Abstract

Writing critical essays is an integral part of the undergraduates’ learning experience especially within the Literature in English programme at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Every literature course including Critical Appreciation, Gender Identities and Selected Literary Works, which were the focus of this research project, requires the learners to discuss and present in written form pertinent issues in an analytical and engaging way using relevant citations from published materials. However, we found that our learners face significant problems in these areas. Some of the problems were rudimentary and could be dealt with through personal consultation. Nonetheless, most of the problems faced by our learners appeared more fundamental including the inability to discuss the issues in a critical manner, lack of paraphrasing skills and doing correct in-citations, purely summarizing the text without creating relevance with the topic and committing acts of plagiarism. As an intervention strategy, we incorporated and expanded certain available approaches that assist students to acquire the main skills they require in order to develop educated responses and write critical essays for literature.

Keywords: critical response; literary writing; writing sub-skills; plagiarism;

1. Introduction

Action research, like all types of academic research, creates an avenue for respective researchers to gauge the extent a subject is successfully taught and learnt. As Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (2006: 7) state, “Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, ‘What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?’ Their accounts of practice show how they are trying to improve their own learning, and influence the learning of others.” This premise is the point of departure for a research conducted this past semester at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia on developing critical responses and avoiding plagiarism among undergraduates of the literature program.

Writing critical essays is an integral part of the undergraduates’ learning experience especially within the Literature program at the school. Literature courses such as Critical Appreciation, Gender Identities and Selected Literary Works require learners to discuss any literary works and present in written form pertinent issues in an analytical and engaging way using relevant citations from published materials. Learners are required to incorporate
the in-depth reading they develop on the topic/questions given in their assignments from the external sources such as journal articles and reference books, with their critical response as well as the analysis of the literary elements of the work of fiction, and produce an insightful and informed discussion. This paper presents the preliminary discussion of the intervention taken in the course of the second semester of 2010-2011 academic session towards developing critical response and avoiding plagiarism among the undergraduates of the B. A. e-lit and B. Ed TESL programmes.

2. Literary writing and the learning experience

Writing can be considered as a process of documentation where it allows ideas and thoughts to be expressed in a more formal manner. This being the case, writing thus plays a crucial role “to encourage reflection because it captures the original experience so it will not be lost” (Zuckermann & Rajuan, 2008: 2). Within the discipline of literary studies, writing about literature has been described as “an idiosyncratic process” (Kirszner & Mandell, 2007: 21) which requires critical thinking, conceptualization of ideas, and in-depth reading of both the literary work and theoretical work. In addition, writing about literature can be further categorized into two basic “approaches” – the “explication” type and the “analysis” type where the former focuses on “a detailed elucidation” of a literary work while the latter focuses on any one “aspect or element or part” of a literary work which may include “point of view, characterization, plot, symbolism, structure” to name but a few (Arp & Johnson, 2009: 5, 6). In other words, writing an essay for literature requires students to demonstrate their abilities to incorporate the mechanics of a text to the overall discussion of the story/poem/play. At a more advanced stage, students of literature programme must also be able to appropriate “the intellectual challenge of modern theories” including formalism, reader response, feminism, and Marxism in order to demonstrate a more informed understanding of the text.

Based on preliminary findings conducted by the lecturers of the respective courses including SKBS 1023 Critical Appreciation, SKBS3063 Gender Identities and VVVB3483/ SKBS2213 Selected Literary Works, it is found that these undergraduate learners face significant problems in specific areas. Some of the problems were rudimentary and could be dealt with through personal consultation. Nonetheless, most of the problems faced by our learners appear more fundamental. Some of the primary problems exhibited by students involved formulating a critical discussion in the form of an essay that includes the inability to discuss the issues in a critical manner. Students appear to merely summarize the plot or central story of the text without being able to identify the central theme or issue that they wish to discuss. In addition, students also display an absence of the skill to create relevance between the secondary reading materials quoted and the topic discussed. Students have been caught duplicating sentences taken from the source materials without paraphrasing and/or giving proper citation, thus, committing acts of plagiarism. Based on these concerns, we have developed an intervention strategy through our action research in order to incorporate and expand certain available strategies that may assist students in acquiring crucial skills in developing critical responses to a text which would allow them to produce engaging academic essays for literature.

3. The intervention strategies and preliminary results

In order to understand the ability of students who are subjects in the literature courses, three workshops were held in the course of the 14-week semester. The central aim of each workshop was to create awareness of the various sub-skills of reading and critical thinking and writing. Each of the workshops also focused on further developing the students’ ability to incorporate both elements of literature and critical theory in producing engaging essays on any given text. The workshops also set out to gauge the students’ current abilities in critical responses and academic writing. The three workshops in a way act as a platform for lecturers to monitor students’ progress and at the same time gather enough data that will later be used in understanding the needs and competency level of each student. The following is the description of the students who are involved in workshops:

| Table 1. Description of class and setting |
|------------------------------------------|
| Lecturer | Dr. Raihanah | Dr. Ruzy | Dr. Arezou |
| Course | E-lit (year1) | E-lit (year 3) | TESL (year 2) |
| Total | 27 | 13 | 15 |
4. Description of the three workshops

The discussion of the action research is divided in three sections based on the three workshops conducted. Each workshop focused on a specific topic and all of the topics presented in all the workshops mainly centered on improving writing among literature students. The first workshop focused on the developing critical response to a text. The second workshop concentrated on developing summarizing and paraphrasing skills. Finally the third workshop deliberated on incorporating critical works and theory in the explication of a literary text.

4.1. Workshop one

Workshop one focused on the basic usage of literary elements towards developing students’ competency in providing critical responses on a given text. During this workshop, students were shown a short animated video about a woman who is unable to fit into a pair of jeans because she has put on some weight. She gets upset by this and attempts to blame her husband whom she thinks has put the jeans in the drier and thus causing them to shrink. Students were required to give their interpretations and comments regarding this situation of character in the video. The video was shown three times and after each viewing, students were asked specific questions in order to draw out their responses. The questions ranged from opinion based response to a more analytical type response in which they were requested to focus on specific aspects of the animation such as setting, characterization and point of view.

Based on the preliminary reading of the students’ comments, we have found that there was a marked change between the initial reaction to the video and the later responses based on the questions asked. Students generally held a superficial opinion of the text initially with answers such as “the video is funny” or “the woman is silly”. However, they began to gradually develop a more critical response to the video upon subsequent viewing and questioning. Some of the responses inclined towards criticisms of the woman for behaving in the manner that she has. Others showed great sympathy towards the husband who had to endure the wife’s accusations. In addition, we also found that when asked analytical questions based on specific elements of literature such as point of view and character, the students’ feedback displayed a more critical mindset. For instance, some students began to examine the stereotypes imposed on the woman and how the video exhibited patriarchal bias. What was also interesting is that this movement of superficial to a more engaging discussion is seen across the board among both the first year literature students and the third year literature students.

Thus based on the first workshop, we found that pertinent analytical questions opened up an avenue for our undergraduate students to provide insightful explication of a text. However, the process is slow and students need to be guided with meaningful clues. They still require probing and this is where the lecturer needs to function as a facilitator towards engaging a more critical response in them.

4.2. Workshop two

As stated earlier, one of the fundamental problems faced by our learners is the lack of paraphrasing and summarizing skills which may lead to the acts of plagiarism. As part of the intervention strategy proposed in this action research, Workshop Two aimed to assist students to improve their summarizing and paraphrasing skills. In addition, the workshop also set out to achieve other related aims that can further assist students’ academic writing abilities. The following elaborates on the content, aims and outcome of Workshop Two. As one of the primary aims of the workshop, students were reminded that in order to write about literature they need: (1) to develop their own personal response to a literary text, (2) be familiar with techniques and vocabulary to use which depends on the genre of the literary text, and (3) know the various ways of looking at the text, a concept/theory/approach.

To begin with, students are given a revision on certain knowledge of literature that they are required to have. These include knowledgeable about the techniques and vocabulary to use when writing – this knowledge refers to the elements of a literary text. For a poem, the basic elements include diction, imagery, figurative language, rhyme, rhythm and sound. For a drama, the elements consist of staging, conventions, character, plot, theme, and language. For a novel or a short story, it can be summarized as narrative, plot, character, setting, theme and language. In addition, they are also reminded of the various ways of looking at the text as taught in the Reading Approaches course, such as Formalist, Feminist, Marxist, and Psychoanalyst. The most important part of the workshop was to inform students of when, what, why and how to bring external/secondary sources in their writing of academic essays.
on literature. Making notes was emphasized as one of the pertinent techniques that students usually ignore or skip in the writing process.

Taking up Julie Grover’s (1998) point, personal responses are to be developed not from the experiences of others but through an individual’s own experience of engaging with a text. In Workshop Two students are trained to develop their own responses to the given text. The practices in workshop two mainly concentrated on a contemporary Malaysian short story, “Cempedak” (2010) by a local writer, Amir Muhammad. Students were given elaborated instructions on the various skills of quoting directly, techniques of paraphrasing and types of summarizing. After each targeted skill mentioned above, samples of practice were given to students and the answers were discussed during the workshop. One of the strategies that we used in conducting the workshop was to focus first on sample practices from non-literary texts, which are generally easier for students to do. This made it easy for students to understand the main techniques in paraphrasing and summarizing. Then we moved on to practices which were based on the selected short story. Students were guided in the course of doing workshop in a systematic way by providing sample answers after they attempted their own paraphrases or summaries. This technique could help them to understand their own areas of difficulty and ways for improvement. Having reviewed their handouts, majority of students demonstrated a good command of vocabulary in terms of paraphrasing sentences. However, it seems that they need to work on their abilities of writing grammatical sentence structures.

Writing an essay on the primary meaning of the short story “Cempedak” was chosen as the final practice in order to evaluate students’ ability in developing their personal response with reference to an element of fiction – themes and ideas. In writing the final essay, students were assisted to develop an understanding of how to incorporate the summarized and paraphrased sentences in their discussion. The review of their essays showed that students have difficulties in establishing links between the paraphrased and summarized sentences with their personal response. This gap in students’ writing skills can partly be referred to students’ unawareness of synthesizing skill which would be highlighted in the last workshop.

4.3. Workshop three

Workshop Three was a culmination of the first two workshops. The students were given the same short story, “Cempedak” because of its familiarity. A task sheet containing various exercises accompanied the reading of “Cempedak”. The objective of the workshop was to show how certain crucial materials can help in a literary analysis, which will consequently result in better writing.

Before the students can interact meaningfully with the text, they were requested to identify the attributes of the short story. They would choose a particular aspect of it, for example, they could focus on the relationship between the young wife and her husband. Then they were asked to identify the literary aspects of the short story to enable them to expand on the attribute which they have chosen. Therefore, the worksheet looks like this:

1. Write the attributes of the short story “Cempedak”.
2. Identify the literary concepts in “Cempedak” to exemplify the attributes that you have chosen.

Once they have identified the attribute and literary concepts such as characterization, point of view or setting which would allow them a deeper insight into the text, they were given three articles to show how one’s essay can be more scholarly and critical when used together with secondary sources. For “Cempedak”, three articles, a) a brief description of new writings in Malaysian Literature in English, b) “Imagery and Symbolism in the Definition of Women,” and c) “Feminist Literary Criticism” which would allow them to contextualize “Cempedak” as one of the new writings in Malaysian Literature in English. If they had read the first article carefully and understood its description, they would be able to argue that new writings in English moved from a preoccupation with alienation within a community to alienation within the self. The second article describes the stereotypes of women in literature. In relation to the short story, the article will open up new avenues of thought regarding the portrayal of the young wife. Is she stereotyped as mindless because she over-reacts to trivial issues? Is she given agency? The third article on Feminist Literary Criticism draws them to a conceptual framework. Therefore, they will be exposed to the notion that each critical analysis requires a specific reading lens. In this case, if the students focus on gender relations, they would need to know the ways in which a woman or man is stereotyped and the critical theory which is useful for making the analysis. Thus, a critical essay requires a focus on the attribute of the text, the literary mechanics which
are used by the author to make overt/subvert the attribute, the historical or social context of the story and most importantly, the reading approach one can use to make the analysis meaningful.

5. The way forward

The three workshops were conducted in sequence – with month-long intervals – to enable students to practice what they have learnt and use them in their writing assignments. The workshops showed them the importance of breaking one’s analysis of a text into smaller sections, by asking questions that elicited a more critical and meaningful response. They were shown ways to summarize and paraphrase, how they can make their critiques of texts more scholarly by using research articles in explaining the context of a certain work, as well as choosing an appropriate reading perspective which underpins their responses. These intervention workshops have been shown to assist the students in producing quality critical works with in-depth analysis and correct citations. Consequently, they experienced a meaningful process of learning in a literature classroom. We believe that students who are unaware of the learning experience are hindered by their own limitations and never progress beyond the entrance qualification. To overcome this issue, this action research set out to assist selected first year and third year students develop a sense of awareness of the fundamentals of literary academic writings by focusing on specific sub-skills of critical thinking and writing and the importance of critical and analytical thinking skills. It is hoped that the intervention strategies taken at this stage has assisted them to be more analytical and critical writers, necessary characteristics of high-quality literature students.

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