

LEARNER BEFORE TEXT AND TEACHING*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of focusing on the learner in the literature classroom. The need to take into consideration young adult concerns in the world learners live in, the learners' psychological and cognitive development when choosing literary texts as well as teaching strategies are highlighted. The paper ends with a discussion on ways to access new sources of literary texts such as adolescent and young adult literature and ways to connect learners to literary texts.

Introduction

Much has been said and written about text selection and teaching strategies but less consideration seems to have been given to learners in the literature classroom. The choice of text, especially for literature courses is often given greater priority even over the learners for whom it may be selected. In many cases, textbook selectors, with their concern to select the "great books" or canonical texts, fail to give sufficient consideration to the learners who need to read the prescribed texts. And even though syllabuses are written for learners and texts are chosen for our learners, their concerns as young adults are not given adequate attention.

The learner in the literature classroom is an important factor in text selection. Many reasons have been given for teaching literature in schools. However, a key consideration for teaching literature is to help learners read texts so that they can later become good readers of life. If we subscribe to this view, we should be concerned with the lives of our learners and the world they live in. As such, in this paper I will examine various aspects of our learners and the world they live in and consider them in relation to teaching literature in English.

The learners in Malaysian secondary schools are between thirteen and nineteen years of age. Learners in this age group have been described as teenagers, adolescents and young adults. For the purpose of this paper, I shall use the term young adults to describe these learners as I believe that it is the least problematic term. Both "teenagers" and "adolescents" seem to carry various unfavourable connotations.

Concerns of Young Adults

The world today is very different from the world we grew up in two or three decades ago. Although there are many concerns and challenges that transcend the different periods, today's young adults face many problems and situations that are complex and have a powerful influence on their lives. Thus, when considering what texts to teach our learners or what texts to encourage students to read on their own, it is important to take into consideration the concerns of young adults. Havighurst (1972) and Stover and Tway (1992) indicate the concerns of young adults and these concerns can be used as criteria for selecting literary texts for our young adult learners.

The concerns of young adults are closely related to their development as adolescents and young adults. I will now consider the psychology of young adults in terms of several concerns of them as learners. First is the need to come to terms with developing sexuality and with physiological changes brought on by puberty. Adolescence and young adulthood are traumatic periods in the lives of our learners. There is need for proper education on these aspects of changes in their lives. This will help our learners understand themselves better and make the passage to adulthood less distressful. Often using literary texts that deal with these issues will be beneficial for young learners.

Second, young adults may be concerned with achieving a “proper” masculine and feminine role. Our learners need to achieve gender roles that are appropriate to their societies. Young adults will discover what is acceptable behaviour and what is considered inappropriate. They also need to achieve mature relationships with their peers and age-mates of both sexes. The world in general has changed in many ways and young adults today find themselves caught in a world that can be both confusing and challenging. Among the more pertinent changes are those related to the changing sexual mores and increased risks from various forms of sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS. These are challenges that we will require the support from adults who are among them.

Third, young adults are at a stage when they begin to consider their future education, careers and job possibilities. They need to make decisions in terms of choosing a field or discipline for further education. They may even have to think about the kind of work they want to do, should they decide not to pursue further education. They would have to deal with issues relating to personal choice, personal abilities and parental approval. Learners are driven by parents and society to achieve in the field of education if they want to succeed in adult life.

Today, both male and female young adults have access to further education. In fact, there is greater access and opportunity for female young adults in terms of educational opportunities and more female young adults are pursuing education in universities. Female young adults are also entering fields of study that are dramatically different from those that were available to girls of earlier generations. In terms of job opportunities, generally, there is also a change in the kind of careers and jobs young adults today want to pursue. Traditional notions about jobs based on gender no longer hold. These boundaries are blurred and it is now not uncommon to see male nursery teachers and women firefighters. The home is no longer the only place for women. Women are beginning to assert themselves and are in competition with men. Men will have to deal with women’s presence in all domains of their lives.

Fourth, even as our learners move towards adulthood, they will have to prepare themselves for marriage and family life. It is not uncommon for girls to marry after secondary school education. These young adults will begin to deal with issues relating to personal independence from parents and achieving meaningful relationships with the opposite sex. Their choices will be interwoven with their own needs and expectations from family and society. Even as they consider their independence, they will need to become aware of their inter-dependence in the communities they live in.

Fifth, as young adults begin to mature, they will need to determine an individual moral, ethical, religious or political principle. A personal ideology that will be the driving force in their life will begin to take shape. The development of a personal ideology is a major achievement for our learners. At this stage of their lives, a personal ideology will be closely related to their own moral development.

Kohlberg (1972) presents three broad stages of moral development. Each stage leads into the next as the learner develops. The first stage, the pre-conventional stage, is the stage young children are usually at. It is a stage when children are self-centered and are unable to consider the interests of others. At this stage, young children are motivated to do the right thing in order to avoid punishment. The second stage is the conventional stage. This is the stage we find most adolescents and young adults in. Moral decisions are made on inter-personal acts of caring for others, following the Golden Rule and also to be seen as a “good person.” The third stage is the post-conventional or principled stage. This is very much the adult stage where one is able to distinguish and adopt principles as part of one’s personal ideology.

Our learners, being young adults, are mostly in the second stage. This needs to be borne in mind when we set tasks for them based on literary texts used in the literature classroom. As young adults read, they should be given tasks that will allow them to draw from their moral development. This will not only connect their reading experience to their personal lives, but it will also make their reading experience more meaningful. This is discussed further in the next section of this article.

Sixth, young adults move to a stage where they begin to see beyond their own world and consider themselves as part of society. In relation to this, they also begin to consider their social responsibilities and need to develop interpersonal skills, and move beyond the self to others around them. Learners begin to become part of a bigger community as they grow out from the family and school circles.

Seventh, the mass media, popular culture, technological advancements and other influences outside the homes and schools affect our learners in many ways. The nature of entertainment and leisure activities has changed tremendously in the world today. As young adults spend more time outside the home, they have easier access to and increased use of alcohol and harmful drugs. Young adults have even more opportunities to get access to cigarettes, alcohol and other harmful drugs despite legislation. Young adults will have to consider how to deal with these influences.

Having considered the young adults in terms of the world they live in, their concerns and moral development, it is also important to consider their cognitive development.

Cognitive Development: Reading Appreciation Stage in Young Adults

The focus of this paper is on the learners’ reading appreciation stages and on reading in a literature classroom. The mastery of the various sub-skills of reading is also important as learners vary in their abilities to read texts, but discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

The categories of the stages of reading appreciation as propounded by Carlsen (1974) are drawn upon for the purpose of this paper. As learners develop as young adults, they move from one level to the next level of reading appreciation. According to Carlsen (1974) the lowest level of reading appreciation is that of unconscious delight. This is the stage young children are in. They merely enjoy the sounds of the language when they read nursery rhymes or just enjoy a good story (Vethamani, 2002). In the second stage, learners seek situations that parallel their own life and the situations and issues they face. We find some young adults in this stage. In the next stage, our learners, mostly young adults, begin to deal with philosophical problems like defining one’s personal identity. The highest level of reading appreciation is described as the aesthetic delight stage (described as the adult stage) when the reader considers the art of presentation, thematic treatment and style in literary texts.

It is important that teachers are aware of the stage their learners are at, so that appropriate reading tasks can be assigned. It will be suitable and useful to give reading tasks that require young adult learners to give a personal response by employing reader-response techniques (Rosenblatt 1978, Beach 1993). As young adults, they would want to sympathize or empathize with the characters in the literary texts (Bushman and Bushman 1997).

Fewer tasks requiring students to deal with aesthetic delight should be considered for most young adults. Some students may be able to handle this stage adequately but generally most learners tend to shy away from tasks which require them to consider literary style and devices. This is because they have not arrived at this stage of reading appreciation.

Text Selection for Young Adults

Having considered the various aspects of the learner, I would like to examine text selection. I wish to suggest that there is an intrinsic difference between the way adults choose texts and the way adolescents or young adults choose texts. Generally, adults and teachers choose books that reflect and reinforce attitudes they already hold. Asher (1992) states that young adult readers are actively searching for ideas, information, and values to incorporate into their personalities and into their lives. The books they read become a very real part of their lives. Most young adults, on the other hand, make reading selections based on the subject matter of the book rather than literary merit, language difficulty, or complexity of the story (Carlsen, 1974).

This contrast in selecting reading material is an important consideration teachers need to pay attention to. Teachers need to put themselves in the position of the young adult learners and try to seek out reading materials that young adult learners would want to read.

In view of this, I wish to suggest that teachers consider using a literary genre that deals with the lives of learners, that is, young adult literature.

Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature is written for a young adult readership. It is specifically about young adults, written about young adult lives, experiences, aspirations and problems. It focuses upon youthful characters and explores the characters' sense of identity, their adventures, their dreams and their trials (Donelson and Nilsen, 1993; Bushman and Bushman 1997; Brown and Stephens 1995).

The themes in young adult literature deal with the lives and concerns of young adults. Some common themes in young adult literature are: understanding marriage and parenthood, becoming self-aware, becoming aware of interdependence, understanding the nature of society, acknowledging contradictions, judging by appearance, being responsible for one's own life and dealing with a sense of isolation (Lukens and Cline, 1995).

The characters and themes in young adult literature will appeal to our young adult learners. Instead of having to read canonical works that are chosen by adults and often deal with the adult world, it would be more appropriate for our learners to read about young adult characters and issues in the young adult world. The young adult learner will then be able to relate to the characters and the issues.

Teachers today can have access to various websites which not only give titles of popular young adult literary texts, but also provide lesson plans that teachers can adapt for their own classes. The following are two websites worth accessing: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/nquick.html> and www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists. I would also like to suggest a few young adult literary text titles that have been popular with young adults in Malaysia. These titles are: 'Hero' by Rottman, S. L. (1997), 'If You Come Softly' by Woodson, J. (1998), 'The Chocolate War' by Cormier, R. (1974), 'Chinese Handcuffs' by Chris Crutcher (1989), 'Sixteen and Dying' by McDaniel, L. (1992), 'Beethoven in Paradise' by O'Connor (2000), and 'Breaking Boxes' by Jenkins, A. M. (1997).

Teaching Strategies and Using Young Adult Literature

When developing tasks for our young adult learners, we need to take into consideration the world the young adults live in, their concerns, their development as individuals – their psychological, moral and reading appreciation stages. The reading tasks set for young adults should enable them to interact with the text both emotionally and cognitively. It must be immediately relevant to their lives.

Teachers could subscribe to Carter and Long's (1991) personal growth model for teaching literature. This model for teaching literature is learner-centered and it advocates the use of literary texts to provide learners with opportunities to discover about themselves. Closely linked to this model for teaching literature is the use of reader-response approaches to reading literary texts (see Rosenblatt, 1978). Reader response approaches focus on readers and their experience as readers of text. Using this approach will give young adult readers the opportunity to give their own responses to texts based on their reading of the texts.

Conclusion

The reading of literature should be a pleasurable experience. Learners should also be able to relate to that which they are reading. Probst (1988: Preface) argues that "literature is experience, not information, and that the student must be invited to participate in it, not simply observe it from outside. Thus, the student is very important – not simply a recipient of information, but rather a maker of knowledge out of meetings with literary texts". As teachers we need to be sensitive to our learners' needs and facilitate this engagement with literary texts and help our learners to create meaning for themselves. E. M. Forster said, "Only connect". That is our responsibility as teachers. We need to connect our learners to texts that are available to them and make reading literary texts a meaningful experience.

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