



Malaysian Students' English Literary Text Selection: A Mixed Method Approach

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ABSTRACT

English literary text selection is still a problem in Malaysia, due to the conflict of interest between the text selectors and the students. Thus, this study investigated the students' English literary text selection essentially in terms of the student's preference for a literary genre, context and topic of the text. A mixed method of the explanatory sequential design was employed in the study with two stages of data collection. The findings of the study revealed that students favoured short stories and do not mind the contexts of literary text be it a local or foreign one. In terms of topics, students mostly prefer topics that are familiar and informative. Additionally, it was discovered that students related these criteria of literary text selection with several themes that result in an enhanced comprehension of a literary text and interest in literature or vice versa.

Keywords: English Literature; Literary Text; Selection; Students

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The use of literary texts in the English language classroom is usually beneficial in most circumstances. Nevertheless, such advantages can only be achieved when the choices of literary texts matched the student's needs, wants and interests because inappropriate text selection is a major failure in English literature learning particularly in second language classrooms (ESL) (Alshammari et al., 2020; Awing Ukat & Hanim Ismail, 2022; Tevdovska, 2016; Zengin et al., 2019). As an illustration, unsuitable text choices will only hinder students' comprehension of the text and builds negative emotions towards literary texts or literature in general (Carroli, 2002;



Govindarajoo et al., 2022; Tevdovska, 2016). Lim (2019) added that text selection should be given more emphasis for promoting reading involvement, specifically by choosing texts that are recognizable to the real worlds of the readers.

It was also proved that English literary text selection requires more attention as it is one of the dominant obstacles in the English language literature classroom (Lima, 2010; McKay, 2001; Savvidou, 2004) simply because it is a complicated task for both teachers and curriculum designers as many factors such as students' prior knowledge, demographic background and language proficiency should be taken into consideration before selecting a literary text (Khatib et al., 2011; Renganathan, 2021; Tevdovska, 2016). In brief, a successful literature classroom relies on literary text choices because when students are interested in what they read, they are likely to read more, and this makes them independent as well as voluntary readers (Abdelaziz, 2014). As a result, a positive attitude toward reading among students can be built and reading problems among students in ESL classrooms can be reduced significantly (Revathi & Mazlin, 2020).

Problem Statement

In the Malaysian context, it is becoming increasingly prevalent for our local students to face challenges in reading and understanding English literary text and text selection is certainly one of the causes concerned (Abdul Hamid & Mohd Shah, 2017; Awing Ukat & Hanim Ismail, 2022; Govindarajoo et al., 2022; Mihat et al., 2018; Mohaideen et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2020; Mustaffar et al., 2019; Puteh et al., 2012; Thirunavukarasu & Raja Harun, 2021). Primarily, literary text selection is a problem in Malaysia because of the conflict of interest between the text selectors for the English language curriculum and the students who deal with the text (Isa & Mahmud, 2012; Renganathan, 2021; Revathi & Mazlin, 2020).

Consequently, students failed to engage or communicate with the literary text meaningfully when they are compelled to read literary texts of not their interest or kind (Revathi & Mazlin, 2020). In the same way, Mohaideen et al. (2020) claimed that our Malaysian students are at greater risk of constructing poor meaningful text engagement. As a result, it leads the way to their frustration, thus taking up an easier method which is rote learning, particularly when the literary text chosen for them, failed to meet their needs and interests (Tevdovska, 2016).

Aim of the Study

This study investigates Malaysian students' English literary text selection mainly in terms of students' preference or interest in the genre, context and topic of the literary text.

Objectives of The Study

1. To identify how students select their literary text in terms of preference towards the genre of the literary text.
2. To identify how students select their literary text in terms of preference towards the context of the literary text.
3. To identify how students select their literary text in terms of preference towards the topic of the literary text.

Research Questions

1. How do students select their literary text in terms of preference towards the genre of the



literary text?

2. How do students select their literary text in terms of preference towards the context of the literary text?
3. How do students select their literary text in terms of preference towards the topic of the literary text?

Significance of the Study

This study integrates three aspects which are the preference of genre, context and topic of the literary text and makes it one of a kind. Another unique feature of this study would be the participants because most past literature targets teachers and curriculum designers as their research participants, while minute has been done with Malaysian secondary school students and their attitude towards literary text selection. Nevertheless, one can never neglect students' attitudes towards literary text selection because they are the primary figures dealing with literary texts in school that have been selected for them, be it reading for pleasure or even to fulfil the curriculum requirement such as scoring good marks in the literature component in the examinations.

Thus, it is hoped that through the findings of this study, text selectors or curriculum designers will be able to cater to the student's needs and interests in learning the English literature component at school and to build interest and positive attitudes towards literary texts as well as literature in general. Undoubtedly, the findings can be significant for upcoming researchers in the field to carry out more related studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature in the English Language

In Malaysia, English literary texts were integrated into the language curriculum with the fundamental goal of helping students to develop and advance their English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Perry, 2019). With the same opinion, Muthusamy et al. (2017) viewed the teaching and learning of English literature in Malaysia as rapidly transforming into an acknowledged means of achieving language competence. Nonetheless, students' understanding of the literature is often neglected, as curriculums or syllabi are decided by policymakers whose expectations might not agree with the students' ability, need and interest (Suhaimi et al., 2020b), therefore, students' interests must be taken into consideration to achieve an affirmative learning environment and outcome (Govindarajoo et al., 2022).

For example, Othman et al. (2015) argued that the learning objectives in the English literature lesson rely upon the student's attitude toward the incorporation of the literary text in the ESL classroom. On the other side of the coin, Naser and Aziz (2017) revealed that students were keener on the plot of the texts rather than the type of literature used. Thus, Zengin et al. (2019) wrapped that one of the major obstacles to a blossoming literature classroom in Malaysia is the inappropriate choices of the literary text.

English Literature Component in Malaysian English Language Syllabus

The English literature component was brought into the English language curriculum in Malaysian



secondary schools in the year 2000, with the motive of advancing students' language proficiency (Rashid et al., 2010; Suhaimi et al., 2020a). This comprises short stories, novels, poems, and drama. This initiative by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MOE) garnered mixed feedback from parents, teachers, and students in the early years of its implementation however, the constructive feedback from teachers and students has turned more positive with its full implementation.

This implementation of the Ministry was exceptionally appreciated and welcomed by students with good command of the English language because they perceived the literature component as an added measure of enjoyment to their learning while polishing their language competency (Renganathan, 2021). Yet, this was not the case for students with low English language competence due to their absence of complex skills needed to read and understand literary texts, therefore they viewed literature as an added burden to their existing language weakness and problem (Rashid et al., 2010).

Literary Text Selection in Malaysia

A group of panels were assigned and responsible for selecting the literary texts to be used in the English language curriculum in schools however, their selections will always be questioned by the society on whether the literary texts selected were suitable for the students (Siti Hajar & Azlina, 2017). One of the reasons for such conflict is that the authority's selection of literary texts and preferences in reading literature text might be different from students and the literary texts which the panel believed would be captivating and suitable for the students might backfire them (Fan-ping, 2010). Therefore, the panels should pay special attention to students' interest and need in reading literary texts because an improved and comprehensive literary text selection process would push the students to read the literary texts voluntarily (Awing Ukat & Hanim Ismail, 2022; Govindarajoo et al., 2022; Siti Norliana et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Vethamani and Nair (2009) also added that selecting the apt literary text was more fundamental than building the ideal curriculum with the expected results in order to let the students read the texts and promote love and interest in literature. Firstly, context is a problem with our current literary text selection as students found it difficult to communicate meaning if the culture or value portrayed in the text is unfamiliar to the students (Mohaideen et al., 2020; Nordin & Eng, 2017). As an illustration, a great number of Malaysian secondary school students found the literary texts they are using in English classrooms are complicated due to the presence of cultural differences and they prefer literary texts based on a familiar or known context (Nambiar et al., 2020; Isa & Mahmud, 2012). In addition to that, reading an irrelevant and uninteresting topic of literary text causes a problem for Malaysian students to a greater extent (Nordin & Eng, 2017). As a result, most of the students fail to comprehend the literary texts used in the school and they found such texts boring (Isa & Mahmud, 2012). Equally, genres of literary texts seem to be a problem because students prefer one genre more than the other due to several reasons such as the style of writing and language used (Siti Norliana et al., 2009; Tseng, 2010).

Students' Attitude in an ESL (Literature) Classroom

Candlin and Mercer (2001) said that students' attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning environment may all play some part in explaining their success or failure. Attitude has cognitive, affective and conative elements which involve beliefs, emotional reactions and



behavioural tendencies related to the object of the attitudes (McGroarty, 1996). Fortunately, the attitude remains dynamic where it can be altered through the learning process such as by using appropriate reading text or materials (Siti Norliana et al., 2009). Nevertheless, one of the main challenges for successful literature reading is caused by the text itself and that negatively influences students' attitude towards literary texts and literature components, particularly in terms of their interest and confidence (Arvidson & Blanco, 2004; Siti Norliana et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, most of the existing studies have not paid much attention to the student's attitude towards literary text selection, but mostly to the teachers' beliefs, perceptions, pedagogies or approaches and curriculum policies associated with literary text selection. Thus, the present study is in need due to its scarcity and study gap in the literature. Equally, most studies were also conducted among adult students (undergraduates or postgraduates) or teachers instead of school students (Calafato, 2018; De-Malach & Poyas, 2018; Greig & Holloway, 2015; Holloway & Greig, 2011; Luukka, 2017; Tevdovska, 2016). Besides, the contexts of past studies were mostly based on EFL settings as well (Firdinatovna, 2015; Tevdovska, 2016; Luukka, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

'The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work' presented by Rosenblatt (1978) works as one of the frameworks of this study. It explains the act of reading which is transactional between the reader and the text that occurs within a specific situation. Rosenblatt (1978) views the text as merely ink on a paper until a reader comes along. Her theory demonstrates the reader-text relationship as the river and its banks because each works its impacts upon the other resulting in text comprehension. According to Rosenblatt (2018), meaning does not dwell in the text but it is the result of the reader's interaction with it. To put it differently, words themselves are not sufficient for successful comprehension of a literary text because a reader takes in personality traits, prior experience, as well as present needs and interests (Rosenblatt, 1978). Thus, to extract the essence of a text, the text must be in a state where readers can actually interact with it. Therefore, an appropriate literary text selection that matches readers' needs and interest paves the way for successful comprehension of a text.

Similarly, Wolfgang Iser (1978) contributed to the reader-response theory by coining 'The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response'. He argued that a literary text can only stimulate a response when it is read by the reader. This theory highlights two central figures which are the text and the reader. According to Iser (1978), reading is an interactive process between literary texts and readers, and it is always influenced by one's assumptions. This interaction is called the 'virtual space' where the meaning of a literary text is stimulated by the readers (Iser, 1978).

Moreover, Iser (1974) also introduced the notion of 'Implied Reader' where the process of literary reading is 'regulated' by the text (Hall, 2005). As a demonstration, texts must agree on certain conditions that facilitate their actualisation by readers. For instance, texts are the formulation of worlds as perceived by authors and promote hints of the world views of the authors' stories, experiences and arguments (Iser, 1974). This will influence the literary text selection among the readers, as they prefer one text genre more than the other. Hence, both notions of Iser (1974) explained the importance of interaction between the reader and the text which results in a better comprehension of a literary text and interest in literature.



On the whole, Rosenblatt's (1978) and Iser's (1974; 1978) theories are the central foundations for this study as those theories and notions explained the importance of interacting with a text in selecting and reading them for meaning-making. The meaning-making here constitutes the level of a student's understanding of a literary text. Equally, all the theories also explain that comprehension of a literary text is not always based on the words written but on other aspects of the text such as genre and a topic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is designed as a mixed-method case study, and it follows an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Students' attitude in literary text selection is a unification of students' interests, needs and expectations, concerning the intricate details of students' daily reading and text selection practices and it can only be explored in a real context. The research focus is qualitative in nature as it focuses on *how* the participants were influenced (the phenomenon) by the interest in the genre, literary context and topic of the text.

Research Site and Participant

The research site for the current study is a government secondary school. The participants for the study come from secondary school students of both lower and upper secondary with different English language competencies and demographic backgrounds. In reference to that, 66 participants took part in the quantitative phase which was distributed by the researcher through online platforms. Additionally, purposive sampling was implemented by selecting one student from each level of study (Form 1 to Form 5) for the qualitative phases with the help of the subject teacher because it is the best way to yield appropriate and useful data on relatively small samples (Campbell et al., 2020).

Research Methods

The research methods employed in this study were eclectic and comprised of a close-ended questionnaire followed by a semi-structured interview and a personal response task (reflection writing).

i) *Closed-Ended Questionnaire*

The closed-ended questionnaire designed for this study was adopted from previous studies on using English literary texts in the English language classroom by Tevdovska (2016) as well as Revathi and Mazlin (2020).

This questionnaire (method) was administered in the first phase of data collection, and it was then analysed to plan and build the second phase which is qualitative. Thus, the results derived from the questionnaire informed the researcher of the types of participants to be purposefully selected for the qualitative phase and the types of questions to be asked (Creswell, 2014). This questionnaire was administered to 66 participants comprising students from each level of study (Form 1 to Form 5). These participants were contacted through social platforms such as 'Whatsapp' and 'Telegram' with the help of their teachers.



ii) *Semi-Structured Interview*

The semi-structured interview was chosen as the primary instrument for the qualitative data collection phase where it was conducted after the quantitative data was analysed and seven questions were built accordingly with some being adapted from the previous questionnaire.

As for the response, a total of 5 students (purposive sampling) were interviewed (one participant from each level/form of study) and each interview session took about 12 to 15 minutes, and it was then transcribed.

iii) *Personal Response Task (Reflection)*

This instrument was chosen by the researcher as an additional data collection tool to support the data from both questionnaires and interviews. This method was chosen by the researcher because it is an effective way to obtain data about a person's feelings, opinions, and attitudes (Cohen et al., 2005; Janesick, 1999).

There are various types of reflective writing, but this study employed a personal response task (reflection writing), in which the researcher asked five participants to write a short paragraph or essay of not less than 200 words describing their ideal literary text's criteria. This was administered to the participants who were selected to be interviewed.

Data Analysis

The online questionnaires were analysed and reported in the form of frequency and percentages. Later, the results of the online questionnaire were used to create questions for the semi-structured interview. These interviews were conducted via 'Google Meet' where all the sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed into words.

Later, the findings of the study are presented in three sections. Firstly, demography, secondly, the student's preference of the literary genre, context and topic of the text. Lastly, the personal response task (reflection writing) was analysed and presented as supporting data.

FINDINGS

Demography

A total of 66 participants have responded to the online questionnaire distributed through various online platforms. Out of 66 participants, 55 (75.8%) were male participants while 16 (24.2%) were female participants. Meanwhile, interview sessions were conducted with four male participants and one female participant.

The participants of the study were mainly from four different racial groups in the country. As for the questionnaire, there were 33 (50%) Malay participants followed by 23 (34.8%) Indian participants and six (9.1%) Chinese participants. Lastly, four (6.1%) of the other race participants. On the other hand, three Indian participants followed by one Malay and Chinese participant took part in the interviews.



The participants who completed the online questionnaire come from five different levels of studies (form) where the majority of them are Form 5 students with 19 (28.8%) responses while Form 4 students with 13 (19.7%) responses. Both Form 3 and Form 2 students shared 12 (18.2%) responses each and lastly, Form 1 students with 10 (15.2%) responses. Additionally, one participant from each level of study (form) agreed to the interview sessions.

Student's Preference of The Literary Genre, Context and Topic of the Text

i) Genre

The short story stands first in the list with 62 (93.9%) responses and the novel with 37 (56.6%) responses, respectively. Next, the participants kept drama in third place with 35 (53%) responses. Lastly, the poetry with eight responses (12.1%). This finding was further explored through the interviews.

a. Association of Language and Style of Writing with Complexity

As a result, it was found that students have associated language and style of writing of a particular genre with its complexity. They have further illustrated by saying the language used in a genre matters a lot for students in order to understand the bottom line of a text. In addition, students also mostly prefer genres with clear continuity of a plot or logical connection between the scenes or events with brief elaborations. Similarly, students also have positively associated a simple, brief, and straightforward genre of a literary text with their enhanced understanding of the text and interest in literature. For example, students dislike reading elaborated or lengthy text because it is time-consuming and that leads to frustration and boredom.

ii) Literary Context

Moving on to the preferred literary context, the questionnaire revealed that a large number of participants with 55 (83.3%) responses demonstrated that, they do not mind any literary contexts while seven (10.6%) participants preferred local literary contexts and four (6.1%) participants preferred foreign contexts.

a. Association of Context Familiarity with Simplicity

The interview unveiled that students have associated familiarity of a context with its simplicity in understanding a text and promoting interest in literature. Therefore, although students do not bias towards any literary contexts, they still preferred the '*local literary context*' over the imported ones because it is familiar to our local students and that made the texts easier for them to comprehend as they share the same background or prior knowledge. For example, the participants have elucidated that literary context should be within the student's general knowledge or their level of experience to escalate their comprehension of the text and interest in literature. Yet, this is not just limited to foreign contexts because students are aware that even local literary contexts can be unfamiliar to students due to geographical locations or social status. So, when the context of the literary text is alien to students, mostly it leads to poor comprehension, frustration and discrimination towards literature.



iii) Topic of a Literary Text

As for the topic of the literary text, the participants were allowed to choose more than one answer in the online questionnaire. There was a total of nine topics that the participants can choose from and ‘*Family and Friends*’ topped the chart with 52 (78.8 %) responses. In addition, we have ‘*Entertainment*’ with 46 (69.7%) responses and followed by ‘*Life Lessons*’ with 33 (50%) responses and ‘*Teenagers Issues*’ with 29 (43.9%) responses. On the other side, ‘*Technology*’ comes with 28 (42.4%) responses as well as ‘*Social Problems*’ with 25 (37.9%) responses. Moreover, ‘*Science*’ obtained 19 (28.8%) responses and ‘*Sports*’ with 15 (22.7%) responses. Lastly, ‘*Current Affairs*’ stood last in the chart with nine (13.6%) responses.

a. Association of Familiarity of a Topic with Ease of Comprehension

Students generally preferred topics that are familiar or close to their life as they found it easy to indulge in the text compared to an unfamiliar topic. They also argued that when a topic falls under his or her circle of experience or knowledge, it enables them to appreciate the text better and to make meaning.

b. Association of Informative Topics with Educational Value

The students fairly associated an informative topic of a literary text with educational value as it enhances one’s comprehension of a text and interest in literature. As an example, *Candidate C* admitted to learning new vocabulary related to travelling by reading a literary text and it greatly helped him during his visit to an abroad country. Thus, it motivated him to read more literary texts and instil an interest in literature.

In short, the data from reflections supported, confirmed and aligned with the findings yielded from the questionnaire and interviews.

DISCUSSION

The present study reconfirmed the findings of past studies, where the genre of the literary text is an essential determinant in the Malaysian classroom because students favour one genre more than the other due to several reasons such as the length and language used (Siti Norliana et al., 2009; Tseng, 2010). The findings of the present study have also manifested that students do not mind the literary context to a greater extent in making their text selections however, some students still prefer local literary context compared to foreign context ultimately because they have related familiarity of context with simplicity in understanding a text which was also proven in past studies (McCafferty, 2002; Horowitz, 2002; Saraceni, 2003; Siti Norliana et al., 2009; Estuarso et al., 2017; Lasekan & Godoy, 2020; Mohaideen et al., 2020; Nambiar et al., 2020). The current study equally magnified the results of past studies where students’ preference for a literary text’s topic and its strong association with students’ understanding of a text and interest in literature. For example, students associated a familiar topic of a literary text with their enhanced comprehension (ease of understanding) of a text as well as interest in literature and vice versa (Macalister, 2008; Siti Norliana et al., 2009; Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Nambiar et al., 2018; Nambiar et al., 2020).



Overall, students are more motivated to read the literary text if the selections of the decision-makers match the student's interests and preferences. By doing so, it will also result in a better understanding of a text and interest in literature because the students are willing to communicate with a text voluntarily which promises text engagement (Govindarajoo et al., 2022; Nambiar et al., 2020).

Implications of the Study

This study will be fruitful for decision-makers to choose literary texts that match students' needs and interests and to incorporate them in the English literature component at Malaysian schools as a way to instil interest and positive attitudes towards literary texts as well as literature in general. Undoubtedly, the findings of this study also can be a handful for researchers in the field to carry out more related studies.

Limitations of the Study

Just like any other study, this research comes with a few limitations as well. Firstly, the findings of this study could not be generalized or popularized because it was only conducted in one school involving a small number of participants. Besides, all the data collection were administered through online platforms, thus it made it difficult for the researcher to record or take note of student's non-verbal behaviour such as gestures, expressions, and attitudes, especially during the interview sessions as such information is indeed crucial and greatly contributes to the findings of a study as well.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies can still explore students' attitudes towards literary text selection in various aspects such as among students with different language competencies, social and geographical backgrounds as well as the different perspectives of genders. Additionally, future studies can also be done with a greater population.



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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors confirm sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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