

UNLOCKING AFFECTIVE READING RESPONSES IN EXPOSITORY TEXTS THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING: THE CASE OF TWO READERS

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ABSTRACT

Although reading is primarily a cognitive act, it is very much influenced by the affective elements like emotional content that can play a significant influence on students' language learning success. However, discussion about affective elements is centred more on narrative than on expository texts. Given that digital storytelling is portrayed by previous literature as encouraging others to interweave emotional content in digital stories, the study aimed to explore students' affective responses that had emerged by developing digital stories based on some expository texts. Reader-response theory was used as the theoretical framework. Qualitative case study research methods were applied. A purposive sample of an above-average and a below-average readers from the faculty of engineering was selected. Findings indicated that through digital storytelling, both readers had well included affective elements which were influenced by their situational, topic and individual types of interest. Thus, digital storytelling is seen as having potential to be integrated in the English expository reading class since it can help readers of different proficiency levels to utilize their affective elements. Future research with digital storytelling may include second language learners from other faculties and also third language learners to further explore and substantiate its usefulness in language learning.

Keywords: *digital storytelling; expository texts; affective elements; engineering students; situational, topical and individual types of interest.*

1. Introduction

Reading is a complex process which involves the reader, text and purpose (Nuttall, 2000; Rosenblatt, 2006). While reading expository texts (texts that deal with informing, explaining and clarifying various concepts) mainly involve finding main issues, analyzing and making inferences which are cognitive elements, it can also be of responding to the texts which is an affective act (Gammill, 2006). Having reading responses, like stating personal feelings, making associations and thinking about experiences during or after a reading event can lead to reading comprehension (Rosenblatt, 2006), and can play a significant influence on students' language learning success (Oxford, 1990). Nevertheless, knowledge about affective reading responses for expository texts is limited since more of the discussion is found in narrative texts (Altmann, Bohrn, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2012). Pang (2008) and Rosenblatt (2006) have suggested that reading research focuses on affective reading responses, besides the readers who make the responses since the same reading texts may yield different meanings to different readers.

Given that digital storytelling is depicted by Lambert (2003) and Kajder (2006) as encouraging ones to interweave emotional or affective content in their digital stories, the study aimed to explore students' affective responses that may have emerged through the development of digital storytelling based on some expository texts. An above-average and a below-average readers of diploma engineering students in a university had been chosen to participate in the study. Their responses would be investigated through the development of digital storytelling.

2. Review Of Literature

2.1 Digital Storytelling As A Means Of Evoking Affective Elements

Digital storytelling is an art of presenting main ideas in the visual form using multimedia tools like graphic, images, still photographs, audio, animation and video clips (Robin, 2008; Sandars, Murray & Pellow, 2008). In this study, digital storytelling referred to the creation of a story containing textual contents, images and songs based on the understanding of expository texts in the multimedia form.

A significant reason for digital storytelling to be considered as a means of learning is because it addresses the affective elements. According to Oxford (1990) and Yahya Othman (2008), students who use affective elements in reading, such as having interest in their reading texts, feeling motivated and considering their emotions while reading can become better readers. In digital storytelling, Lambert (2003) reported that ones may want to weave emotional elements such as using songs and trying to evoke the feelings of audience. These are affective elements. Together with Center for Digital Storytelling, University of California, they had taught digital storytelling to thousands of people around the world and numerous organizations to share their life stories to empower themselves and others (Center for Digital Storytelling, n.d.). Kajder (2006) strongly recommended that digital storytelling be used by teachers in this era of digital technology. Malin (2010), Siti Nor Amyah Khasbullah (2011) and Stuart (2010) used digital storytelling in their literature classes and found that students had responded to and understood literary works better. Nevertheless, the aforementioned studies have not examined the affective reading responses that could have emerged by reading expository texts. The studies have only benefitted the layman, certain agencies or students learning literature. Since there is the dearth of research on affective reading responses in expository texts, this study aimed to explore these responses that above-average and below-average readers in diploma of engineering exhibited through their digital stories based on the comprehension of expository texts. This phenomenon needed a thorough understanding because a case could be made whether digital storytelling is suitable to engineering undergraduates in their English reading class.

2.2 The Differences between Above-average Readers and Below-average Reader

Above-average readers are those who score at or above the mean score for the total population in a particular reading test, whereas below-average readers are those who score below the mean score for the total population in a particular reading test (Paris & Myers, 1981). Long, Oppy and Seely (1997), Pang (2008), and Tatum (2009) were of the opinion that above-average readers, in contrast to below-average readers, can better predict, visualize, ask questions, infer meanings and summarize when reading. Below-average readers have difficulty in appreciating text structure (Nation & Angell, 2006) and identifying themes from reading texts (Long, Oppy & Seely, 1997). In general, above-average readers perform better than below-average readers

in cognitive (Georgiou & Das, 2013) and affective (Chamot & Kupper, 1989) elements in reading.

2.3 Affective Elements in Reading

The affective elements in reading can be referred to factors like emotions, attitudes, motivations, values, inhibitions, risk-taking, anxiety and tolerance for ambiguity; they can play a significant influence on students' language learning success or failure (Oxford, 1990). As such, Garrett (2002) reported that reading researchers suggested that the ability to read both for information and enjoyment which belong to the affective components of reading is essential if students are to feel successful in reading.

Ainley, Hidi and Berndoff (2002) and Hidi (2001) explained that affective responses or feelings are influenced by readers' types of interest, such as individual, situational and topic. These types of interest were claimed by them to heighten the affective component of readers. Individual interest is the interestingness of a situation to a reader. It is triggered by the reading text features and other aspects of a situation, such as listening to news, viewing pictures, or a combination of both auditory and visual stimuli like a documentary on television. Situational interest is elicited by certain aspects such as how a life theme or a situation is organized and presented. For example, a reader who has no previous interest in plastic surgery issues may have his interest inculcated when presented with a novel and personally relevant text on the topic of plastic surgery. Topic interest refers to the interest triggered by a word or paragraph that presents the reader with a topic.

2.4 Rosenblatt's (1978) reader-response theory

In reader-response theory, responses are reactions or reflections made during or following a reading event by a reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). Each reading event includes a reader and a reading text; both form a dynamic situation. Responses may range from personal life experiences, feelings, associations, memories, expectations and images (Rosenblatt, 2006). Given this, no reader has approached a reading text as an inexperienced person but brings with him memories and anticipations to the reading text. She also explained that a reader who takes the role of thinking and feeling can engage emotionally with the reading text.

While making responses, the approach the reader takes will influence his comprehension. If the reader takes the cognitive or the efferent approach, he will emphasize more on the factual, logical and referential aspects of meaning; whereas if the reader takes the affective or the aesthetic approach, he will emphasize more on the sensuous and emotive aspects of meaning. Since reading is complex, this study aimed to understand what responses and approach the above-average and below-average readers had made and taken.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 2002). It was utilized as to understand the complexity and the uniqueness of the affective reading responses of both the above-average and below-average readers that were portrayed in their digital stories. The respondents' were selected on purpose and this was based on two criteria. Firstly, the respondents were the opposite of average students to represent heterogeneity in the population (Maxwell, 2005). The engineering diploma students International Conference on Postgraduate Research (ICPR 2015). (ISBN 978-967-0850-24-5). 1-2 December 2015, Bayview Hotel, Langkawi, MALAYSIA.

were reported as the least proficient in the English for Academic Purposes course in comparison to students from other faculties in a university (Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Penang, 2012). Thus, an above-average and a below-average readers from the engineering faculty who were identified through a reading placement test with twenty-eight students were selected to be studied carefully as they were the opposite of the average readers that usually represent the average students. Secondly, they were chosen as to establish comparisons between them both (Maxwell, 2005). Both respondents were Malays and whose age were nineteen years old. Their permission to participate in the study was sought.

The placement test employed was the participating university's October 2009 official English for Academic Purposes final exam for the reading component. Categorized as a criterion-referenced standardized test, it required each student's score to be compared to a cutoff score set by the test authors (Wolf, 1993, as cited in Caldwell, 2002). The test examiners were expected to adhere strictly to all directions for scoring with no changes to any procedures. The total mark for the reading test component was set at twenty and the mean grade equivalent reading scores for the total population was 11.3 marks (Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Penang, 2009). Block (1986) and Paris and Myers (1981) defined good or above-average readers as those whose reading comprehension test scores were at or above the mean score for the total population, and poor or below-average readers as those whose reading comprehension test scores below the mean score for the total population. In this study, the above-average reader scored 17 marks in the placement test, while the below-average reader scored 8 marks.

Before the digital storytelling project, all the students were familiarized with digital storytelling, the importance of the seven elements of digital storytelling in developing a digital story, and a software needed to develop a digital story called the Windows Movie Maker. The familiarization and the tutorial classes for working with Windows Movie Maker were carried in two weeks' time. Next, data were obtained in three weeks' time of the digital storytelling project through observational field notes, readers' documents, interview transcripts and respondents' digital stories. There were three two-hour classes in a week.

The digital story was entitled 'Plastic surgery: The reasons, the risks and a lesson learned'. The respondents and their classmates were supplied with two expository texts on plastic surgery (UiTM's April 2009 official English for Academic Purposes final exam for the reading component) from which they could locate ideas for their digital stories. They were also allowed to look for other reading texts to assist them in developing their digital stories.

In this study, the process of finding themes as proposed by Merriam (2009) consisted of comparing one unit of data from one method to the next data from multiple methods. Recurring regularities in the data were searched for. For instance, the respondents' entries in their reading logs were checked against the behaviours observed in class and the details told in the interviews. Then, a set of themes was inductively developed that represented the nature of reading responses as portrayed by the respondents in their digital stories. These themes were also informed by the understanding of the Reader-Response Theory by Rosenblatt (2006) and the affective elements in reading. The themes that were captured in this study were as follows: stating personal feelings and conveying a message.

4. Results

4.1 Case study one: Fikri

Fikri (pseudonym), whose age was nineteen years old at the time when the study was administered, was an above-average reader. He had scored 17 marks in the placement test. He scored all As for the English paper for the Malaysian Certificate of Education, and the UiTM Semesters I and II English papers. He was selected for case study in order to understand what reading responses in relation to affective elements an above-average reader would produce while developing a digital story.

Fikri was strongly against plastic surgery and showed his sarcasm towards it. This feeling may have been influenced by his background knowledge about the dangerous effect that tumbled the life of a Korean model. Preparing for his digital story, he wrote in his digital storytelling elements worksheet "I'm going to show my audience a terrible experience of a Korean model" (Fikri's Digital Storytelling Element Worksheet, August 2, 2013). In slide 28 of his digital story, he showed pictures of a Korean model whose face turned ugly after a failed plastic surgery (Fikri's Digital Story, Slide 28). His punch line which represented his strong feeling against plastic surgery is "Before you get yourself a plastic surgery, think twice, one mistake and your whole life is ruined" (Fikri's Digital Story, Slide 36). In fact, his uneasiness about plastic surgery was consistently portrayed in his reading log, digital storytelling elements worksheet and digital story. In his reading log, he wrote "I can't imagine how fake the skin is" (Fikri's Reading Log, July 4, 2013). In his digital storytelling elements worksheet, he planned to insert in his digital story a question "Is plastic surgery an option?" (Fikri's Digital Storytelling Element Worksheet, August 2, 2013). This question appeared in slide 26 of his digital story only to prepare the audience to the element of sarcasm (Fikri's Digital Story, Slide 26). For example, in slide 22 of his digital story, he showed pictures of which a dog's body parts were implanted into a patient's face (Fikri's Digital Story, Slide 22). He then asked in slide 23 a sarcastic question "Do you find them attractive?" which he himself answered as "SERIOUSLY NO!" in slide 24 (Fikri's Digital Story, Slides 23 – 24). In an interview, he advised all that "*Natural beauty comes from our inner self, so we don't have to ... improve ourselves by using any plastic surgery. It's a fake – it's a fake beauty,*" (Fikri's interview transcript, August 21, 2013).

4.2 Case study two: Ammar

Ammar (pseudonym), was also nineteen years old when the study was administered. He was a below-average reader. He had only scored 8 marks in the placement test. He scored B for the English paper for the Malaysian Certificate of Education, and B- for the UiTM Semester I and C+ for the UiTM Semester II English papers. He was selected for case study in order to understand what reading responses in relation to affective elements a below-average reader would produce while developing a digital story.

Like Fikri, Ammar too believed that plastic surgery was unpleasant, useless and that natural beauty was the best. Through the introduction and the songs used in his digital story, it could be assumed that his message about plastic surgery was that it was depressing. His introductory slides were filled with dark colours like blue, grey and black which depicted a gloomy atmosphere (Ammar's Digital Story, Slides 2 – 4). This gloomy atmosphere could be associated to the depressing plastic surgery. In fact, one of the songs used in his digital story was 'Set Fire to the Rain' by Adele. Ammar made a remark in a class observation that he International Conference on Postgraduate Research (ICPR 2015). (ISBN 978-967-0850-24-5). 1-2 December 2015, Bayview Hotel, Langkawi, MALAYSIA.

purposely chose the song as to indicate how useless it is to light fire in the wet rain; similarly, plastic surgery was also “... *useless ... and ... isn't worth doing*,” (Class Observation, July 19, 2013). Then, he was also contemplating on using the song ‘Be Yourself’ by Audio Slave in his digital story to accompany the slides of Michael Jackson transforming himself from someone who was dark to the one who was fair (Class Observation, July 25, 2013). Ammar said that Michael needed not undergo a series of plastic surgery to be ‘white’ since he was already one of a lifetime greatest performers, and that “*We just need to be ourselves. We don't have to change our appearance*,” (Class Observation, July 25, 2013) because he believed that plastic surgery “is not natural” (Ammar’s Student Journal, July 4, 2013). His belief was again emphasized in his digital story when he wrote “For me, I choose natural beauty than plastic surgery because everybody in this world are (is) unique. We have our own natural beauty and we should realize it” (Ammar’s Digital Story, Slide 39).

5. Discussion

For the affective responses in reading, both the respondents’ portrayal of personal feelings suggested that they were unsupportive of plastic surgery and they conveyed a message that plastic surgery is dangerous, unpleasant and unnatural. These personal feelings are believed to be influenced by the situational and topical types of interest. In situational interest, the way a theme is being organized in a reading passage interests a reader to read further; additionally in topical interest, a word or paragraph that presents the reader with a topic fosters him to read more. Since the reading passages supplied to the respondents dealt with the risks of plastic surgery, and the title of the digital story was ‘Plastic surgery: The reasons, the risks and the lesson learnt’, their personal feelings thus may have been inspired by the theme that plastic surgery is risky.

Besides being influenced by the situational and topical types of interest, the respondents were also influenced by the individual interest. In individual interest, a reader is interested to read further because he has the background knowledge about the theme being discussed. In this case, the respondents conveyed a message that plastic surgery is dangerous because they had known that plastic surgery has indeed ruined the lives of popular Korean and Hollywood artists. This knowledge must have been gathered from news that they listened to or read about previously. Truthful to what Rosenblatt (1978) has maintained, none of the respondents had approached the reading texts as inexperienced readers but brings with them their background knowledge to the reading texts.

The findings thus supported Ainley, Hidi and Berndoff’s (2002) and Hidi’s (2001) ideas that the respondents’ feelings were influenced by the situational, topic and individual types of interest. In fact, both the above-average and below-average readers alike in this study had shown that they could depict their feelings well and thus rejected Chamot and Kupper’s (1989) view that below-average readers offer affective responses less appropriately. In fact, the below-average reader took a step further by thinking and cleverly depicting the gloom and doom of plastic surgery with his selection of music and colours. He also painstakingly selected a few songs to accompany his digital story by looking into the lyrics of these songs that he felt were connected to the theme that he was presenting. This also reinforces Rosenblatt’s (1978) theory that a reader who takes the role of thinking and feeling can engage emotionally with the reading text. Next, this particular finding also informs us that even with expository texts, the respondents were able to take on the affective or aesthetic approach by conveying their personal feelings and messages about a theme. This finding could add to the literature about International Conference on Postgraduate Research (ICPR 2015). (ISBN 978-967-0850-24-5). 1-2 December 2015, Bayview Hotel, Langkawi, MALAYSIA.

affective responses in expository texts since previous discussion on affective responses was centred on narrative and literary texts (Altmann, Bohrn, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2012; Rosenblatt, 1978).

6. Conclusion

In short, the findings of this study have indicated that by developing a digital story both the above-average and below-average readers alike had considerably utilized some affective elements in reading expository texts. For the affective elements, they were equal in depicting their feelings since both of them were influenced by the situational, topical and individual types of interest. The findings in this study have indicated that with specific prior knowledge and attitude formed about a topic, above-average and below-average readers alike can offer good affective responses.

In this study, expository texts of general science had been used with engineering students. This study has shown that a reader's unique background knowledge and interest about a topic can all play an influential role in the portrayal of the reader's understanding of an expository text in a digital story. It is suggested that future research focuses on digital storytelling that is developed based on engineering texts to see whether readers' responses can be elicited in this type of texts and whether it can benefit students' understanding of complex engineering concepts.

Since this study has suggested that digital storytelling has benefitted the second language learners from the engineering faculty, further studies may want to replicate the study with more number of respondents from other faculties in the university such as the Pharmacy, Health Sciences and Hotel and Management so that similarities and differences among students from these faculties can be attained and understood better, and their performances in the areas of reading responses in expository texts can be developed further. Next, the present research may also be replicated in other third language classes like Arabic, French, Japanese, Mandarin and German which are offered in the participating university to have richer data on the areas of reading responses and substantiate its usefulness in language learning.

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