

Using Science Fiction in the ESL Reading Club:

A Reader-Response Approach

Anna W. B. Tso

Abstract

When teaching reading to English language learners, some teachers tend to “see reading solely as foreign-language practice” (Parkinson and Thomas, 2000, p. 32). Teaching literature is often limited only to the study of fundamental elements of English. One downfall of such an approach is that while learners are asked to “look up unknown vocabulary, answer questions about it, and perhaps do exercises on vocabulary and grammar relating to it”, it may, as Parkinson and Thomas note, “distort literature, discourage extensive reading and militate against learner independence” (2000, p. 32). Therefore, this paper explores how a more balanced learning environment can be created for teaching literature (science fiction), so that learners can enjoy reading, think critically, stretch their imagination, and develop their English skills through meaningful discussion and creative writing. Through studying the reading and creative writing teaching strategies employed in an “English Reading Club,” this paper illustrates and argues that English teachers do not always need to explain the literary texts in full and then direct their students to somehow find an “accurate interpretation” of the texts. Rather, by taking a learner-centered, reader-response approach, teachers can employ

reading strategies such as visualizing, questioning and predicting to arouse learners' interest and encourage learners' instant responses to science fiction. In addition, this paper will outline how creative writing can be used as a post-reading activity for learners to engage further with the texts, develop their own viewpoints, and express themselves freely in simple English.

Keywords: creative writing, hands-on activities, reader-response theory, science fiction.

Introduction

In this paper, I will share my experience of teaching reading and creative writing through science fiction novels in an English teens' reading club run by the Hong Kong Public Libraries. The aim of the paper is to (1) illustrate how the reader-response approach can be used to teach science fiction and arouse the reading interest of Primary Four to Primary Six (9 – 12 years old) learners in Asia, and (2) demonstrate how creative writing can be promoted as post-reading activities in the form of monologues, diary entries, and personal letters.

Background of the English Teens' Reading Club

The annual English teens' reading club, organized by the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL), is a learning platform for Hong Kong children and youth between the age of 9 and 17 to share their love of reading and learn English language through reading literary texts. At the moment, only six major public libraries in Hong Kong run the English teens' reading

club, which is usually held in four consecutive weeks in spring. Club members usually meet weekly for 1.5 hours during weekends. Participants who have an attendance rate of 75% or above will be awarded a certificate.

In March 2012, I had the honor to be invited by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department to lead the English teens' reading club at the Kowloon Public Library. Regular meetings were held on four Sunday afternoons (from 2:30pm – 4pm). There were all together 30 participants. Most of them were P.4 – P.6 students at the age of 9 to 12, whose mother tongue was Cantonese, and English was their second language.

English Learning Background and Proficiency of Learners

The 30 local Cantonese participants of the reading club came from traditional English grammar schools in Hong Kong, where all subjects except Chinese language were taught in English. Having started learning English language since kindergarten (at about 3 years old), most participants were competent users of English. They had no problem reading English children's books and they were able to express themselves in simple English, spoken or written. However, English learning may not always be enjoyable because the English curriculum in school, according to the participants, seemed to be filled with a great deal of homework, dictations, grammar tests, and exam-oriented drilling exercises. As a number of participants revealed at the beginning of the reading club sessions, during leisure time, they

preferred reading Chinese books, newspapers and magazines to English ones. In fact, among the 30 participants, only a few said they knew something about *Frankenstein* or the *Time Machine* before coming to the reading club. None of them had heard of Jules Verne or H.G. Wells beforehand. Yet when I told them the Chinese translation of the classic science fiction texts, many realized that the selected texts were actually not entirely new to them. So to speak, the English learning environment outside classroom may not be as rich as parents and teachers believe it to be. English reading, to the young learners, was largely related to school work and assessment.

Using the Reader-response Approach to Teach Reading in the English Reading Club

One observation I had was that running a teens' reading club is, by nature, different from conducting a reading lesson in an EFL or ESL classroom. Rather than putting much emphasis on analyzing the authorial intention, historical background, literary techniques and linguistic features of the texts, the reading club aims at developing teen readers' life-wide learning skills, such as self expression, creativity, personal growth, and most importantly, the interest in reading. In other words, the reading club is not meant to be examination-oriented, which assigns supreme authority to the author or the text. Readers are not supposed to be tested if they can get the "true meaning" and "correct interpretation" of texts. Instead, the focus is on readers and their enjoyment of reading. Here, readers take an active role to play – they are expected to enjoy and interact with the texts, give instant responses, and share freely

their interpretations of the texts with each other. This is in line with Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of literature as well as the reader-response approach, which suggests that the author's text can only be complete with the contribution of the reader. The interpretive authority should be shifted from the text / author to the reader. As Hirvela (1996) further explains:

[The] Reader-response theory...challenges traditional emphases on authorial intention in a text, and on the text itself, in assigning supremacy to the interpretation of texts, asserting instead that the reader plays at least an equal role in the interpretive process.

The reader-response approach...is interested in the evoked work or reader's text created by the learner during the transaction with the original text...the reader-response approach acknowledges the fact that learners bring many forces into play when they read a text, and that, as a result, the interpretations or reactions they describe are a reflection of themselves as well as the text. (p. 128 & 130)

In light of this, when leading a reading club, the reading instructor should not pass judgment on readers' interpretation of the texts. As Harfitt et al (2011) remark, "We made no judgment, and none was needed because the sharing in class illustrated the many perspectives that could be elicited from a single text common to all" (p. 100). Reading activities should be designed to "activate awareness of their experiences" (*ibid*) and elicit readers' personal and

imaginative responses to the texts. As readers read, the reading instructor can encourage reader-text interaction and help readers create new meanings from the original literary texts.

Texts Selection

The theme of the reading club was “Lose Yourself in Science Fiction,” so the library selected four science fiction classics for the participants, each for one Sunday –

1. Mary W. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)
2. Jules Verne’s *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864)
3. H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895)
4. Douglas Adams’s *A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1978)

Frankenstein was chosen for the first club meeting because it is widely regarded as the first science fiction novel. As a reading instructor, I would like every young reader to feel its impact on the science fiction genre. Also, as Jules Verne is known as the “father of science fiction,” *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* was chosen for the second club meeting. Similarly, since H.G. Wells is often called the “father of modern science fiction,” it was important to include his work in one of the four Sunday sessions. Finally, Adams’s radio script, *A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was selected because I would like to see young readers have a taste of the crossover of humor and the sci-fi genre. Though it was the first

time science fiction classics were introduced to the English teens' reading club, teen readers of the club reflected that they thoroughly enjoyed the learning and reading process. Most readers revealed that they found the first three sessions most successful, exciting and memorable. In the following section, I will share teaching ideas and approaches I used for teaching *Frankenstein*, *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, and *The Time Machine*.

One concern about language arts lessons is that while teen readers may occasionally need assistance in reading comprehension, they may not always be able to enjoy reading if English teachers insist on teaching English science fiction or literature as an academic subject. In fact, the anxiety of making mistakes and losing face in front of the class can inhibit learning, not to mention the enjoyment of reading. While teaching basic reading strategies, English teachers can reduce learners' anxiety by encouraging personal and imaginative responses, so that learners can engage in reading. When learners have built confidence in reading, they will read more widely on their own. As Carter and Long (1991) explains:

It is better perhaps that the text should "stay with the learners" for a long period, and that they remember it as one of their favorite poems, plays or novels. The teacher for whom the text is also a favorite will be aiming for a sharing of interest; with possible additional long-term benefits in words acquired, and language skills. This seldom happens instantly. Over-detailed explanation in the interests of an instant pay-off may obscure the more lengthy

process by which a hard-earned text is remembered and enjoyed well after the learner has finished his or her literature classes. (p. 24)

It is advisable that if teachers want learners to enjoy English literature and language arts, they should avoid over-detailed explanation of the literary texts. Moreover, teachers should not make comments and pass judgment too often. Learners should be allowed more freedom to explore literary texts on their own.

Session One: *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was written for British adult readers in 1818, so one concern was that the original text may not always be suitable for young learners and non-native English readers. To maximize involvement of English language learners, a retold version of *Frankenstein*, namely Patrick Nobes's *Frankenstein* (2005), was chosen for session one of the reading club. There were three reasons why Patrick Nobes's *Frankenstein* (2005) was chosen among numerous abridged versions: firstly, the selected chapters were about the right length for light reading and reading aloud during the 1.5-hour session. Secondly, compared with Mary Shelley's original text, the vocabulary and sentence structures in Nobes's retold version were easier for young learners. In addition, as many reading club members agreed, the illustrations in between the pages of the Nobes's text allowed readers to visualize the spooky atmosphere and mysterious plot of the story.

Pre-reading Activities for *Frankenstein*

1. Introduction to the Science Fiction Genre

While a pure teacher-centered approach is not advised, new concepts (such as the sci-fi genre) and unseen vocabulary can be pre-taught. Since readers at the age of 9 to 12 may not be familiar with the science fiction genre, at the beginning of the first session, there was a brief introduction to science fiction – participants were encouraged to brainstorm and share with one another their answers to “What is science fiction?” before there were given definitions of sci-fi genre. To further stimulate their’ interest, I showed on screen visual images of aliens, cyborgs, the Universe, the time tunnel, and a spaceship flying in a futuristic city etc. during the discussion time. Teen readers could then make good use of their prior knowledge of science fiction and add to their understanding of the genre.

Next, teen readers were told the information that most good science fiction starts with the question “What if...?”, where the starting point is that the sci-fi writer supposes things are different from how we know them to be. A number of “What if...?” sample questions, such as “What if we could travel in time?”, “What if we were living on another planet? ”, “What if we made contact with alien races?”, etc. were given to the participants. They were then asked to form their own “What if...?” questions and share their ideas with the group.

2. Introducing Mary Shelley (1797 - 1851)

After learning about the science fiction genre, teen readers were presented iconic pictures of Frankenstein from Hollywood movies. Most readers recognized Frankenstein's face immediately, saying that the monster was a Halloween figure which they had seen on TV and in commercials. Then, I asked them follow-up questions, directing them to guess who wrote *Frankenstein*, when the book was written, and what the book is about. Meanwhile, additional information was also provided – participants were informed that Frankenstein is commonly known as the first science fiction, which came from a nightmare a 19-year-old pregnant lady (young Mary Shelley) dreamt during a thunderstorm at night. When the group was fully immersed in the rich pre-reading environment, I showed a painted portrait of Mary Shelley and explained to them that Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* (1818), was the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as the wife of P.C. Shelley, the famous Romantic English poet.

While-reading Activities for *Frankenstein*

Having briefly introduced the sci-fi genre and Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, learners were then given time to read Dr. Victor Frankenstein's story silently – the selected chapters were a vivid description of how Dr. Victor Frankenstein secretly took parts from dead people, stitched up the parts, and created “life” in his laboratory. A few moments later, learners were read the monster's story – they continued with the story from the perspective of the poor monster, who was abandoned by Dr. Victor immediately after he was “born”.

During reading, the reading instructor should refrain from providing detailed explanations of the text because that would inhibit unique and creative reader-text interactions of readers. For learners with low language ability, the reading instructor may, if need be, explain a few lexical items that enhance better understanding. After the reading time, learners were provided with four types of response prompts devised by Hancock (2007, p. 199):

1. Experimental prompts

- How do you relate the story of Frankenstein with science today?
- How does the story of Frankenstein remind you of someone you know?

2. Aesthetic prompts

- How do you feel after reading the monster's story?
- How do you think Dr. Victor Frankenstein felt when a new life was created?
- How would you feel if you were the newly-made monster?

3. Cognitive prompts

- What do you think will happen to the monster, who has no food and shelter?
- If you were Dr. Victor Frankenstein, what would you do in this situation?

4. Interpretive prompts

- What kind of person do you think Dr. Victor Frankenstein is?
- Do you agree that nobody (including medical doctors, scientists, artists, etc.) should re-use parts of human's dead bodies for any reason? Why? Please explain.

The response prompts facilitated understanding, emotional feelings, and active reflection of teen readers. The key of the activity was to elicit readers' valuable and genuine responses to the text. As participants shared with one another their thoughts, opinions and viewpoints, they were also encouraged to jot down anything they found interesting, inspiring, and controversial. The exchange of feedback to the response prompts was a good preparation for post-reading creative writing.

Post-reading Activities for *Frankenstein*: Creative Writing

When learners were familiar with the plot and main characters of *Frankenstein*, they were asked to choose a book character, step into the shoes of the character, and write a first-person narrative in the form of a monologue. To model the idea, I showed participants a sample monologue of Dr. Victor Frankenstein:

Victor Frankenstein: God forgive me! What have I done? I can't believe I have created a monster! Life is supposed to be beautiful, but this horrible creature is no difference from a zombie! Oh, I can't bear to think of his scary red eyes and pale purple skin. He makes me feel sick. Ever since the awful creature came to life, I have not had one good night's sleep. Oh, God, how I wish I never started the experiment!

Learners who were confident of their writing were also encouraged to read aloud or even perform the monologue. At the beginning, some participants appeared to be shy, but when more and more participants were willing to read and perform their writing, the activity turned out to be the most enjoyable in session one. As Fennessey (2008) puts it, “writing in role” “provides practice in the genre of first-person narrative”, “strengthens literary analysis skills”, “enhances reading comprehension”, and “allows for experimentation with solo acting” (p. 120). Also, since the reader-response approach focuses much on the reader-text transaction, the creative writing can be considered as a platform for readers to express how they interpret and supply meaning to the text.

Session Two: *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

In session two of the reading club, teen readers of the reading club were introduced one of the most famous science fiction of all times – Jules Verne’s *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864). Unlike in session one, I did not use a retold version; rather, chapter 33 from the original text was chosen for reading. It is the diary of Axel from 15 August, 1863 (Saturday) to 18 August, 1863 (Tuesday), recording the exciting but dangerous cruise journey in the Lidenbrock Sea. Considering that there might be some unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar sentence patterns in the text, I pre-taught some basic geographical terms in the pre-reading session. Nonetheless, I was conscious of not doing micro-text analysis or giving out “correct and absolute answers” of everything to readers. After reading chapter 33, participants were

also shown a movie clip from Eric Brevig's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (2008), which more or less visualized the exciting scenes described in Axel's diary entries. The rationale for showing the movie clip was that readers could, without too much guidance from others or the reading instructor, take on an active role in comprehending the text and understanding the story plot.

Pre-reading Activities for *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

1. Introducing Iceland and Geography Vocabulary

As the story of *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* starts in Iceland, participants were first shown a map of Iceland. They were then invited to locate Iceland on the world map and make guesses of what Iceland is like – whether it is all covered with ice, and whether it is an island, a peninsula, or a continent. Next, participants were provided with various photographs of the stunning natural landscapes in Iceland, the exotic place which Jules Verne travelled before he wrote the world famous science fiction. My observation was that visual images usually work well with readers, in particular the younger ones. Hoffner (2010) points out that “[v]iewing, the ability to draw meaning from visual images such as photographs, maps, and comic art, is perhaps the oldest and most universal of the language arts” (p. 82). It is commonly agreed that students with good viewing skills can perform better when they are to “connect information with their background knowledge, interpret maps and diagrams, and

find subtle clues in pictures” (Hoffner, 2010, p. 82). I would recommend teachers to provide more opportunities for students to develop their viewing skills.

After arousing learners’ interest in Iceland and its beautiful scenery, geography vocabulary was introduced to the group. Words such as lakes, volcanoes, blue lagoons, glaciers, geysers, midnight sun, Northern lights, etc. were written on small cards, and each learner was given one card. They were then asked to use colored pencils to draw an illustration of the word on the card. Learners were also encouraged to help one another with the new words and meanings as they draw pictures. When teen readers became more comfortable with the new geography vocabulary, vocabulary games or competitions such as “finding the odd man out”, “hangman”, and “crosswords” were used to further strength their spelling and understanding of the vocabulary. The pre-teaching of vocabulary could be treated as a warm-up before readers actively participate in ‘re-creating’ meaning in the text.

2. Making Predictions

As teen readers got more interested in Iceland, they were instructed to make predictions about what they would encounter in the adventure. Here, readers drew on their prior knowledge and experience of what an adventurous journey means and produced multiple possibilities of interpretations of the text. From my observation, learners worked best when

there was a good mix of individual tasks and pair work. To get learners involved in making predictions, teachers may consider making use of the following thought-provoking questions:

Questions for individuals:

- What if a friend told you he would take you to Iceland and go miles down into the Earth? How would you react?
- What would be your greatest concern?
- What would you bring with you? Water? Bread? Ropes? A compass? A sleeping bag? A torch? What is more?
- What would be too scary for you to do – what is your limit? Would you be willing to go up in space, beneath the ocean?

Questions for pairs:

- Compare your ideas with your partner's.
- Do you think it is a good idea to invite your partner to go on the expedition with you? Why or why not?
- Sit with a new partner. Share with him / her your ideas. In turns, he / she will then tell you his / her ideas.

**Adapted from Kennedy's pre-reading tasks (1999)*

According to Lacina and Silva (2011), predicting is one of the effective comprehension strategies that facilitate students' understanding of a text. When used properly, learners will be able to "make predictions about what will happen next, and confirm their predictions as they read" (p. 175). In other words, learners will learn to become mature readers who can explore literary texts on their own. Teachers do not need to explain the plot, characters, setting and everything in detail. Moreover, through the predicting activity, "they identify sections of the text they did not understand, and model how they would reread the passage to help answer their questions about the passage" (Lacina and Silva, 2011, p. 175). This matches with the ultimate goal of the reading club, which is to promote independent reading and self-initiated learning. At the same time, this is also in line with the reader-response approach, where learners are given authority to bring in their view of the world and decide how the text should be read and interpreted.

While-reading Activities for *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

When teen readers were read extracts excerpted from chapter 33, I also showed on screen illustrations of some vocabulary that learners may find difficult when reading. For instance, a picture of a porpoise and a photo of an alligator were displayed on screen at the same time when teen readers read about the monstrous sea animals swimming in the dark water of Lindenbrock Sea. However, when giving explanations to vocabulary and phrases which young readers may not fully comprehend, teachers are advised not to put too much emphasis

on “the small unit, the discrete point” (Carter and Long, p. 24). Teachers should relate the text to “the learners’ wider experience outside the classroom” (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 24). Otherwise, the reading process may become teacher-centered. At its worst, the class may end up spending a great deal of time “worrying or agonizing about a single word which may have no great significance in an appreciation of the whole work” (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 24). Too much concern on the linguistic content may defeat the intended purpose of the reader-response approach.

Immediately after the chapter was read to the participants, a short clip of about five to ten minutes showing the same scene as described in chapter 33 in the book was shown to the teen readers for comparison. Readers were put into small groups. In a group of four to five, learners shared their feelings about the book chapter and the film clip. Since the clip was extracted from a relatively recent 3D action movie, i.e. Eric Brevig’s *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (2008), many readers reflected that they felt surprised for they had never thought that an old book could be renewed and remixed in a recent Hollywood movie. During the sharing session, one group focused on what they found most frightening in the scene. On the other hand, another group mainly discussed the psychological motivation of the characters and how the characters relate to the plot as a whole. It may be a good idea to ask learners to make a table showing all similarities and differences they could find between the original version and the film adaptation. When they finished the discussion, one spokesperson from

each group was invited to report to the class their major findings. To reduce the spokespersons' anxiety, the reading instructor must make sure that the audience understands that the reading club is a platform open for free expressions. Ideas and interpretations suggested by participants, be they hilarious or funny, should be appreciated and embraced.

Post-reading Activities for *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

After learners had enjoyed reading chapter 33 and watching the exciting clip excerpted from Eric Brevig's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (2008), it was high time that learners started creative writing for further and related discourse production. With reference to chapter 33, Axel's diary, learners were asked to imagine that they, too, went on an expedition with Axel and Professor Lindenbrock in the centre of the Earth, where they found the most stunning landscape, met the strangest plants and animals, and experienced a most wonderful and adventurous journey. To take the writing activity to a more advanced level, teachers can blend problem solving concepts into their students' writing task. They can instruct their students to develop more on what problems they encountered during the adventurous journey, as well as how they managed to solve the problems and rescue the dangerous situation(s). As Lundsteen (1989, p. 13) observes:

When teacher and children use communication stimulated by creative problem solving (CPS), they are economically using a great number of thinking

processes and skills (not a multitude of separated ones). Students then need little or no drill-type (or bottom-up) practice in basic mental skills, in attentiveness, or in atomized activity in six major processes of thinking: (1) perceptual, (2) associative, (3) inferential, (4) creative, (5) critical thinking, and (6) problem solving. These basic processes are usually integrated in a meaningful way when children use problem solving. (quoted from Russell, 1956)

Following the format of the diary genre, learners were expected to describe in detail their adventure in the center of the Earth in the format of simulated diaries. This could be yet another precious chance for learners to express their own responses towards the text. If time allows, teachers can also display learners' simulated diaries on the board and invite all participants to vote for the best diaries written.

Session Three: *Time Machine*

Considering that the original texts may be too lengthy and linguistically difficult for young readers, I used two abridged versions of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895): during the reading time, club members first had a silent reading of chapters one to three of a cartoon version of *The Time Machine*. With the illustrations, straightforward sentence patterns and simplified plot, readers had no problem understanding and following the story.

Afterwards, readers continued with the story by listening to me reading chapters eight to ten of another simplified text of *The Time Machine* (2002). The simplified version chosen has both a retold English text (printed on the left side) and a Chinese translation (printed on the right side). The Chinese adaptation is written by Guan Jia-qi, a renowned Taiwanese children's writer, while the English version is written by Zhuang Shi-yue. The abridged English version was good for both silent reading and reading aloud. Learners were instructed to read the English text while I read the story to them. They were encouraged to refer to the Chinese translation only when they came across difficult vocabulary.

Pre-reading Activities for *Time Machine*

1. Motivating Learners

Reading is supposed to be an active process. Learners need to see the point of reading before they become fully motivated. To establish purposes for reading, we need to make learners see how the text or the topic is related to them as individuals. In the reading club, I asked readers initiating questions: What is time? How do you know that time is passing? How does time flow? Does time flow in only one direction? Is there a constant "universal" time? Participants were encouraged to describe their understanding of "time," both as a concept and a personal experience.

As members expressed their ideas about time, I followed up with probes keyed to their responses: Can you add to that idea? What makes you think that this is so? Do you agree with (Mary), or do you have a different idea? Then, to further arouse their interest in “time,” I introduced the conundrum of time: on the one hand, some believe that the past has gone and it no longer exists. The future does not exist, for it has not yet arrived. Therefore, we exist only in the present, in this very moment. On the other hand, some philosophers argue that there is no such thing as the “present”. There are only “the immediate future” and “the recent past”. The “present” is only a thin line, the moment when “the past” meets “the future”. We found that participants were excited about the puzzling case and the open-ended discussion about time.

2. Introducing H. G. Wells (1866 - 1946)

While stimulating learners’ interest in reading the literary text was important, giving learners a brief introduction to the author was equally essential. Before showing them facts and background information about H.G. Wells, I showed them only one picture of the author. Then, I encouraged participants to make intelligent guesses about who the author was, predict when he wrote *The Time Machine*, and see if anyone could name other famous science fiction novels written by the same author. We found that not many participants have heard of H.G. Wells, but a few of them told us they knew or have heard about *The Invisible Man* and *The War Between the Worlds*. Nonetheless, the historical information was only a prelude to the

reader-text transaction. Teachers do not need to spend too much time on discussing the author's background.

3. Vocabulary Building

One of the aims of pre-reading tasks is to prepare students for the language in the text (Chan, 1999). Hence, as participants articulated their thoughts about time, I revised with them vocabulary associated with time, such as time of the day (dusk, morning, noon, midday, afternoon, evening, dusk, etc.), the measurement of time (i.e. seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years, decades, centuries, millenniums, etc.), seasons, growth, changes and cycles in Nature. The revision of vocabulary must be carefully handled though. The main goal was to encourage learners to express themselves freely and share their personal experiences happily in English. In other words, the pre-reading activity should not gear towards drilling or testing learners' knowledge of vocabulary or the concept of time. Rather, reading instructors should guide learners to make good use of their existing knowledge and English vocabulary.

4. Directing Learners to the Theme of the Text

In the last pre-reading activity, learners were directed to the central theme of the science fiction novel. The topic of time travel was brought about in the session. First of all, participants were shown the book title "The Time Machine". Then, to further familiarize them with the topic and draw out what they might already know, think or feel about time

travel, I showed them pictures of “time machines” from *Doraemon*, the Japanese cartoons popular with most children and teens in Hong Kong. Participants were asked to imagine where they would exit in the time tunnel if they had a machine that could help them travel back and forth in time. Students were also encouraged to draw cartoon strips to illustrate their ideas. Interestingly, half of the club members expressed the wish to go back in time. One participant expressed her wish to see her grandma again, who passed away years ago. Another participant said he wanted to re-do his math test, saying that he would definitely get full marks in his second attempt. The rest of the participants said they wanted to know what the future is like. Next, all members were invited to imagine what the future would be like in 10 years, 100 years, and 1000 years. Surprisingly, many participants raised issues such as wars, pollutions, global warming, aging population, food and resources shortage. A few even mentioned the Mayan prediction about the doomsday in December 2012. In general, members of the reading club seemed to have a pessimistic view towards the future world. As Hirvela (1996) notices, when the reader-response approach is employed, learners stop playing the “secondary, or dependent role” of “decoding what the author/text says” (p. 130). In the response process, readers guided by the reader-response approach naturally blend their cultures and expectations into the reading process in a confident manner.

While-reading Activities of *Time Machine*

1. Plot and Characters Retelling

Participants were given ten minutes to finish reading the comics. Then, they were asked to describe what was in the plot. Each time, one participant from one group was invited to use one sentence to summarize the story. It was noticed that some learners were able to use vocabulary in the retelling. To further visualize the story, I showed them a short clip from a movie version of *Time Machine* which illustrated how the time machine works. Afterwards, copies of the selected chapters from the abridged version were delivered to the child readers. Chapters eight to ten were read to book club members, and participants were told the time traveler's journey to the future world, including his encounter with the *Eloi* (the kind people who live in the village), his adventure in the under-world, and the menace of the *Morlocks* (the intelligent and cunning man-eaters who live in the dark under-world). To assist readers' sense of story and encourage interactions between readers, after reading chapter nine, I stopped reading for a while and asked learners to imagine how *Eloi* and *Morlocks* look, according to the description in the text. Some participants were invited to draw *Eloi* and *Morlocks* on the whiteboard, while others were encouraged to identify features of the two species, and then find out similarities and differences among humans, the *Eloi*, and the *Morlocks*.

2. Jumbled-pages Re-ordering

After reading chapter ten, I provided club members with jumbled pages copied from the comic version (from chapter four onwards). In small groups, students recalled the story and discussed how to put the jumbled pages back into the chronological order. Since chapter ten was not the last chapter and club members did not know how the story ends, they were encouraged to predict what would happen next in the story, as well as what they would do if they were the time traveler. As participants showed more and more curiosity and interest towards H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, they were reminded they could borrow the book and other works written by H. G. Wells from the library.

Post-reading Activities of *Time Machine*: Creative Writing and Peer Evaluation

After reading, I introduced the idea of “time capsule” and asked participants to discuss and explain what items they should put into the time capsule before it was to be sealed and re-opened 30 years later. Then, after brainstorming, I gave each club member a piece of paper to write a “letter to myself,” which would be read 30 years later (when the time capsule is re-opened). After all participants completed their letters, I nailed all the letters on the board, gave them some time to read over all letters, and asked each participant to vote for the most impressive letter. Meanwhile, I did not intervene with the voting process. Participants were given the full right to choose what they believed to be the best among all letters. The following was the letter which almost everyone in the reading club voted for:

A letter to myself (slightly revised)

Dear me,

Hello! This is me from your childhood! Do you remember me? Do you miss me? This is weird -- no one knows me better than you do, yet I have never met you. I don't even know you! I also know, when you are reading this letter, I will no longer be there. Promise me, save a place for me in your heart, OK?

So, how are you doing? Are you happy with what life is showing you? How are mom and dad? Did you get married with Jane, the most beautiful girl in school?

P.S. Please correct my grammatical mistakes if you have found any in the letter.

Conclusion

Although it is a challenge to try teaching literary texts with the reader-response approach, the reader-as-authority orientation in the English teens' reading club was successful and has gained appreciation of teen readers. In this paper, I have demonstrated how the reader-response theory can be applied when teaching language arts and literature such as science fiction in the English classroom. I have also illustrated different ways of arousing learners' interest in reading and expressing themselves freely through creative writing in English. I suggest that while teachers can scaffold learners' ability to read literary texts and write creative writing, teen readers should be given the authority to create meanings to literary texts.

In addition, young learners should be granted the autonomy to develop their own skills, as well as the freedom to explore literary texts at their pace. As Cramer (2004) puts it, “A balanced view of ownership means that teachers have general responsibility for establishing the curriculum, setting goals, and assigning work; yet children must also have ownership responsibilities and rights based on the choices offered to them” (p. 41).

References

- Brevig, E. (Director). (2008). *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* [Film]. New Line Cinema.
- Carter, R. and Long, M. (1991). Literature and experience. *Teaching Literature*. Carter, R. and Long, M. London: Longman.
- Cramer, R. L. (2004). The language arts: A balanced approach to teaching reading, writing, listening, talking and thinking. Boston, New York, San Francisco: Pearson.
- Davis, T. (2008). *H. G. Wells's The Time Machine*. Minneapolis, San Diego: Stone Arch Books.
- Fenessey, S. M. (2008). *Language arts lessons for active learning, grades 3 - 8*. Portsmouth, Heinemann.
- Guan, Jia-qi. (2002). *The Time Machine*. Trans. Zhuang Shi-yue. Taipei: Li de Chu Ban She.

Hancock, M. R. (2007). *Language arts: extending the possibilities*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Harfitt, G. and Chu, B. (2011). Actualizing reader-response theory on L2 teacher training programs. *TESL Canada Journal*. Vol. 29, no. 1, p. 93 – 103, Winter 2011.

Hirvela, A. (1996). Reader-response theory and ELT. *ELT Journal*. Vol. 50, no. 2, 127 – 134, April 1996.

Hoffner, H. (2010). Literacy lesson K-8: Connecting activities to standards and students to communities. California: Corwin.

Kennedy, P. (1999). Using Hong Kong stories in Hong Kong classrooms. *Learning language through literature in secondary schools*. Kennedy, P. and Falvey, P. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Lacina, J. and Silva, C. (2011). *Cases of successful literacy teachers*. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Lundsteen, S. W. (1989). *Language arts: A problem-solving approach*. New York: Harper & Row.

Nobes, P. (2004). *Frankenstein*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parkinson, B. and Thomas, H. R. (2000). *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois

University Press.

Verne, Jules. (1994). *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books.

Appendix: Lesson Plans for the Teens' Reading Club

Theme of the Reading Club: Lose Yourself in Science Fiction

Books selected:

1. Mary W. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)
2. Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864)
3. H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895)
4. Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1978)

1st Lesson: 4 March 2012 (Sun)

Book: Mary W. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)

Learning Activities:

- Give an overview of the genre of science fiction, a literature of “What if...?”
- Learn how to form conditional sentences “What if...” in English.
- Introduce Mary W. Shelley and *Frankenstein* to teen readers.
- Extract passages from *Frankenstein*; recite and read with explanations.
- Learn new vocabulary: name different body parts.
- First-person monologue creative writing
- If time allows, discuss the concept of ‘dangerous science’ in Western culture (i.e. Genetics and cloning). Debate: Should human cloning be banned?

Teaching Materials:

- Extracted passages from *Frankenstein*
- Worksheets
- English dictionary
- Movie clips of *Frankenstein*

2nd Lesson: 11 March 2012 (Sun)

Book: Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864)

Learning Activities:

- Give an overview of the Earth's evolution and the eventual extinction of some animals and plants (e.g. dinosaurs, mammoth).
- Show maps, photos and basic information about Iceland (because the novel takes place in Iceland).
- Learn geography vocabulary such as caves, cliffs, volcanoes, creeks, etc.
- Introduce Jules Verne and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* to teen readers.
- Extract passages from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*; recite and read with explanations.
- While reading, ask readers to predict what will happen in the following from time to time.
- After reading, invite readers to compare an exciting scene in the text and that in the movie version.
- Ask readers to make a list of what they will bring with them if they are to go on a hazardous journey. Then, ask readers to create a fearful scenario in the adventure. Share in the form of picture, role-play, drama, or writing (dairy writing).

Teaching Materials:

- Extracted passages from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*
- Worksheets
- English dictionary
- Movie clips of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

3rd Lesson: 18 March 2012 (Sun)

Book: H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895)

Learning Activities:

- Start by introducing the concepts of time and space and invite readers to imagine the possibility of time travelling.
- Introduce H.G. Wells and *Time Machine* to teen readers.
- Teach vocabulary about time and seasons.
- Extract passages from *Time Machine*; recite and read with explanations.
- Ask participants to recall the story plot, re-order jumbled pages of the comic versions, and discuss how they like / dislike the main characters.
- Museum for the future: Ask readers to pretend that it is 100 years from today and people are going through a museum to learn about time in history. Ask readers what people may find in the museum and what these items say about us.
- Ask readers to write a letter to be put inside the time capsule.

Teaching Materials:

- Extracted passages from *Time Machine*
- Worksheets
- English dictionary
- Movie clips of *Time Machine*

4th Lesson: 25 March 2012 (Sun)

Book: Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1978)

Learning Activities:

- Start by introducing astronomical terms such as the Universe, the black hole, the galaxy, planets, stars, etc.
- Introduce Douglas Adams and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to teen readers.
- Extract passages from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; recite and read with explanations.
- Hello alien: Ask readers what they would ask an alien if they met one in their local coffee shop. Readers will write some questions they would like to ask the alien. Then, readers take turns in being the alien and answer the questions creatively.
- Diary / journal writing: Ask readers to imagine that they were aliens. Readers will write their diary entry in their journey through outer space, the planet Earth and the strange people who live there. Read the diary in class.

Teaching Materials:

- Extracted passages from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
- Worksheets
- English dictionary
- Movie clips of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

About the Author



Anna W. B. Tso, Ph.D., is a lecture in English and Applied Linguistics. She teaches postgraduate and undergraduate courses at the School of Arts and Social Sciences of the Open University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include language arts, children's fantasy, gender studies and translation studies.