

## Popular Pedagogy: Multimodal Environments for the Teaching and Learning of Literature in the Malaysian Tertiary World

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### Abstract

The task of teaching literature (in English) to Malaysian tertiary students is often fraught with difficulties. Challenges range from dealing with a majority of learners with little competence in the English language, much less analytical reading and writing skills. However, literature taught and learnt effectively can pave the way towards the development of multiple literacy skills especially as it is known to be an effective tool in generating multicultural awareness and communication skills in learners. This article will demonstrate the ways in which the latter can be achieved through the incorporation of popular television series and music in literature courses. It will show how popular television series as well as popular songs can be used as captivating tools to channel an understanding of key issues and terms crucial to literary studies that can prove to be far more successful than when teaching and learning is based merely on literary texts alone. The article concludes that such incorporation of diverse perspectives in teaching what has been traditionally a text based subject can effectively foster a sense of inclusiveness in its learners and in the process generate desired literacy skills.

### Abstract in Malay

Tugas mengajar kesusasteraan (bahasa Inggeris) kepada pelajar-pelajar pengajian tinggi di Malaysia sering dikaitkan dengan kesukaran. Cabaran-cabaran berkisar daripada menangani majoriti pelajar yang kurang penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris, apatah lagi kemahiran membaca dan menulis secara analitikal. Walau bagaimanapun, bidang sastera bila diajar dan dipelajari secara berkesan membuka jalan ke arah perkembangan kemahiran literasi-pelbagai lebih-labih lagi, ia dikenali sebagai kaedah yang berkesan dalam menjana kesedaran terhadap kepelbagaian budaya dan kemahiran komunikasi pelajar. Artikel ini akan menunjukkan cara-cara yang mana kesedaran tersebut boleh dicapai dengan penggunaan siri televisyen popular dan muzik dalam kursus kesusasteraan. Ia akan menjelaskan bagaimana siri televisyen dan lagu-lagu popular boleh digunakan sebagai kaedah yang boleh menarik minat pelajar untuk menyalurkan

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pemahaman isu utama dan istilah-istilah penting dalam pengajian sastera dan boleh menjadikan pengajaran dan pembelajaran lebih berkesan berbanding penggunaan teks kesusasteraan semata-mata. Artikel ini merumuskan penggunaan bahan pengajaran yang pelbagai dalam subjek yang selalunya berdasarkan teks dapat memupuk rasa kebersamaan di kalangan pelajar dan seterusnya menjana kemahiran literasi yang diharapkan.

### **Keywords**

Multimodality, visual literacy, multiple literacies, pedagogy, learner inclusiveness, tertiary literature learning

### **Keywords in Malay**

Pelbagai-kaedah, literasi visual, literasi pelbagai, pedagogi, kebersamaan pelajar, pembelajaran kesusasteraan di peringkat pengajian tinggi

### **Introduction**

Traditional Teaching and Learning of Modes of Textual Analysis usually consists of an introduction to key issues and terms crucial to literary studies, the application of key issues and terms learnt through identification in selected literary texts and the incorporation of examples from relevant literary texts. However, in Malaysian tertiary institutions, classroom encounters are usually with a majority of learners who have little competence in the English language, little exposure to literary texts, and insufficient analytical reading and writing skills. How then does one attempt to teach a course in literary reading approaches (Literary theory) to such undergraduates, achieve set course objectives as well as develop understanding of key issues and terms of literary analysis? Most significantly, how does one communicate with students without alienating them and simultaneously ensure that real learning takes place within the classroom?

This article will demonstrate the ways in which the latter can be achieved through a communicative platform that incorporates *popular* connections with tertiary students, in the form of popular television series and music. It will show how popular television series and popular songs can be used as captivating tools to channel an understanding of key issues and terms crucial to literary studies that can prove to be far more successful than when teaching and learning is based merely on literary texts alone. The article concludes that such incorporation of diverse perspectives in teaching what has been traditionally a text based subject can effectively foster a sense of inclusiveness in its learners and in the process generate desired literacy skills.

## Communicating Theory

Almost all literature departments in higher institutions require their students to undergo a course in theoretical reading approaches so as to introduce useful methods to aid in the reading and subsequent understanding of selected literary texts. These generally involve the incorporation of key aspects of significant literary theories or critical reading approaches as these are otherwise known. The course syllabus would often focus on generating an awareness of the various reading approaches that have been formulated by various theorists and creating an understanding of ways in which to use these theories to frame critical readings of literary texts by determining key aspects that will be useful. Yet, the most crucial task is to ensure that real learning takes place through real communication between teacher and student, in making the classroom, “a place of discovery, of dialogue, and of cooperative reading” (Bretz and Persin 166). Given the fact that the current generation of tertiary students are of a new media generation that focuses on things visual and vivid, the communicative platform within the tertiary classroom needs to be one that is built with multimodal material.

Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen use the term “communicational ensemble” to refer to the platform upon which literacy is generated via multimodal means. This ensemble, as they explain, concentrates on two things: (1) the *semiotic resources* of communication, the modes and the media used, and (2) the communicative practices in which these resources are used (Kress and Van Leeuwen 111). As a multimodal text or context displays a combination of the visual, the textual and even the auditory, it simultaneously becomes a portal for the acquiring and presentation of literacy skills, the “communicative practices” referred to above. Each element in the multimodal text is interlinked with the others present, each having a role to play in the whole process of communicating meaning. Hence the term ensemble, an arrangement of different modes of instruments of communication, all working in unison to produce a single *composition*.

A further significance of multimodal literacies lies in its engendering of design, transformation and meaning making. When students are encouraged to use multimodal texts to convey meaning or articulate their interpretation of events or readings, they essentially acquire agency in the communicative process as they become involved in the process of designing and transforming word to image and other modes as relevant (Kress 2000). This aspect opens up the whole platform for learning and the acquiring of literacies, as students are not hemmed in by the sole source of language.

Multimodality is not merely the utilisation of different modes of texts and contexts for learning but rather the catalyst for communication and creativity. Once multimodality is incorporated into the learning process, the attendant results are the advancement of learning across different spaces. When students

are given a number of modes within which to communicate their ideas and articulate their interpretations, these modes create in turn portals for the acquiring of multiple literacy skills. Numerous studies on the use of multimodality in the classroom have revealed this correlation. Carey Jewitt asserts that:

Seeing the communicational landscape of the classroom through a multimodal lens has significant implications for conceptions and processes of learning. Thinking about learning as a process of design and choice of representation gives a renewed focus on the role of the learner. Design, diversity, and multiplicity emphasise the meaning-making practices and interpretative work of students. (258)

Note how the significance of the enabling process of the utilisation of multimodality in the classroom is accentuated and that key references are made to the range that learners are presented with, especially with regards to notions of design, potential and communicability. The issue of the centrality of the learner and the creativity of the learning process is also an important factor of the argument above.

Such creativity and agency is also highlighted by Margaret Early and Sondra Marshall in their presentation of findings from a study of the significance of incorporating visual modes to mediate the reading and understanding of literary texts for ESL learners of Literature. In their discussion, Early and Marshall demonstrate the ways in which a “mandala method,” a form of visual representation with its roots in ancient Eastern culture, mainly Indian and Tibetan, was used as a mediating tool for students to visualise key concepts from literary texts. They subsequently found that this method had great impact on the interpretation and communicability skills of the students:

It is fair to say, then, that it was not only the visual to verbal transmediation that enabled the ESL students’ growth in interpreting literary texts but also process of transmediating written and visual to oral, and vice versa, in the context of participating in collaborative group work. (Early and Marshall 389-90)

The consensus in the studies reviewed above is that multimodality can be a significant platform for the creation of opportunities for agency and empowerment in the classroom, which in turn become gateways to the development of multiple literacies in students. The ensuing discussion will show the ways in which these very aspects were engendered through the use of popular connections to develop understanding of critical approaches in the literature classroom at the tertiary level.

### **Popular Pedagogy and the Teaching and Learning of Literature**

The following discussion is based on the pedagogical modes of delivery of a reading approaches course in a Malaysian tertiary institution. The aim of the course was to introduce students to a number of critical theories and guide them towards comprehensively applying these theories in their analysis of literary texts. The students were guided through five different reading approaches to literature over a period of 12 weeks. These approaches consisted of the theoretical frameworks of Formalism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Marxism and Postcolonialism. Each topic was presented to the students in the form of a one hour lecture, followed by a two hour tutorial session where students were assigned a particular literary text consisting of either a short story, a poem or a novel and guided into identifying the evidence of key aspects associated with a particular reading approach.

The content of the lecture incorporated the use of visual media to reinforce the terms and concepts. This essentially involved connecting terms and issues pertinent to each topic with a world that is popular with and familiar to the students, mainly popular television series, movies and music videos. The reason for this was twofold. The first was as a strategy to engage and sustain the interest of the students within the classroom while simultaneously instilling the awareness of the fundamental aspects of each of the reading approach listed above. As Louise Rosenblatt succinctly puts it:

When we teach literature, we are... concerned with the particular and personal way in which students learn to infuse meaning into the pattern of the printed symbols. We are not dealing with books as separate and fixed and neatly outlined and summed-up entities. We are dealing with each student's awareness, no matter how dim or confused, of a certain part of the ongoing sequence of his life, as he seeks to marshal his resources and organise them under the stimulus of the printed page. Our subject-matter as teachers of literature, then, is the transactions between readers and books. If we are to "teach literature," certain kinds of experiences known as literary must first be brought about – that is our primary responsibility. This means helping specific students to have such experiences. (63)

When the currency of transaction between teacher and student involves a frame of reference from the familiar world of visual media, the literature classroom can become a space that is able to facilitate the infusion of meaning and understanding of literary terms of analysis in the contemporary learner, especially as the current media generation focuses on things visual and vivid. This is where multimodality is best able to engage these students as it is able to create spaces for various types of literacy skills. For, as Douglas Kellner notes, there is the need to cultivate a wide range of types of multiple literacies to deal with the exigencies of the cultural and technological revolution that we are

currently involved in, ranging from computer literacy to multimedia literacy to new forms of cultural literacy. Such concerns are part of a critical pedagogy which summons educators, students, and citizens to rethink established curricula and teaching strategies to meet the challenge of empowering individuals to democratically participate in our increasing multicultural and technological society.

The second reason was to provide inroads into the assessments that were to follow as amongst the tasks required were the graphic visualisation of key aspects of the theory as seen in their reading material. By choosing to use visual examples of actors, scenes and settings from popular culture, a correlation between theory, text and context was established and instilled in the classroom. The discussion below outlines the gradual introduction of popular connections through multimodal teaching methods and the attendant facilitation of a multimodal environment of learning that ensued.

The first lecture was introduced to the students using a mainly textual based format, through Powerpoint slides that contained only written information. It was mainly teacher centred, as the main objective was to impart the outline of the course and the various evaluation methods. The format of the tutorial was conducted along the lines of a general discussion of lecture notes. Students were then told to read the poem and respond to it. This was then followed by student led discussion in groups of four, guided by a set of tutorial questions. During the tutorial that followed, a short poem was used to facilitate a preliminary pathway into understanding. This first tutorial incorporated two presentation techniques, the traditional teacher input as well as small group discussion, followed by an informal presentation of findings to the class. In this way some element of multimodality was evident.

The lectures on the first reading approach (Formalism) saw the incorporation of learning through audio and colour elements. A popular song was selected and played during lecture to facilitate the understanding of the main concepts of the assigned reading approach to literature. The entire lyrics of the song were displayed on the slide while the song itself was played via an audio clip embedded into the slide. Specific lines were also highlighted using fonts in different colours to further emphasise the connection to the aspects. In this way, lecture notes were not the only information that was projected on the screen. Each concept of the reading approach was reflected in the song ("Unfaithful" by Rihanna) through its lyrics and this audio aid worked to stimulate their understanding. This was subsequently followed by examples from literary texts, by which time too the distance between teacher and student had been narrowed through the inclusion of a familiar (popular) cultural framework. In tutorial, students were told to link the audio with the poem that they were to read and analyse using the specific reading approach. The tutorials incorporated a discussion of the lecture notes, including the audio clip. To

develop further understanding of the concepts, the students were divided into groups to discuss the poem by applying the concepts and then presenting it to the class. All groups wrote down the findings from their discussion and subsequently read from their notes when asked to present to the class. In this way, the learning process incorporated a number of modes of presentation, namely audio, colour, oral, textual and written.

The lectures on the second reading approach (Psychoanalysis) incorporated the use of graphics from a combination of contemporary movies and television series that were familiar to the students. Concepts of the second reading approach were accompanied by stills of various characters and scenes from *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* and the hit television series *Heroes*. Each explanation of the fundamental aspects of key concepts connected to the reading approach was illustrated by stills of characters as well as specific actions, the setting, specific (and symbolic) images, colour and light.

In tutorial, students were assigned a short story to read and analyse. The tutorials incorporated a discussion of the lecture notes, including the graphics presented during lecture. The link between the graphics and the concepts were reiterated. To develop further understanding of the concepts, the students were divided into groups to discuss the story by applying the concepts and then presenting it to the class. As before, all groups wrote down the findings from their discussion and subsequently read from their notes when asked to present to the class. In this way, the learning process incorporated a number of modes of presentation, namely graphics, colour, oral, textual and written.

Lectures on the third reading approach (Marxism) incorporated the use of an entire music video of Kanye West's "Diamonds are Forever" that was played as an introduction to the Marxist reading approach. As the concepts were explained to the students, reference was made to selected scenes from the music video through the rewind, fast-forward and "pause" function. In this way, the lecture integrated a multimodal approach that integrated visual, audio and textual elements.

In tutorials, students were assigned a novel to read and analyse. The tutorial engaged the same multimodal features as before, including reference to the music video presented during lecture to reiterate key aspects. An added feature however was a simulation task where students were told to:

- (a) Dramatise specific scenes from the novel with reference to the ways in which these reflected key aspects of Marxism.
- (b) Dramatise a real world situation that reflected key aspects of Marxism.

By the addition of the mode of the latter, students were able to gain an insight into the situation by contextualising it and actively participating through enactment as well as relating what is learnt through the text with real life situations.

When conveying key aspects of the Feminist reading approach, the lecture drew from two popular series, *Desperate Housewives* and *Ugly Betty*. The first was used to illustrate the various expectations of wives and mothers and the balancing act often required in the process. To illustrate the various key concepts such as the conflicts between the expectations of fulfilling traditional roles (such as mother and wife) and satisfying individual desires, visuals of various scenes from *Desperate Housewives* were displayed on the screen to provide the context and to facilitate meaning formation. *Ugly Betty* was used to emphasise the concept of Other feminisms, of the pressures that women of minority communities face, not only in terms of not conforming to mainstream notions of cosmopolitan ideals of beauty and fashion but also of marginalisation, ethnicity markers and double oppression. This paved the way for the introduction of the last in the series of reading approaches covered in the course, i.e. Postcolonialism.

Two popular songs were used to illustrate the main issues covered in the lecture, the first being racial identity and exclusionist politics, the other of hybridity and the intermingling of cultures. To convey key issues of the first aspect, the students were presented with the audio clip of the popular song “Where is the Love” by the hip hop group Black Eyed Peas. Extracts from the lyrics of the song were also displayed and connections were made to key issues of Postcolonialism such as discrimination, Othering (other than your own race) as well as the search for equality and harmony. To present the issue of hybridity, the song “Hey Waley Waley” by Malaysian hip hop artiste Reshmonu was chosen as it contained elements of the intermingling of Western and Eastern musical genres as well as the linguistic landscapes of varieties of English (standard Malaysian English as well as Black English) as well as some lines in Punjabi, thus demonstrating the fluidity of identity.

Ultimately, all of the lectures incorporated a multimodal approach that integrated visual, audio and textual elements as key concepts were presented to the students through analogies grounded in visual images and broadcast advertisements. This is in contrast to the traditional teaching method based solely on textual information and accompanying verbal explanation. Here, the teaching method incorporated a range of modes to facilitate the learning of key concepts. As Noel Entwistle puts it:

The essential difference between contrasting approaches to teaching is in the relative attention given to the subject matter, seen from the teacher’s perspective, and to the activities that best support learning, as experienced

by the students.... Teaching is no longer seen as a set of techniques, but as an act of imagination that translates “dead” information into the more engaging ways of thinking that bring it to life, creating an expanded awareness of the effects of teaching on learning. (75)

The lecture mode was transformed into a creative portal where generally wooden (to the young adult tertiary learner) expressions of key theoretical terms were translated in visually engaging modes that were placed within contexts that appealed to the popular imagination. The pedagogical approach was thus based on an “expanded awareness” of inculcating learning for understanding and meaning formation.

### **Conclusion: Popularity Ratings by Students**

The effectiveness of teaching methods are always best gauged by its impact on learners and to explore this, six students in the course were interviewed using the focus group structured interview mode to ascertain general views of the method of teaching that incorporated analogies from popular culture and in what way(s) these made them understand what they were learning. The total number of students in the class was thirty. The rationale for the selection was based on performance in class, with two from the top tier, two from the middle and a further two from the lowest tier of grades. The transcript of the interviews revealed some common features. The following is a collation of key information extracted from the interview:

“It was very fun and far more entertaining than all the other lectures. It managed to capture the attention of most students. This way we are able to forever remember what was going on in each class thanks to the songs and pictures!”... “We are familiar with the lyrics so it makes it easier to understand the concepts.”... “It was a good experience and I hope that this form of examples are used more often in the future because capturing the attention of the students is the most important factor.”... “It was very interesting especially [the] Kanye West video which was used to teach Marxism. It made Marxism understandable and reader friendly.”... “Reshmonu’s ‘Hey Waley Waley’ made me understand the concept of hybridity well.”... “At times there are texts that depict issues that are difficult to relate to. However by using songs and videos or even series that most students watch, we are able to understand what is going on and see at the same time that certain issues are still applicable today. By incorporating such examples, we are able to see that those issues still manage to surface within our daily lives today.”... “The use of popular songs creates a positive mood during learning because [the] music that [was] used inspired us to be motivated... [it was] a good method to make students interested in this subject that looked a bit difficult.”

The collage of information above reveals that when students were presented with actual figures familiar to them they developed a sense of the link between an abstract concept from the particular theory and manifestations of it in recognisable forms. It helped even more when these were drawn from a variety of modes, mainly the linguistic and the verbal, the spatial and visual, the kinaesthetic and the musical. Note the references to the kind of mood of learning that such examples created, as stimulus to the creation of an active learning environment. As Alan Pritchard puts it, “Heightened emotions especially to do with fun, enjoyment, excitement... seem to serve the aim of promoting effective learning... a relaxed and well-prepared teacher... can lead to a relaxed atmosphere in which trusting relationships can begin to be built” (114). The last is especially significant for the teacher could really bear witness to the change in the atmosphere in the first class where the popular song was introduced, as students sat up, almost on the edge of their seats and brightened up throughout the lecture. This happened at every class subsequently as they virtually sat in anticipation of the kinds of popular analogies that awaited them. Teaching and learning thus became interactive and inclusive.

The main objective of this paper has thus been to demonstrate that the *popular* connections that were made to bridge teaching and learning possibilities enabled the provision of new avenues for students to articulate their responses to literary texts. Consequently, they created spaces for the shifting of traditional approaches that have been heavily dominated by monomodality and facilitate the emergence of a new pedagogical paradigm that involves multimodality. The significance of this multimodal approach is that it acknowledges multiple literacies in students and thus inevitably allows space for and the subsequent acknowledgement of the presence of multiple intelligences in the classroom, providing the means and avenues for various modes of communication of ideas.

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