

Reading and Studying Literature in English: Facilitating the Educator Through Netnography

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ABSTRACT

There has been a call by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for a shift in teaching practices in Malaysian classrooms, from traditional teacher-centred transmission models to more student-centered ones since the year 2009. The Blueprint also specifies the expansion in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to customize learning and scale up quality learning across Malaysia. However, such pedagogies are still largely unfamiliar to both teachers and learners within the Malaysian context. The purpose of this study is to provide educator with a process that they can adapt to in order to construct meanings in reading and studying literature in English. The methodology explored in this study is a form of Netnography as proposed which subsists on narrative responses elicited through students' online responses of two selected short stories from Malaysian Literature in English (MLIE). The extended online discussion which lasted for four weeks, was carried out amongst 10 students from a pre-university program in Taylor's College, Kuala Lumpur. A form of narrative analysis introduced was applied to the narrative responses obtained from these students through Goodreads.com. The empirical material was analysed to gather students' views on how these stories were activated, produced, organized and transmitted. The findings indicated that the educator was facilitated in their reading and studying of text through necessitating orientation to reality where meanings were constructed through the context, medium and language. Findings also showed how meanings were aligned to local relevancies through cultural settings and gender associations. Hence, the significance of this study has brought to the fore 21st-century expressions that reflect meanings that are related to our present-day realities.

Keywords: Malaysian Literature in English; Teaching Practices in the Malaysian Classroom; Reading and Studying Literature; Narrative Analysis; Netnography

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INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) has been set on reforming the education system for more progressive and transformative policies to compete globally with other nations (Ministry of Education, 2012). It can be seen to respond to some of the previous shortcomings of the current practices. Shift 2 of the 11 shifts targets upskilling of English language educators and expanding opportunities for more exposure to English via a compulsory English Literature component at the secondary school level (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014). Its commitment to raising literacy levels alongside the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in classrooms can be seen as key to enhancing student-centred approaches. However, such pedagogies are still largely unfamiliar to both teachers and learners within the Malaysian context as Dass and Ferguson (2012) point out.

It has been reported time and again about the unpreparedness of the teacher when it comes to this task at hand (Abdul Rahman & Abdul Manaf, 2017; Suliman & Md. Yunus, 2014). Engagement with previous scholarly

works seem to indicate that there is a heavy reliance on comprehension exercises, lecture sessions, explanation of content, reading notes from workbooks, handouts, or provision of background information (Ling & Chen, 2016). The demand is on the educator to provide clarification and explanation. This manner of approaching literary text reaps an expected and standardized outcome which is in a way devised to meet the testing and evaluation criteria in the classroom and also the post-colonial theories that shape readings, especially in the context of Malaysian Literature in English (MLIE).

However, this can undermine the true value of a literary text and underrate the importance of literary text and the present-day context of the student (Hwang & Embi, 2007; Sanub & Md Yunus, 2016). It appears to be that educators are well aware that using these approaches merely facilitates the teaching process but not their own understanding of the text. This was pointed out in a study where teachers continue to admit that they have not had ample opportunities to be formally instructed in ways of reading and studying literature (Aziz & Nasharudin, 2010; Dhillon & Mogan, 2014; Omar, 2017; Subramaniam, 2003).

The clarification as to why this study is necessary stems from the need for educators to be adequately aware of the possible ways in which text can be read and studied in relation to constructing meaning. Previous literature has indicated that educators are not sufficiently shown and taught processes or series of actions that can be taken to facilitate their reading and studying of literature. This paralyses their ability to construct meanings to a text. Yet, when policymakers put together a syllabus for teaching literature and create learning objectives and expected outcomes, it may seem to be done with the supposition or the belief that the practitioner is one that has a firm footing in the area.

Likewise, literature handbooks highlight what literature can do. Its potential, extensive forms, and functions, alongside its theories, are elucidated for the practitioner's perusal. For example, in Wellek & Warren (1976), a renowned handbook for literature enthusiasts highlights the vital aspects to studying of literature. It covers definitions and distinctions, operations, and the intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to the study of literature. While the information is pertinent in grasping some of the basic understanding of the nature of the subject matter, it presents information in the form of concepts, theories and principles. Handbooks on teaching literature approach the subject matter in the same way.

While there has been admittance on the part of the educators that they have not had ample opportunities to be formally instructed on ways to read and study literature, scholarly works to date continue to focus on activities that can be carried out in the classroom to ease the teaching of literature. Handbooks and syllabi continue to provide information in the form of principles and abstract concepts when the teacher is desperate for a more cohesive set of processes in a form that illustrates how to interpret the text through more effective reading and studying. Therein lies the gap that this study intends to address. There is a lack of processes which the educator can follow in order to read and study literature in a more systematic and cohesive manner.

It is necessary for handbooks and syllabi to continue to support the educator by providing information in the form of principles, concepts and expected outcomes. But there is a gap here where execution and delivery are a concern, especially when educators have pointed out their needs directly or indirectly for a more cohesive set of instructions on how to interpret the text. Hence, this study addresses this gap where there is a lack of teaching support in terms of reading and studying processes available to the educator. The educator's reading and studying of literature in English can be facilitated if there were more accessible processes which the educator can follow in order to enhance their ability to construct meaning to the text. Hence, this study addresses this by bringing to the fore a possible process that educators can adapt, in which co-construction of meaning is critical, as a way to enhance their reading and studying of Malaysian novels and short stories in English.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Malaysian Literature in English (MLIE)

MLIE has always been associated with Malaysia's heterogeneous, multicultural and pluralistic denotations of society. Representations in the literary text have been shaped by diasporic concerns that have played a key role in influencing how this society sees gender, identity and culture. The economic exploitation and stratification in the colonial social system have been identified as part of the ongoing theory about Malaysia's current predicaments. The narrative hinges on alienation, longing for a sense of belonging, dislocation, displacement

and the search for an identity as elucidated by its literary works. These thematic trends are the epitome of the Malaysian author writing in English; these paradoxes, complexities and conflicts are taken on by as part of his role and responsibility, in connection to his culture, history and environment (Omar, 2014; Zainal, 2014).

However, it must be noted that the new generation of Malaysians whether students or not, have been exposed to the 'Reformasi' movement, seen a series of 'Bersih' rallies, and experienced a downfall of a government that has been in power for over 60 years, mourned the loss of MH370, plagued with newspapers headlines on heinous crimes such as rape, murder, bullying and to top it off, part of the phenomenon known as Social Media. To extend to this list of happenings is the Covid-19 global pandemic. These are our present-day realities. Given that, these are their realities. Hence, these realities, identities and views call out to be addressed in an approach that can accommodate these new agendas. Hasan (2016) forces us to re-examine our positions in this post-colonial era in light of literature being a subject that is "value-laden, highly subjective and reflective of the site of its production" (p50). In other words, the perception and construction of gender, identity and culture call out to be explored in this new light.

Like Chuah (2017), he is highly critical of the Western values and norms embedded in not only the selection of literary works but also in the minds of the educators when he refers to this giving in as a "cultural domination of the West" which undermine the intelligence and critical ability of our own intellects, academics and literary scholars of the East (p50). The social stance taken by Hasan is shared by Lin (2017) when he points out that classroom pedagogy should be constructed along the lines of socially-oriented linguistics where lexico-grammar and meaning is ascertained based on the socio-cultural context in which the text presents itself. He cites Paran (2006) and McRae and Vethamani (1999) as works that reflect a pedagogy privileging stylistics with a social orientation.

Teaching Practices in the Literature Classroom

What can be summed up from the interrogation of teaching practices in the Malaysian classroom is that while there are multifarious options to teaching approaches, the Malaysian educator is confined to a limited range. Carter and Long, (1991) point out the three main approaches to teaching literature: the Cultural Model, the Language Model and the Personal Growth Model. The Cultural Model which is teacher-centred, is reliant on the teacher as the source of information and knowledge while the Language Model allows the teacher to employ strategies used in language teaching to deconstruct literary texts in order to serve a specific linguistic goal. The Personal Growth Model is focused on a particular use of language in a text and in a specific cultural context. These models have been incorporated in various approaches to teaching literature: The Language-Based Approach, Paraphrastic Approach, Information-Based Approach, Personal-Response Based Approach, Moral-Philosophical Based Approach and Stylistic Approach.

More recent research shows that educators are integrating approaches and using multi-modal methods in the classroom in order to provide a more holistic approach to interpreting text but much has been said about the limitations of these exploratory practices (Abdul Rahman & Abdul Manaf, 2017b; Dass & Ferguson, 2012; Muthusamy et al., 2017; Othman et al., 2015; Pillai & Vengadasamy, 2010; Rafik-Galea & Singh, 2017). Educators have linked the shortcomings of these practices to Malaysia's exam-oriented culture which places importance on results rather than the learning process. When the objective of teaching and learning literature is directed towards examination purposes, the educator becomes that sole body of information that spoon-feeds the students into his perspectives and beliefs of a text (Ramlan, 2015).

Studies have in fact begun paving the way for re-contesting of these terms. More recent research shows that educators are integrating approaches and using multi-modal methods in the classroom in order to provide a more holistic approach to interpreting text through various exploratory practices (Abdul Rahman & Abdul Manaf, 2017b; Dass & Ferguson, 2012; Muthusamy et al., 2017; Othman et al., 2015; Pillai & Vengadasamy, 2010; Rafik-Galea & Singh, 2017). In fact, Hashim et al. (2011) use an ethnographic-oriented approach in their review of Malaysian perspectives on gender constructions. They attest to ethnography as a method that facilitates the rethinking of gender stereotypes and enables an exploration of the way we read and makes meanings out of text and context. Perhaps the most poignant finding in their study is that Western theorizing does not fit the local context. In fact, previous works that frame their interpretations and readings of local works using post-colonial theories risk doing exactly that. It marginalizes local beliefs and values in the process of interpretation. Hence, an approach that enables local relevancies to surface is desirable in the classroom for a more accurate representation of local meanings.

Reading and Studying in Context

While there have been attempts to facilitate the educator in reading literature and interpreting the text, the majority of scholarly activities are directed toward facilitating the teaching of literature. Exploring teacher roles in teacher literature circles and using analogy as a scaffolding tool for teacher trainees have in fact helped educators in their comprehension of text (Vethamani & Nair, 2007a; Vijayarajoo & Samuel, 2013a). However, much more needs to be done because literature teaching is about cutting across all teaching approaches and reading strategies. It is

about enabling the educator to integrate models in the classroom that stretches across the Informational-Based Approaches into the Stylistics, Biographical, Psychological Approaches and so on.

In the context of literature, the terms ‘reading’ and ‘studying’ work hand in hand and involve similar processes. They refer to a set of highly specialised skills which require the practitioner to be able to make sense of the text and how the text can be developed into an informed view of a larger pattern and thought (Durant & Fabb, 1990; Maley, 1989). The ideal state of a practitioner is summarised succinctly by Spack (1985) when he says that the understanding of a text comes when one is “intellectually, emotionally, if not linguistically and culturally, ready to examine literary works” (p704).

Brumfit and Carter (1986) assert that literature is in fact a way of reading in itself and it would seem less rigid if the activity involved the inclusion of the writer, the text, and the reader. Hence, in the context of this study, the terms ‘reading’ and ‘studying’ will be viewed as a collective skill. It will refer to both terms as an active skill that hinges on the ability of the educator to be prepared intellectually, emotionally, linguistically and culturally to examine a story. To be able to ‘read’ and ‘study’ literature in this study also refers to the educator being able to develop an understanding of how stories work in transmitting larger societal concerns through the involvement of text, context (writer) and audience (student). Hence, this study attempts to equip the educator through engagement with selected writers of text in order to facilitate the reading and studying of literature in English. It also prepares the educator for the negotiation of meanings with students in the literature classroom through an active participatory approach.

Narrative Analysis

The use of narrative analysis is to further the understanding of the social world and the production of data (Bruner, 1986; Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1975; Riessman, 1993; Rosenweld & Ochberg, 1992). Hence, the form of the textual data should not be questioned because it provides leads into why the account has taken place in such a form. If anything, it actually informs the narrative inquiry. Earthy and Cronin (2008) argue that the point in a narrative analysis is to explore the different ways in which individuals and groups choose to tell their stories because it hinges on the process of production as well as the process of analysis.

In an attempt to study narrative reality, Gubrium and Holstein’s approach which privileges the studying of how text is activated, produced, organized and transmitted, allows this inquiry to go beyond the conventional idea that stories are merely messages that have actively been assembled and dolled up as multidimensional textual windows on the world. Instead, it empowers the text to provide insights into the social organization and interactional dynamics by considering what speakers do with stories that help shape meaning for their listeners as a consequence of their communication. In other words, this study is interested in the process in as much as the result which makes the context and audience as prerequisites to a meaningful interpretation in order to locate narrative reality in everyday life.

2.4 Reading and Studying Reality through Narrative Analysis

It is the case today that stories and narratives no longer function as a mere by-product of society; instead, its purview expands into the social reality of what is. In fact, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) urge us to consider how this form of expression is more of a social practice than it is a social product. This form of narrative analysis allows this study to evaluate current works on the basis that if stories are about our lives, our worlds and its events, then it is also part of our society. So, while the prominent writers of our time have, in fact, given us one aspect of what is a necessary part of our social worlds, engaging with newer works and writers can serve to bring to the fore the here and now. In fact, the potential in using narratives as a source to discern the unfolding and ongoing activeness of the process cannot be undermined when present forms of expression are taken into consideration. Bamberg (2010) aptly summarizes the versatility of this form, which enables this study to use stories to tackle the social dimensions of narrativity:

When narrators tell a story, they give ‘narrative form’ to experience. They position characters in space and time, and in a very broad sense, give order to and make sense of what happened—or what is imagined to have happened...narratives attempt to explain or normalize what has occurred; they lay out why things are the way they are or have become the way they are...it provides a portal into two realms: (i) the realm of experience ...and (ii) the realm of narrative means...(p.3).

So, while this form enables us to make sense of happenings and events by conferring subjective meaning to experiences, it also specifically uses this form to do so. Hence, this method can benefit this proposal in its attempt to use novels and short stories to study reality.

According to Gubrium and Holstein (2009) in narrative reality, what happens outside the text is as important as what happens within the confines of the text because “the practice of storytelling and the resulting features of stories relate to what is at stake on the occasions stories unfold” (p.2). So, by engaging with current writers and works, this study orients towards understanding the current state of identities, realities and views via stories in society today, which are meaningful and important today. Employing an ethnographic approach on top of that, serves to catapult the inquiry further into obtaining primary empirical data that allows the documenting of the process both within and outside of formal interviews.

Hashim et al. (2011) use this ethnographic-oriented approach in their review of Malaysian perspectives on gender constructions. They attest to ethnography as a method that facilitates the rethinking of gender stereotypes and enables exploration in the way we read and makes meanings out of text and context. Perhaps the most poignant finding in their study is that Western theorizing does not fit the local context. In fact, previous works that frame their interpretations and readings of local works using post-colonial theories risk doing exactly that. It marginalises local beliefs and values in the process of interpretation. An ethnographic approach is centred on understanding cultural behaviour, as Alsop (2005) posits:

Ethnography as a research methodology is typically associated with the social sciences, most usually, although not exclusively, with the discipline of anthropology. It is chiefly a qualitative research strategy that relies primarily on participant observation and concerns itself in its most general sense with the study and interpretation of cultural behaviour. (p.111)

Although Hashim et al. (2011) limited their work to understanding women who work at home, their findings are based on first-hand interactions with real people rendering a true representation of a woman’s plight in a local context as previously held constructions were benchmarked against Western standards which are not our social realities. Hence, this approach will enable newer themes and ideologies to surface when the social life of stories is elicited directly from the storyteller.

In order to ensure a thorough representation of meaning when it comes to understanding identities, realities and views, the audience’s perception of these stories is equally necessary if our social realities are to be understood. The role of the reader is paramount in giving a work of fiction its value. “...reading and comprehending literature involves “extracting” and “constructing” meaning from the written text where readers engage in acquiring meaning, confirming meaning and creating meaning” which, in fact, form the basis of reader-response theories and criticism (Malloy & Gambrell, 2013, p.23).

In light of this, we can infer that the reader’s response is not only about enhancing their worldviews but also validates certain experiences about places, people, situations, relationships and possibly any sort of encounters. Their resistance, acceptance, rejection and emotional engagement towards appreciation of the culture in context helps in the meaning negotiation process. The onslaught of social media and how today’s generation chooses to be heard cannot be undermined in this respect. Previous works have resorted to the traditional methods of obtaining readers’ responses to text such as focus groups and the like. In line with this study’s notion of keeping true to the notion of social reality, this proposal will explore readers’ responses to the chosen text using Netnography as an approach.

Netnography

With many people now using online communities such as blogs, forums, social networking sites, podcasting and virtual worlds, the internet is now an important site for research. Netnography, which is a form of ethnography that is conducted online is a method specifically designed to study cultures and communities online. “Online communities form or manifest cultures, the learned beliefs, values and customs that serve to order, guide and direct the behaviour of a particular society or group” (Kozinets, 2010, p.12) This form of research adapts to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interaction. In doing so, it can be a powerful tool that can lead to the formation of not only communities that share certain beliefs, values and customs but it can be seen to empower certain beliefs, values and customs.

This method can be useful for the study of Malaysian Literature in English. In this age of social media, this technique has been founded on the basis that traditional notions of a field site as a localized space are outdated (Boyd, 2009). Netnography is relevant in today’s classroom because it incorporates the use of ICT and is in line with the Malaysian education Blueprint. Advances have been made in the classroom where technology is used as a platform to appeal to this present generation. Rahamat, Shah, Din, and Abd Aziz (2011) evaluate the use of mobile technologies in the teaching and learning of literature. Their findings appeal to the tech-savvy generation but subsist on the ability of the language teacher to blend ICT with conventional teaching.

In light of previous studies conducted in this area, this paper furthers the exploration of new and other meanings that can be constructed in relation to gender, identity and culture. It reveals to the educator how an online platform for eliciting students' responses can bring about other ways of reading and studying the text in a practical way and facilitate the educator's own reading and studying of literary material.

METHOD

The Netnography Process in this Study

This study adapts Kozinets (2010) traditional Netnography process by employing both, passive and active phases of Netnography in tracking students' perceptions of the two selected Malaysian fiction, *Monster* by Xeus (X) and *Don't You Dare Forget Me* by Julya Oui (JO). The writers came on board the project voluntarily and selected which one of their stories they wanted to undertake. This step was taken to ensure the researcher had no biases when it came to text selection as well as a choice of writer. This was also an attempt at using newer voices in the industry to see if Gen Z, as described in Section 3.3, could relate and connect with their ideas. The exercise was undertaken for a period of 4 weeks. By incorporating both, active and passive phases, the educator, who assumed the role of researcher, was more able to co-create the meaning of the texts under study. This was because, while the first phase was passive, descriptive and observational, the second phase involved the researcher and other members of the online communities actively engaging in a stream of continuous conversation over a period of time.

Having two phases has been said to be a better guide for Netnographers in achieving ethical standards and co-creation necessary in a Netnography study (Costello et al., 2017; Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013; Wilkinson & Patterson, 2010). In this case, the educator, who was the researcher at this stage, played observer in the passive Netnography sessions, and an involved participant in the active Netnography stage. What this meant was, the nature of the inquiry for the researcher was one that was exploratory. The role of the researcher was to explore and allow the constructionist in them to make meaning out of the endeavour.

The Platform

This study identified a public online platform, Goodreads.com, which the researcher-educator utilised for the purpose of eliciting students' responses. Goodreads.com was chosen as ideal ground for this form of communication to take place because it was user-friendly. Members were free to review and comment under this publicly listed domain, Goodreads.com. Each book and writer had a corresponding online community whose comments, reactions and responses were visible to all members. This site also enabled the forming of private focus groups for discussion purposes, which this study utilised. This is the feature that this study proposed for the educator to conduct the Netnography. With a Gmail account, anyone can become a member and start engaging in a discussion.

The Readers

The readers in this study came from a Malaysian classroom in a private institution where Literature in English is taught as a subject on its own. These students have been exposed to a variety of foreign texts with very minimal to almost no knowledge of Malaysian novels and short stories in English. Ten students chose to come on board to this study on a voluntary basis and engaged with the researcher online over a period of time after reading the two short stories. Ten student readers were deemed sufficient for the study because while it was a voluntary task, using students from a literature classroom was considered purposive sampling in a sense. They were aware of how a literary text needed to be analysed. Thus, they provided information-rich cases and were called in precisely for their experience and competence as Patton (1990) points out. Charmaz (2006) suggests anywhere between five and fifty participants in such situations. Being a voluntary endeavour, the researcher had no control over whom the participants were going to be. The objective was to ensure that the researcher, in this case the educator, was going to discover, understand and gain insights and, therefore, had to select a sample from which the most could be learned (Patton, 1990).

Hence, the ten student-readers were seen to be able to provide rich empirical material needed in this study. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) also maintain that this policy is adequate in building consistency for in-depth interview methods such as this study practised. These were readers between the ages of 16 years to 19 years and were representative of the three core races in Malaysia. Both genders were also represented. A schedule was given to the participating students to ease their understanding of timelines in terms of which text was to be covered and when it would be covered. This was done so that there was no confusion between the observation periods and active periods of the Netnography. During the analysis, the students remained anonymous for ethical reasons but were acknowledged at the start of the study.

The Phases

There were two phases. Observation of activity was the first phase. It is also known as passive Netnography. This is the phase where the readers engaged with each other on the online platform with regards to the story they just read. They were expected to post their reviews and comment on other members’ views. While this was taking place, the educator, who was now the researcher merely took in what was happening and reflected on viewpoints that were related to how they felt these stories were activated, produced, organized and transmitted. The researcher did not intervene, mediate or attempt to influence anything. This took up to anywhere between five to seven days. The researcher had to use his discretion to determine if all viewpoints had been exhausted before moving on to the second phase.

The second phase went on to attempt engagement with its members for further details and clarification in line with what they thought about the activation, production, organization and transmission of these selected stories. The questions in this forum were highly dependent on the responses and reactions that the researcher received from the audience in a narrative form. The questions revolved around inquiries pertaining to a story’s theme, plot, character, settings and language devices in order to ascertain what the audiences’ perception was of the stories’ activation, production, organization and transmission. This part of the process was, in fact, the most pivotal. It enabled the researcher to probe, intensify certain discussions and explore realms that physical classroom constraints did not allow. The second phase lasted anywhere between five to seven days as well, depending on how vocal and interested the community of students was. This is why the choice of text was important in determining interest. Analytical coding was undertaken for categorising. This is when the educator proceeded to sieve out themes, trends, and response patterns and attempted to capture particular nuances that inform the educator. Hence, an adaptation of Kozinets (2010) traditional Netnography process was employed in Figure 1 in this study:

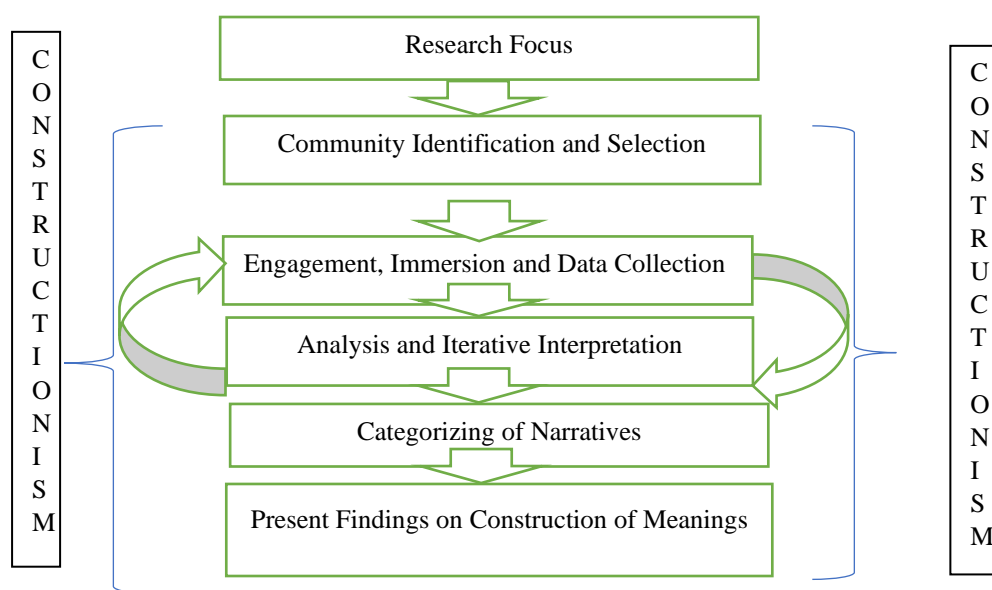


Figure 1. The Netnographic Process in this Study (Adapted from: Kozinets, 2010)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Findings and Discussion section illustrates the final categories after the co-construction of meanings has undergone sufficient refining through a tedious and rigorous reiterative process of analysing the empirical material. The categories indicate the main idea or rather the re-surfacing idea in the empirical material gathered from the narratives of the two writers (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). It prepares the reader of this study to see how the narrative exemplifies that particular category, as seen in the headings and sub-heading. These steps are repeated for the analysis of the activation, production, organization and transmission aspects of the stories as described in Section 2.3. In this study, it answers the question as to how the educator’s reading and studying are facilitated through this process that utilizes Netnography. These final categories are the findings of this study, which are

discussed at length here. The necessary literature is brought back into the discussion in order to show how this reading and studying approach and process facilitates the educator in the co-construction of meaning.

Necessitating Orientation to Reality

Context

Shared Realities and Multiple Realities

The term reality refers to its literal meaning which is the state of things as they are. Shared realities would then be an extension of that idea where people are bonded by similar situations, experiences, influences and the like with an emphasis on present-day realities. Different and unknown realities are then the other bits of real life that is actually taking place, but we are either not exposed to it or have not experienced it due to a host of factors such as demography, culture, and so on. In light of this, it would facilitate the educators' reading and studying of text if they orientated their reading strategies to one that accommodates the present context in order to sustain MLIE as a subject that is evolving with the times and is relevant to the readers. In fact, Chuah (2017) has many a time emphasised the importance of the writer producing up-to-date literary material in order to capture present-day social reality and its many manifestations. These narrative responses from Don't You Dare Forget Me accentuate that school of thought:

"Malaysian writers write this way both as a way to stand out and to highlight certain realities that are present in Malaysia. The stories may be fiction, but readers know that that is not completely true because there are sociopaths like Fong and believers of the supernatural in Malaysia"
-Student5

"Don't You Dare Forget Me" shows us the ignorance of society towards current problems such as sexual abuse"- Student1

"I believe they are almost like parables in their own way; they highlight the grittier side of life and human action in Malaysian contexts, and can thus act as examples of what not to do"
- Student3

This is an indication of shared realities. These students understood the context and could participate in the activity with ease. Hence, this study encouraged the educator to pick up on that point and recognise that current literary materials in the classroom, are realities that require readers to imagine quite a bit because they are often steeped in memories and recollections of a diasporic past which they may or may not be familiar with. Hence, they contribute less, or say nothing at all. Research has shown that this has an effect on the interest levels of the students. There must be a certain amount of shared reality and there must be points of convergence as the findings have illustrated. When text does not go far enough or goes too far off, overstrain and boredom set in and readers will tend to leave the playing field (Iser, 1980). Hence, this form of reading and studying facilitates the educator in striking that balance between the writers' intentions and the students' needs enabling an evaluation of the suitability of context.

Social Realities

Monster and Don't You Dare Forget Me orientate to reality because both X and JO discuss the social crimes of today. X's context revolved around trafficking, begging and kidnapping of children while JO tells a story about sexual abuse and paedophilia. These were contexts that immediately resonated with the student-readers because this society wreaked of these crimes and media coverage of these incidents were far and wide. These responses from Monster capture these narratives:

"By writing this way, it also grounds the stories in Malaysia as it highlights the harsh realities of the lives of many Malaysians. The stories may be fiction, but readers know that that is not completely true because there are child beggars like Timmy, in Malaysia. So, through the way the stories were written, it reminds readers that things like those that happened in the stories are happening in Malaysia. It makes everything seem more real"- Student5

"In "Monster", we see how Timothy meets a tragic end as he is caught in the vicious trade of child trafficking. The sad truth is that both stories are very likely to occur in real life, and probably has happened many times before. In reference to "Monster", it seems to be common knowledge that many "beggars" in our society are being used by illegal syndicates and yet, how many of us try to free them?" - Student2

Bringing such contexts into the classroom was a win-win situation for the educator and the students because they were drawing an understanding of the text by literally reflecting on their lives and how this society operated. In a foreign context, these may have been absent; the over-strain on the imagination in order to make some form of sensible meaning could have been draining, especially if the educator was also not familiar with the context. In this study, the educator was already ahead with his share of meanings because art was imitating life or so to speak. The co-construction of meaning with the readers served to clarify, negate, or expose the educator to new meanings. This, in return, enhanced the educator's reading and studying of text, which was applicable in an MLIE context that looks at today's society.

Medium Platform

It is important for the educator to note that orienting the context alone to reality does not suffice in elevating his own reading and studying of text. The channel in which the educator uses to elicit responses play a key role in ensuring feedback is honest, the environment in which the responses are constructed is user-friendly and has the capacity to accommodate synchronous and asynchronous discussions, and all forms of freedom of expression are supported unconditionally. In *Monster*, the student speaks honestly:

"It is unfortunate, but when I was younger, I, like Timothy, was disgusted when faced with the beggars on the street. Even now, so many years later, I have become so accustomed to beggars at the pasar malam that I simply pass them by, not even sparing them a look of pity, much less some spare change. I think this is extremely reflective of the Malaysian mentality..." Student4

This is reiterated in "Don't You Dare Forget Me":

"It seems to hint at an inefficient criminal justice system as well as subtly criticise the impartial nature of citizens. The story shows unfortunate outcomes for victims - in "Don't You Dare Forget Me," Fong, although convicted in the end, is already seventy by that time and has already lived through most of his life lavishly... There have been too many cases of sexual abuse in Malaysia that have been simply swept aside and justice never acquired for the victims"- Student2

A better representation of meaning is more likely to come through if the system of elicitation is less rigid, less formal, and if possible, outside the classroom context. In this study, using Goodreads.Com brought about contestations, orientations, biases and subtle nuances that perhaps came across differently because it was an online platform.

Emic and Etic Consciousness

Norton (1997) points out that identity is "how people understand their relationship with the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand the possibilities for the future" (p.409). With X and JO, we learn that they compartmentalize events. Their narrative style is objective, mechanical, and crafted. Furthermore, none of these writers use "we" when they referred to Malaysians or Malaysian society in general, which suggested they chose to be outsiders looking inside with some inherent biases. This fluidity in identity was enabled by this online "space" where an individual is free to have multiple identities at any one time. This informs the educator's reading and studying of texts because it brought to the fore how the educator had to consider how identities were formed outside a textual context inasmuch as it was transmitted through the text.

On an online platform, the educator cannot assume the identity the individual has constructed for himself will be constant throughout the exercise. What the educator needs to consider here is what Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) say about identity as being a concept where disciplines like psychology, anthropology and cultural studies intersect. This study has, in fact, made connections to various disciplines in this discussion thus far in attempting to make sense of the nature of the empirical material. Holland et al. (1998) add that people apparently act towards others to accommodate their self-beings in different worlds and localities. Therein, the fluidity that this "space" encouraged. Narratives were openly discussed, and point of view were inhibited as students assumed their roles with insider and outsider information:

"It is unfortunate, but when I was younger, I, like Timothy, was disgusted when faced with the beggars on the street. Even now, so many years later, I have become so accustomed to beggars at the pasar malam that I simply pass them by, not even sparing them a look of pity, much less some spare change. I think this is extremely reflective of the Malaysian mentality"... -Student

This marrying of narrative knowledge and paradigmatic knowledge was observed here by the educator. This enabled the educator to note how stories were, in fact, rich excavation sites for interdisciplinary study, and must be read as so (DeVault, 1994; Emden, 1998).

Language

Noise

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) refer to good narratives as accounts that retain the “noise” (p.4). This “noise” is seen to contribute significantly towards a more distinctive perception of reality, including the view that humans are not merely governed creatures, but, in fact, subsist on complex-inter relationships (Flyberg, 2006; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). In this study, the educator’s reading and studying of text became that much more enriched when the online platform enabled this “noise” to surface in the form of internet slang, group lingo, abbreviations, emoticons and incessant bracketing at the end of comments to insert side comments of sorts as seen in the readers’ responses during Netnography.

For example, in “Don’t You Dare Forget Me”, we get a glimpse of what this “noise” looks like:

“Hannah, I totes agree with you on how shocking the story was. I think it was particularly shocking to me because like Monster, I did not expect the storyline to go in the direction it did AT ALL. With the title, "Don't You Dare Forget Me", I (quite foolishly, I might say lol) thought that it was going to be a romance but it turned out to be a thriller bordering on horror (to me)... Yes, there was suspense, but it was not too drawn out” - Student5

As this study has defined earlier on, “reading” and “studying” MLIE is not only about preparing the educator intellectually and emotionally but also “linguistically and culturally ready to examine literary works” (Spack, 1985 p.704). In light of this, these forms of communication which are the language of today’s world in the real context, must be acknowledged as functional, and not mocked as a perversion.

Lingo

Following through from the concept of “noise”, Abdul Hamid, Nambiar, and Abu Bakar (2007) state that social conventions and processes influence how we choose to use language as a medium to construct and create meanings. While it is systematic, they add that it is generative and perpetuating. During the Netnography, the researcher observed how proper grammar and syntax construction were sacrificed and replaced with common internet abbreviations such as “idk” (I don’t know), “imo” (in my opinion), “totes” (totally) and “lol” (laughing out loud) for example.

Capitalization of full words such as “OH!! MY!! GOD!!”, “HAHA” and the use of multiple icons to generate emotions “:((((” was lingo shared by this community. One may argue that these are in fact signs of depletion of the English Language, but these were actually forms of expression of the English Language today on social platforms. There has been a strong preoccupation with the fluency and “purity” of the English Language as she is spoken in the context of teaching literature in Malaysian classrooms (Yahya, 2003). However, Netnography is a tool that elicits responses in order to gain insights into how meanings are constructed in its most natural form. It signifies a current trend in contemporary English and a medium that is at the forefront of change.

Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) argue that these colourful expressions are living language that does not lead to a breakdown in language but is firmly rooted in existent language suggesting that these forms actually expand and enhance the linguistic repertoire. They are correct to point this out because what was observed in the Netnography is that we have now markers to show tones, emotions, feelings and mood, which were, in fact, lacking in written communication. Furthermore, there were intensifiers with the use of emoticons and the incessant bracketing, which carried their ‘asides’ to the educator or researcher who is reading their narratives.

This not only suggested the shifting norms and practices of speech communities but also what was pointed out earlier, as functional. This study also revealed that these student-readers knew when to use proper English and when ‘lingo’ was acceptable. Their post-reflection writings of this study were professional and academic. Furthermore, in the higher secondary classrooms in Malaysia, the nature of reading and studying literature comprises both the small ‘l’ and the big “L”. Educators can use Netnography to support the big “L” in terms of providing an avenue for their viewpoints, and small “l” in terms of getting them to engage interactively in English at the very least. The educator should not limit expressions that suggest what Yahya (2003) refers to as a “colonial hang-up” or a post-colonial condition because it prevents reconstructing realities. Social platforms online are windows to reality. This indicates that despite the “bizarre logic of email grammar, spelling, semantics which, in some instances, are simply incomprehensible” it expands the educator’s vision of the complex nature of

relationships and communication (Nandan, 1995). This form of reading and studying literature helped the educator learn about a form of cultural diffusion.

Cultural Diffusion

Cultural diffusion in cultural anthropology refers to the spread of cultural items between individuals, whether it is within a single culture or from one culture to another (Frobenius, 1898). While in the past, these diffusions, in the form of ideas, styles, technologies, languages and so on, spread through war, marriage, business and the like, today, among literate society, electronic media is seen to propagate this phenomenon. During the Netnography sessions, it was observed how these language idiosyncrasies manifested as a culture shared among this community. It started with one student using it and gradually, it caught on with the rest in a way that suggested this was now the set of social and cultural norms, which the reader was supplying as a necessary adjunct of his readings. This mirrors what Iser (1978) refers to as becoming a repertoire alongside the text itself.

Further to that, they also started passing on certain ideas, planting seeds in each other's minds and triggering thoughts between themselves that became the master narratives. This is seen in Don't You Dare Forget Me:

"Nat, I completely agree with you regarding the final plot twist, near the end of the story. I re-read the sentence three times before I grasped what was happening! Now that you've brought it up, I do think that the pacing of the story is a little off" - Student4

This repertoire may be unique to this community because it is not a key feature with the writers, which also suggests that this is linked to the younger generation and the type of online platform in use. According to Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) their exploration indicated that the use of these language forms differed when they used SMS and email. Hence, using email with the writers did not support internet lingo as much as the discussion-type platform that Goodreads.com supplied. These are pertinent findings and must be embraced by the educator as an adjunct to his reading and studying of MLIE.

This is where the educator integrated into his readings facets that encompassed what goes beyond the text because what happened outside the classroom was as important as what happened in the classroom, therefore it was not only about what the readers said about the text that mattered but also how they said it is culture linked. Thus, it became part of the construction of reality whether one accepted it or not. In fact, the Social Variationist approach from sociology and linguistics underlies the concerns of culture, society and language. According to Gumperz (1982), people contextualize utterances differently to produce different messages. Similarly, Goffman (1955) also concurs that language is interconnected with social life and utterances produced can have meanings change from context to context.

This is in line with how these student-readers manipulated visual and linguistic devices in order to show various forms of emotions and feelings. Most importantly, it struck a conversational tone, an unfiltered field for data mining and a bridge between classroom teaching and outside-the-class learning for the educator. In fact, Curran (2002) insinuates that science and technology do not care about the "winter of despair," as he pokes fun at literary language when methods of communication are moving at an amazing speed. This is noteworthy to the educator because it suggested that literary competence comes with understanding the operative system at that particular time. Following the restricted nature of a convention can lead to intelligible work because new ways of reading have been developed to meet what is the fundamental demand of the system (Culler, 1975).

If the educator was not on board with these new ways of reading and studying the text, then much of how meanings are conveyed today will be lost. Therefore, the use of language on online platforms should be treated as features of reality that are in line with societal pressures, culture and trends in today's Malaysia, and thus, must be embraced as a narrative that has been shaped by society's emphasis for creativity, innovation and trend-setting. This form of reading and studying MLIE is akin to what Iser (1978) says when he talks about elements of reality working hand in hand with elements of literary tradition. It de-familiarizes and reshapes the educator's assumptions about the nature of reality, at the same time providing a general framework through which the meaning of the text is obtained.

Aligns Meanings with Local Relevancies

Cultural Settings

East vs West

On this note, both the readers and the writers philosophise about the Asian way through the apt cultural settings of East versus West in an artistry that is an expression of a real-life problem; "imagining what it's like to be the

person or persons caught in the causes and effects of the problem” (Wai & Chuah, 2014 p.59). In *Monster*, the register that Timothy uses not only defied logic but also defied the Asian communication pattern, which the readers alluded to as Westernisation. While X only attested to the overt display of Asian versus Western parenting, the ideology ran deeper for the readers when they assigned cultural meanings to the names of the characters and linked that to their practices or non-conformance:

“I noticed that the author gave Timmy’s dad a Chinese name, Keng Weng, but named his mum Liz and himself Timmy. Not only does this acknowledge Timmy’s family as Chinese but it also explains why Timmy’s dad is always getting angry with Timmy and complains that his wife had spoiled Timmy just because she doesn’t scold or hit him. Keng Weng believes in a more “Asian”/traditional way of parenting and thinks that him and Liz should not give in so easily to Timmy’s tantrums or he will grow up a brat. So, we can say that Keng Weng is a representation of the majority of Asian parents” - Student5

They also assigned blame to their generation, Gen Z, as responsible for the corroding of Asian values, which did not correspond with X’s blaming of Gen X. The logic is inherent here; such Gen X’s, like Liz, produce such Gen Z’s, like Timothy and the vicious cycle continues:

“I realised that it is in fact not the story’s purpose to put so much emphasis on the child beggars’ crisis that is present in Malaysia but it is also to highlight other common issues faced by Malaysian society such as white worshipping and modern-day parenting. Timmy, who is only 7 years old, resents his Chinese roots and I think that this is, albeit a little exaggerated, a reflection of Malaysia’s youth today” - Student5

Gender Associations and Related Practices

The readers also formed gender-based observations which point out that X is resolute that Timothy be identified as male with everything from his toys to the way he behaved in the story. He only resonated with male-dominant features. These were findings that were purely concocted by the readers which suggest how settings may not even be simply literal as seen in *Monster*:

“Considering gender, there is somewhat stereotypical depictions of gender roles; ... Timmy’s mother is thrust upon with the responsibility of “raising” Timmy while her husband works, and is later blamed as the reason Timmy has developed bad behaviour. Perhaps it may be interesting to consider that these stereotypes are culture specific? That’s another aspect to look into, I suppose” - Student 3

The name and gender associations were symbolic to the readers, which indicated that they harboured “hidden thoughts and emotions” as people who are part of these quandaries or a generation that had a heightened sensitivity towards gender biases, and the affinity with the Chinese culture:

“It is also interesting to note that the author chose to write about how Timmy’s room is filled with TV, computers and toys and that he has a Playstation, which are traditionally more “boyish” toys just because Timmy is a boy. I think this shows how ingrained gender roles are in our society” - Student 5

However, in *Don’t You Dare Forget Me*, the readers did not see the cultural aspect of sexual abuse and paedophilia, which the researcher learns from the ethnography with JO. She highlighted these as “some culture’s practising belief” and how “just because it is a tradition it doesn’t always have to be a good thing.” Since the context was predominantly Chinese characters, one would assume she said this in relation to Chinese culture. What JO brings to the fore is a cultural practice that is demeaning and should not be practised.

JO offered a look at cultural practices that were darker and uglier; practitioners should be treated as an outcast of society. This extended the meaning of the narrative into one that could be applied across cultures and across MLIE. This facilitated the educator’s reading and studying of these sorts of Malaysian texts in a sense that it brought to life what Hasan (2016) maintains when he says that as practitioners, we have to understand that literature is “value-laden, highly subjective and reflective of the site of its production” (p.50). The educator’s reading and studying of MLIE becomes that much more enhanced when settings are seen as espousing more than merely the state of the writer and the protagonist, but also the consciousness of the readers and their mindsets.

These are instances in which the Cultural Model, Language Model and the Personal Growth Model as championed by Carter and Long (1991) intersect. The educator could use these approaches to garner a specific cultural goal.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of Netnography to elicit students' narrative responses has in fact provided another facet of how meanings can be constructed alongside a textual analysis. It facilitated the educator's reading and studying of MLIE because it brought to the fore another possible process in which meanings were derived. The above study has brought to the fore new meanings to two new short stories that have not been used in academia or for scholarly activities prior to this. The meanings that have surfaced suggest to the educator the relevance of these stories as well as the importance of the use of familiar contexts. The use of stories in this study has their context deeply rooted in a Malaysian setting. Hence the procedure enables local relevancies to come through as opposed to using a Western yardstick that is steep in American and British literary traditions where the construction of meaning is determined by a post-colonial theory and the like. The ability to construct meaning using narrative responses of students can open up the channels for further engagement into different realities which reflect present-day social realities and promote new teaching strategies in the classroom.

For further research, it is recommended that this form of narrative analysis be conducted using other online platforms to elicit responses. Expressions, language and associations have been known to change given the context in which it manifests and the environment in which it is elicited as the discussion section has pointed out. Hence, using social media platforms, other than the ones used in this study, is bound to bring to the fore findings that can further the educator's reading and studying of MLIE. As for the interviews with the writers, another way to further the study of narrative meanings and their representations would be to combine forms of digital ethnography at a time. This can provide another dimension of meaning to utterances. Now that the potential of narrative analysis has been realised through the use of these selected novels and short stories, it can be used to further the study of local relevancies in determining specific constructions of gender, identity or culture. It can also be used to look at specific ideologies and how certain themes in the past such as historical memory and post-colonial trauma have evolved into other significant forms for study.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author* affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no self-interest in the study conducted

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