SHAKESPEARE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL, IS IT TRUE?

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English language through literature has shown improvement in a primary school, in the district of Hulu Selangor. The researcher had used story books which were provided by Curriculum Development Centre, Malaysia. It was a project based approach; students with little knowledge in Literature were exposed to prepare scripts, dialogues, posters and retelling stories, role-play and drama too. By doing so, they have improved in their communication skills. Most of the teachers say that teaching English is tough, what more with extra storybooks and project based. The researcher managed to follow one particular class (year 4) from 2009 till 2011 (year 6) for the pilot program. Results indicated that the majority of the pupils’ communication skills have improved. Their final year stage performance was the best results ever for the pupils who have prepared their own scripts and props. The written examination which was a school based, also showed remarkable changes. Even though Literature was taught only once a week but the writing of scripts, dialogues for skits, making masks, posters and retelling the stories have enhanced the pupils’ communication skills and made them speak confidently.

Introduction

Literature helps us grow, both personally and intellectually. (Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs, An Introduction to Reading and Writing, 1998). It provides an objective base for knowledge and understanding. It links us with the cultural, philosophic and religious world of which we are a part. It also enables us to recognize human dreams and struggles in different places and times which we do not know of its existence. Literature also helps us develop mature sensibility and compassion for the condition of all living things. Most of the time the readers do not know how to explain why they actually enjoy reading. Literature is lovable and pleasurable. It has universal appeal and it appeals to the heart of the readers. Literature finds an everlasting place in the memory of the learner because of its strong appealing quality but this is not agreed by all. Some say Literature is boring and difficult to understand. One does not have to be an expert in Literature to understand and to know it. It is actually up to the reader how he interprets the text.

In 2004, The Malaysian Ministry of Education implemented ‘Contemporary Children’s Literature to be taught in all primary schools in Malaysia. Teaching English was tough, what more with extra storybooks, portfolios and project based. The teachers were provided with 8
books since 2004 which are used for year 4–3 books, year 5–3 books and year 6–2 books. The aims for introducing Literature in primary school is to:

- help the pupils improve in their English through reading simple fictions,
- provide a continuum for the literature component introduced in secondary school.
- create an enjoyable learning environment.

The objectives for the implementation is to:

- instill and inculcate the reading habit among pupils.
- enrich pupils’ vocabulary and language content.
- enhance pupils’ thinking skills.
- promote cultural understanding in the Malaysian context.
- improve English Language proficiency of pupils.
- provide lively, enjoyable and high-interest readings.

The Cabinet decided that ‘Children’s Contemporary Literature to be taught in Year 4,5 and 6 so that it can provide an early beginning and a foundation in literature and will develop an understanding of other societies, cultures, values and traditions that will help them in their emotional and spiritual growth. It is also to prepare the primary school students to the literature lessons in the secondary schools. All the schools were provided with the books and they were on rotation basis for the classroom implementation. Most of the English Language teachers were sent for short courses and the pupils were introduced with all the books. Pupils need to read 2/3 books in a year, which will be 4 months for a book.

(Malachi Edwin Vethamani - The Malaysian Journal of ELT Research, Vol. 3, 2007) stated that the study and teaching of literature has been a challenge for many teachers and students. He also mentioned that it is due to the fact that many teachers are not trained to teach the subject and many students have not seen the significance of reading literary texts as an important aspect for language development but that is for secondary school. Well, Literature Component is tested in the examinations and students in secondary school has no choice but to read the text and most of the time they memorize their literary elements and details to prepare themselves for their examinations.

Well, for primary school, ‘Contemporary Literature’ is not tested in any examinations but it helps them to improve in their English through their simple fictions and it also creates an enjoyable learning environment.

Machura(1995) presented a delightful description of her experience with children’s Lit in Hungary. Her 12 year olds actively worked through ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar (a picture storybook for young children, by Eric Carle). The same story was also done in Lebanon for 4 year olds (Goshn 1997). Both have mentioned that the superb illustrations undoubtedly add to visually aesthetic experience as well. We, know that the text chosen for the students are very important and when the teachers take charge to deliver it, they have to play the biggest role to make the students to understand the text and enjoy the story too.
A research by P. Padmini, M.A., M.Phil., M.C.I., was done in India, 2009 to show ‘Why and How’ of Literature in Language Classroom and the Poor Communicative Competence in English. The question was, ‘Is Literature Teaching Responsible for it? The research has shown that Literature provides the students with abundant examples of the subtle and complex uses of grammar and vocabulary of English. It also shows that English is used at its idiomatic best and is used most effectively in Literature. The teaching of literature would definitely help the students improve their language skills and leads them in gaining not only communicative but also creative competence.

What happens in the classroom here is, many teachers fail to discuss a prescribed literary text, they just read and interpret the literary text. The students should be engaged in as many activities as possible to ensure their interaction with the text and with each other in many ways which would hopefully help in promoting language learning (P. Padmini, 2009).

These are the reasons why I chose to teach English through Literature and made it into a fun learning environment. All the 35 pupils in my class enjoyed learning the subject and they always wait for lessons even though it is only once a week.

Methodology

This study was addressed using qualitative measures. The data collection and information were based on the non-structured interview and classroom observation. It was conducted in a rural school, in the district of Hulu Selangor. The targeted group was 35 pupils from year 6 aged 12 whom I followed the class since they were in year 4 (2009). The research instruments were mainly a classroom observation and non-structured interview. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and interpreted. A pilot study was carried out on these 35 pupils when they were in year 4 (2009). Scaffolding techniques were used to help the weak students. The reading record booklet was the tool which help the students in their writing skills. The pupils were interviewed and the classroom observation for each activity were compiled. All observations were summarized and compared in order to draw appropriate conclusions and interpretations. In order to achieve the objectives. In the second study, the scaffolding techniques were used to enable learners(MKO) to assist their partners to gain understanding during the discussions and class performances. Vygotsky (1978) claims that the learning process takes place when learners are transported from the actual development to the potential development by (M KO) a more knowledgeable other. This can only be achieved if the learning process occurs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The idea is that a child is only able to take the next step in their cognitive development if another person supports and prompts them to do so. This sort of assistance has been called ‘scaffolding’. Pupils were divided into groups and I always put the good ones in every group which represents the (M KO), by doing so the average pupils were guided through. When the pupils complete a particular text, they will complete their reading record booklet in order for them to remember things, such as the sentences, familiar words, the characters and other important information. By doing so, the pupils started to improve in their writing skills. When they began to prepare the skit, it was the best work ever. It was not easy but they did it.
Results

The findings revealed that the use of ‘scaffolding’ techniques and the ‘reading record booklet’ as the main tool had enhanced the communicative and the writing skills for the year 6 pupils of the particular school. When I interviewed a few pupils before I started the scaffolding technique, none of them came forward to talk or give any answers. After a year, when they were in year 5, they became slightly brave when once a week they have to present a story, a skit or even retell the story which they have read. The ‘Hot-Seat’ activity gave them the confidence to communicate to each other, I really did not focus much on their minor errors when they did the skit or the retelling of a story. What concerned me was, my pupils actually forgot the fear in the subject and I manage to get rid of the ‘stage-fright’ in them.

Out of 35 pupils, 27 of them obtained ‘A’ in their trial examinations (UPSР 2011) compared to only 2 pupils with ‘A’ when they were in year 4 (2009). 7 pupils obtained ‘B’ and 1 with a ‘C’ and when he was in year 4, he always fails in English. I also realised that when I did Literature, the pupils were very interested because they tried to involve themselves in the characters. It also helped the pupils to remember the story well. I noticed that most of the pupils began to act out the characters during other lessons with other teachers when they relief their classes. The pupils were given a chance to prepare masks, pertaining to the text and the end product was always some hands on activities based on the project based lesson. This had enhanced the pupils to know the story well and by involving themselves in the act, skit and drama had made them to know the whole story very well indeed. All my students, whom I followed from year 4 (2009) till year 6 (2011) were able to communicate and write in English. In year 2012 the English Language results were 85% and 9 students obtained 5A’s in UPSР (final year examination for 12 years old students).

Discussions

The data gained from the interview and the classroom observation shows that pupils prefer to have more hands-on-activities such as story telling, hot-seat, retelling a story, poem reciting, singing, making puppets, masks, performing a short skit and drama too. All these are basically project-based which has enhanced the pupils communication skills and led them the write creatively in their written work especially the examinations. The tool used to enhance their writing skills was a reading record booklet which I created for this class. It is known that by just reading a literary text pupils will not go anywhere, so after a year following them by just reading, explaining and answering questions, I decided to change the teaching style. The course I attended in Singapore was a great help and the guidance by the lecturers in ELTC KL (Mdm Jaya and Ms Mercy) were excellent. So, I referred to all the project based activities that I was exposed to in order for the pupils to understand what they are reading and what is the literary text is all about. It was fun to watch the pupils working in groups, discussing, arguing and the best part was they started to add extra characters in the story. This added some spices to the story. The short skits created by the pupils were better than the text which were prescribed. They did not run away from the story, its just some dialogue were given for some passive objects which became the humor in the skit. This happened because of the scaffolding techniques and the reading record booklet, because the booklet is very
detailed and it helped them to write better and gain ideas. End of the day, the pupils began to write creatively in their essays, test and examinations.

Conclusion

Eversince the ‘Children’s Literature in Primary School was launched in 2008, quite a few teachers started to do it in their schools. The teachers find it difficult to cope because we have limited time to teach literature in primary schools. Teachers complained that they have to prepare a lot of work before they teach literature and they also cannot do much because of the exam classes where they have to complete their syllabus before the final exams. When I conducted the internal courses, many teachers asked me how I managed the time since I was teaching the exam classes. My answer was simple, if we teach the pupils English Language and not the examination formats, the pupils will be able to answer anything. C.L.i.P.S or Contemporary Literature is not all about Shakespear or Robert Frost. CDC provided 8 books which were carefully chosen, guidelines to follow and some sample lessons and activities for the teachers to use in the classrooms.

There are problems when we conduct the lessons, such as time consuming, books to be shared, classroom control and other factors. It is in our hands how to plan and to carry out the lesson interestingly in order for the pupils to understand it easily. It not just reading. They have to understand what they have read. It is time that more teachers accept the challenge and be more creative.

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