggests that to develop readers' interaction with texts, more frequently at a higher level, teachers should provide students with texts that contain more cultural content that students are more familiar with. The art of remembering is the art of thinking. Thinking is the ability to make connection between what we have in our mind and what is shown to us. The connection is thinking, and if we attend clearly to the connection, the connected thing will certainly be likely to remain within recall (James, 1983).

Generating questions for comprehension exercises, for example, should be more focused on developing student's ability to analyze and criticize the contents of the materials, making connections between classroom texts and other texts that they have read, and making connection between texts and their own real life experiences. Questions should be able to test student's ability to draw inferences, make evaluations and demonstrate appreciation of literary texts used by teachers in classrooms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the comprehensions of readers to multiethnic literature in this study were significantly affected by the cultural backgrounds from which they come. This study suggests that students should be provided with opportunity to improve their reading comprehension by reading literary texts that reflects their own ethnic background. They will understand the text better if the content were closely related with their own experiences and practice. Multiethnic literature provides readers with rich discussion of the nature of their own custom and everyday practice. By using multiethnic literature in the classroom, teachers may help students to respect the values of their own culture, raise their aspirations and expand their understanding of other people. As they begin to understand themselves, they begin to develop a feeling of self-esteem, and try to understand and appreciate their own culture and culture of others. At the same time these literary texts may develop students interest in reading and dialoging with the text that teacher used in classrooms.

The need for English instruction that emphasizes skills, know-how, reflectiveness, higher order questions and thinking are important, especially in a classroom with students who come from various ethnic groups. Teachers need to provide these students with literary experiences that reflect the culture from which

they come. Providing them with reading materials that act as a reflection of their culture may help to enhance their interest to learn English as a second language. It may help to bridge the gap between the language that they are not familiar with and the language that they are using in their everyday life. Therefore this study suggests that multiethnic literature should not only be widely used but also wisely used in English classrooms.

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