

TEACHING LITERATURE THROUGH MIND MAPS

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ABSTRACT

A large number of young students experience major problems in such areas as thinking, memory, concentration, motivation, organization of ideas, planning and decision-making when studying English literature. This paper discusses the application of mind maps as visual tools in the teaching of literature to help students make meaning as they read and write. Mind maps are intimately connected with the function of the mind and can be used in nearly every activity where thought, recall, planning and creativity are involved. The paper discusses how visual tools enable teachers to help students assemble ideas, make and represent connections between ideas, concepts and information aided by colours, symbols, numbers, lines and arrows.

INTRODUCTION

Responding to literature refers to the way in which one reacts to something that has been read or listened to (Cooper, 1993). This process begins before reading as one thinks about what is to be read and continues during and after reading (Martinez & Roser, 1991). Rosenblatt (1976; 1978) has contended for many years that individuals construct their own meanings by transacting with the text. It is therefore important that students are provided tools that will help them develop understandings and help them relate what they have read to their personal experiences. It is through this process that students learn to construct meaning and or comprehend information.

Researchers have found that readers respond to literature in a variety of ways – by retelling, summarizing, analysing and generalizing (Applebee, 1978). Very young children are able to respond in these ways on a very simple level (Many, 1991). It is therefore important to seek ways of helping children read literary texts. Reading is an important factor in young children's reading development (Wells, 1986). As students become more experienced readers and writers, they develop more sophisticated abilities to construct meaning by analysing and evaluating literature (Kelly & Farnan, 1991). Writing is one form of responding to literature and by giving written responses to literature, students learn to construct meaning through writing. They further develop their ability to think critically (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). It is therefore

important for teachers to model different types of responding behaviours for students (Martinez & Roser, 1991).

Reading and writing are mutually supportive and interactive processes. Good readers tend to be good writers, and good writers tend to do well in reading (Strickland, 1991; Teale & Sulby, 1989). Both reading and writing requires the novice reader to focus and think about the print and the relationship between letters and sounds. This is important because both reading and writing introduce children to elements that are parts of stories (e.g., characters, settings, conflicts and resolutions.) Familiarity with story elements contributes to understanding stories and reading achievement.

Teaching literature in an ESL/EFL contexts can be a daunting task. This is especially so in the context of teaching literature in the Malaysian English language classroom where young students who lack the mastery of the English language struggle to deal with their literary texts or materials. The problem is further compounded if these students also experience problems in such areas as thinking, memory, concentration, motivation, and organization of ideas, planning and decision-making. Such situations create problems for English language instructors in the teaching of the literature component in secondary schools. The literary component was introduced to improve students' competency in the English language. It was believed that this would lead to the use of appropriate processes in which literary texts presented to students in the classroom would be a:

- source for eliciting strong emotional responses from students;
- fruitful way of involving the learner as a whole person;
- means for providing their personal opinions, reactions and feelings.

The upsurge of interest and concern in how literature can be used with language learners has been a key issue in the methodology of language learning and teaching. Students need guidance when exploring multiple levels of meaning in a literary text.

Comprehending Literary Texts

Comprehending literary texts involves the ability to identify, understand and interpret information, read for practical purposes in order to obtain information and analyse the text in terms of what it might mean symbolically or philosophically. In addition students must also be able to analyse information critically and to read between the lines. Competency in the English language would be of enormous advantage in this case.

In order to teach students to read literary works, there is a need to identify appropriate strategies which would help them understand the underlying meaning of a

literary text. Strategies like the use of mind maps are a good means of developing a variety of mental models to represent students' understanding of what they have read.

Mind Maps

Mind maps are closely connected with the functions of the mind, and they can be used in nearly every activity where thought, recall, planning and creativity are involved. Such a visual tool enables teachers to help students to assemble ideas, make and represent connections between ideas, concepts and information aided by colours, symbols, numbers, lines and arrows. According to Buzan (2000: 55-56) mind maps have four essential characteristics, as in the list below:

- The subject of attention is crystallized in a central image.
- The main themes of the subject radiate from the central image as branches.
- Branches comprise a key image or key word printed on an associated line.
- Topics of lesser importance are also represented as branches attached to higher-level branches. The branches form a connected nodal structure.

In order to guide students in the initial stages of their brainstorming and mind mapping session, the teacher has to first help students structure their thoughts and their mind maps using hierarchy and categorization.

The Process of Using Mind Maps

The process of mind mapping begins with the central image that expresses the main issues. This image needs to be incorporated with a dimension of colours. Colours have proven to aid students' memory in recalling and on expanding their inner thoughts. It further aids the transfer of information from mind maps to writing. After this, the first Basic Ordering Ideas (BOI's) that come to the mind of the students would be printed in large capital letters on a thick curving line connecting to the central image.

Radiation of ideas would then be associated to the main ideas. This will further be developed as students experience another spray of ideas. This would expand effortlessly into a wide range of ideas as some of these thoughts themselves generate ideas into levels of ideas.

Having generated enough ideas to satisfy the requirements, students should then decide to order the ideas or thoughts by putting the mind maps designed into a chronological sequence. This would create an overview of the subject matter mapped by the students.

Baby Steps in Using Mind Maps

We will use the literature text *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson used in a sample lesson to illustrate the use of mind maps in the literature class. During the lesson, students were first introduced to the text through reading and discussion of the synopsis of each chapter. At the end of each chapter, students were required to answer a set of multiple choice questions. This was followed by completing a cloze text by filling in blanks with one correct word. This was to reinforce students' understanding of the plot in each chapter (refer to Appendix A).

The mind mapping technique was then introduced to students. In the first lesson, we carried out a brainstorming session with the students on the main characters, eliciting as much information as possible from the students by asking them journalistic questions of '*what, where, why, when and how*'.

The students developed mind maps of each character written as the main ideas and described the characteristics of each character further by substantiating them with examples and elaborations. Thus the students were able to relate to the characters and their mind maps clearly reflected their understanding of what they had read.

The students were also encouraged to do the same for the plot of the story. Appendix B shows a sample of a mind map of the plot of the story *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* developed by a student using these 'baby steps'. In the process of mind mapping facts about the plot, students brainstormed collaboratively during a 40-minute lesson. Responses from students were mapped out on the board to allow students to elaborate what they had read in the story. In-depth discussions helped students recall better as they filled in all the gaps to complete the entire story.

Students were then encouraged to mind map independently. This allowed individual students to reflect on their own understanding of the plot in each chapter. By allowing students to design their mind maps individually, the students were given the opportunity to understand another aspect of the story.

The students used colours, lines, arrows and symbols and as they became accustomed to the basics of this technique, they were then given the opportunity to develop mind maps on the theme, moral values and plot.

In the initial stages, teachers should conduct conferencing sessions with individual students and help students expand their thoughts, ideas or opinions by probing. This would further enhance the development of the students mind maps, as they are able to see a clearer direction. Over a period of time, brainstorming becomes a personalized activity. Students no longer require the assistance of the teacher in imparting their thoughts, ideas and opinions both verbally and in writing.

Discussion

Taking students into the world of literature is a sensitive process. Literature is seen to be a difficult subject to learn, especially by students with average and below average proficiency levels. In order to instill interest in literature, it is essential for teachers to design and to create an atmosphere where the learning becomes fun and easy. The “Baby Steps” method used in this paper provided the initial steps needed for students to comprehend what they had read and understood from their own perspective. Samples of the mind maps designed by the students show the depth of their understanding and reflection on the text.

Providing students with the proper tools helped to enhance their comprehension and thinking ability. They were able to connect facts with situations and were able to carry out in depth elaboration by relating to incidents from the text. This allowed the students to voice their opinions on various issues in the text, leading them to think critically and to substantiate their opinions with facts.

The mind maps provided the students with the opportunity to be creative and is an effective tool in helping students relate to the text in a proper sequence, aiding their memory through the association of words that relate to certain situations and incidents. Mind maps are also known to evoke students’ memory. By developing a mind map, students are able to exploit the text in depth and to reflect on various elements of the story.

Familiarity with story elements contributes to the understanding of the story and to reading achievement. By giving students the opportunity to mind map individually, we provide them with a focal point for expanding their language base, help to increase their vocabulary, excite and captivate their imaginations and motivate them to read for more information.

Different students will react differently to literature. The mind maps developed by the students will enable teachers and students to ‘see’ or view their representation of their understanding of the text from different perspectives. When the students interpret the texts visually, it reflects their understanding of what they have read in a unique way. Transferring these visuals into words, phrases and sentences becomes easier as the ideas and comprehension of the texts has become much clearer to them. Students are able to further relate this to the world around them. Ultimately, learning to read and write becomes meaningful, as students are able to clearly voice their understanding, thoughts and opinions through writing. The use of mind maps makes it possible to create meaningful reading and writing experiences for students in the classroom.

Conclusion

Literary texts are rich in information that students can relate to, enabling them to question and represent their thoughts through drawings without feeling restricted. The examples provided show how students, as beginners, can demonstrate their understanding of literary texts using mind maps, and have fun while doing so. In thinking creatively about how to and what to use to represent their understanding, learners are automatically thinking critically as well as creatively in the literature classroom. Students will easily remember what they have presented graphically and will face less difficulty in transferring graphic information to written texts.

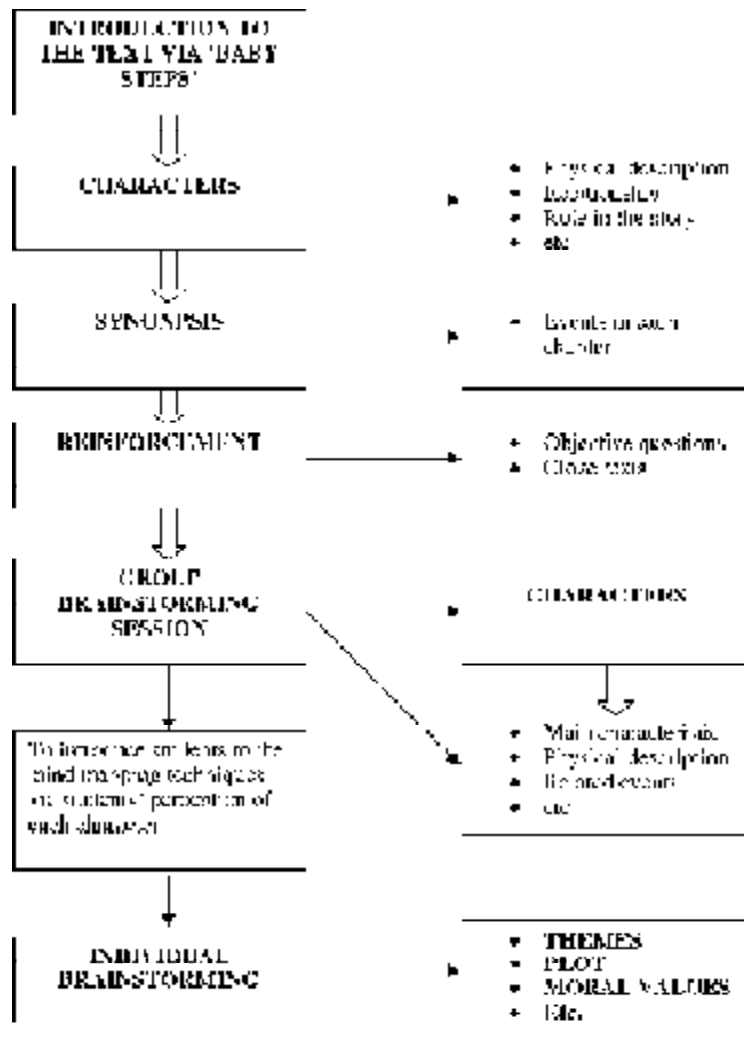
The role of the teacher in this case study is one of decision maker, mentor and coach. The teacher plans and supports activities that allow students to plan themes, activate relevant prior knowledge, thus supporting students in reading and responding to the literature in appropriate ways. In some instances the teacher plans and teaches mini lessons using literature as a model for helping students learn a needed strategy or skill. By supporting students with activities such as discussion circles and written response activities, the teacher plays the role of a coach. Learning becomes independent when students begin to mind map individually reflecting their thoughts, memory and understanding of the text.

To inculcate interest in literature independently, certain techniques and tools need to be administered to provide students with a path or a direction towards achieving comprehension. Reading aloud or mere discussions can drown the interest and cause boredom. Providing students with instructions gives them the opportunity to apply what they have learnt to other reading texts.

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Appendix A The Teaching Procedure



Appendix B

