

Engaging learners' comprehension, interest and motivation to learn literature using the reader's theatre

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ABSTRACT: This article reports on a teacher's experiment with Reader's Theatre (RT), an interactive play reading activity with elements of reading aloud, drama and theatre, for her 20 unmotivated learners of literature in a premier school in Malaysia. Using RT, the students staged Angela Wright's Potato People. The procedures and design of the study were built around Kolb's Model of Experimental Learning. The aim of the experiment was to discern if RT is able to enhance learners' understanding of the literary text and increase learners' interest and motivation to learn literature. The quantitative and qualitative data obtained showed that RT significantly enhanced learners' understanding and increased their interest and motivation to learn literature. The findings from this study suggest that learners are able to perceive and examine literature and the learning of literature positively and constructively if the teaching and learning of literature are aligned according to the interests of the learners and, are based on creative, flexible and learner-based pedagogical approaches.

KEYWORDS: Reader's theatre, learning literature, motivation, experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

Literary pieces for the literature component in the Malaysian English language teaching curriculum are identified and chosen by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) after a group of teachers, parents, learners, academics and educational officers read hundreds of books, novels, poems and short stories. This group short-lists several titles, which are then further scrutinised by educational officers from the MOE to ensure "appropriateness", which basically means, the literary materials do not contradict the norms of Malaysian traditional cultures, convey strong and high moral values, and suit the syllabus and objectives of the literature curriculum. The Malaysian educational authorities have always taken into account cultural and moral-religious issues in implementing educational policies and practices, as "ethnicity and religion are important social markers in Malaysian society" (Joseph, 2005, p. 30).

The objectives of the Malaysian English literature programme are that students should be able to develop

...an ability to enjoy the experience of reading literature, understand and respond to literary texts in different periods and cultures through an exploration of areas of human concerns as depicted in the selection of short story, novel, poetry and drama. (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 1-2)

However, in the numerous reviews and studies (see Tan, 2001; Sidhu, 2003) learners express that most of the texts prescribed are difficult to understand and do not interest them. Poems like “Life’s Brief Candle”, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, “Monsoon History” and “If” are perceived as complex, are concerned with deeper meanings that are extremely difficult to understand. Learners lament that they are unable to make the connections between the elements found in the texts and their own lives. Learners also find that short stories like “The Drover’s Wife”, “The Sound Machine” and “Looking For A Rain God”, are convoluted and multifaceted, and are not easy to comprehend. Hence, the learners are unable to appreciate and enjoy the literary texts. Furthermore, most of the novels and short stories cited above are situated in the contexts and settings of foreign lands and cultures of different epochs that are told using a “foreign language” that is, the English language. Thus, many of the learners, who do not have adequate English language competency, tend to be more confused than enlightened (Ganakumaran, Shahizah & Koo, 2003). Instead of empowering students with cross-cultural understanding as envisioned in the curriculum, the readings and poems have now become a source of “cultural alienation” that creates more misunderstanding. The above factors lead to learners losing interest and the motivation to enjoy and learn literature as part of the English language-learning curriculum.

In order to heighten learners' interest and motivation to learn literature, teachers should engage learners in an experiential learning environment so that learners are able to experience learning literature as an element of enjoyment and intellectual stimulation. This can be achieved by creating a literature classroom with rich, imaginative and critical presence among students (Rogers, 2006). Based on Rosenblatt's (1978) critical engagement theory, which concerns aesthetics and interpretation, Rogers (2006) advocates Rosenblatt's beliefs that “literary teaching might be an exploration, that teachers may serve as guides, and that classrooms were democratic microcosms in which students might exercise their critical reading and thinking skills” (p. 48). Drawing from this emphasis on critical and creative engagement of learners, the Reader's Theatre approach (explained further in the literature review) is selected and structured as a classroom experiment with the aim of enhancing language-learners' interests and motivation to learn literature. The overarching idea of this research is to see if RT can be utilised as an effective pedagogical tool to increase learners' understanding of the literary text, and to increase learners' interests and motivation to learn literature. This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the learners' perceived comprehension levels of the literary text before and after literature learning through the RT?
2. What are the learners' interest and motivation levels to learn literature before and after literature learning through the RT?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer (1995) define RT for pedagogical purposes as a staged presentation of a piece of literature or selected pieces of literature that are thematically linked. The staged presentation or performance can be read individually or chorally by ensembles as a way to focus on the meaning of literature (Annarella,

1999). Though RT is well accepted as “an oral presentation of drama, prose or poetry” (McCaslin, 1990, p. 263), the reading engagement is “active, analytical, socially negotiated and interpreted through both verbal and non-verbal means” (Wolf, 1993, p. 541). The participants of RT are readers, not actors, centring the audience’s attention on an author’s ideas, inviting it to use its imagination to visualise characters and background of a presentation. The appeal lies in the vocal and facial expression of the interpreters, and the action is mental, not physical, and “does not require costumes, make-up, props, stage sets, or memorization. Only a script is needed, from which students read aloud” (Carrick, 2001, p. 1). The subject matter (in the form of a script) can be any form of literature – poems, novels, short stories, as well as plays – but it must be presented vividly so that the audience may become involved emotionally in the ideas generated by the author (Ommaney & Schanker 1972). During an RT presentation, a narrator (a selected learner) will convey the story’s setting and action, and give the necessary commentary for transition between scenes (Carrick, 2001).

Researchers have experimented with the use of RT as a tool to enrich various aspects of learning. In terms of reading, Martinez, Roser, & Strecker (1999) integrated a daily 30 minutes of RT over a 10-week period, whereby second-grade learners practised and performed story scripts. They found that the children’s oral reading fluency increased, largely because RT “offers a reason for children to read repeatedly in appropriate materials” and “provides a vehicle for direct explanation, feedback, and effective modelling” (p. 334). Learners with learning disabilities also seem to benefit from RT. Corcoran and Davis (2005), for instance, measured the effects of RT on the literacy motivation of 12 second- and third-grade learners diagnosed with learning disabilities. They found that RT had a positive impact on their reading attitudes and confidence level. In addition, the learners also made progress toward increasing their fluency scores. These two studies illustrate that RT is capable of providing a strong platform and foundation for learners to improve and eventually strengthen their reading skills.

RT has also been quite extensively used by teachers and researchers to enhance learners’ writing skills. Stewart (1997), for instance, discussed RT in relation to the use of children’s literature to prompt writing. She used RT to get learners to examine the literary devices in the books they read, focusing on E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, and the use of that book as a writing model. The daily discussions that were held sparked ideas for the learners’ writing, and there were indications of an overall improvement in written dialogue and enhancement of writing skills. Other studies by Liu (2000), Forsythe (1995) and Latrobe (1996) on RT and writing also indicate encouraging effects on learners.

Apart from reading, writing and oral fluency, experiences from the classroom indicate that RT assists learners in comprehending literature. For instance, in the use of RT for less skilled readers, Katz and Boran (2004), using practising teachers’ anecdotes and experiences with RT, show the various aspects of literature and literature learning that the learners have gained. The following teachers’ comments indicate how much their learners appreciated and enjoyed the experience of engaging with the reading texts through RT – “They were so engaged in the text. They really knew what was going on”, “When students took on the role of a character, they became the character with real conviction” and “this approach brought the story world into my classroom” (p.

35). With the aid of storyboarding – an integral aspect of RT where learners write their own scripts of their interpretation of the text – Doherty and Coggeshall's (2005) – learners were able to understand the text read (that is, *Walk Two Moons*), write about one of its themes, and could apply the theme to their own lives. This was possible because there was a multi-level learning engagement that happened during the process of RT, where the learners read, interpreted, (re)wrote and experienced the text. Through role-plays and the enactments of the characters, they literally became the character portrayed, and this process consequently led to a deeper level of understanding of the characters in their time, settings and situations (Annarella, 1999). Subsequently, the learners grew in strength as independent learners who were responsible for their own meaning-making, understanding and learning (of the readings).

However, the above cited literature and studies are based in the Western context. What would be the views of learners in non-Western cultures, who regard the English language as a second, third or even as a foreign language? How would learners in a non-Western context view this teaching method? To what extent would it influence and characterise their learning of literature, particularly in increasing their comprehension of the text read, and enhance motivation and interest towards learning literature? Unfortunately, from our literature review, we could not find any reported or published studies on the use of the RT for literature learning in the non-Western context, particularly in the Asian region. Since the problems of literature learning in Malaysia highlighted in this paper are similar to other contexts (see Saraceni, 2003; Timucin, 2003), findings or experiences from this research may benefit teachers from different parts of the world, especially in the Asian settings, in teaching literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model supports the notion of learning by doing. This model is a four-phase framework that encompasses concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. With regard to this study, learners underwent all four phases that were integrated into the structure of instruction with the aim of increasing learners' comprehension of literary text read and heightening their interest in and motivation to learn literature (Figure 1).

In the first stage of "abstract conceptualisation", learners gain information by thinking about, analysing and planning their presentation. In their ensembles, they help each other to conceptualise something very abstract, that is, imagining the "picture" the writer has painted in her text and the messages she wants to convey. In this phase, there is an active thinking process taking shape aimed at arousing learners' curiosity as they begin to produce the theatre. The second phase is referred to as "active experimentation" or doing. In this phase, learners transform the text into their own RT scripts. They assume active roles as readers and players, and rehearse their reading and acting.

The "concrete experience" phase in the Kolb's model is integral to RT experience, where the learners are finally ready to perform. In concrete experience, they construct their own meaning of their learning. In the last phase of "reflective observation", the learners scrutinise their learning experience on two different levels. At one level, they self-evaluate the characters they enact (implicit/introspective). At another level, they

also critique and evaluate their peers' performance and the resulting learning (explicit/retrospective). At these two levels, learners assimilate information, reflect on their experience, construct new knowledge based on their existing knowledge, and analyse and evaluate the constructed knowledge. In this last phase, learners are given the opportunity, based on their self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, to draw conclusions whether their learning had been successful or not. The above four phases were incorporated into the procedures and design of this study.

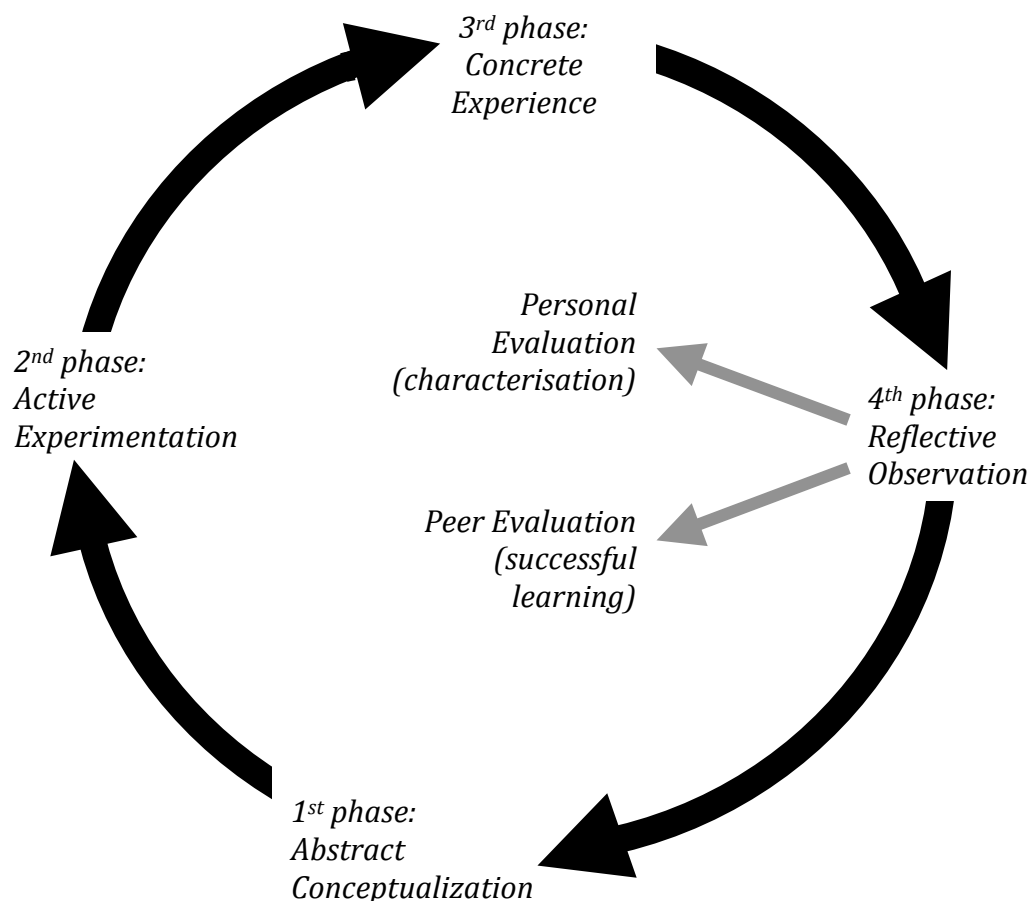


Figure 1. Adaptation of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model for reader's theatre

METHODS

Participants

Participants for this study were 20 Form Two learners (average age of 14) of 10 boys and 10 girls, who were randomly selected from two advanced-level classes in a premier residential school (referred to as PRS) that is located in the north of Peninsular Malaysia. These 20 learners were considered average to good English language learners based on their final semester examination, in which they obtained scores ranging from 70% to 80%. However, they considered English to be a second/third/foreign language and not their favourite study subject. To these 20 learners, learning literature had always been unpleasant and reading literary texts was

a painful, arduous and not an enjoyable learning experience. This small sample size, as well as the pre-experimental design (explained later), did not allow for the generalisation of findings to other contexts. These were the main limitations of this study. Nevertheless, teachers may benefit in terms of the learning experiences of RT in classrooms and the processes and procedures of conducting RT.

Research procedures: Learners' and teachers' roles

The study was carried out during a school term, from January to June, 2009. In between these six months, there were two inter-connected continuous stages in which several activities took place such as reading the literary texts, learners experimenting with RT and data collection. There were two main difficulties/problems faced by the teacher in implementing RT. First, writing the script turned out to be quite a difficult task for the learners as they thought that they were required to write a drama script. The teacher pointed out that RT is a combination of narration and dialogue. Then the learners managed to produce scripts that combined narration and dialogue that were embedded with elements of creative writing, that is, the learners' own interpretation and understanding of the text. The script was then reviewed by the teacher to ensure accuracy of the learners' interpretation. Rehearsing was another difficult task for the learners. The RT presentation style, where reading is a combination of glancing at the script, making appropriate facial expressions, projecting voice and maintaining eye contact, was a new experience to the learners. To overcome this, during rehearsals, the learners' presentations were videotaped and reviewed together with the teacher. This greatly helped them improve their presentation.

The first stage

At the beginning of the semester (January 2009), all the 20 learners were given a week to read and understand, on their own, the novel *Potato People* by Angela Wright. No other specific instructions were given to them. The aim of this was to find out the learners' views on learning literature before experiencing RT. After the first reading, the questionnaire was administered, and then the first interview (before RT) was conducted. Literature lessons then went on as they normally would.

The second stage

This stage was divided into four phases, according to Kolb's model. Each phase had its own aims and procedures, and were conducted in a specified sequence:

First phase (abstract conceptualization)

In the first phase, that is, abstract conceptualization (first week of March 2009), learners were divided into cooperative learning groups (ensembles) consisting of three to four learners. Each group was given two chapters to read and prepare for their performance. The learners spent their first five lessons in the week reading the two chapters, writing scripts for the chapters (that is, transforming chapters into scripts that are made up of dialogue between characters) and writing and editing their narration. The scenes and events were described, as written in the literary text or modified but retaining the original meaning, to complement the dialogue. As a starting point and a guideline to write the scripts and narration, the learners were asked to identify and use key scenes, important characters, critical moments and underlying and fundamental messages and values that they could find in the two chapters they read. During this phase, the teacher acted as a facilitator who assisted the learners when they needed help with the reading, writing and editing of scripts and

narration. She also contributed ideas and provided critical and constructive comments regarding their scripts and narration.

Second phase (active experimentation)

In the second phase, that is, active experimentation (the second week of March 2009), the learners practised their performance. They had to be coached in several aspects of presentation such as delivering the narration, facing the audience, controlling voice projection, reading from the script and maintaining eye contact with the audience. The other learners also had to practice synchronising their actions with the narration until each scene was satisfactory. One learner in the group would narrate, while the others mimed or spoke to show action. The narrator was the most important individual because she or he had to read aloud the lines and ensure the story was clearly conveyed. Since RT is minimal theatre, it had to be simple, needing no props to stage it. Using Shepard's (2006) version of presentation as guide, where the readers wore black to distinguish themselves as the centre of attention during each scene, learners in this study used their normal school uniforms but with attractive headgear so that the audience would know the characters they were characterising. For example, in the play staged, the learner portraying Patrick, the 14-year-old Irish boy in *Potato People*, wore a straw hat, while another, portraying Marie the gypsy girl, wore a silk scarf over her head. Nevertheless, learners were also given the freedom to dress themselves appropriately in order to bring to life the characters that they were playing.

Initially, there was a need for the teacher's input and comments during rehearsals to improve the learners' performances. The teacher video-recorded some of these rehearsals and showed to all the groups. Viewing and discussing the video recordings greatly helped the learners, as subsequent rehearsal sessions saw marked improvements in terms of their overall performance. Once the learners showed the signs of independence and were able to grasp the techniques well, the teacher slowly distanced herself, giving more freedom to the learners to explore and enjoy themselves during the practices as they began to experience the learning with their peers more independently.

Third phase (concrete experience)

The concrete experience phase was carried out in the third week of March 2009, where the actual theatre performance was staged. Each group was given 10-15 minutes to present their prepared two chapters. We videotaped their presentation for discussion and analysis purposes later on. The presentation sessions lasted for a week.

Fourth phase (reflective observation)

In the fourth week of March, the reflective observation was used as a debriefing and reflecting session, where the learners discussed and reflected on the text and each group's video-taped performance. There were two aspects in this phase; the first was personal evaluation, where the learners reflected on their own characters or roles played, and how they now understood (or misunderstood) the characters, and how they could now relate to the literary text read. The second aspect was peer evaluation, where each group commented on each other's performance. But more importantly, they analysed, critiqued and commented on other groups' interpretations of their two chapters, raising serious questions about their current or existing understanding of the text, how they arrived at their new understanding, and the extent to which they were valid (Hall & Piazza, 2008).

RESEARCH DESIGN, INSTRUMENTATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study utilised the pre-experimental design, that is, the one group pre-test – post-test (O-X-O) that did not examine the causes of the effects that were observed. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) point out that the pre-experimental design threatens the validity of the findings. Therefore, an embedded mixed method research design was planned, where “more meaningful information results when the qualitative second phase builds on significant predictors rather than on simple group comparisons” (Creswell & Park, 2007, p. 146). The use of qualitative methods reinforced validity of the comparison of quantitative data as well as explaining the meaning of the comparisons that were made. The experimental element in this study was aimed at determining if learners perceived that they had experienced an increase in comprehension, interest and motivation in learning literature as a result of RT. Three instruments were utilised to collect the required data – a 5-level Likert scale questionnaire, interviews with the learners, and teacher observation. The use of the three instruments allowed for corroboration of data and hence, contributed to data triangulation (see Figure 2).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 10 items and had a reliability of 0.8095. It elicited responses on a 5-point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) designed to find out the learners' perceived comprehension level of the literature text read (items 1-5) and their interest and motivation to learn literature (items 6-10). The 10 items in the questionnaire is the minimum number of items required to form a reliable construct (Pallant, 2001). In addition, the relatively small number of items enabled the respondents to focus on the items and respond accordingly and accurately, and thus answer the research questions. The items were derived from literature in the teaching and learning of literature in the Malaysian setting (see Sidhu, 2003; Too, 2006; Vethamani, 2004; and Ganakumaran, Shahizah & Koo, 2003).

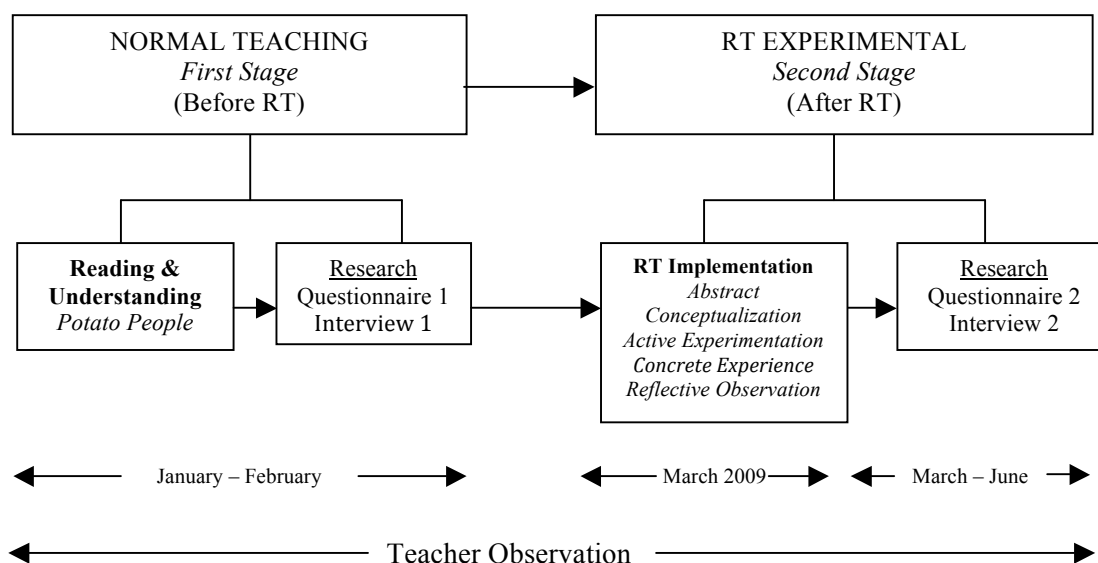


Figure 2. Research design, procedures and instruments

The questionnaire was administered in the first stage (first administration) after all the learners had read the text (and before the first interview session was conducted with the six learners). After the learners' experience with RT, the same questionnaire was once again administered (second administration) to the same 20 learners after the debriefing session in the reflective observation phase in the second stage. The aim of administering the questionnaire the second time was to find out if their perceptions toward the 10 items had changed now that they had experienced "a new way" of learning literature. However, the comparison of mean scores via t-tests was not feasible because the sample was a small one (that is, 20 learners); the use of a t-test would not have been valid in explaining the data. Therefore, the Wilcoxon Matched-pairs Signed-rank Test had to be used in this case, where the distributional assumption was weak and when the subjects are measured on two occasions or under two different conditions (Pallant, 2001). By using this test, the significant differences between the learners' conditions before and after RT were observed and recorded, where two-tailed null hypotheses were written and tested at alpha level of .05 for all the 10 items (before and after RT). Based on the significances, hypotheses were accepted or rejected. (Note: Similar hypotheses are written for the remaining nine items). Below is a sample of the null hypothesis (H_0),

$$H_0: \mu_{\text{Motivated After RT}} = \mu_{\text{Motivated Before RT}}$$

There is no significant difference between learners' motivation level after experiencing RT and before experiencing RT.

Interview

Data gathered from the interviews was utilised to support and give extra meaning to the quantitative data. The interviews were conducted in 2 phases of the study – before the learners experienced RT (1st interview) in the first stage and after the learners experienced RT (2nd interview) in the second stage. In the 1st interview, the main objective was basically to gain a deeper understanding of the learners' views on learning literature before experiencing RT, so that a comparison of their experiences (before and after RT) could be made.

Six learners (three boys and three girls) from the 20 learners were chosen for both interviews. All the 20 learners were coded S1, S2, S3....S20. The six learners interviewed were S2, S4, S7, S13, S14 and S20. S2, S4 and S14 were girls while the rest were boys. Of all, S4 was the most vocal in voicing her problems in literature learning, while S7, the quietest, S7 needed a lot of gentle probing during the interview to say his mind, although he agreed with others most of the time. S7, S13 and S20 were purposely chosen because they had openly expressed their dislike of literature during literature lesson and their test results on literature were not encouraging. S2, S4 and S14 were chosen because they were more positive than the others about learning English in general and learning literature specifically, and scored better in tests. The selection of these six learners, it was hoped, would yield a more balanced and reliable view and opinion of the group's experience with RT.

The questions asked were designed for an in-depth exploration of the learners' feelings toward the literature component, the texts they had to study and the literature lessons. At this point, the learners responded to the questions in the interview based on their perceptions and initial experiences of literature learning in the previous

academic year. During the interview sessions, although all the learners were able to converse well in English, they were allowed to use the Malay language if they needed it to explain their feelings better, which most times they did. Data in the Malay language was then translated into English (minus fillers).

As for the second interview, the same six students who were interviewed in the first interview were again interviewed after the reflective observation phase. The questions asked were designed to discover:

- a. the learners' feelings towards how they like (or don't like) learning literature using RT;
- b. how well the learners understood (or did not understand) the text they had to study to stage the theatre and;
- c. the learners' interest and motivation level before and after the use of the RT (if there was any).

To ensure reliability and validity of the data from the interviews, Cohen, Manion & Morrison's (2000) suggestions and procedures were applied; for validity, the teacher's observations were used to support and explain the data obtained from the interviews. Teacher observation also provided insights for further understanding and elucidation of the initial data. As for the reliability of the data obtained from the interview, structured questions were used, that is, highly specific and focused questions were forwarded to the learners (Appendix A).

Data attained was analysed using coding strategies (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), which were the means of sorting the descriptive data collected so that the material bearing on a given topic could be physically separated from other data. In this study, the coding was based on "situation codes" and "activity codes". The aim of situation codes was to place units of data that described how the learners viewed the learning of literature before and after RT and the benefits that were gained. The situation codes were framed to identify and understand the different situations of learning literature before and after RT experienced by the learners, as well as the benefits that were gained. For activity codes, they were directed at identifying and understanding the learners' regularly occurring kinds of behaviour before RT, and as a consequence of their experience with RT. Schema, such as Table 1, were used to code, arrange and organize the data. The findings are presented in the learners' own voices. The emerging themes were adopted (when applicable) to categorise the outcomes of the learners' thoughts and feelings about their experiences without RT and with RT. Nevertheless, readers should note that the rich nature of the data means that some excerpts may indicate or contain more than one theme and, at times, the themes may be intertwined and intersect with one another in an excerpt.

Teacher observation

Another source of qualitative data for this study was teacher observation. The teacher observation covered both the first stage and the second stage. Data from these observations provided a clear understanding and explanation of many of the issues and themes that emerged from both interview sessions (first interview and second interview). The observations had "overpowering claim to validity" (Gillham, 2008, p. 1) because they verified what the learners "actually do when they might say they do

when asked in interview” (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 168). In order to identify and determine learners' interests and motivation, the following actions and behaviours of learners were observed:

- a. Evidence of increased “positive interaction” in a positive environment between learners while engaged in any RT activities – for example, increased discussion between learners, effective portrayal of characters, and working together and collaborating to resolve issues/matters pertaining to RT;
- b. Evidence that indicated learners' keen interest and motivation during RT activities – for example, increased voluntary active participation of learners, and willingness to listen, focus and concentrate fully while RT activities were in progress.

Example excerpts (learners)	Analyses (Note/comment)	Themes
(I) don't like workbook activities, drilling task sheets, presentations on <i>mahjong</i> papers... we just presented things copied from reference books (S2) [Activity Code – Before RT]	Learning literature was quite mundane and not meaningful. There seem to be evidence of rote learning rather than real learning.	Learners not interested and motivated to learn literature.
It is something we looked forward to. In one week, we could finish the presentation of the theatre, and we really looked forward to class. The preparation was fun. (S20) [Situation Code – After RT]	The fact that the learners are looking forward to their literature class as well as working hard towards completing their tasks of presenting are two strong indications that they are now motivated to learn literature	Learners are very much motivated to learn literature using RT
It made all of us involved become creative. We discussed how to present our chapters more interestingly, for example, how to act scenes out, what head gears to wear and the props to use. My group wanted to impress others with the most interesting presentation (S13) [Situation Code – After RT]	In the process of planning and preparing, the learner mentions about making his group's presentation most interesting; meaning they want to be creative and be different from the other groups.	Benefits of RT – learners think about creativity. They want to fulfil the need to be creative, and be different from others in terms of their presentation

Table 1. Sample schema to code, arrange and organise data (interview) according to the themes

The “critical incident” technique of observation was utilised to identify and determine the learners' actions and behaviours demonstrated in all four phases of the Kolb model of experiential learning (refer to Figure 1). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), critical incidents are “particular events or occurrences that might typify or illuminate very starkly a particular feature” (p. 310) of learners' behaviours that are more interesting than others. These require more detailed observation and annotation of the events in the classroom. To facilitate systematic and easier management of the intricate data gained from observation, an observation schedule was developed (Table 2).

The data of the critical incident observation was written in a reflective manner by the teacher and was transferred immediately into the table after each session with the learners (while the observations were still fresh in the mind of the teacher). Each excerpt was coded as TO1a, TO1b...TO2a, TO3 and so on, when cited as evidence in the findings for easier cross-referencing. The code "TO1a" can be interpreted as the following – "TO1" would refer to the teacher observation made on an item (for instance, students' interest), and "a" refers to the first aspect identified and observed by the teacher, and noted into the table.

Observation made (Teacher's understanding of what happened during RT)	Evidence: What? When? (Provide concrete evidence in order to have a basis to make the observation and conclusion)	Conclusion (is basically an extension of the observations made)
[TO1f]: students' interest was increased	Somehow, the word spread that morning and students from other classes wanted to watch the presentation! They pleaded with their teachers to be allowed to watch...and the teachers agreed that it was a good idea to combine all the other Form Two classes and let them watch the theatre presentation by this particular Form Two group. To accommodate everyone, the presentation was held at the hall!	The other students and their teacher thought it was something worthwhile and beneficial to watch. They were interested to know what the RT project was all about.
TO3: A system of morality.	In one of the rehearsal sessions, my students asked me if they can depict the sad plight of the Irish people to the audience. When I asked why, they said they feel responsible and need to relate the novel's message to everyone. They said that they feel that they are the bearers of righteousness, and need to highlight the good against the evil, where good prevails. [TO3a]	But imagination, creativity and role assuming in RT helped them realise their potentials. Here, their sense of morality, which might have stayed dormant if the teacher had limited their experiences, was manifested and demonstrated by the learners.

Table 2. Sample schema to code, arrange and organise data (teacher observation) according to theme

FINDINGS

Qualitative data attained before and after RT will be cited to support the quantitative findings. In general, the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that learners in this study perceived that they had vastly benefited from the use of the RT as a creative classroom approach to learn the literature component. The findings of the study are organised according to the two research questions delineated earlier.

General findings

The learners' views and perceptions of learning literature before and after RT are presented in the form of means scores (Table 3).

No	Items	Mean Scores	
		Before RT	After RT
1	I understand the literary text easily	2.40	4.00
2	I find the literary test fascinating	3.50	4.20
3	I am able to relate to the characters in the literary text easily	3.25	4.50
4	I am able to visualise the scenes in the literary text easily	3.50	4.50
5	I am able to remember the events in the literary texts easily	3.10	3.45
6	I look forward to literature lessons	3.10	4.00
7	Literature lessons are enjoyable	2.85	4.45
8	I am motivated to learn literature	2.50	3.85
9	Literature learning engages my interests	3.80	4.30
10	Literature lessons stimulate my creativity	2.65	4.30

Table 3. Mean scores of learners' literature learning before and after reader's theatre

Before RT, the items that had the lowest mean scores (that is, mean score of less than 3.00) were item 1 (*I understand the literary text easily*; mean score = 2.40), item 8 (*I am motivated to learn literature*; mean score = 2.50), item 10 (*Literature lessons stimulate my creativity*; mean score = 2.65) and item 7 (*Literature lesson are enjoyable*; mean score = 2.85). After RT, all items except for items 5 (*I am able to remember the events in the literary texts easily*; mean score = 3.45) and 8 (*I am motivated to learn literature*; mean score = 3.85) had a minimum mean score of 4.00. Data obtained in Stage 1 (that is, the first administration of the questionnaire before RT was implemented), suggests that the learners had problems with understanding literary texts and were not motivated to learn literature. They also didn't find the literature lessons stimulating nor enjoyable.

Students' comprehension of literary texts

In the comprehension construct, there were five items. The Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test statistics for this construct were as in Table 4. If the p value is less than the specified level (.05), the null hypothesis for item 1, "*There is no significant difference between learners' understanding of the literary text easily after experiencing RT and before experiencing RT*", can be rejected. For the Wilcoxon Matched-pairs Signed-rank Test, the p value for Item 1 was .001, which is less than .05. Thus we can reject H_0 , that the mean difference between learners' understanding of literary text after and before RT is the same. This indicates that there is a significant improvement in terms of learners' understanding of the literary text after experiencing RT, as the learners perceive it.

For items 3 and 4, which are the ability to relate to the characters (Wilcoxon p-value = 0.02) and ability to visualise the scenes respectively (Wilcoxon p-value = 0.01) the null hypotheses can be rejected because both p-values for both items are less than the specified value ($p = .05$). Hence, we can conclude that after experiencing RT, the learners perceived that they were able to better relate themselves to the characters and were able to better visualise scenes from the literary text. However, for item 2 (*I find the literary text fascinating*) and item 5 (*I am able to remember the events in the literary texts easily*), the null hypotheses had to be accepted because the p-value for both items were more than the specified value ($p = 0.5$). Therefore, in this aspect, learners perceived the literary text the same before and after RT. that is, the learners

perceived that there was no significant change in their ability to remember the events in the literary text before and after RT.

	Item	Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
1	I understand the literary text easily	(-) Ranks	1	11.00	11.00
		(+) Ranks	18	9.94	179.00
		Ties	1		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 3.438 Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .001			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
2	I find the literary test fascinating	(-) Ranks	3	5.00	15.00
		(+) Ranks	11	8.00	90.00
		Ties	6		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 2.433* Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .015			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
3	I am able to relate to the characters in the literary text easily	(-) Ranks	2	8.25	16.50
		(+) Ranks	16	9.66	154.50
		Ties	2		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 3.058* Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .002			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
4	I am able to visualise the scenes in the literary text easily	(-) Ranks	0	.00	.00
		(+) Ranks	14	7.50	105.00
		Ties	6		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 3.407* Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .001			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
5	I am able to remember the events in the literary texts easily	(-) Ranks	3	7.00	21.00
		(+) Ranks	9	6.33	57.00
		Ties	8		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 1.462* Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .144			

*based on (-) Ranks

Table 4. Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test and Sign Test statistics for the comprehension construct

Qualitative data from the learners' interview before RT and after RT supported the quantitative data obtained.

Qualitative data (Stage 1 – Before RT)

Before the learners experienced RT, they faced various difficulties and problems in terms of learning literature:

I was not happy when teacher assigned us to read the novel on our own because I couldn't understand it and because I couldn't understand it I would not finish it.... [S20]

It was found out later that other learners shared S20's views, as not even one of them finished reading the assigned novel independently (TO11). The learners lamented the difficult phrases and deep literary meaning they could not understand owing to lack of cultural understanding:

There is one part in *Potato People* that said the path to America was lined with crosses. I did not know it meant a lot of men died along the journey. I did not realise that crosses meant death of Christians. [S2]

The learners also highlighted their problems in understanding the portrayal of characters in the novel. For example, S20 was not able to answer a phrased literature question based on the text read:

For this question, "Based on one of the novels above, write about a tragic character. Give reasons from the novel to support your answer." How do I answer this question? What does it mean? Who is the tragic character in the novel? [S20]

Qualitative data (Stage 2 – After RT)

In contrast, after experiencing RT, the learners acknowledge that they could visualise scenes and relate to the characters in the novel better than when the teacher explained them and that RT aided them in understanding the novel/text. S2 and S13 elucidate:

When the teacher told the story, it was boring and we felt sleepy, but when our friend did it, they were funny. We could imagine Skullgoragh and Cork (the characters). We could also remember little details in the story, which was read and shown as simple props, like Sean's harp and rusty axe. [S2]

It is different from mere acting. When we act, we recreate the story, but in the theatre we read the original dialogues and narration and these help a lot in understanding the novel especially the difficult part [S13]

The teacher also observes and recognised that the learners were able to relate to the characters they portrayed. For instance, she narrated that this happened when the learners "took the opportunity to masquerade as the characters" (TO4d) and,

.... posed themselves effectively as the character that they acted. They were not being themselves but as the characters they were posing as. They had accent! Their voices changed....they acted pompous and timid – in line with the characteristics of the characters. [TO4d]

.... they acted out the characters, they accepted why the characters had to behave the way they did. For example, the character Sean who was robbed by the British Lords; he (Sean) murdered the cruel overseer and stole back what was rightfully his. [TO6b]

In terms of remembering events of the story, S2 agreed that she understood the story better, especially when they read and acted the scenes out at the same time, and thus “we are able to imagine scenes and events better than reading on our own or listening to teacher’s explanation”. The teacher acknowledged that the learners highlighted important events in their presentation, “for example, the burning of the village, the arrest of Sean and the horrors of the famine...they made all these so real” (TO3b). In addition, S4 articulated that not only did they understand the text and learn from the staging of the theatre but also, by observing others who performed, “We understood the story better when we watched everybody present the whole story” [S4].

Besides the self-discovery of the learners, the teacher recorded that there was motivation within the learners and strong initiatives taken by them to actually understand the text:

...the learners had a lot of questions pertaining to their chapters and the script writing. ... they wanted to really understand the story so that they could write their scripts well to best portray the scenarios[TO1b]

Apart from the presenters, the audience, who had read the text as well, gained understanding too, as they could follow the story that was read and react accordingly;

...the audience were attentive and alert as well during the theatre presentation....they laughed, clapped and cried at all the right places...[TO1g]

Students' interest and motivation

There were five items in the construct of interest and motivation. The Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test statistics for this construct are as in Table 5. The null hypotheses for all five items can be rejected because the p-values for those items were less than the specified value (0.05). Hence, the null hypotheses for item 6 (*I look forward to literature lessons*; p-value = 0.03), item 7 (*Literature lessons are enjoyable*; p-value = 0.00), item 8 (*I am motivated to learn literature*; p-value = 0.00), item 9 (*Literature learning engages my interests*; p-value = .032), and item 10 (*Literature lessons stimulates my creativity*; p-value = 0.01) can be rejected. From the quantitative data, it then can be concluded that after experiencing RT, the learners perceived that their interest and motivation to learn literature had significantly increased.

The mean score (2.50, Table 3) obtained before RT shows that learners had low levels of motivation to learn literature. Data from the first interview at the initial stage of the research (before RT) also revealed that learners were not motivated to learn literature. Although several admitted that they liked learning English, the learners unanimously agreed that the literature component was not interesting at all to them. Most of their problems stemmed from the texts, which they claimed were difficult to understand and boring. The learners also claimed that literature classes were not stimulating enough, unlike their favourite subjects, which were Mathematics and Science. Before their RT experience, learners indicated that literature classes were dull and dreary and

that they did not look forward to them. One learner stressed that she did not like “workbook activities, drilling task sheets, presentations on mahjong papers”. When they were asked to do these activities in class, they “just presented things copied from reference books” (S2). S13 admitted this as another cause for her boredom in literature classes – “Listening to teacher teaching was boring. Group work and presentations were also boring because usually we copied information from workbooks. We know that information already.”

	Item	Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
6	I look forward to literature lessons	(-) Ranks	1	4.00	4.00
		(+) Ranks	12	7.25	87.00
		Ties	7		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 2.970*			
		Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .003			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
7	Literature lessons are enjoyable	(-) Ranks	0	.00	.00
		(+) Ranks	16	8.50	136.00
		Ties	4		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 3.579*			
		Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .000			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
8	I am motivated to learn literature	(-) Ranks	1	4.50	4.50
		(+) Ranks	16	9.28	148.50
		Ties	3		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 3.477*			
		Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .001			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
9	Literature learning engages my interests	(-) Ranks	3	5.50	16.50
		(+) Ranks	10	7.45	74.50
		Ties	7		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 2.140*			
		Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .032			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Rank</i>	<i>Sum of Rank</i>	
10	Literature lessons stimulate my creativity	(-) Ranks	1	7.00	21.00
		(+) Ranks	15	6.33	57.00
		Ties	4		
		Total	20		
		Z = - 3.541*			
		Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed) = .000			

*based on (-) Ranks

Table 5. Wilcoxon signed-rank test statistics for the interest & motivation construct

However, after staging *Potato People* through RT, the learners found themselves very much enjoying learning literature.

Instead of just discussing the texts, this time the teacher wanted us to try this theatre out. We were excited by her explanation but we did not know anything about it. But we were eager because it sounded fun. [S4]

When friends performed, the story came alive. It became funny and entertaining. Some of our friends read in comical ways and we laughed at them. It is something we looked forward to. [S20]

The teacher observed that the learners began to demonstrate their interest and motivation to learn literature, particularly with RT. This was discernible from their quick responses to the tasks that were assigned to them, as well as the hard work and effort that they put in during rehearsals and while preparing for the staging of RT. They consulted the teacher on various matters and put in extra hours for rehearsals:

They quickly finished reading the (two) chapters that I gave the previous week. They impressed me with a very efficient task delegation/completion. [TO2a]

The groups made an effort to seek my advice even outside class hours to consult on their scriptwriting and preparation for their presentation. I had two groups during break time just now... they wanted my views, comments on what they have done so far... I could see the intense interest on their faces and they way they forward their questions...[TO1c]

The final presentation was attended by learners from other classes who did not participate in the RT project, and it created even bigger interest among the other students. The teacher described the whole event:

Somehow, the word spread that morning and students from other classes wanted to watch the presentation! They pleaded with their teachers to be allowed to watch...and the teachers agreed that it was a good idea to combine all the other Form Two classes and let them watch the theatre presentation by this particular Form Two group. To accommodate everyone, the presentation was held at the hall! A small classroom project has turned into a major school performance... [TO1f]

The teacher could also see the learners' excitement and eagerness to learn and appreciate literature whereby, right before the presentation, the learners waited in a state of anticipation and excitement, and during the actual presentation, the learners were totally engrossed with what was going on the stage. She noted,

They came early to the hall to watch the presentation, excited and eager to see the novel presented through RT...I have never seen them (the learners) like this... They were an attentive and riveted audience, so involved in the presentation. [TO2d]

The mean score for item 8 before RT (mean score = 2.50) clearly indicated a very low level of motivation to learn literature. Before RT, according to S13, "I did not find that literature lessons made me more creative. I usually sat and listened to the teacher teaching or friends' group presentations of characters, plot, moral values. Those were

really boring things to do". This low level of motivation appeared to have a link with creative ways of learning. S13 and S20 further elucidate:

But with RT....we discussed how to present our chapters more interestingly, for example, how to act scenes out, what head gears to wear and the props to use.... It made all of us involved become creative. We discussed how to present our chapters more interestingly, for example, how to act scenes out, what head gears to wear and the props to use. My group wanted to impress others with the most interesting presentation [S13]

The class was no longer filled with boredom. There is action and we moved around actively. [S20]

The teacher also observed the link between motivation of her learners and creativity, especially after RT. She observed that the learners' motivation to be involved actively in learning literature was driven by their desire to be creative:

Not one group presented their narration/script the same way. Each group made an effort to be creative and different. Yes, I constantly encouraged them to be unique in their work, but they surprised me when they themselves wanted to produce something that could capture other people's interest. [TO7a]

Each student made an effort to create an interesting headgear that depicted the character they were portraying. They fashioned soldier's hats from boxes, sewed lacy villagers' bonnets and cut out cardboards to make crude props like Sean's Irish harp and axe. Even though they wore their school uniforms during performance, these little things helped project an image of the characters in the novel. [TO7b]

In a later observation after the learners had staged their RT, the teacher made these concluding remarks regarding the learners' motivation to learn literature and creativity:

Each group presented their best. Maybe because it was different from their usual class activity, maybe due to the countless rehearsals, maybe because they were videotaped, perhaps due to the large audience-all these could be factor that made them more motivated to present creatively. [TO7c]

The learners' motivation to learn literature and make the RT project a success was evident at various phases. For instance, in the active experimentation phase,

The learners worked very hard, going the extra mile to perfect their presentation. For example, they edited and proof read their scripts with my help, and other teachers too. ...they kept upgrading their presentation during rehearsals. [TO2c]

And in the debriefing session, the learners showed a totally different side of themselves – as motivated learners who comment and contribute ideas. The teacher noticed the difference:

Before RT, most of the time, my students are quiet during class discussion, either reluctant to take part because they were shy/passive or they genuinely had nothing much to contribute. However, after the RT presentation, they all had something to say, mostly comments about their friends' performance. Like just now, I let them say

what they wanted but slowly focused and steered their discussion towards what they have learnt about the novel through the performance. [TO2f]

Benefits gained by learners

Data from the teacher observation (and at times, complemented by data from learners' interviews) were used to identify other benefits gained by the learners after experiencing RT. These 20 learners managed and completed various tasks in staging their RT presentations in a collaborative and cooperative manner between members in the group. In the first phase (that is, abstract conceptualization), when the idea for RT was first explained to the learners,

Job delegation was done really quickly by the leader. In the next lesson, they already have their cast ready and are starting to write the script. That only meant that group members finished reading the assigned chapters overnight. [TO8b]

...teacher put us in groups and divided the chapters between the classes. We discussed two chapters each, came up with the narration and dialogues and practised reading and performing. [S4]

During the second phase (that is, active experimentation), when the learners faced difficulties in scriptwriting, rehearsals, they consulted and referred to the teacher.

The teacher taught us the correct techniques of reading (for RT). Teacher kept reminding us to watch our audience. If we looked straight at them, raise our voice at times, smile and were interesting, they will listen to us. If they started talking and not pay attention, that means we were boring...and we have to do something to grab back their attention, liking moving closer to the audience and reading louder. [S1]

And in the third phase (that is, concrete experience), the learners not only solved problems while presenting, but they improvised many aspects while on stage:

I noticed and saw a lot of new things; new ways of presenting, new words and phrases being uttered, new movement and new interaction between characters in the real performance (as compared to the ones that they rehearsed), which meant they had kept on progressing with flashes of ideas and actions, while presenting. [TO4c]

As for being spontaneous in providing ideas and actions, the learners demonstrated this noticeably during their active experimentation phase, particularly during rehearsals and in the concrete experience (during presentation) phase:

Rehearsal time is when students came up with more ideas, spontaneous ideas to change their original plans and scripts. [TO4b]

After the presentation, the students came to me and admitted that they got "carried away" by the performance and the occasion. They really posed themselves effectively as the character that they acted. [TO4d]

The teacher identified one occasion where the issue of morality arose and was discussed:

In one of the rehearsal sessions, my students asked me if they can depict the sad plight of the Irish people to the audience. When I asked why, they said they feel

responsible and need to relate the novel's message to everyone. They said that they feel that they are the bearers of righteousness, and need to highlight the good against the evil, where good prevails. [TO3a]

The above critical incident suggests that the learners had a sense of morality and social responsibility, but it was the only observation made by the teacher and, thus, strong conclusions cannot be made to support the above claim. In the following excerpt by TO6a, the teacher observed a couple of elements of morality being discussed but not detailed, that is, cruelty of landlords and oppression. In terms of accepting the facts and realities of the world, the teacher had this to say about her learners from her observation:

They had no ideas on the feudal system, The Great Hunger or Irish immigrants in The New World. However, when they were involved in the RT project, they were curious to know more about all the above. They commented on the cruelty of the landlords (during discussions and rehearsals). They also appeared to have understood what oppression is. In fact, in the reflective discussions (debriefing session), they were even able to compare parallels of what happened in Ireland then to the realities of current economic situation in Malaysia, particularly the increasing price of food. [TO6a]

In one of the debriefing sessions, when the learners discussed their performance, particularly the character of "Sean", they discovered and accepted many traits of human characters in real life. One that was identified by the teacher is what a person would do and react when they were driven to the brink of desperation (TO6b). The teacher was unsure about the learners being objective and not prejudiced. She reasoned:

During the performance, my students assimilated into their characters – they actually became the characters! These characters were foreign to them, and they wholeheartedly played and read the characters without feeling any prejudice about which they were portraying, I feel. They seemed to embrace it with their open heart. Or maybe, they got to know the novel, setting and characters really well and this eliminated whatever biases that they might have had (?) [TO5b]

DISCUSSION

The quantitative and qualitative data in the previous section merely describe the 20 learners' experiences with RT, particularly in enhancing their literary text comprehension and interest and motivation to learn literature. The following discussion will be focused on the experiences of the learners in this study and the explanation for their experiences, without attempting to generalise the findings to other contexts.

The experience with RT provided learners in this study with a creative learning platform, where they were meaningfully engaged with the characters in a text. By being invited to enact the characters, learners understood the text by means of watching and observing their own demonstration of the characters, and their own connections with the characters in the literary text (Roser, Martinez, Fuhrken & McDonald, 2007). Instead of just reading or discussing a character, they now literally

stepped into the character's shoes and felt and became the character based on their own interpretation and evaluation (of the character). Also, instead of just trying to figure out a scene, they stepped inside and influenced the scene with their characters in the active experimentation and concrete experience phases, and (re)considered "its meanings and their shifting understandings" (Monahan & Fink, 2008, p. 101) during the reflective observation phase.

The learners in this study benefited from the (1) intensive construction of the characters and scenes during the abstract conceptualisation phase; (2) development of characters, narration, dialogue and plot in the active experimentation phase; (3) performance during concrete experience and; (4) evaluation and reflection during the reflective observation. This whole cyclic experience had a deep impact on the learners. One good example would be, for weeks after the presentation, a learner who enacted "Mr Greystone" (a greedy and unfair character who burned down the villages) being called "Mr Greystone" by his friends instead of his own name.

The many reading and re-reading activities during RT allowed the learners to be in control of the text, encouraged and directed learners' attention to detail and assisted them in knowing what was important (Blau, 2003; Monahan & Fink, 2008). Because of the elaborate experiential processes, aided by the teacher's support in terms of writing, revising and editing the scripts and narration, the learners perceived that they understood *Potato People* better (Schmoker, 2006). Prior to experiencing RT, the learners clearly lacked cultural understanding. Their cultural understanding improved when they constructed and reconstructed a new meaning of *Potato People* during the debriefing sessions, where they were engaged in analytical discussions of the characters and interpretation of the text. They even reconstructed a new meaning of *Potato People* for the Malaysian context by experiencing and perceiving the texts through their beliefs and cultural background.

The learners' interest and motivation level to learn literature significantly increased after experiencing RT. They now look forward to literature lessons and are more enthusiastic when it comes to learning literature. We believe one reason for this positive outlook is because RT in this study is constructed on the basis of an experiential learning environment that emphasises direct involvement of learners, from the beginning to the very end of the cycle, at every phase of RT that was experimented with in this study. The learners' learning, participation and contribution were not in isolation or individualistic, but encouraged their independent and autonomous learning in a culture of collaboration. For instance, as individuals, the learners worked independently in small groups (ensembles) to accomplish tasks (such as writing and editing scripts and narration) that were assigned by the leaders of the ensembles. At the same time, they had to work as a team in terms of discussing and rehearsing their presentation and, exchanging ideas and views to perfect their presentation. The rehearsals and performance were "creative but deliberate" (Athanasios, 2005, p. 89) processes, that were interwoven with other literacy activities such as close reading and writing (Wolf, 1994). The reading and writing, rehearsals and performance were meaningful activities in RT that enhanced the learners' engagement in learning literature and to a great extent, satisfied the learners' "belonging needs for power, caring, and sharing, as well as creating and cooperating with others through language arts tasks that have meaning to them" (Block 1997, p.

17) and hence, aroused their interest, and eventually motivated them to learn literature.

Learners in this study also demonstrated a considerably high level of creativity throughout RT and displayed critical thinking especially during the reflective observation session. They were able to make connections between learning literature and how they perceived and valued learning, and how such learning could rouse their creative minds (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). The learners were given plenty of freedom to be creative; they discussed and decided on the script and narration, wrote and edited the script and narration the way they interpreted and understood the literary text, and create headgear and props. Roser et al. (2007) argue that the introduction of headgear and prop (or realias) make a "character's world more concrete, comprehensible, and discussable – opening the way to understand plot and themes" (p. 554). Ng (2004) discusses how the creative product of learners, who are given free choice and encouraged to take initiative, is superior to that of learners being controlled by an autonomous mode of instruction. The overarching reason behind this is that a creative solution to a certain problem involves mastering a certain domain of knowledge that results in an innovative contribution.

The growth of the learners' creative and critical thinking meant they were able to better understand and gain critical insight into the literary text. The learners perceived that their comprehension of the text increased, and their RT experience basically helped them remember details in the novel. This was something that they could not achieve while reading on their own as the reading was isolated and therefore, meaningful connection between the learners and the text were not made. The learners grasped the story better through the purposeful writing and reading of the script, and the narration and vigorous enactment the original story. Hebb and Axiotis (2000) underline that both reading and writing are active and recursive processes, and both are "connected, mutually reinforcing processes" (p. 22) and, when taught together, may extend thinking, expand learning and transform knowledge. In RT, both reading and writing activities are practised over and over again meaningfully in a dynamic, cyclical process of the experiential learning model. The constant revisiting of the literary text, according to Kucan (2007), encourages the learners to "think about it in deeper ways and to notice what they overlooked at first glance", and this becomes a "context that elicits and supports" learners comprehension of the text (p. 518).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, the features of RT were framed in an Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1984). As a result, the learners perceived that their comprehension of the literary text increased, as well as their motivation and interest to learn literature. This learning model led them to gain new knowledge and experiences without being conscious of the learning process, understand themselves through the experience of others and engage themselves in a very positive learning environment. What is also interesting is the fact that through the four phases of RT, these learners practised and enhanced their creativity and creative and critical thinking skills. They also used different ways and abilities to solve problems, which were basically cooperating and collaborating with their peers and consulting the teacher. They too exhibited spontaneity and imagination to come up with ideas and actions (when needed). It is

the teacher's responsibility to provide such opportunities for his/her learners. Wright and Kowalczyk (2000) explicate:

Our commitment as teachers includes relaying the principles of freedom, justice, solidarity, tolerance, peace, and understanding. We do this by creating an environment of social interaction, providing opportunities for collaborative learning, allowing our students to make interdisciplinary connections, and engaging students in meaningful language-based activities through the arts (p. 63).

The findings of this study seem to support Guthrie's (2004) framework of reading engagement, which advocates that reading should be viewed from multiple perspectives that consist of motivational dispositions, cognitive strategies, conceptual understanding and social discourse. These contribute to learners' reading achievement and valued learning outcomes. Since RT requires engaged reading and hands-on experience, self-directed learning, learning through conceptual themes and constructive classroom discourses are achieved.

The learners in this study were not forced to learn and like literature, but rather they were exposed to various methodologies that are sensitive to the learners, as Saraceni (2003) argue:

...the necessity of a reduction of distances the texts selected should be of types nearer to the students; teaching methodologies and classroom practices should follow teaching paradigms nearer to local cultures and sensitiveness; and, in general what is done in the class should be nearer to what the students wish to learn. (p. 25)

What RT did for the learners in this study was move them emotionally, help them to reflect on life and all its possibilities (Wolf, 2003) and increase their interest in learning literature. This endeavour tells us that the teaching and learning of literature should integrate elements of independent, autonomous learning infused with the elements of collaborative learning so that learners can profit more in terms of comprehending the literary pieces and appreciating their aesthetic values. Also, learners are able to perceive and examine literature in a more positive and constructive manner if the teaching and learning of literature are aligned with the interests of the learners and are based on creative, flexible and learner-based pedagogical approaches. As such, any planned literature learning ought to incorporate the facilitation of learners' creativity and critical reflective thinking practices if the aim is to ensure total participation of learners in learning.

Having said the above, it has to be reiterated that the sample of this study was small, and that there were no pre-post measures of comprehension, just the pre-post questionnaire, which captured the learners' perceptions. Hence, it would be difficult to generalise the findings to other situations or contexts in terms of learners' comprehension of the literary text. The interview with the learners and the teacher's observations may have provided some tentative evidence regarding the benefits of RT in the context of this study, but more concrete evidence is needed to show that the RT experience in the classrooms can lead to increased comprehension of literary texts. This would require a robust experimental study that measures the actual learning and learners' comprehension levels of literary texts as a result of RT. Also needed is a study with a larger sample size that involves learners with different levels of abilities and language proficiencies, particularly in Asian settings.

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APPENDIX A**1st Interview (Before RT)**

1. Do you like learning literature? Please explain your answer.
2. What are your opinions and feelings of the literature texts and readings that are used?
3. How do you learn literature in the classroom?
4. Does the way you learn literature now interests and motivates you? Please explain your answer.

2nd Interview (After RT)

1. What are your opinions and feelings of learning literature using the Readers Theatre (RT)?
2. With the use of RT, did you understand the text better or worse? Please explain your answer.
3. How do you feel about learning literature now that you have completed the RT task?
4. Do you think that you have gained or benefited something out of your experience with RT? If you have or have not gained, please explain why.