

READING WITH A “WRITER’S EYE” (PART 2) : LEARNING THROUGH THE FABLE GENRE

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Abstract

This case-study undertook to find out whether learning through the fable genre helped support and extend learners’ critical thinking. Four young learners between the ages of nine to eleven were immersed in fables where they ‘heard’ fables, read fables and reviewed fables as they learnt the fable genre. Data was collected in the form of learners’ discussions and through participant observations. The findings indicate that learning through the fable genre helped to support and extend learners’ critical thinking as they reviewed the fables and made connections with issues in their lifeworlds. The findings also suggests that learning through the fable genre links the reading done in the classroom and the critical reading that needs to be done beyond the classrooms. Hence genre approach to reading can be seen as a plan or even a tool for empowering learners.

Keywords: Genre, critical reading, creative reading, fable, gender

Part 1 of this study investigated how learning the fable genre and learning about the fable genre helped learners become more confident of their writing skill. It can be found at: Antonysamy, A. C. (2012). Reading with a “writer’s eye” for writing with a “reader’s eye”. Jurnal Penyelidikan Tindakan Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Ilmu Khas, Jilid II: 2012.

Introduction

The reading that is done in the classrooms and the reading that is done beyond the classroom do not necessarily match if ‘testing comprehension’ rather than ‘teaching comprehension’ becomes the focus. Like Freire (1985), one ponders then on how to bridge the word and the world for our learners as we prepare them to become critical consumers of knowledge. This study explores how learning through the fable genre helped learners become more critically aware of what they read.

Genre

It has been difficult to avoid the word ‘genre’ in literary and language education in recent years, particularly concerning the teaching of reading and writing. I noticed that new ways of looking at genres, traditionally a way of classifying texts with common features or purposes, have been emerging in different educational contexts. Shaw and Liu (1998), Chapman (1999), Caudrey (1998) and Calkins (1994) are but some who claim that a genre focused pedagogy is effective and beneficial for language learning. However, Freedman (1993) strongly feels that attempts at explicit teaching of particular genres may be unhelpful, in fact may quite possibly be detrimental. She claims that the genre approach subordinates individual voices to pre-determined notions of genre, promoting an artificial, formulaic, even impersonal image of writing and language. Genre approach, she says, become prescriptive and even authoritative in practice.

Oliver (1999), on the other hand, argues that a flexible, participatory and critical view of genre offers ways of seeing writing as both a social and personal activity and provides a basis for discussing differences similarities and change in all kinds of text and text-making processes. This is true as Chapman (1999) says that genres are seen as dynamic, things that people do with language, ways in which communication between readers and writers is set up in particular communities and situations. Recognising the empowering nature of mastery of genres, we see great benefits in the use of genre-based reading and writing during language lessons.

Learning Through Genre

Callaghan, Knapp and Noble (1993) say that a worthwhile step is to have students explore the possibilities of the genre by working creatively within and beyond it. This is important, they say, not only because creativity is in itself a useful and necessary part of learning, but because it allows students to see how aspects of a genre and their modification affect the process of communication. Russel (1997) advocates using genres as cognitive tools. He argues that learning to use genres as cognitive tools is more important than adopting textual features. Thus curriculum subjects should be used not only as vehicles for teaching content knowledge, but as ways of teaching thinking and communicating.

Chapman (1999) states that the most important aspect of curriculum genres is their epistemic (knowledge-construction) potential: learning through genres. Curriculum genres can create situations that enable students to experience ways of discipline-based thinking and communicating. The greatest potential for situating genres within the school based subjects is to enable students to use them as cultural tools and as resources for supporting and extending thinking (Freedman, 1997). Chapman (ibid) says that we can create situations and the genres embedded in them socially situated, immediate and 'real' for students. Therefore, in schools, even though we cannot replicate exactly what goes on in the wider world we must try to imitate as close as possible.

For many learners, literary genres, like the fables, appear to be decontextualized rather than socially situated. Perhaps traditional approach to teaching literary genres, with its focus on textual features rather than features of situation, has created this sense of 'disconnection'. Chapman (1999) proceeds to say that the potential of narrative genres is realised more fully by shifting from learning about narrative (story elements) to learning through narrative – narrative as a tool for creating personal identity and for connecting with others, one's culture and one's world. She also goes on to say that writing is more socially real when writers and readers engage in conversations around texts.

Literary thinking is important to intellectual development, says Santman (2001). Literature, she says, helps us to realise who we are and imagine who we could become. It helps us consider others and see a world larger than our own. Therefore, she advises that the curriculum should be so designed that it would be able to teach kids to think proactively and compellingly about their books and to use books to think proactively and compellingly about the world. This perspective is mirrored in Delpit (1991) who says that learning genre is too easily seen as a matter of assimilation rather than critical engagement. Thus, a broader view of access is necessary – access to critical as well as normative knowledge; access to reflection as well as to performance; access to experiment as well as to convention. Thus, we have decided to explore how learning could be done through the fable genre.

Focus of the Study

According to Taitt (1982) in Pfeiffer and Wessberg (2013), telling a child what to think makes him a slave to your knowledge while teaching him how to think, makes all knowledge his slave. This study seeks to examine whether learning through the fable genre helped

support and extend learners' critical thinking. Williams (1997) advocates working with genre because it enables the reader to confront the social in writing. Genre, he emphasises, can be seen as a powerful dimension of learning about writing, texts and most importantly here, social communication.

Fables are very brief didactic tales. The fable genre is based on human nature, and although their characters are often animals, the animals personify humankind. The characters are usually one-dimensional: The fox is always sly while the mouse is small and rather weak. Characters in fables basically remain the same. However, as the fable unfolds, each character learns, as does the reader, a valuable lesson in life. Because of the brief length and story structure, we have used fables to investigate learners' critical thinking beyond the text. Williams (1997) as well as Gavelek and Raphael (1996) advice that the text is not just an enjoyable avenue through which to encourage children's reading nor a venue to practice decoding, but it is actually an agent in developing understanding of how texts in a particular range of register mean.

Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

Our study mainly explores the way critical reading is carried out using genre approach. Analysing and researching genres as one of the dimensions of learning about texts can help raise critical awareness of reading among learners. Our study seeks to examine how genre approach to reading can help learners become 'better' readers who can think critically. We hope our study would help learners become empowered readers. Specifically this study seeks to address the following research question: How does learning through the fable genre help support and extend learners' critical thinking skills.

Target Group

Four young learners between the ages of 9 to 11 have been recruited for this study. The name of all persons and places in this study are pseudonyms.

Eric, 11, knows the importance of reading but limits himself to reading comics because of his interest and because comics "has not much words and lots of pictures also ...er... very fast can finish reading." He would rather spend his free time playing play-station, cycling or playing football. Thus his mother felt he would benefit from this intervention plan that aims to make learners better readers and writers. Moreover, Eric too was quite worried as he would be sitting for his UPSR examination. This 'fear' made him a willing participant.

Jenny, 11, is an average reader who, unlike Eric, reads beyond comics. She likes to read Enid Blyton's story books. She is confident and not at all worried about English as a subject because in her Chinese school, she excels. The Chinese Language is what worries her. She kept telling the "Chinese Karangan" (essay) is the hardest, English is easy. This is probably she only converses in Chinese in school and with her mother. The rest of her communication is carried out in English with her siblings, father, cousins and friends. Her mother agrees that she should participate in this intervention because everything is a learning experience. Jenny too is quite eager to join the group.

Elaine, 10, studies in a Chinese school. Her parents also make her read more Bahasa Malaysia story books because they find her karangan (essays) bad. "The Malay standard is so high. Elaine cannot cope" they said. They did not mind Elaine joining the group as she may get good input because she hardly has much time left for English.

Kathy, 9, is the youngest in the group. She studies in a national school. She is an average reader. She is quite anxious as she would be going to a higher level. She has been told that upper primary is difficult. Thus she was quite eager to join this 'tuition' class.

Instruments and Data Analysis Techniques

The instruments for this case study involve two sources; audio-taped discussion during instruction/intervention as well as the researchers' field notes from the participant observations.

We audio taped (Frank, 1999) the discussions so as to enable us to capture our learners' voices and sense making processes. The audio taping was supported with our field notes (Zuengler, Ford & Fassnacht, 2005) of the classroom observations. We tried to capture as much details as possible – writing down our comments, questions to ask the learners, matters that needed clarification and more explanation, our thoughts and initial interpretations. The transcripts and field notes will be used to corroborate and triangulate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) the findings as means of ensuring validity.

Findings and Discussion

The fables (The Hare and the Tortoise, The Crow that Wanted to be White as well as The Crow and the Peacock) which we used as springboards for discussions formed the framework within which we stimulated our learners' imagination and helped them develop their critical thinking skill.

Critical thinking is generally defined as a higher level thinking skill that involves reflecting, responding and decision making. Ananda (2000) says that critical thinking occurs when students construct meaning by interpreting, analysing and manipulating information in response to a problem or question that requires more than a direct, one answer application of previously learned knowledge. Duzer and Florez (1999) state that critical literacy is a way of interacting with information that goes beyond the decoding of letters and words. It encourages learners to engage with information sources and to question the social contexts, purposes, and possible effects that they have on the learners' lives.

From our learners' responses and reflections, as we encouraged them to experiment within and beyond the textual boundaries and conventions of the fable genre, we found that learning through the fable genre helped to sensitize the learners to be more linguistically aware of the way pronouns were used to create certain effects like gender difference. It also helped learners to see the implicit message and not merely the explicit message. Learners could go beyond the surface meaning of a text by exploring its creation and eventual interpretations.

We'll start off by explaining what the children were actually asked to do and how it led to the findings. From these findings we attempted to identify the critical thinking skills that surfaced during the discussions, namely the linguistic awareness and the prediction of gender of the author.

Linguistic awareness

The Hare and the Tortoise was one of the many fables read in this study. During the first reading, this fable was treated as any other fable where our learners scrutinised the genre and picked out the attributes of the fable. We decided to use the same fable again because this time we wanted to 'problematize' (Graves, 2000 p.20) the text. We wanted to 'make strange the familiar'. We wanted them to 'see with new eyes'. We wanted them to see for themselves how critical reading can be enlightening. Thus, we broadened the area of fable to include the issue of gender difference.

Hence, when our learners read The Hare and the Tortoise the second time, they had a different task to accomplish. They were given highlighter pens to highlight the pronouns

'he, she, his and her'. They were then asked to identify the gender of the animals, where the hare was the male while the tortoise was the female. We then set a task where they discussed how they felt reading with gender being 'marked' compared to the earlier reading they had to do textual analysis to see how the reading of fables helps them in the writing of their own fables. We asked them how they felt now that the tortoise, representing the female gender, wins.

Our learners were given another text on The Hare and the Tortoise and again were asked to highlight the pronouns 'he, she, his and her'. But this time, the writer only uses 'he' to refer to both the tortoise and the hare. Once again I asked them how they felt now that both the animals are of the same gender. Table 1 below presents the critical analysis of the use of pronouns in both the fables.

Table 1

The Critical Analysis of the Use of Pronouns in Fables Read

The Hare and the Tortoise	Data Sample	Critical Thinking Skill
<p>(with gender marked)</p> <p>he - hare - male</p> <p>she - tortoise - female</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> making the girl win... (Elaine) making the girl better (Kathy) 'it' can use for boy and girl. But 'he' is only for boy and 'she' is only for girl (Jenny) if the writer use 'it' then we don't know if girl win or boy win (Eric) 	<p>Making associations and connections</p> <p>Evaluation and provision of evidence</p>
<p>(with gender unmarked)</p> <p>he - both hare and tortoise</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> anyone win also okay (Eric) don't want anyone to think they're better.... who is better.... who is boasting.... (Elaine) in the first one the writer purposely want to show how..... that the girl is better (Jenny) 	<p>Analysis for bias</p> <p>Making inference</p>

Our learners' responses in the table above show that they are aware of gender differentiation. Eric and Jenny's comments indicate that both of them are becoming aware of gender differentiation in lexical choice. They are able to make association. They said that if they were to write the story, they would opt for 'it'. Cameron (1990) made a similar observation. She points out one of the strategies for avoiding the use of generic masculine or feminine pronouns is to substitute 'one' or 'one's' or to use 'their'. During our discussion, Jenny showed an understanding of this strategy. She explained that she would use 'it' because the hare and the tortoise are animals..... no need to use 'he' or 'she'. Jenny and Eric displayed a fair appreciation of critical awareness in relation to gender differences in language use compared to Elaine and Kathy. But Elaine's remark 'don't want anyone to think they're better' shows her applying the 'analysis for bias', one of the critical thinking skills.

When we asked them which one they preferred, Eric said that he preferred the one with the gender unmarked. 'It never tell who will win at last....er....no...it never tell whether that one is female or male,' Eric commented, 'in the other one, the girl will win at last. I don't

like that.' Kathy and Elaine insisted that they preferred the one with gender marked because 'the girl wins'. Both these girls said that they have older brothers who often teased and bullied them. As such they were very firm with their choice. Eric, on the other hand, has an older sister and younger brother. His sister, Isabel, is a very accommodating girl who gives in to Eric. So he too was very firm with his choice. All three of them compared the fables, evaluated them and chose the version they liked. They justified their choices. Jenny is the eldest in her family and has two adopted younger brothers. She said that it did not matter to her which version was better because the message 'Don't boast' was in both versions and that the moral value was of more importance than gender difference. Her acute awareness of fables enabled her to see beyond the gender difference to the purpose of a fable.

We have encouraged our learners to critically read, analyse and respond to the way language is used in texts they read. We created a space for critical discourse analysis in which students can respond to issues about the power of one's language choice. Learning through the fable genre helped to sensitize the learners to be more linguistically aware of the way pronouns were used to create certain effects like gender difference.

The prediction of gender of the author

This emphasis on the pronoun 'he/she' and 'him/her' also brought about another discovery through Jenny. Jenny initiated the prediction of the gender of the author. Table 2 below shows the learners' exploration of the gender of the author based on the pronouns 'he/she' and 'his/her' in the fable.

Table 2

Learners' Exploration of the Gender of the Author Based on the Pronouns 'he/she' and 'his/her' Used in the Fable

Gender of the Author and Reasons for the Prediction	Critical Thinking Skills
The Hare and the Tortoise (with gender marked)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think this writer is a girl... maybe Enid Blyton or Enid Blyton's sister or girl cousin or anyone.... girl (Jenny) 	Making Predictions Making Inferences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girl writer – the girl wrote it-lah because she made the girl win at last (Eric, Elaine&Kathy) 	Drawing Conclusions
The Hare and the Tortoise (with gender unmarked)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> must be a man because both win (Kathy) 	Prediction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cannot be girl-lah.....because he make the hare and tortoise....a boy. If girl writer...er...the hare and tortoise will be girl also-lah..... (Eric) 	Making Inferences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the man want to show that....he want to show that you cannot boast....he don't want to show girl winning or boy winning (Elaine) 	Making Inferences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the same person (Jenny) but doesn't mention the gender 	Drawing Conclusions

Eric, Elaine and Kathy maintained that the writer of the fable with gender marked is definitely a girl “because they say that the girl will win at last. The girl wrote it-lah because she made the girl win at last”. Although Jenny was the first one to mention that the fable (with gender marked) was written by a girl, she later changed her mind and said that perhaps the writer of both the fables was the same person but she makes no reference to the gender of the writer. Then she changed her mind again and said that the writer might be a ‘he’ as seen in the excerpt below.

- Jenny : This (with gender marked) is the first story he wrote... and the writer thought thatit’s very.... you know....he has how own original set....but he printed it out already
- Researcher : ummm.....
- Jenny : And then he saw that....her....and.....she.... the girls win....so he gave it another....ending....
- Researcher :he.....now you’re saying that the writer is ‘he’. Who do you think the writer is?
- Elaine : Maybe it’s a ‘he’
- Eric : Where can..... the ‘he’ made the ‘she’ win huh?
- Jenny : Maybe
- Researcher : Why do you say so?
- Jenny : Maybe the writer was small [she actually meant ‘young’] he wasmaybe he
- Eric :he liked girls
- (everybody laughs)
- Jenny : Maybe.....when he became older, he wrote the second one. He think maybe it’s fair to make both equal.

Eric disagreed when Jenny and Elaine mentioned the possibility that the author of The Hare and the Tortoise with gender marked was a male. He questioned with disbelief, “Where can..... the ‘he’ made the ‘she’ win huh?”. He disagreed with Jenny’s reasoning that the author might have been young. He gave his own reason, maybe he liked girls. This remark shows how Eric is projecting himself onto the situation. He too probably does the same ‘things’ to please ‘girls’. If before he vehemently disagreed with Jenny over the possibility of the author being a male, he now seems to consider the possibility of the author being a male, he now seems to consider the possibility of the author being a male with his remark, ‘he liked girls’.

This exploration is of great significance since in explaining the reasons for their opinions and speculating about the author of the texts, our learners made use of several critical thinking skills. Our learners revealed a great deal about the ways in which they were interacting within and beyond the text. The learners predicted the gender of the author and supported their predictions with reasons they saw fit. Table 2 and the excerpt above show the learners’ critical exploration of the gender of the author.

Conclusion

Learning to ‘read genres’ may give students clearer understanding of what is valued, and in turn enhance their command of the genres concerned, by setting up active correspondence between the genre-as-written and the genre-as-read (Wells, 1998). Such reading, he adds, might also help to open up the often closed and mystified agendas of writing. Our study shows that learning through the fable genre helped to sensitize the learners to be more critically and linguistically aware of the way pronouns were used to create certain effects like gender difference.

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