Facilitating Reading Engagement by Foregrounding Students' Voices through Epistolary Writing: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Engaging students in reading permits students to experience reading in a more meaningful manner as well as develop their identity as effective readers. Currently, the teaching of reading does not allow students to experience reading in an engaging and meaningful manner because the process of retrieving the required information at the end of the reading text has hindered them from experiencing reading in this manner. This exploratory study presents an approach to facilitate students' reading engagement through the employment of epistolary writing. The purpose was to explore the employment of epistolary writing in facilitating ESL students' reading engagement. The students wrote their understanding and interpretation of printed texts in the form of a letter to their instructor. Three third year students participated voluntarily in this case study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documents such as students' letters, instructor's reflective notes, and pre-teaching and post-teaching questionnaires. Findings showed that the students appreciated that their voices were being considered throughout the teaching and learning process. They also described how relating their ideas through epistolary writing contributed to personal changes of viewing reading as an active process. The research highlights the value of including students' voices in the teaching and learning process. Allowing students to voice and share their learning experiences with their peers and the instructor, enabled the instructor to construct a better instructional approach to assist the students in their progress as engaged readers. In addition, this study extends knowledge that writing plays a key role in L2 tertiary level academic literacy development.

Keywords: epistolary writing; students' voices; reading engagement; reading in a second language

INTRODUCTION

Engagement in reading has been viewed as one of the most significant components to facilitate reading. Guthrie (2004) defines reading engagement as a process where readers read a text in a meaningful manner. Students who are engaged readers find fulfillment when they are immersed in their reading (Pressley, 2002). Engaged readers approach reading text by employing reading strategies, having motivation to read, wanting to extend existing knowledge, and viewing the process of reading as a social interactive process (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Reading engagement may increase in a class where the instructor includes opportunities for students to experience concrete interactions with reading materials as well as when students' voices are considered throughout the learning process (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004; Van Manen, 2007). This can be accomplished when reading and writing are integrated in a reading classroom. As stipulated by Guthrie (2004) and J. Van Manen (2007), when reading and writing are integrated in a reading classroom, the students'

engagement in reading is facilitated because reading and writing are both acts of composing (Grabe, 2010; Graves, 2004; Zamel, 1992). The process of writing students' understanding of the text allows them to conceptualize and strengthen the comprehension of the text. In addition, the simultaneous process of reading and writing provides a space for students to engage in the meaning construction which consequently prepare them to become effective readers (Grabe, 2010; Olson, 2007; Shanahan, 2006).

Many research findings on the effects of reading and writing connection (e.g., Bosley, 2008; Coady, 2007; Shen, 2009; J. Van Manen, 2007) reveal that when reading and writing are integrated, students' reading skill improved. They further noted that writing activity in a reading program permits students to explore and discover their own interpretation of the text being read. These studies also demonstrated that reading and writing are taught most effectively as an integrated process. Nevertheless, the current practice of teaching reading at university, particularly in the ESL context, does not create the space for students to engage with their academic text meaningfully (Ahmad Mazli, 2007; Kuldip Kaur, 2001; Harison, 2010; Nambiar, 2007; Sivasubramaniam, 2009). This is one of the two aspects which have hampered students' growth in reading. The other one is pedagogical approach in teaching reading.

Thus, one approach that can be employed to facilitate students' engagement in reading is through epistolary writing. The pedagogy of epistolarity constitutes input, instruction of task and feedback (J. Van Manen, 2007). According to J. Van Manen (2007) the central key of the pedagogy of epistolarity is interaction and negotiation of meaning. She further noted that in order to make learning a successful process, both the teacher/instructor and students need to play their part. The epistolary writing differs from other reader response approaches that employ writing such as journal, log writing, and dialogue journal. Other approaches that employ writing for student reflection focus only on the students. On the other hand, epistolary writing involves the exchanges between two people namely the students and the instructor. J. Van Manen (2007) noted that such exchanges create a dynamic and open pedagogical space which is not only personal but also social in nature.

J. Van Manen (2007) describes epistolary writing as an approach which employs letters to generate meaning of a text by a reader. The letters as noted by J. Van Manen (2007), contain students' reflections on their reading. The students are required to reflect on the article or passage that they are reading and write their reflections in the form of a letter written to an intended recipient. They are required to reflect on the content, the author's voice, language, vocabulary of the text and also to indicate their own interpretation of the text. As such, according to J. Van Manen (2007), epistolary writing creates a space where ideas can be explored and interpreted.

Previous research on university students has shown that the average reading level of university students is insufficient to meet postsecondary academic literacy demand (Pennsylvania Department of Education Report, 2004). In the local context there are indications that a similar situation is experienced among Malaysian students (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013; Ahmad Mazli, 2007; Isarji & Ainul Madziah, 2008). For instance, in a study conducted by Zuhana, Wong and Shameem (2014) on Malaysian university students' reading ability, they discovered that the students' analytical and reference skills in reading are weak. This may be due to the emphasis on students to mainly retrieve information from the text as they read. As a consequence the process may have hampered students' engagement in reading (Sivasubramaniam, 2009). The current pedagogical approach puts emphasis on the end product that is the abilityof students to answer the list of questions at the end of the reading materials. According to Bernhardt (2011), Han and Anderson (2009), and Nassaji (2011), this pedagogical approach, which is inspired by top-down models, has not looked at how students would benefit most in becoming engaged readers. Haynes (2009) and

M. Van Manen (1991) assert that encouraging interaction in a reading class may promote the students' development in language, relationships, thinking, and contexts. This is because all of these elements are interactive and interconnected.

Furthermore, university students require a different pedagogical approach in order to sustain their interest and motivation to learn (Keeling, 2006, Mezirow, 1997). The students at this level have already acquired the basic foundation of the concepts of learning that they obtained in their formative years of schooling. The new information presented at the university is only a resource in the student's learning process (Mezirow, 1997). Currently, the students are regarded as the silent party in the class while they sit and listen attentively to what is taught. Allen, Swearingen, and Kostelnik (1993) posited that students have come to view the purpose of reading a text as just finding the answers to the questions that follow the text; and by answering the questions correctly, they illustrate that they have understood the reading text well. Sivasubramaniam (2009) referred to this as ritualized approach that denies space for students to engage meaningfully with the assigned reading text. To sustain the students' interest in learning, it is important to include their voices throughout the teaching and learning process (Marjan, 2014). As such, this has not helped the students to become effective readers and engaged with their texts; in fact they become bored with the traditional reading classroom, and this contributes little to improving any students' reading performance (Eskey, 2005). In addition, the ritualized approach in tackling reading has also influenced students' perceptions of reading and has not encouraged them to develop as effective readers. They focus more on pursuing achievement goals rather than mastery goals. As a result, they view reading as a chore, which is to answer the questions given rather than to make meaning of what they read. Hence, the way the lesson is taught may influence and affect the students' motivation and interest to learn because the students observed that the same method was employed in their secondary and university education (Levin & Calcagno, 2008). Thus, the students continue to experience challenges when approaching reading because they do not view reading as a meaningful process.

To teach reading in an effective manner, the instructor should allow students opportunities to engage with the text in a meaningful manner. According to Bernhardt (2011), Grabe (2010), Grabe and Stoller (2002) and Guthrie, Wigfield, Perencevich (2004), instructional approach in reading should create space for the students to make meaning of the reading text. They further asserted that the instructor should select and design lesson which would allow the students the opportunity to grasp reading strategies. This will enable students to handle academic reading texts. In addition, the pedagogy employed should allow students' voices on the learning experience to be heard which can be achieved through the pedagogy of thoughtfulness (J. Van Manen, 2003). Reading instructors can gain an in-depth understanding on how the students make progress in their reading when they take into consideration the students' experiences throughout the teaching and learning process. Subsequently, the instructor is able to assist and scaffold the students' learning in a discreet manner (J. Van Manen, 2007).

Therefore, to teach reading as a more engaged and meaning-making activity to university students, instructors need to develop appropriate classroom instruction as well as strategies which integrate writing and reading (Corden, 2007; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Falk-Ross, 2001; Shen, 2009). Bosley (2008), Coady (2007), Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000); Koons (2008) stipulated that a pedagogical combination of reading and writing is useful in facilitating learning and understanding of reading. Sanchez and Paulson (2008) supported this view and suggest that a more progressive pedagogical approach to teaching academic literacy should not only address how students learn to read effectively but must also expose students to reading strategies and ways of analyzing critically the discourse that makes up the text. In addition, the pedagogical instruction and practice should be thoughtful and reflective (M.

Van Manen, 1991). The pedagogical instruction should allow students to grow and understand their learning process. This type of teaching occupies a space for the instructor and the students to interact. The space created will enable the lecturer to really understand what the students are undergoing as they read the text. Consequently, the space provided will be an avenue for the instructor to give whatever assistance and help to the students in understanding their reading text. Therefore, the strategy that we focus on in this study is epistolary writing. The aim of this study is to examine the potential usefulness of epistolary writing in contributing to ESL students' reading engagement. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the participants respond to the employment of epistolary writing?
2. How does the employment of epistolary writing contribute to the participants' reading engagement?

METHOD

This study is aimed at investigating the role of epistolary writing in fostering university students' engagement in reading. A case study method was employed to gather in-depth data. The method was employed to gain insight into the area under study as well as to illuminate the existing problem faced by L2 readers. Case study is different from other research studies whereby the focus of attention is the case, not the whole population of cases (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 2005). Additionally, the intended purpose of the study was to have an in-depth understanding of the role played by epistolary writing in contributing to the engagement of reading among university students in their reading classroom. As aptly put by Patton (1990, 2002), qualitative case study seeks to understand conditions in their natural context and the interactions that take place.

The students were required to take the course as part of the university requirement. Before the study, all the students were briefed on the purpose of the study. The instructor invited participation by explaining to them what they could gain from the research and how it would benefit them as students. Requesting students to volunteer provides a better advantage to the researcher (Maxwell, 2005).

The students were divided into three groups according to their Malaysia Certificate Exam (SPM) English result (equivalent to the Cambridge "O" level exam).A grade 1 on the SPM is the highest grade (that is a distinction), and a grade 9 is the lowest grade (which is a fail). The average score for the students' SPM English result in the class were C5 and C6. The result showed that the majority of the students' grade scores for SPM English fall under the category of lower proficiency level of English. After the explanation, the instructor requested volunteers from the three groups. Three students from the three different group participated voluntarily in the study. Pseudonyms were used to mask the identities of the three participants. They are Shelly, Kay and Ridz. The data for the research study were collected through semi-structured interviews and documents such as students' letters, instructor's reflective notes as well as pre-teaching and post-teaching questionnaires. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the data were triangulated from the various sources collected. The three students, (two females and one male), reported in their pre-teaching questionnaire that they dislike reading English materials (refer to Table 1).

The epistolary writing was done on a weekly basis by all the students in a reading classroom throughout the semester. The instructor distributed a reading text at the end of the class and the students were asked to read, reflect and write their understanding of the reading material to the instructor via letter. They needed to send their letters through e-mail to the instructor. The students were given a guideline on what they need to include in their letter (see Appendix A). They were asked to summarize the reading material, to pen their thoughts

and to share any personal experience in relation to the content of the article in the letter. In addition, the students were requested to jot down any reading strategies that they have employed while reading the text. The instructor provided samples of letters to the students. The letters were then analyzed using Guthrie's (2004) framework of reading engagement to determine the participants' reading engagement. According to Guthrie (2004) students are engaged readers when they employ reading strategies, are motivated to read, have desire to extend existing knowledge, and are socially interactive.

TABLE 1. Participants' Background and Learning Attitude

Participant	Gender	Age	SPM English (equivalent reading to O level)	Attitude toward English classes	Attitude toward reading
Shelly [Sh]	Female	20	C3	Difficult to Learn	Dislike
Kay [K]	Female	20	C4	Boring and Difficult	Difficult
Ridz [R]	Male	20	C5	Difficult to Learn	Dislikes, only read sports

Other forms of data collection came from interviews (see Appendix B), pre-teaching and post-teaching questionnaires (see Appendix C). The set of questions for the interviews vary from the first to the fourth interview. The first focused on the participants' background knowledge of reading, second on their learning experiences, third on the reading strategies they employed during reading, and finally their reflection of the learning experiences throughout the semester. Since the researcher played a dual role that is as a researcher and instructor in the class, the researcher cum instructor decided to ask another colleague to interview the three participants. Before conducting the interview session, the researcher had a few sessions with her colleague (the interviewer), to ensure that she understood the purpose of the study. The three participants, Kay, Shelly, and Ritz, were interviewed. Four interview sessions were conducted with the participants. Each interview lasted from 50 minutes to 1 hour. The pre-teaching questionnaire was given to the students at the beginning of the semester, while the post-teaching questionnaire was given at the end of the semester. The pre-teaching questionnaire was on students' initial perception of reading and writing. The post-teaching questionnaire dealt with the students' current perspective of reading and writing and their learning experiences in the class. After data using the mentioned instruments were collected, the researcher examined the participants' letters, pre-teaching and post-teaching questionnaire. The interview data were later transcribed and triangulated with the other collected data.

FINDINGS

The first research question was formulated to gain a better understanding of how the participants responded to the employment of epistolary writing in a reading class. Participants were asked to provide responses with regard to what they think of their learning experiences. The data obtained from the students' documents and interviews which were presented in the study were not altered. The themes and subthemes presented were identified following extensive reading of the participants' data. The researcher also showed the raw data to the participants for clarification and identification of participants' interpretations. In addition, the researcher repeatedly viewed and transcribed the nine videotaped classroom observations during the process of teaching and learning for a total minimum of two times. Two themes emerged which described how the participants responded to this new mode of learning. They are: (1) develop positive attitude to reading and (2) ability to voice thoughts openly.

DEVELOP POSITIVE ATTITUDE TO READING

At the beginning of the class the students were requested to write their perception of reading and writing. The data obtained showed that the three participants dislike English and reading English materials (refer to Table 1). Data from the interview also supported this. Shelly acknowledged the importance of reading. However, this has not motivated her to read English materials. She felt bored when she has to refer to a dictionary for every difficult word. Subsequently, this affects her interest in reading. She reported in her pre-questionnaire "Honestly, I don't like reading materials in English. I like to read but English materials make me take a longer time to finish. I feel bored when
I need to refer to dictionary every time" (PreQ[Sh] 7 Jan 2011). She explained the reason, "Because it is boring, difficult!! I want to improve my English language but it is boring because I do not know how to understand" (Int. l.[Sh]. Line 54-44, 1 March 2011). She noted in her interview that "usually when I read I just read that's it (with hand gesture indicating no strategy)". She clarified "When I was taught reading it was just reading comprehension. The teacher would normally give us a passage and we were supposed to answer. There was no strategy given on how to do reading" (Int. 1. [Sh]. Line 39-40, 1 March 2011).

A similar view was echoed by Kay, who obtained a C4 in her SPM English (equivalent to 'O' level English); she expressed her feelings toward English class. She said difficult words in English will make her bored and lose interest in reading. "I only like to read materials simple words to understand. . . The reading materials that use difficult words or sentences make me feel bored because I will lose interest to read it"(PreQ [K], 7 Jan 2011). When she has problem in her reading, she would turn to a dictionary. She claimed that "If I read an article in English and I do not understand the information I will try to find the meaning of the words by using dictionary" (PreQ [K], 7 Jan 2011). Another student, Ridz, too shared similar opinion. He dislikes reading materials in English: "I don't like to read materials in English…I will like to read English materials if they are easy reading where most of the articles use words which are easier to understand" (PreQ [R], 7 Jan 2011). He even expressed similar opinion during the interview; "Because sometimes when I don't understand it becomes boring. So we become lazy to read" (Int. 1. [R]. Line 451, 8 March 2011).

However, after attending the class, they began to view reading differently and they developed a positive attitude of their identity as readers. They reported that the way the class was conducted influences the students' conceptions of the class. They compared this class with other English classes that they had taken and claim that the approach used in this class is interesting and has a positive impact on them in wanting to learn. Initially they thought that this class would be the same with other English classes which they found boring. However, they soon disagreed as they like and enjoy doing the activities in the class. Ridz shared his view: "Fun. This is the word that I used for this class because the method and the learning process are easily understood. In my opinion, with this method it can help students not to feel shy or embarrass to pose question to the instructor (PostQ.[R]. Apr 2011)**.** Shelly and Kay too express similar view. For instance in the following excerpt, Shelly said "Throughout my learning in this class, I feel very happy because I gain knowledge and I can apply them as strategy in reading/writing skill. What I mean is the class is informative" (PostQ.[Sh]. Apr 2011).

ABILITY TO VOICE THOUGHTS OPENLY

The three students claimed that the process of writing enabled them to voice their thoughts openly. Findings from observations and interviews showed that all the students enjoyed the pedagogical approach used by the instructor for this class. This excerpt demonstrates the claim; "The instructor then modeled the strategy using one of the paragraphs. She then

monitored the students' learning by moving from one group to another and provided the necessary assistance. Their smiling faces and body gestures showed they were comfortable and enjoying themselves. When they have questions to ask, they immediately put their hands up without hesitation" (Obs. Wk 7. 22 Feb 2011). This is in accordance with Noels (2003), who says that attitude and motivation "can be enhanced in the appropriate social context" (p. 99). The students portrayed a positive attitude toward learning. They become motivated to learn. In fact, they claimed that they were able to understand and employ what was taught to other subjects. For example, Kay shared her view about this class "from the aspect of teaching, learning and activities, all of them are interesting for me. Maybe I never feel like this in the English class before. This is the first time I am interested in English class." (PostQ. [K].10 Apr 2011).

The students appreciated the attempts made by the instructor. For example, Shelly appreciated the fact that the instructor took time to respond to each student's letter. "I know that she is busy but she will always check her e-mail. Even when her students pose questions to her she would respond" (Int.2.[Sh]. 15 Mar 2011). She said "Before this I felt that there is nobody who wants to evaluate us. With e-mail it is different . . . but I felt that there are many students who send e-mail to her. Will she be able to reply?" (Int.1.[Sh].1 Mar 2011). In one instance, Shelly showed that she did not hesitate to share her thoughts with the instructor when she experienced problem with a reading material as shown in the following excerpt: Shelly wrote:

> "This article is a little hard to understand when compared to the previous article, because the writer kept using flashback comparing his life before and after the accident, and also what happened 11 years after that" (OCL.L3[Sh]. 9 Feb 2011).

The students were unhesitant to share their thoughts openly because they feel safe and realized that the space provided is personal, and that is it is only between them and the instructor. Kay too appreciates the effort made by the instructor. She said: "It is more special when my e-mail is replied with a positive comment by my instructor" (PostQ. [K] Apr 2011). This act of conversation between the instructor and the students is seen as a personal rapport. The students voiced their opinions and the instructor responded to each of them personally. In addition, she provides encouragement to them to withstand any difficulties that they face while they progress to become effective readers. For instance in her respond to Kay: "Thank you for writing to me. From your letter you have shown that you have understood the article quite well. Good. Keep it up. You have managed to find the main idea and have stated the intended purpose of the writer writing the article. Very good. Do also try to apply the strategies that I have taught you in the class even when you find that the article is not difficult to understand" (OCL. Letter2[I_K]. 29 Jan 2011). In another letter to Kay she wrote "I am glad that even when you find the article difficult to understand you continued reading and managed to overcome some of the difficulties. Although you claimed that the flowery language the writer used was difficult for you to make sense you persisted to continue reading. Good. Keep it up"(OCL. Letter 1[I_Kh]. 21 Jan 2011).

Students who initially had negative perception of reading began to view reading in a different perspective. They do not give up easily because they reported that the instructor encouraged and provided motivation for them to take up the challenge. The instructor seized the opportunity to encourage her students to progress. If they do face difficulties it should not hinder them to progress. With epistolarity approach, it is important for the students to be aware that the instructor is always there to motivate and give advice to continue reading (J. Van Manen, 2007). In the process of providing feedback to her students the instructor simultaneously imparts explanation so that the students were able to understand what have they missed or left out and how to employ the strategies as they read. Thus, the writing is not

only used to strengthen their understanding but also as an avenue to voice and share their thoughts.

The second research question concerns how the employment of epistolary writing plays a role in contributing to the participants' reading engagement. Two themes emerged under this section: Writing letter helps me to understand better and progressing as active reader.

WRITING HELPS ME TO UNDERSTAND BETTER

The three students claimed that writing is a tool for them to foster better understanding of what they read. For instance, Shelly described the connection between reading and writing as a package. She said "For me writing and reading is like a complete package. It is like when we write at the same time we need to adapt what we have read. It is like a combination of two" (Int. 2[Sh] 15 Mar 2011). Kay and Ridz too shared the same opinion. For instance, Kay uttered: "When we write we do not need to write or copy what we read but we just write down what is the main point or the important things the author wants to deliver. So it is clearer and easier to understand" (PostQ.[K].Apr 2011). Ridz too said "In my opinion writing together with reading able to make me understand better. When we read and write we can refer to the important points of the article again. At the same time we can make conclusion on what we have read with the points that we have written while reading the article" (PostQ[R]. Apr. 2011). "In this case" he said "writing is more towards my understanding because like what I have said earlier if we just read and did not write we do not remember. For example in the case of taking notes, the case of writing is just like taking notes in the class. If we just listened and we did not take notes when the class ended then that is it. But if we jotted down notes we would remember better. We may refer to the notes again, so in a way it is efficient" (Int.3. [R] 6 Apr 2011).

While Kay viewed the task as special, Shelly perceived it as interesting (PostQ. [Sh] 16 Apr 2011). All the three students recognized the benefits of writing and they began to cherish the task. For instance, in one of the Shelly's out-of-class letter (OCL), she shared her understanding of the text. She used the space to interact and informed the instructor what she had understood from the reading article. Additionally, she used the space to validate her understanding.

> "After I read the whole article, I knew the title '*Looking forward, looking back*' referred to the life of the writer: his life before the spinal-cord injury, and his life after the incident. The reason why I stated this lies at the last sentence of paragraph one, '*Time looms large at the beginning of the ordeal, and looking back at the past is more pleasant than pondering the future*.' But 11 years after the ordeal he said" (OCL. L3 [Sh]. 9 Feb 2011).

As shown in the preceding excerpt, Shelly used the opportunity to openly share her understanding. She was unhesitant to express her ideas and understanding to the instructor. She interjected her voice as a reader and stated her opinion about the article in the letter. Shelly's ability to recognize the discourse structure by connecting the last sentence to infer the meaning conveyed by the writer reflects she was engaging and making meaning with the text. She did not read at surface level which corresponds to Grabe's (2010) assertion better readers are able to recognize key ideas.

In another letter Shelly reported: "And I find it quite hard to understand this article, and I had to read so many times in order to know what the writer wanted to tell to the reader" (OCL.L3[Sh]. 9 Feb 2011).

The cited excerpts show that Shelly is using the space to write and reinforce her understanding. The process of putting down her ideas and share her understanding of the text

with the instructor forced her to read the text several times to enable her to understand the meaning of the article. The data from the out-of-class letter (OCL), showed that Shelly was actively engaged with the text in multiple ways such as rereading the text appropriately several times in order to identify the meaning of the text, was aware of the difficulties she faced and attempted to resolve any difficulties she faced. This confirms Grabe's (2010) claim on students' active engagement in reading where they would constantly check and monitor their reading and evaluate the information in the text in several ways.

The students, who are skeptical about using English openly, welcomed the personal space created. Through the letter writing, they know the instructor did not make fun of their language, hence, they willingly communicated with the instructor using the target language without hesitation. The students cherished the space made available through this letter writing because they have never experienced this mode of learning before, which is being able to share their thoughts and opinions with the instructor. This supports J. Van Manen's (2007) view that pedagogical aspects of relationship can be fostered through the letter writing dimension of a reading classroom. To students who are more reserved they value this medium of interaction because it is not easy for them to talk and share their opinion openly in the class. As Kay uttered:

> "No. I would not because I am not at ease to speak to the instructor as I am afraid to do so. Then the situation is made worse when there are other group of students who are more outspoken and they received the most attention. To people like me who is quiet in the class we just sit silently and wait." (Int.2. [K] 15 Mar 2011).

Finding from the Post Q also supports this. For example, Ridz reported:

> "The role of writing in this class is to express my understanding about what I read. After I enrolled in this class I realized that writing is important as reading so that I am able to understand what I read better." (PostQ[R]. 16 Apr. 2011).

This permitted the students to make meaning with the text better. This also corroborates with J. Van Manen's (2007) study that letter writing in a reading classroom permits the students to understand themselves as readers, use the space created to apply what they have learned, and gain better understanding of the reading materials because the process of writing evokes the acts of writing and reading simultaneously. Moreover, the letter writing enables the instructor to monitor, scaffold, and facilitate the students to advance as engaged readers. The participants appreciated the spaces created because they could express freely their joys and struggles to the instructor as they approach the assigned reading materials.

PROGRESS AS ACTIVE READER

The three students reported that the way reading is taught permitted them to progress as engaged readers. For instance, Kay uttered:

> "When there are various strategies or techniques to understand reading automatically, they lead me to become an active reader. Being an active reader is important in order to interpret what I understood through writing. . . Sometimes the instructor asked us what we have understood from the article and explained the content of the article to her. Thus, we need to understand the article. So by being an active reader we can explain it well" (Post.Q.[K] Apr 2011).

Ridz too expressed his opinion. He indicated that he may have not reached the status of active reader yet, but he is able to understand reading material better than before. "In my

opinion what I have gained from the techniques that were taught in the class enable me to understand an article easier and better. . . . Although, maybe I have not progressed as an active reader totally but I notice that there is an increase in understanding when I read" (Post.Q.[R] Apr 2011). To Shelly the learning experience in this class has triggered her to be more cognitively active while reading. She claimed that by being active she becomes more curious and excited to finish the reading article. She employed the metacognitive strategy whenever she reads which allow her to be more reflective and analytical. According to Shelly:

> "The strategies taught in the class have helped me to understand an article easily. When I am able to understand the content of the article I become more excited, I want to know the rest of the article. I am more curious to know why it happens, how and what will happen next. . . If we understand how to read correctly such as we know the author's intention, the supporting details, the main idea in the article and the title being discussed we will definitely become 'active reader'. Post.Q.[Sh] Apr 2011).

The data from the interview and post-teaching questionnaire (Post Q) also corroborate this. For instance, Shelly described the connection between reading and writing as a package. She said, "For me writing and reading is like a complete package. It is like when we write at the same time we need to adapt what we have read. It is like a combination of two" (Int. 2[Sh] 15 Mar 2011). This is also evidenced in the instructor's reflective notes: "After receiving students' third letter I noticed they are now more open and honest to me. The language used was more relaxed. They would share their personal opinion and experience willingly to me. I believe they are beginning to cherish the space provided to interact with me as their instructor" (Refl. Wk. 5).

In addition, this lends support to Cohen's (2004) study that writing provides students opportunities to project their own voice and a concrete validation of their educational experience. This also corroborates with Guthrie's (2004) reading engagement theory. According to Guthrie (2004), autonomous support can be achieved when students are given the opportunity to have some control over their own learning. By honouring the students' voices and ownership ideas of their own reading the students' motivation in reading will heighten (Guthrie, 2004). The finding also substantiate Grabe's (2010) assertion L2 students need to be taught to openly questions the author of the article and posed questions when necessary to gain a better understanding of academic materials.

Kay shared similar opinion:

> "For me writing is used as an interpretation of what we read. When we read sometimes it is only for a short term and we cannot remember all what we read. But if we read and then we write down what we read it helps us to interpret what we understand from our reading. That is why writing and reading are related to each other. By writing, we can remember the content for a long term and it can be as our reference" (PostQ.[Kh].16 Apr 2011).

Shelly too has similar opinion on letter writing.

> "To write the letter to the instructor, we must first concentrate on the article in order to understand. Then only we can write. We need to understand what we read. When we have understood, then only we can write or else we do not know what to jot down" (Int. 2[Sh]. 23 Mar 2011).

This corroborates with J. Van Manen's (2007) study that writing permits students' to strengthen their identities as readers. J. Van Manen (2007, p. 40) asserts that the "letter

writing situation evokes simultaneously the acts of writing and reading". From the pedagogical perspective, letter writing provides the instructor with a sensitive medium for acquiring insights into students' perspectives of reading (J. Van Manen, 2007).

To Shelly, the letter writing not only provided her space to interact with the instructor; it is also a tool to assess her performance. She claimed that by writing and reflecting her understanding of the article, as well as receiving respond from the instructor, she would be able to know her performance. She articulated that when she received feedback from the instructor she is able to monitor her own progress. She further explained:

> "Another thing when we give the letter via e-mail she responded so we will be able to know our performance whether we have summarized and analysed the article correctly." (Int. 1[Sh]. 1 Mar 2011).

Ridz shared the same view. Ridz indicated:

> "When I composed a letter and sent it to the lecturer and to friends it can help me to understand the article better. It is because I would write what I understood and then I would receive feedback it. Through this medium I can know whether I am on the right track or not." (Int. 3[R].31 Mar 2011).

The students were aware on the benefits of activating their mind as they read. They became more active and analytical when they read. Furthermore, an important finding is that when the students read, they no longer read in a passive manner for they began to pose questions such as the intended purpose of the author, what will happen next, why it happens, and so on.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed that the participants found the experiences of writing and sharing their understanding of the reading materials with the instructor has facilitated them to develop a positive attitude as readers as well as assisted them to progress as engaged readers. They began to experience a shift in their identity as readers. Initially the data from the pre-teaching questionnaire showed that the three students had never liked and enjoyed reading in English. They reported the process of reading as difficult and boring. These participants, who obtained average and below average score in their Malaysia Certificate Examination (SPM) English language (equivalent to 'O level' English), expressed negative feelings and attitude toward English class prior to taking this class. The findings revealed the pertinent role of writing in the reading class. The students claimed that in order to foster a better understanding of what they read; writing down the information helped them to understand better. This lends support to Bernhardt's (2005) and Grabe's (2010) claim in which they state that writing is one strategy that would help L2 readers to reinforce their understanding of the academic materials. In this study, the instructor created a learning space through letter writing so that the students are able to reinforce their understanding as well as a space for her to interact with each student personally. The findings indicated that the role of letter writing was found to be invaluable to support, extend and validate the participants' understanding of their reading and learning experience. The finding is similar to Nor Fariza, Hazita and Afendi's (2013) study in that when students are given the opportunity and space to express personal views on reading, the students' level of reading comprehension are increased. This is because the interaction with peers and instructor through writing which is the in-class letters (ICL) and out-of-class letters (OCL) permitted the students to share their learning experience openly.

The instructor scaffolds their learning in a discreet manner as they interact with her through the out-of class (OCL) letter. The students related their positive experience of writing

letter to their instructor as illustrated in their interview and Post Q. The three students perceive writing as a skill that complements the act of reading. When the students write their interpretations and understanding of the academic text, sub-consciously they need to read carefully the text, monitor their reading continuously and they are aware on whether they are able to or not to comprehend the text.

This also lends support to Tierney and Shanahan's (1996) view that writing is a powerful vehicle to extend understanding of reading. This also supports the view of Guthrie, Wigfield, and Perencevich (2004), Shanahan (2006), and Zamel (1992) that both writing and reading are parallel in the process of composing meaning. The findings illustrate the transformation process experienced by the participants, which is a move from being readers who only read at surface level to being more reflective readers. Meziow's (1997) transformative learning theory supports this particular finding. Through the concept of transformative understanding, the student's reflective processes are "placed at the core of the learning experience and the student is requested to evaluate both the new information and the frames of reference to acquire meaning" (Keeling, 2004, p. 9). Transformative learning occurs when the students are able to experience a shift in their perception to learning that is viewing the process from information transfer to identity development (Keeling, 2004).

Additionally, for the instructor, the letter writing opens a space for personal interactions with her students. The instructor understands their struggle to express their opinion and share their thoughts freely when using English, hence, she decided to be flexible and encouraged the students to use English and Malay language interchangeably. The scaffolding theory within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as promoted by Vygotsky (1978) supports this approach because the instructor is evaluating and scaffolding what the novice (student) is capable of doing independently. Mezirow's (1997, 2000) and Vygotsky's (1978) assert that discussion and feedback are found to be effective strategies for learning development.

Furthermore, the process permits a better relationship between the instructor and student to develop. This affirms Keeling's (2004, 2006), J. Van Manen's (2007), Mezirow's (2000), and E. W. Taylor's (2007) view on the process as transformative relationships which permit learner autonomy and the development of trust between the students and the instructor to develop. The finding illustrated establishing relationships between the instructor and students allow them to experience learning in a more engaging manner, which validates E. W. Taylor's (1998) claim on the importance of fostering student-teacher relationship to learning.

Subsequently as the weeks passed, the students continued writing the letters in English and they seldom used Malay language in the letter. Furthermore, the students welcomed the personal attention they received from the instructor because they felt that the instructor care about their learning development. This process is referred to as pedagogical understanding and pedagogical reflection (M. Van Manen, 2003) whereby the instructor showed understanding and concern and reflected on what would be the best medium to approach the students. The practice of priming interaction puts emphasis on this.

The space created allows the instructor to work with each student individually. She used the space to provide feedback and explanation on how to go about if they do face difficulty in their reading and in employing the reading strategies. Furthermore, the space allows her to discreetly facilitate by giving them words of encouragement and motivation to sustain their interest to read. She recognizes and remembers each of them personally; identify their strength and weaknesses, the problems they face, their preference and dislikes. All of these items can be used as pedagogy in understanding and assisting the students. Subsequently, the students feel that the instructor does care and have trust in them. The

students then openly expressed their thoughts and shared their joys and the difficulties of readers as they embark on this journey to become engaged reader. Besides, focusing on having personal interaction with the students, the instructor too includes a variety of texts for students to read. In order to help students progress as engaged readers, it is necessary for reading instructors to expose students to variety of texts (Barrot, 2013). J. Van Manen's (2007) claims that letter writing in a reading classroom permits the students to understand themselves as readers, use the space created to apply what they have learned, and gain better understanding of the reading materials because the process of writing evokes the acts of writing and reading simultaneously. Moreover, the letter writing approach enables the instructor to monitor, scaffold, and facilitate the students to advance as effective readers.

CONCLUSION

It can be deduced that the pedagogical space provided through the letter writing allowed the instructor to interact, scaffold and facilitate learning discreetly to each student. As a result the students began to develop a positive attitude toward reading and gradually progressing as engaged readers. The scaffolding required that the instructor to monitor the students' learning carefully and consistently. This pedagogical approach is different from the traditional way of teaching which focuses more on achieving the end product that is whether the students are able to answer the questions at the end of the printed text.

Guthrie and Cox (2001), and Scull and Lo Bianco's (2008) assert that effective reading instruction is different from the traditional teacher-led transmission models of instruction because in an effective reading class, there is evidence of interaction, collaboration and exchanges between the students and the instructor whereby the students are encouraged to take an active role in their learning. This finding lends support to recent research by J. Van Manen (2007) besides corroborating with Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory and Guthrie's (2004) reading engagement theory on the idea that giving students tasks such as letter writing and small-group task would enable the instructor to gain insights into students' learning outcomes and also allow the transformative growth of the students as effective readers to take place.

To progress as effective readers, L2 students need opportunities to interact in social and academic setting (Mohr & Mohr, 2007). In addition, as aptly put by Mohr and Mohr (2007), second language (L2) students need a positive learning environment and opportunities to interact with the instructor to enable them to participate actively during the learning process. Furthermore, interaction can be fostered when reading and writing skills are integrated. The medium of writing can be a tool to substantiate students' understanding as they interact with the printed text as well as a tool to interact personally with their peers and instructor during the learning process. The study, in particular, extended theoretical understanding of how reading for second language learners can be approached. The study contributes to an understanding of the role of epistolary writing on reading. Reading engagement can be fostered when reading and writing are integrated. This is because the medium of writing can be a tool to substantiate students' understanding of the reading material. As a consequence the students' engagement in reading is fostered. While the contemporary literature recognizes the importance of addressing university students' reading comprehension skill particularly understanding of academic text, empirical research among L2 tertiary level students is limited. This study has extended the knowledge base on how L2 tertiary level students' reading comprehension can be approached as well as the important role of writing in a reading classroom.

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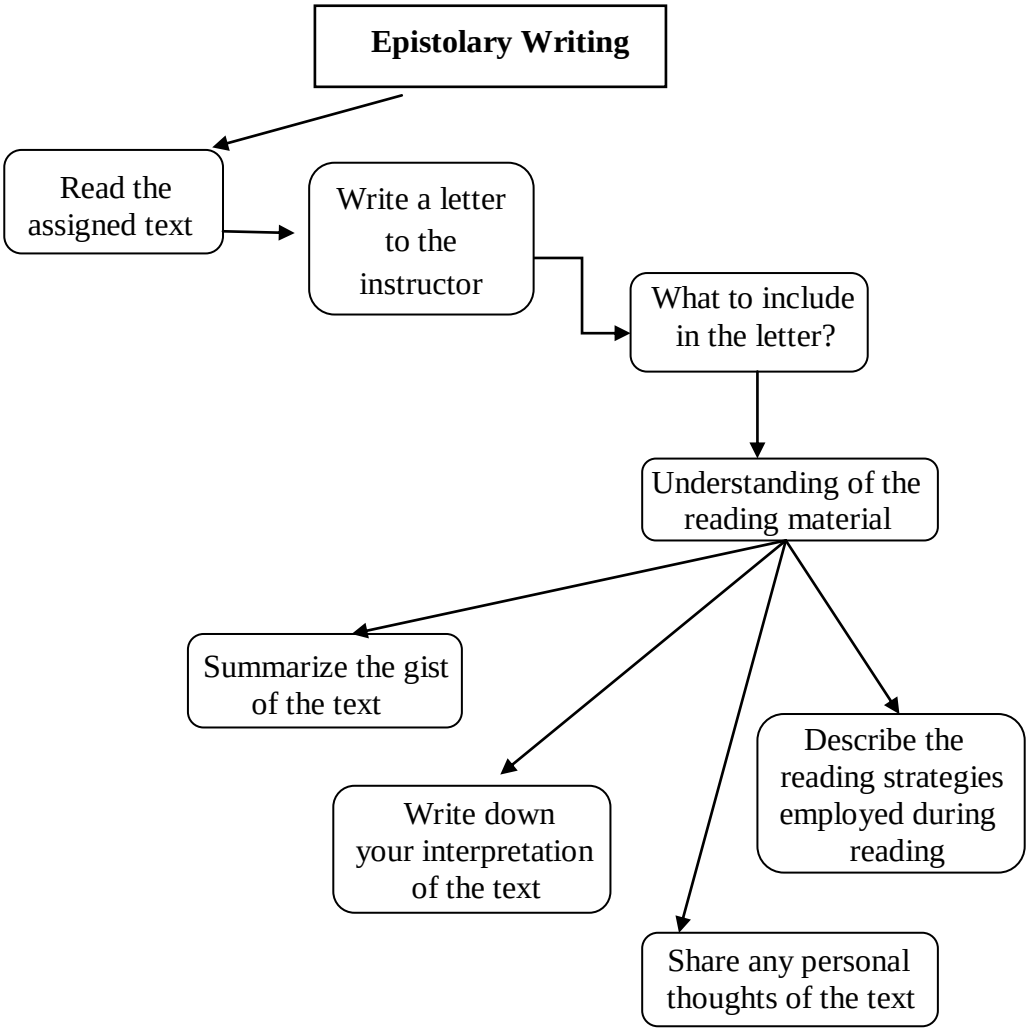
APPENDIX A

EPISTOLARY WRITING



Students' guideline on epistolary writing

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1 – Participant's Life Experiences Prior to taking the class

What is your perception of reading in English?
What is your perception of writing in reading class?
Why did you state that you like/dislike reading in English in your pre-teaching questionnaire?
How was reading taught to you earlier?
How was your previous learning experience in the English class?
What do you think of that class?
What did you do in the class?
Tell me about this class.

Interview 2 – Sharing details of their current experiences

Tell me more about your learning experience in the class particularly on reading and writing.
Can you share your experience in writing letter in this class?
What do you think of this approach?
What do you do for the OCL?
What do you think of this approach?
Out of these two letters which would you likely prefer?
What is the role of writing in this class?
What do you like of this class?

Interview 3 – Relate understanding of a reading article and employment of reading strategies

What is the article about?
Explain to me how you manage to get the meaning of the article.
What were the strategies you use to make you understand better?
How has the class facilitate you to become a reader?
Did you face any difficulties understand the article? If yes did you manage to overcome the problem?
Explain how you manage to overcome the problem.
Before taking this class how did you approach your reading?

Interview 4 – Reflection on the learning experiences

Tell me your opinion of this class
How do you describe your learning experience in this class?
If you are given an opportunity to improve this writing approach in your reading class what do suggest?
How is your relationship with your lecturer in your first two classes?
If there is no writing activity in this class what do you think of the class?

APPENDIX C

PRE-TEACHING AND POST-TEACHING QUESTIONNAIRE

Pre-Teaching Questionnaire

- SPM English Result
- What is reading to you?
- How was reading taught to you in your school?
- What do you do when you face problem in reading?
- What is writing to you?
- What is the connection of reading and writing?

Post-Teaching Questionnaire

- What is reading to you?
- How was reading taught to you in your school?
- What do you do when you face problem in reading?
- What is writing to you?
- What is the role of writing in this class?
- What is your opinion of this class?
- Use a word to describe of the class
- What is your opinion of reading English materials after taking this class?
- What is your opinion of writing after taking this class?
- Use one word to describe your experience in using writing in your reading Class.

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