POPULAR CULTURE: A NEGOTIATION TOOL OF LITERARY TEXTS

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The aim of the study is to investigate the significance of using popular culture and related illustrations in an English literature classroom context. This study specifically focuses on how popular culture references and photographs can facilitate the construction of meaning and bridge the gap between home and target culture of learners. The study also views the students' engagement in comprehending the literary text via quality class discussions. This study is done at an international school where the students are following the national English literature curriculum. Using popular culture elements helps the learners to comprehend the nature of the popular culture transition over time in relation to the literary text and target cultures that are under discussion in an effective manner. Popular culture references and related photographs are effective negotiation strategies for bridging the gaps between the known home culture and the unknown target culture, which assists the learners in their cognitive development.

Keywords: popular culture, negotiation tool, literary texts

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INTRODUCTION

Asma, an English literature teacher, explained the term "lumber room" using the example of the famous Holly Wood movie 'Home Alone' where the protagonist, a small boy, goes to the dark attic and becomes scared. While listening to this example, Bumitha said, "Miss, the movie, Grudge, which is a horror movie, has a similar scene. I was so freaked out that I turned on the light the whole night to sleep peacefully". Many other students also nodded in approval. One of the students expressed the phrase "The Chinese Ghost," and other students chimed in for a while. In another language situation, when Asma brought in the discussions in relation to the Bhagavad Gita, some students related it to the popular television-series *Mahabharata*, a Hinduism based epic. The above discussed speech events serve as a thought-provoker for me to examine how well popular culture allusions and visuals might aid students in understanding complicated themes and concepts in English literature. This study is also extended to evaluate how popular culture aspects can be used to bridge the gap between the known and unknown; home culture of the students and the target literary culture. This mini study identifies 'Popular Culture' as deep-rooted practices, belief systems and artifacts that are associated with different communities.

OBJECTIVES

First, this study will explore the effectiveness of using popular culture references and popular culture-related images in teaching English literature instructions and facilitating the comprehension of complex themes and ideas. Next, the study will also assess the use of popular culture elements to bridge the gap between the home culture students and the target literary culture by curbing the students' perspectives and opinions in relation to the socio-cultural perspectives of the present society in general.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How effective is the use of popular culture references and related illustrations in the construction of meanings among home culture students learning a target culture in literature classes?
2. What is the impact of using popular culture references and related illustrations on the students' engagement with comprehending complex literary ideas and themes?

The answers to the above-mentioned questions will assist us in comprehending and shedding light on the perspective of popular culture in the light of the psychologist Vygotsky (1978) and his reflections about the importance of culture-embedded language teaching in his socio-cultural theory. Notably, he focuses on the importance of the use of social scaffolding strategies to be applied in collaborative learning and class discussions to produce authentic language acquisition experiences among the learners and expose them to the real world.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study belong to a leading school located in the urban area of Colombo with a diverse student and teacher population consisting of individuals from various backgrounds who follow both the National and Cambridge curricula based on their own predetermined choices. The study participants consist of three English literature teachers who possess more than five years of teaching experience and hold a bachelor's or master's degree in the relevant field of study. In order to find suitable answers to the research questions,

qualitative research methods have been applied to gather data from students and teachers about their experiences with the use of popular culture and related photographs in English literary instruction. This includes classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The data has been gathered and analyzed using thematic analysis in order to detect repeated patterns and themes related to the study. Furthermore, the above methods ensure the validity and reliability of the study, as they triangulate the findings and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. The participants in the study have already given their written informed consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Popular culture denotes the long-held practices, beliefs, and even objects that reflect society, in general. This notion, which is inclusive of mass media objects, entertainment, free time activities, trend settings, and even specific linguistic elements, was forwarded by the sociologist, Kidd (2014). Barnhurst (1994) reveals that even historical photographs become a part of historical evidence of evolution and are crucial parts of culture. For example, Imihiri explained about the protagonist of the play, Popova, a fashionable woman in mourning, using examples from the 1800s Victorian Era. She explained that the mourners wore black or white dresses with a veil or matched them with purple hats as an indication of the grieving process. "Romans also wore black, but this practice was commonly followed by commoners during the Georgian Era. The best example is Queen Victoria, who mourned the death of Prince Albert for forty years." said Imihiri. She also showed the pictures attached in Appendices A and B. Imihiri further discussed the popular culture of post-mortem photography during the Victorian era, which prompted murmurs from the students. Interestingly, Iresha said, "Yes, miss. I have read about them. There was something about their eyes that was spooky. Immediately Zahra added, "Miss, they drew the eyes." While the discussion was going on, Imihiri showed the popular death photographs shown in Appendices C and D as examples to discuss the concept of grief and its cultural significance. These popular cultural examples from Victorian times opened up not only constructive discussions but even motivated the students to give their input, opinions, and perspectives in relation to the topic of discussion. Tateo (2018) claimed that post-mortem photography, or death photography, during the Victorian era reflected how Victorians dealt with grief in their culture and was also a part of how they dealt with their expressions of emotions. Post-mortem photography was popular during the Victorian era to deal with the affective domains of individuals in relation to the deaths of loved ones. Here it is noticeable that certain popular cultures are also interconnected with the emotions of their followers, and this is a distinct nature of popular cultures.

In classroom negotiation, in order to explain the target culture's literary texts, the negotiator imported popular culture references and related illustrations, which were widely used to mitigate the literary content among the cultural hybrids. For instance, when Asma was discussing the short story *'The Nightingale and the Rose'* written by Oscar Wilde, in order to negotiate the concept of ballroom dancers and their dancing styles, she imported the example of the famous Disney animated movie *'Cinderella'*. She further elaborates on this by adding the following explanation: "When the clock struck twelve, Cinderella, who was dancing a ballroom dance, ran away quickly, before it was too late, as she was about to become her old self again, the poor girl." Hearing this explanation, some of the learners randomly voiced their opinion against the stepmother's partial treatment and the Fairy Godmother's kind gesture to grant Cinderella the wish to go to the ballroom dance. At this point, if we observe carefully, we can see that popular culture examples do not merely serve the purpose of being an effective mitigating strategy among different cultures: they also help the students to redefine and reformulate their individual opinions and perspectives of what is right and wrong. Kidd, Kim, and Turner (2017) express that popular culture is relatable to those products that are sparsely enjoyed by the masses, across their cultural frontiers. This enables the students to share common and collective experiences among their diversified peers, yet there is a common meeting point for all. This was a similar view forwarded by Petracca and Sorapure (2001). Popular culture also leads to the promotion of high-order thinking skills among students. For example, Imihiri, while explaining the theme of women's emancipation in

relation to the play *'Bear'* by Anton Checkov, brought in examples of Marvel movie characters such as Black Widow, Captain Marvel, She-Hulk, and Scarlet Witch, along with Bat Woman in the Netflix series. This seemed to open up the learners' eyes to society's outlook on the mistreatment of women. When discussions about the unequal status of women popped up, some students made the following verbal utterances "That sounds unfair.", "In university, we have more female students studying harder than men", "Everyone is equal who says women are lesser".

In an economic sense, Kidd (2014) further explains that this notion of popular culture is also closely associated with the capitalistic values that exist in the present social system. The decision-making process of ethnocentric popular culture itself is a dynamic of power, as discussed by Darvin and Norton (2023). The education system decides on the learners' identities and whose voices are heard or unheard. On the other hand, Zimmerman (2009) reflects a different angle on popular culture. They connect popular cultural references to the cognitive domain of the negotiators. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory claims that culture-related products create comprehensible input for language acquisition and for comprehending complex literary texts effectively. The students can make connections between popular culture experiences and literary text discussions. As a result, the students can minimize their time spent processing the text, reducing their cognitive load. For example, when Asma was introducing the term 'lumber room' imported the example of the popular Tamil horror movie *'Kanchana'* and also said the name 'Maya' which was the Sinhala version of the same movie. Hearing the name of the movies, a few students recalled one of the film scenes in which the actor keeps his cricket bat in the storeroom, and then Imihiri related it to the parallel term lumber room. Here, we are able to see how the learners are able to connect and construct meanings from the new information perceived from popular culture to their already constructed mental structures. This is known as the assimilation process of language acquisition, which is based on Piaget's schema theory (as cited in Lefa 2014, p. 04). Furthermore, Imihiri was also explaining the term 'fire screen'. To focus on the meaning, she said that "fire screens were introduced during the 19th century and are used to avoid the fire sparks from flying into the room. It is also available in various designs. This serves a decorative use as well." Imihiri also showed some pictures of the fire screen (Appendix E) to accompany her explanation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals how popular culture accommodates the negotiation of complex literary ideas and themes in an easily perceivable manner and how it also enables both teachers and students to mitigate the alienated target language culture effectively. Moreover, when popular culture references were utilized, the learners did not hesitate to share their own opinions about the references that they were able to recollect from their schema. Even the introverted student had added his or her comment in relation to the popular-culture related class discussions. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory emphasized that a child's overall holistic development was not merely related to language acquisition alone but also shed light on the acquisition of the target culture-embedded language learning process, which is necessary to manage and live in the present world, in general. In this light, the use of popular culture discussions becomes constructive in mitigating the gap between the unknown alienated text and the known popular culture references and photographs among the students. In order to do so, engaging in socially constructive language discussion within the classroom, inclusive of popular-culture-related interpretations, is needed to keep the learners open to real society's experiences and give them a wider perspective on the language acquisition process. This makes second language acquisition not only an easier and more meaningful process but also a fun-filled and motivating experience.

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Appendix A

Appendix B

Appendix C

Appendix D

Appendix E