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Students' Response to Participating in an International Project on Readers' Response to Lord of the Flies: Insights into Using Collaborative Teaching Techniques

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Abstract

Teaching literature through new techniques and judging its relevance in terms of students' perceptions in an under-researched and significant area of study. This study aims to explore students' response to new teaching methodologies being used in a literature classroom, as part of an international research project. This international project was a collaboration between Pakistan, the UK and Norway. Collaborative teaching techniques of using literature circles within each class and google circles across the three contexts (online) were used. The whole population of the students (n=12) who had participated in the international project were approached for interviews. All twelve participating students from Pakistan were interviewed to explore their reactions to the international study. Students felt that they learnt new things from the use of these innovative methods, were able to learn from foreigners and felt a sense of connectivity to their groups. It is recommended that students from Pakistan be given such exposure to overcome their hesitation as such research studies tend to have a positive impact on students. It is also recommended that further research be carried out in other contexts as well to determine if the use of such teaching pedagogies can benefit other teachers of literature.

Keywords: collaborative learning, fiction, higher education, international, reader response

Introduction

International collaborations in teaching and learning scenarios are becoming increasingly common (Steeple et al., 1996; Tan et al., 2010; Whatley & Bell, 2003), which can be done in the classrooms with peers and also online with counterparts from other geographical locations. Students of literature have also been introduced to modern teaching and learning pedagogies (Sunderman, 1999; Wigger, 2013) like the use of literature circles- student-led, discussion groups- in schools, colleges and universities (Dillon, 2007). In this study we aim to explore students' perceptions to new teaching methodologies being used in a literature classroom, located in an under-researched area in Sindh, Pakistan. The interactive teaching methodologies, literature circles and google groups helped the students to interact with peers from their own class and from other participating institutes in a teacher free environment. The objective of the study was to understand students' perceptions regarding participating in an international study. The aim was to present students' insights regarding these interactions with peers from their class and from other countries. This paper is focused on the research question:

How do Pakistani undergraduate students respond to participating in an international project on readers' response to Lord of the Flies?

Literature Review

Studies related to the topic were reviewed from different perspectives. Studies related to the novel were reviewed and presented to justify the choice of the literary text taken in the project. Furthermore, literature on collaborative learning was studied as collaboration is at the centre of this study. As the study was cross-cultural in its nature and used online groups to interact, studies using similar tools cross-culturally were also reviewed. To begin the literature review we present a background of the selected text, justifying its suitability for such a study. The next two sections discuss collaborative learning followed by cross-cultural learning in online collaborative groups.

Lord of the Flies

Lord of the Flies is a novel about a group of boys stranded on an island trying to build a society from scratch, but end up turning into savages. The writer shows how an island full of vegetation, peaceful surroundings, sandy beaches and

cool atmosphere was turned into ashes by the boys who could have lived happily and waited to be rescued. Two sides of society, evil and virtue are represented in the characters of Jack and Ralph (Wilson, 2010). Written in the background of World War II, the novel represents the author's state of mind and is a representation of that time period.

The novel is based on a universal theme and is very well-received among all types of audiences. Sunderman (1999) suggests by example, a method of teaching *Lord of the Flies* using a reader-response approach. She says, "Literature naturally arouses a response. The challenge is helping the students communicate their reactions in a meaningful way" (p.51). While teaching the novel to eighth graders, Sunderman devised a unique method letting the students go into a wood situated within the school premises to experience occurrences similar to the first chapter of the novel. After three sessions in the woods, the students were given the novel in the class where they read and interpreted it using a reader-response approach. Having gone through the same experience as the characters, it was easy for the readers to interpret the novel and to relate it to their own experiences. Sunderman contends that the novel, if taught with an appropriate technique can help the students form various interpretations letting them understand their own and others' experiences. She further argues that interpretations need to be formed independent of the teacher, be examined, challenged and justified and not dictated. In case of this study, it was truly observed that the students came up with new ideas and interpretation, as they were taking responsibility to interpret and think over the novel.

A similar study on *Lord of the Flies* was conducted by Martens-Baker (2009), where students from two high-schools collaborated online to understand the novel and the collaboration helped enrich their experience and understanding of the novel. The students were also then taken on a school field trip where students from both schools designed a camp. They collaborated and put into practice the life skills learnt from the novel. This is also a unique way of teaching collaboration through the novel.

Lord of the Flies has been widely researched for its potential as a literary medium to teach about social issues. Wigger (2013), for example, suggests that Golding's novel can be used in a second language classroom to teach democratic values such as the right to free speech using reader-response theory. Since Swedish

curriculum requires that democratic values be taught through each subject, Wigger (2013) suggests that students can be taught about democratic values through classroom discussions and writing assignments based on the novel. The perceptions of the participants in this study will depict how far this has been possible in the context of these Pakistani undergraduate students. Furthermore, Ellis (2009) suggests that the novel can be used to teach young adults about feminism. The absence of any female characters in the novel can be used as a discussion point about various aspects of feminism. Syed (2019) also investigated Pakistani undergraduate students' responses to various novels including *Lord of the Flies*. Her research indicated that Pakistani students connected and related more to contextually close novels and as *Lord of the Flies* was not related to their social and cultural context in any direct manner, a majority of the participating students did not connect to it.

Reading fiction enhances young readers' empathy and their ability to understand different perspectives (Alsup, 2015). As the novel is rich in themes, symbols, allegorical meanings and can be studied from different theoretical perspectives, it is presumed to provide ground to discuss various issues to participating undergraduate students.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning enables students to engage in an interaction with each other in a group setting. This provides students a space to share their ideas and experiences in a non- threatening setting. Owing to the changing teaching and learning scenario, it is important to introduce collaborative teaching methodologies in the classrooms (Tan, Wong, Fang, & Gopinathan, 2010). Collaborative groups encourage individual participation, taking responsibility, sharing and encouraging to highlight individual abilities and contribution. Showalter (2003) believes that collaboration encourages learning by analysing, reading, thinking, speaking and writing. Macaro as cited in Bedel (2016) stated that collaborative learning motivates students to achieve a common goal of learning by combined efforts. Students tend to respect each other and the teachers work as a facilitators only. Bedel (2016) further stated that when learning in collaboration, students have to take some authority in order to be active in the group.

In addition to academic learning, researchers believe that students also gain confidence through the collaborative method. When students conform each

other's opinions in activities involving group work, it makes them confident and comfortable with each other. They feel less threatened when the teacher is not there to put a question against them (Macaro, 1997). Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005) express that collaborative learning allows students to know each other's background, discuss personal experiences, analyze and negotiate the current situations around them by relating to topic. Thus, collaborative learning is like an open ground where students feel free to discuss, analyse and relate to the information by performing their own role in a group. Macaro (1997) further argues that collaboration helps students' feel more confident as they learn through helping each other. To conclude this point, collaborative learning is indeed a potential source to gain confidence, discover the each other's world and create a trustful world around the participants.

Cross Cultural Learning in Online Collaborative Groups

Academics throughout the world has relied on online, collaborative, cross-cultural groups and other means to teach and train students in an educational setting (Whatley & Bell, 2003; Yang & Liu, 2004, Steeples et al., 1996). As collaborative groups are interactive platforms for the constructive knowledge and critical thinking, similarly cross-cultural learning is also a great learning experience. Zhu (2012) observes that culture directly shapes the behavior, values and perceptions; hence, collaborative online groups create a feasible environment for critical thinking and enquiry of other cultures.

Chen, Hsu and Caropreso (2006) observe that culture is a learning phenomenon as it provides the context of learning. They further argue that the degree of diversity among people is increasing due to online communication tools, hence students in online collaborative groups are heavily influenced by the thinking and behavior of the students from diverse cultures. Zhu (2012) believes that individualistic culture is more confrontational and direct, but in collective cultures people are humble and avoid conflict and feel more confident and express their views without hesitation in online collaborative communication. Furthermore, Ryan (2000) expresses that people often feel burdened the status of the opposite person and avoid speaking directly, which could be connected to student-teacher relationship in many contexts.

In a research study done on students from across the globe, Ramsay (2005) professes that learners who are engaged in computer mediated communication are

flexible, interested, valuable and provide pedagogical benefits. Zshu (2012) argues that students who participate in online collaborative tasks express more satisfaction as compared to those who do not participate. Dillenbourg (1999) in the same vein gave four critical aspects of collaborative learning: situations, interactions, processes and effects. If we relate the above aspects in cross-cultural online collaborative groups, then various members of groups interact for a common goal. They cross the process of discussion, negotiations and sharing to create effect on each other positively for the sake of understanding and enhanced learning outcomes. Hence, cross-cultural collaborative groups are great platforms for the students to learn more knowledge and each other's culture too.

Methodology

This study presents an analysis of students' response to participating in an international research collaboration between the UK, Norway and Pakistan, which involved students responding to Golding's novel, *Lord of the Flies*. The responses were first discussed in student-led directed discussion groups called literature circles. The students were assigned literature circles roles in advance and in the next class they discussed without the teacher's interference. In the second stage, the participants from Pakistan interacted with their counterparts from Norway and the UK, who had also had similar literature circle discussions on the same novel. These interactions were online with peers from the UK and Norway through google docs which we called Google Groups. These interactions proved to be very popular among the students. The students were asked about the influence of the use of these methodologies and the experience of participation in an international research study during individual interviews.

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative research design. As it is a study of perceptions, a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach was considered suitable for this study.

Population and Sample

The participants of this study were twelve Pakistani undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in an international collaborative project held at a public sector university in Sindh, Pakistan. The whole population was selected as

the sample as there were only 12 participants from Pakistan who participated in the project. The age range of these student were from 21 to 25 years. These students were studying English literature and were final year undergraduates. The students for the international study were selected based on self-selective sampling. Following a literature circle discussion in the class, the students were invited to participate in a google group discussion online. During these discussions, the students were able to interact with their counterparts from Norway and the UK via computers and mobile phones. The use of technology to teach and learn has become increasingly common (Naylor & Gibbs, 2015) and it was expected that the participants had much to gain from the experience. As a follow-up to the international project, we collected responses from the participants, to see if the study had had any impact on them. These responses were taken eight months after the initial data collection. The participants who had been part of the google group discussions in the international research were all contacted for an interview, to which they agreed.

Instrument

The data for this article was gathered through semi-structured interviews as they are the best in situations where flexibility is needed on the part of the researchers. They allow room for discussion while also giving the researchers a direction to follow (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The interviews were designed and conducted according to Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, and Kangasniemi's (2016) model of semi-structured interviews. Kallio et al. (2016) argue that semi-structured interview data should be collected rigorously following a five-step process: (a) identify the prerequisites of a semi-structured interview; (b) retrieve and use previous knowledge; (c) develop an interview schedule; and (d) pilot the schedule and present the complete semi-structured interview guide.

We went through the prerequisites of conducting semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). We also understood that semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate tool in the study of perceptions (Barriball & While, 1994). Secondly, we reviewed academic literature in the area to understand the general trends in our identified area of study, that is, students' perceptions regarding international and collaborative activities. Thirdly, we designed an interview schedule reflecting on our research question, literature review and the purpose of the study. Barriball and While (1994) argue that the interview guide needs to be participant- oriented. We ensured that the questions were not leading

and allowed room for rich data. Fourthly, since Kallio et al. (2016) suggest piloting the interview schedule before conducting the actual interviews with the selected participants, we piloted the interview schedule with three students other than the participants. The post-piloted schedule was then used to collect data from the participants.

Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed thematically in line with the six step model of interview data presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). They suggest that the researchers must familiarize themselves with the data which we did by transcribing and then reading them. We then developed some initial codes before generating themes. These themes were then reviewed and named. The two researchers checked part of the coding against each other's to ensure trustworthiness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1999).

Coding for this project was done through NVivo 12 by both authors in order to increase trustworthiness of the data. Richards (2015) divides codes into three main categories- descriptive, topical and analytical. The initial codes were mostly descriptive and topical. Topical codes such as 'discussion in literature circles' were used to represent the topic of the coded passage. As the coding process proceeded, some analytical codes were also included which involved interpretation and reflection such as 'critical of teaching methods' was a code that needed reflection on when the participants were being critical and suggesting a change.

Analytical decisions were required at every stage of coding. For example, when assigning participants' views on literature and google circles to different categories, some of the categories were easy to decide as they had precedence in literature such as interactive and collaborative activities. When the participants talked about this being an activity where they could talk to peers in class and outside, it was easy to mark that as interactive activity. However, at times it was difficult to decide when participants talked about interaction with foreigners. With increasing number of people talking about these interactions, we coded this as a separate category. There were some overlaps between interactions with foreigners and interactivity activities, thus we coded it under both categories. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, the codes were then categorized and themes were developed. A total of five themes were developed, refined and named. These five themes are

described in the findings and discussion section below.

Findings

The codes developed from our data were broadly divided into five broad themes: (a) views on the methods used; (b) new knowledge learnt; (c) views on interaction with foreigners; (d) a sense of connectivity; and (e) future usage. These were connected to our main research question about how students responded to participating in an international project.

Views on the Methods Used

The participants were very interested pertaining to the methods used by both literature circles and google group discussions. Nine out of 12 participants mentioned 15 times that it was their first experience of such methods in the classroom. As one of them said:

“I have participated in class groups, but not online groups.”

One of the participants also said that he had seen such activities when searching for lectures on YouTube. The students talked about each of the two methods used in the study explicitly. About literature circles, they said that the activity helped boost their confidence as well as language skills. As one of the female participants said:

“Literature circle developed my confidence level and it offered me the opportunity to voice my opinion.”

Another participant stated:

“We had such groups in History of English literature in third year and this was a second experience of this type. By this we can cover all the topics and learn more deeply.”

Google groups were a completely new experience for these students. Even after eight months of having participated, their memories were fresh. As one of

them shared:

“In google group, the level of excitement was high while knowing the fact that what and how those students think and react, what will be their approach.”

The students were especially excited about the fact that they were interacting with peers from a different geographical and cultural setting, as was said by a participant:

“By this we were able to connect with other societies, who are learning the same thing.”

New Knowledge Learnt

The students took this as a new learning experience:

“It was a very good activity for our class. We learned a lot of new things. Shared our experiences with foreign students.”

Both the methods used were new for the students and the exchange of responses within literature circles as well as google groups provided them a chance to look at things from new perspectives. The students when asked about the experience said:

“It was so much positive and there was nothing negative. It was motivating, meaningful and knowledgeable. We learned a lot of things.”

They also seemed to believe that the kind of learning that took place during the google group discussions was very different from what they could learn in a classroom situation. As one of them reported:

“(In) google circles, we learnt more about themes and symbols that we didn't learn in the classroom.”

Views on Interaction with Foreigners

All participants mentioned that an important part of the project was their interaction with students from a different geographical and cultural context. Their involvement in the project was enhanced by the opportunity to interact with students from the developed world. They found difficult to understand their questions and language at times, but most of the times they interacted well and even when they did not understand their question, they asked for explanation. Six of the participants seemed to think that the students from the UK and Norway had a better understanding of the novel they were responding to because of their better language skills. One of the high achieving students also believed:

“I think it was even easier for them to understand the novel as compared to us. May be due to their language strategy or maybe they are frequent readers of novels.”

Five of the participants also said that they got to know of views that were very different from their own from comments of their foreign counterparts. They attributed the difference in views to the difference in culture as one of the male students said:

“Actually we interacted with other students who have a changed school of thought (different mindset), their thoughts were different and ours were totally different.”

A Sense of Connectivity

The participating students mentioned that their participation in the research project had given them a sense of connectivity with their teachers, other students and their foreign counterparts. Nine students talked about this sense of connectivity, six of whom talked about the connection they developed with their peers abroad, two talked about the connection they developed with their teacher and fellow students while one made a general comment. They seemed to enjoy talking to the students from other countries as it gave them a sense of connection with people across the borders. Moreover, they also enjoyed the experience of interacting with their peers. As one of them said about the project:

“It was quite good, like we were in touch with the teachers, we discussed about this novel, discussed with friends in the classroom.”

Future Usage

The students were also asked if they had learnt anything from the project that they might use in the future. Eleven out of twelve participants said that they would try and use the methods used in the study in their future. Though all these participants wanted to use the methods used in the study, eight of them were very confident about it. Among the others, two participants seemed to think that they would not have the support of the school in which they were teaching or planning to teach as schools tend to have their own rules and regulations. One of the participants also mentioned the lack of resources in our institute:

“We don’t have Wi fi access in government institutes as I shall strive for government job and it will be difficult to apply in government sector.”

Discussion

Choosing a literary text such as Lord of the Flies to encourage readers to interact with each other was a conscious decision. It was expected to provide enough chance of debate and argument as well as help the readers connect the text with their society. A number of studies cited in the literature (Martens-Baker, 2009; Sunderman, 1999; Wigger, 2013) prove that Lord of the Flies has been used to encourage a critical response from learners. Furthermore, the use of activities with minimum input from teachers was also expected to provide a space to the participants to engage in interactions with each other.

When asked about their response to participating in an international study, the participants showed a great interest in the new teaching methodologies. The literature circles were used with the intent of helping the students collaborate with each other as Dillon’s (2007) study exhibited. The students’ positive feedback in the interviews on the use of new methodologies shows that this element of methodology proved successful. Google groups were a new technique used in this study, which also proved to be a source of positive feedback from the participants. Google groups made use of computer mediated communication (Ramsay, 2005;

Zhu, 2012). Google groups as a teaching methodology is recommended to be used in literature classrooms as it helps the students interact in groups, respond to literary texts, make use of technology and go beyond the classroom.

International collaboration proved to be a source of inspiration and learning for the participants (Tan et al., 2010; Whatley & Bell, 2003) and the students gained a chance to assimilate new knowledge from other parts of the world. A variety of perspectives were made available to these students who otherwise would not have had a chance to familiarize themselves with such views.

As pointed out in the findings section, the use of literature circles and google circles provided the students a chance to connect and collaborate with peers from the UK and Norway in a teacher-free environment. The literature and google circles were therefore, a collaborative learning technique which provided a chance to the participants to interact with their peers. As discussed in the literature review on collaborative learning (Steeple et al., 1996; Yang & Liu, 2004), such experiences enable the learners to gain more critical skills of analysis. Showalter (2003) argues that collaborative learning helps thinking, analysis, speaking and writing skills of the learners. The students in these literature circles also seemed to believe that this was a learning experience that helped them think and analyze each other's' comments. The students are also expected to gain more confidence through such engagements (Macaro, 1997). The level of excitement and interest shown by the interviewees showed that they were confident about their learning through these group activities.

In addition to being collaborative, google circles also provided the participants a cross-cultural experience. Such cross-cultural activities in most academic literature (Ramsay, 2005; Zhu, 2012) are considered to be a positive exchange that helps boost students' confidence and criticality. However, for the participants of our google circles, it was the first interaction with foreigners and was an exchange with the foreigners more than anything else. Our students being from an underdeveloped context, and their peers being from developed countries, felt the superiority that Ramsay (2005) talks about. They felt awed by their language skills and assumed that they had a better and sounder understanding of the novel as quoted in the findings, that may be due to their language strategy or maybe they were frequent readers of novels. Moreover, the participants were able to see that

there were varied interpretations of literature and felt a sense of connectivity with their peers from across cultures, despite the distance and hesitation on account of having read the same text *Lord of the Flies*. As one of them quoted in the findings said that they had learnt more in google group than their classrooms. This shows that they were open to new learning methods and gained from their experience.

The participating students were also asked if they found the activities plausible for their future teaching. Almost all of the participants wanted to use the activities in their classrooms. Though a majority of the participants said they would like to use it, some were concerned if the administration and resources in hand would allow them to be able to do such work in their classroom. This is an element of the study that needs to be further researched. It is recommended that further research be carried out into how well our institutions are prepared to introduce innovative methodologies including the openness of the administration and the availability of the resources to the teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, students learn from collaborative learning techniques as much as, if not more than a teacher-centered activity. Their views, as discussed in findings and discussion sections, suggest that the new methods used enabled the participants to experience innovative methodologies in a positive light. Furthermore, their interaction and exchange with students across the borders, enhanced their understanding of not just the text but also expanded their world view as they familiarised themselves with how people from other contexts thought about the same text. Most of them also emphasized that they would try and use such measures themselves in the future as they thought it to be a highly successful teaching strategy.

Pakistani students have limited cross-cultural exposure, which makes google circles a new and foreign platform to discuss literature. It is essential; therefore, to provide students a chance to enhance their learning experience by providing them a chance to engage in peer-based discussions of literary works. As shown by the discussion of findings and literature review, collaborative and cross-cultural discussions tend to increase students' level of analysis, strength of their interpretations, confidence and language skills. Collaborative learning through literature circles and google circles can help students learn texts more interactively

and should be encouraged at all levels.

This study presents interviews with only 12 participants, who participated in the google circles. This leaves out 37 students who initially took part in the literature circles. As the use of google circles was voluntary, less students volunteered. Further research into how this activity will be if such cross-cultural collaborations were made compulsory can be useful for educators and policy makers. The findings of this study can also be useful for teachers of literature, academics and students. Further research needs to be done in other contexts to see how students from different contexts behave in similar situations.

Keeping in light the usefulness of international interactions for Pakistani students as shown in this study, it is recommended that teachers should take effort to include students in cross-cultural projects. Furthermore, it is recommended that similar studies should be conducted in schools and colleges. As this study is limited to one Pakistani university, it is recommended for future researchers to check the adaptability of the findings in other contexts.

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