

Teachers' Construction of Meaning and Expansion of Ideas while Sharing Teaching Strategies during Teacher Literature Circles: A Malaysian School Context

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Received: 6 Dec 2016. Accepted: 27 Apr 2017 / Published online: 11 May 2017
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ABSTRACT

Studying literature can be challenging for ESL learners. When the new novel was introduced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 2015, the teachers' responses included concern over how they were going to teach their students who found literature difficult and boring. The teachers were also concerned that they would have to look for books to read and add to their own knowledge and understanding, apart from looking for new resources for tests and examination questions. Hence the researcher asked for volunteers to form a Teacher Literature Circle, an informal gathering of teachers to discuss a literary work on a regular basis, in order to facilitate better understanding of the text. Four teachers from an urban school participated in the study. The Teacher Literature Circle (TLC) discussions took place weekly for seven consecutive weeks, each session varying from two to four hours each. Four months after the TLC discussions had ended, the researcher interviewed the teachers. The purpose of the study was to find out how teachers made meaning of the new text during TLC discussions which may also have impacted their classroom teaching experiences and what went on in the classrooms as well as after the teaching was over. Data comprised the transcripts of every TLC discussion and the interview data of the teachers, 4 months later on, after they had completed the teaching of the new text. The findings revealed that from sharing teaching strategies during the TLC, the teachers brought these strategies into the classroom and together with their students' responses, built on their meanings from the time of the TLC. The teachers co-constructed meaning and expanded earlier ideas from the TLC.

Keywords: Teacher literature circles. Literature. Teaching strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Busy school days seldom give opportunities or time for teachers to talk socially or professionally. Present day school systems have set higher and higher standards and goals for student learning. However, the reform visions depend greatly on teachers to make the changes in classroom practices. It seems that despite the billions of dollars spent on professional development programs, these have been found to be fragmented, intellectually superficial and do not take into account what is known about how teachers learn (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

In 2010, a new cycle of literature texts were introduced into the Malaysian English Language Syllabus (Secondary Schools) by the Ministry of Education, thus situating the current study at a point of text- change with the need to understand the text and to prepare teachers for teaching the new text to students.

The site is an urban upper secondary school setting (Form Four and Form Five) in Malaysia. The situation is one where the students want to score well in all subjects at the year-end examination. Likewise, the teachers want to ensure that the students do well in the examinations. One of the ways to do so is for the teachers themselves to understand the text in order to teach it effectively to students. Since the texts were new (at that point in time), references were still uncertain and the teachers were willing to meet and discuss the text to gain as much as they could before going into the classrooms to teach.

Basically, TLCs, as defined by Daniels (1994, p.61) are “small temporary groups who have chosen to read and discuss the same work of literature.” TLCs are a mode for educators to get together and enjoy literature and the social nature of a book club as they consider literacy from different angles. When teachers are exposed to this exchange, they will be able to understand the text better as well as construct and co-construct ideas for classroom use through their sharing of perspectives and ideas. Teachers can also better understand students’ needs as readers by engaging in reading and being readers themselves, reflecting on their own reading styles and responses to literature.

The purpose of this study was to find out how teachers constructed meaning (of the new text) while sharing teaching strategies during TLCs. Hence, the research question: How do teachers construct meaning and expand ideas, while sharing teaching strategies during TLCs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been found that when teachers discuss literature, not only do they analyze their personal preferences for reading but they also reflect on classroom practices and consider ways of modifying these classroom practices on the basis of what they have gathered from one another’s experiences (Raphael, Pardo, Highfield, & McMahon, 1997).

Wilhelm (2009) states that teachers must inquire into “the issues we teach, into how we teach and by having the courage to continually make the changes that our reflective and reflexive stances suggest to us” (p.39). In this context, how we teach can be interpreted to include teaching strategies during teaching. This study suggests that Teacher Literature Circles are a mode that

could help teachers to make meaning of a text when sharing teaching strategies and provide a platform for later reflections.

For many years, researchers have written about the isolation of teachers and the harm that it brings to their continued learning and development (Lieberman & Miller, 1994; Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1982). Little's (1982, 1986) seminal work showed that teachers who worked together not only build commitment among themselves but also built further learning. TLCs can be seen as an opportunity for professional development as the teacher network helps the teachers to solve problems identified in their practice (Clark, 2001). Such an organization also works against the traditional isolation of teachers from other teachers so that they can craft a new professional community for improving practice (Raphael, Kehus, & Damphousse, 2001). Learning together also included struggling together and helping teachers to learn by way of mastering new practices. This study shows that one of the ways teachers learnt was by sharing and adapting each others' teaching strategies from the TLC discussions, to suit their students' differing needs and circumstances. Lieberman (2010) cites the NWP (National Writing Project) as a good example of collegueship after studying two sites in 2000, confirming that teachers working together was a powerful way to learn about their own and others' practices. During the NWP, teachers learnt to share their best strategies, learn from others and be open to lifelong learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework guiding this study includes reader response theory and socio-constructivist theory. These theories provided a foundation for my conceptualization of how teachers made meaning of the text. This study focused on how the teachers shared teaching strategies as this was a way for them to make meaning of the text as well. The theories offered an understanding of the discussions in teacher literature circles as an important context and medium through which the teachers brought their ideas on teaching strategies in a social context and how they made meaning from various interpretations within the social context and later, within their classrooms.

According to reader response theory, reading is a reflective and creative process where meaning is self-constructed. Fish (1980) informed that readers do not reside in the same context, and reading contexts of an individual change over time. In this study, the focus of the meanings the individuals made of the new text ("Catch Us If You Can" by Catherine Macphail) came by way of sharing teaching strategies that they had heard from other teachers and later trying out and adapting these strategies to suit their own classroom needs. The directions that the discussions took between the different teachers and their students were different, due to the different reading (and experiential) contexts of the students and that of themselves.

Similar to reader response, socio-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1962) conceptualizes meaning as a "dynamic, fluid complex whole," as words change meaning and transition from one sense to another, depending on the context. In this way, Vygotsky's conceptualization of meanings parallel and build on reader response theory where changing contexts result in

changing meanings within the individual. In short, the reader is not a passive recipient of meaning that an author has rendered in the text but rather an active maker of meaning. Readers' contexts are not fixed; their past experiences, beliefs, expectations and assumptions differ. Hence, teachers also change, alter or adapt their original meanings and interpretations as well as their teaching strategies, to suit the changing contexts of their students, the times or their own change in perceptions. TLCs provide a medium for teachers to make initial meaning of the text while they share teaching strategies. Their meanings may develop with time, affected also by their students' responses and their own reflections. Hence, the TLC serves as a platform or space to trigger and develop meanings and ideas.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a case study approach within a qualitative interpretive research design. I chose a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is characterized by the search for meaning and understanding whereby in this research the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. In this study, the data fleshed out was from the discussions and sharing of a teaching strategy that the teachers used in the classrooms.

The group comprised four experienced teachers. Pseudonyms for the four teachers were used: Saty, Di, Anne and Aini. The new literature text ("Catch Us If You Can" by Catherine Macphail) in the TLC served as the 'case'. The case was bound by the fact that all the teachers were experienced and by the specific text used.

The main sources of data consisted of transcripts of the TLC discussions and interviews with the teachers after they had gone into the classrooms and completed teaching the text. The TLC sessions took place once a week for seven weeks, each session varying in duration from two to four hours per session. Other data included interviews with the teachers after they had taught the text to their students, four months after the last session of the TLC. Researcher field notes were also useful. The researcher made phone calls or sent emails to the participants to clarify any uncertainty in the transcriptions, or to confirm the participants' interpretations. These multiple-sources of information provided material for an in-depth analysis: a rich, thick description within the context of the case (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings and discussions are reported and analyzed simultaneously, according to the individual participants of the TLC- Anne, Saty and Di. The findings and analysis stretch over a four-month time frame. This is the period from the TLC discussions through to the time that the participants taught the novel in their classrooms, to the end of the teaching year, as the participants reflected on their meaning making process and practice.

In the first session of the TLC, Anne shared a teaching strategy with the TLC group. The teaching strategy was not hers but one shared with her earlier, by Vim (pseudonym for another teacher, who was not a TLC participant, but a colleague in the same school and who had already begun to teach the novel to her students). In excerpt 1, Anne shared Vim's teaching strategy, that

is, to ask the students a specific question which required a personal response, with reference to strained relationships, which was the issue in the novel at that point in time. The novel dealt with a deep rift between the text characters of the father [Granda] and his son [Tom]. The question posed by Vim was “Anyone of you here [class] who has not spoken to any of your family members for a long time?”

Anne:

Actually when I was reading the part about the strained relationship between the father and son, I was reminded about what Vimala told me when she started on that part of the novel.. She pointed out to the class that in this story the father and son do not speak to each other...for years they don't even know where each of them are. Vimala told me that she asked her students this question - “Anyone of you here who has not spoken to any of your family members for a long time?” and one boy raised his hand and what Vimala said shocked me..., he (the student) has not spoken to his sister for more than one year and then she(Vimala, the teacher) and her students started discussing this...that how, you know relationships are important and all that. So I.I.I., think that's why.....when I go to class and begin to teach, at this point, I will use this strategy – to ask the same question to the students.

Excerpt 1: Strained Relationships.

The excerpt shows Anne sharing Vim's narrative as a result of her [Vim's] teaching strategy of posing a specific question which required a personal response from the students. As Anne shared Vim's experience, it became Anne's nested narrative to the TLC group. Vim's narrative, of her student's response of not having spoken to his sister for more than a year, was powerful enough to convince Anne to use the same teaching strategy in her own class later on.

Anne reported in the interview, four months later, after the TLC had ended and after she had gone into the classroom to teach, that she had used Vim's teaching strategy. “I asked the class a similar question as Vimala's but worded a little differently”. Anne's students, unlike Vim's, did not experience strained relationships with their family members. However, they (Anne's students) knew of friends and relatives who had experienced strained relations. Anne reported that she had an “interesting” discussion on strained relationships with her students. This discussion was triggered by the teaching strategy of asking a personal-response question, to her students. Anne elaborated that her students shared what they had heard from others about strained relationships, which “revolved around issues on marriage, upbringing, money matters and personality clashes”.

The discussions shed light on Anne's understanding as well as that of her students, of not only the text situation but also that of life. Anne reported one student's words, “teacher teacher... I understand, I now know...” Their responses showed that they had a better understanding of the novel. Apart from her students' responses, Anne felt that her students “went deeper into the reasons why ‘Granda’ [the text character of the father] had so much anger towards his son...”. It had to do with issues brought up by her students: marriage,

upbringing, money matters and personality clashes. Anne said, “I began to see more myself.” When Anne drew parallels between what the students had shared and the text, similar issues were recognized. Anne stated “I was enlightened as we [her students and herself] worked through the issues in the novel and tried to make connections and sense of it, together”.

The students as well as Anne made connections with the text by drawing on “retold narratives” of what they [the students] had heard of and from, their friends and relatives. Both Anne and her students were able to make meaning of the text by considering and exploring the underlying issues causing the strained relationship between ‘Granda’ and his son – issues which included marriage, money matters and personality clashes. Elaboration of ideas developed and guided the construction and co-construction of meaning by both – Anne and her students. They shifted their focus on the issues that caused the strain and explored the possibilities of the root causes of the rift and how the rift grew to such an extent. They did not fault either party but empathized, having considered the circumstances.

This outcome was a direct consequence of the TLC discussion, where Anne said that she would use the teaching strategy shared with her by Vim, which she shared with the TLC group.

The researcher traced the discussion from the shared teaching strategy during the TLC, to the classroom discussions and trajectories from the teaching strategy that was used [asking a personal-response question on strained relationships] in the classroom, to the months after the classroom experience. Anne’s perceptions and meaning making developed, as well as that of her students. Anne felt an “enhancement” in her understanding of the text and life in the real day to day living experiences of people known to her or told to her by others, including developing a better understanding of the lives of her students. Hence, the research question of how teachers constructed meaning and developed ideas, as a result of using a shared teaching strategy during the TLC discussion, is addressed.

In the case of Saty, during the interview after the TLC and after completing the teaching of the novel in her class, she reported that she too, had used the same teaching strategy that was shared by Anne during the TLC. The question that Saty put to her class was whether any of her students had not talked to any family member for some time. She reported that one of her students “openly shared in the classroom that he had not spoken to his mother for two years.” How Saty directed the discussion that followed showed how teachers expand ideas while using and adapting teaching strategies which may take different directions in the meaning making processes of both, the teachers and students. Excerpt 2 is part of the interview data from Saty:

“..we were talking about this, whether we can forgive people who have wronged us and one incident which till today I am unable to forget is a boy who came out with this story about he and his mother not having spoken to each other for almost two years. So I related to it.. talking about how Granda has not spoken to his son for many years. And then I asked the students you know, in the class, do you think this is normal, do you think that something should be done about it? And the other boys advised him (the particular

boy) you know, you shouldn't be doing what Granda is doing. They connected it to the text and we asked him if he feels what he is doing is not right and he himself said that he would try to reconcile the matter with his mum".

Excerpt 2: Saty talks of the need to forgive and reconcile

Saty, not only drew parallels to the text but directed the class discussion toward the ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation –another issue found in the text, and explored further by Saty. Saty managed to guide the class towards encouraging and scaffolding the class context of a strained relationship between a boy and his mother, towards forgiveness and reconciliation. From her class context, she drew the parallels to the text situation, of the strain between 'Granda' (the father) and his son (Tom). Saty's impact on the need to forgive and reconcile was great and the rest of the class felt the collective responsibility to help the particular boy in the class to reconcile with his mother, after two years of a cold war. From this point, both Saty and her students understood the text better by way of exploring the issues of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Saty made meaning of the text by expanding on her class context. That is, her particular student's response to the personal-response question [a teaching strategy] which led her to the directions of forgiveness and reconciliation. Later, she shared in the interview, "It made sense to me that Granda and his son should have forgiven each other and reconciled a long time ago....it took too long as both the characters were stubborn". She added, "I was also able to reaffirm for myself, the need to be humble, to apologize and recognize the importance of reconciliation without wasting too much time. " This point became clearer to my students as well as myself". Hence, Saty's construction of meaning and expansion of ideas was a result of the TLC discussion, where a teaching strategy was shared by one of the participants (Anne). Saty later used the teaching strategy in the classroom. The trajectory taken from the classroom experience was a development from the TLC discussion. With time, Saty also reflected on the need to reconcile as quickly as possible.

Di, another participant of the TLC used the same teaching strategy shared by Anne, in her nested narrative of Vim's experience, to another participant of the TLC, Aini.

"Aini, how would you react to any family member you don't like and have not talked to for a long time?"

What followed was Di's responses herself to such situations, perhaps mirroring some of her own experiences. While Aini stated that it was important to move on, Di expanded the idea of strained relationships to deep hurts, which required time to forgive and heal, in order to be able to move on, yet admitting the difficulty in forgiving [deep hurts]. These ideas were a development from the teaching strategy of a personal-response type of question, where Di put herself in the situation before putting it to her students. Di talked from her point of view as she shared personal thoughts and ideas which helped her to construct meaning of the text, while making connections to life. Hence, Di was able to make meaning by applying a teaching strategy

shared during the TLC, on herself which enabled her to bring forth her own personal responses and sentiments.

In the interview with Di, four months later, Di said, “How sad it was that Granda and his son had lost touch for so.....many years. The hurts they experienced were deep but took too much time to forgive and heal. Those years were wasted years and it happens in many families”. Di was able to draw parallels with the text and re-construct her idea on time, that it should not take too long to forgive and get on with life. She was also drawing parallels between the text and real life situations, while mirroring some of Saty’s meanings.

In the interview with Aini, four months later, she stated that Di had brought out “important aspects such as deep hurts and time required to forgive which is no easy matter”. Likewise, when the researcher brought up the issues of hurts and time, during the interview with Saty and Anne, both stated that what Di had said “were so true”. Yet, they felt the need to reconcile quickly as Anne stated, “the longer it took, the harder it would be to get back”.

The TLC was a mode for teachers to discuss a literary work. In this study, the focus was not was by just while but also included the trajectories that the teachers took on, in the classroom and thereafter. While Vim’s (a non-participant of the TLC) construction of meaning by using the teaching strategy was in terms of drawing parallels to the text and helping her students to understand the text, the participants of the TLC developed various trajectories that helped them to construct meaning.

For Anne, her construction of meaning was by exploring and elaborating on issues that her students had brought up in class. She had not herself actively considered issues such as marriage, upbringing, money matters and personality clashes in being the seeds sown for strained relationships to grow from. These issues were explored with her students, enabling both, Anne and her students to draw parallels with the text as well as to be able to understand life in the world, outside the classroom. This was how Anne constructed meaning and elaborated on ideas, as a result of the TLC discussion, of a teaching strategy.

Saty’s experience of constructing meaning is one where, she directed the class discussion towards forgiveness and reconciliation because of her peculiar class context of a student in her class. Not only did the rest of the class see these aspects (forgiveness and reconciliation) as important for their classmate (who had a strained relationship with his mother for two years), but they also understood these aspects in terms of the text, hence enhancing their overall understanding both – of the text and real world. Saty herself did not know the directions that the class discussion was going to take. It came spontaneously from her, as an experienced teacher and mother of teenage children. These roles became more pronounced when she was confronted with the particular student in her class. The role she took on directed her construction of meaning and elaboration of ideas for herself as well as for her students. After the classroom experience, she reflected on the need to not only forgive and reconcile, but also to do it without wasting time. Di, shared her own personal experiences as she asked herself the personal response question during the TLC. She shared about deep hurts which took time to heal and forgive (as was the text situation). However, at the interview later, she talked about the ‘wasted’ years between

‘Granda’ and his son, in the text. These were some of the ways in which she constructed meaning and expanded on ideas, as a result of the teaching strategy applied to her, during the TLC discussion.

CONCLUSION

From the sharing of the above teaching strategy, the teachers were constructing meaning and expanding ideas related to the novel being discussed, as well as to the larger context of the world. These aspects helped them in their own understanding and equipped them better, as teachers, to direct their students’ understanding. The way Anne shared Vim’s teaching strategy in the TLC, was a nested narrative. It had a powerful impact on the teachers who tried it out with their own students and they had narratives of their own to share with the researcher, and with each other, after the TLC had ended. Their meaning making took on many planes from the TLC itself, then to the classroom and then to their reflections after that.

Besides that, the TLC discussions gave the teachers opportunities to understand the text and surrounding issues, share teaching strategies and expand ideas relevant and useful for their deeper understanding.

The teaching strategy was a simple one – to pose the right question at the right point. However, the way it was handled by the teachers showed the different directions the teachers had taken in their classroom journeys. Perhaps another factor which was not the focus of this study was the student factor. Different students respond differently to personal-response questions. This could have influenced the teachers’ directions in the classroom discussions, apart from the teachers’ own personal stories and personalities.

Nevertheless, what was re-told by the teachers showed how they [the teachers] constructed meaning and expanded on ideas, as a result of sharing a teaching strategy during the TLC discussion and later using it in the classrooms, and even later, with time to reflect after the classroom experience. The interviews were held after the classroom teaching, giving the teachers time to reflect on the developments of their meaning making processes.

The TLC discussions on a teaching strategy formed a platform which opened up different and new pathways of constructing and co-constructing meaning, as well as the students’ useful input to guide the teachers’ meaning making process.

An important trajectory of this work was the realization by the teachers that the classroom environment had to be conducive with trust established, in order to share personal narratives. Di and Saty mentioned that creating conducive classroom environments would be one way for students to trust the teachers and the rest of the students.

Hence, creating a safe classroom environment for personal narratives and connections to be made freely is one of the implications of this study.

This study shows that sharing teaching strategies during TLC discussions form a starting

point to enable and provide spaces for the teachers to construct meaning and expand ideas, as they go into classrooms and include their students' input and contexts, and then reflect on these after the classroom experience.

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