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CONTENTS

Prakata .................................................................................................................. vii
Preface ..................................................................................................................... ix

Ciri Buku Teks Bahasa Arab untuk Pelajar Asing yang Mempelajari Bahasa
Arab sebagai Bahasa Asing Ke-2 ................................................................. 1
Ab. Halim Mohamad

Malaysia and Global Terrorism: The Rhetorics of Prime Minister
Dr. Mahathir Mohamad .................................................................................... 18
Abdul Mua'ti @ Zamri Ahmad

Penggunaan Kamus dalam Proses Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab dalam
Kalangan Pelajar Menengah Tinggi Agama ..................................................... 33
Ahmad Hasbullah, Abd. Rauf Hassain & Che Radiah Mezah

A Shift in Language Policy: Impact on Stakeholders ...................................... 45
Chan Swee Heng & Ain Nadzimah Abdullah

Towards the Use of Interdisciplinary Materials in Developing
Science and English Literacy ........................................................................... 58
Chan Mei Yuit & Sabariah Md. Rashid

Enhancing Cultural Reflection and Exploration in Literary Texts
through Media Technology .................................................................................. 74
Che An Abdul Ghani & Nora Mohamed Nor

News Media and the Pre-Iraq War: What Students are Exposed
to and What they Believe .................................................................................. 85
Ezhar Tanam & Wan Anita Wan Abas

'I Am My Language': Imagining Diversity in the New Wor(l)d Order .......... 95
Faiz S. Abdullah

Adoption of Digital News Broadcasting: A Case of Malaysian
TV Stations .......................................................................................................... 111
Hamisah Hassan & Joanne Lim Bee Yin
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The Acquisition of French Verbs and Tenses by L1 Chinese Speakers ..... 122
Lim Sep Neo & Wong Bee Eng

Bahasa dan Budaya: Satu Pengamatan Bandingan antara
Bahasa Arab dan Bahasa Jepun .......................................................... 139
Mohd. Sukki Othman, Md. Alif Redzuan Abdullah & Zawawi Ismail

Aspek Pragmatik dalam Penterjemahan Kata Nama Allah S.W.T.  
(Al-Jabbar dan Al-Mutakabbir): Satu Analisis Teori Relevans .......... 147
Muhammad Fauzi Jumingan

Ke Arah Pemurnian Bahasa dan Terjemahan Skrin yang Berkualiti .... 157
Normah Abdullah

Teori dan Realiti Perubahan Bahasa: Daripada Bahasa Ibunda  
kepada Bahasa Melayu ................................................................. 164
Noor Aina Dani & Mhd. Amin Arshad

Confronting Gendered Identities and Perceptions in Literary Texts ..... 188
Rosli Talif & Jariah Mohd. Jan

Language and Power in Business Negotiations ............................. 204
Shamala Paramasivam

Pembudayaan Bahasa Melayu di Malaysia: Satu Persoalan Moral ..... 215
Zaitul Azma Zainon Hamzah
Confronting Gendered Identities and Perceptions in Literary Texts

Rosli Talif
Jariah Mohd Jan

Abstract

This paper examines how adolescent males and females envisage themselves and perceive their roles in present day society. It also explores how they, as readers, construct meanings and make use of their perceptions of literary representations in the creation of their own identities. The data of this study was obtained from a questionnaire and participant-observations of group discussions of Form 4 male and female students from a selected school in the Klang Valley. These students of different ethnic backgrounds were given opportunities to interrogate cultural and gendered representations and consider different interpretations of gendered roles from selected literary texts. The research utilises feminist theoretical perspectives, which have provided us with alternative ways of viewing and reporting empirical research relating to gender differences. The results show that students generate their own perceptions of gendered roles based on their stereotyped schema which include their expectations, beliefs and values.

Introduction

In most societies, men and women see themselves as conforming to the typical behaviour of their sex groups. This is because members of certain cultures hold beliefs or have certain perceptions and expectations of how men and women should conduct themselves in that particular society. Previous studies such as those of Spence and Helmreich (1978) and Worrell (1978) show that members of a society form opinions or perceptions on what they think as the accepted and desired characteristics for men and women. These characteristics can also translate into gender-bias activities, expertise and social roles. The different genders may also use different ways of communicating. Our construct of masculinity and femininity influences our reactions to men and women, i.e., once we have categorised someone as a male or female, “... our gender constructs
Confronting Gendered Identities and Perceptions in Literary Texts

come into play, providing us with judgmental standards against which to compare a person, in forming impressions about their masculinity and femininity" (Smith, 1985:28).

Schools and institutions of higher learning are considered important settings for examining how gender roles are constructed and enacted through the everyday actions. For example, gender-role differences in these institutions may be suppressed since most students presumably, hope to succeed in their studies. However, while the higher institution educational system rewards the (supposedly gender neutral) drive for academic success, students' goals are affected by how they accommodate to dichotomized gender roles. Texts can also shape responses along gender lines. Feminist literary critics have contributed descriptive studies of the ways in which gender has played a role in text interpretation. In addition, Flynn (1986:267) postulates that reading researchers have contributed empirical data on gender-related similarities and differences among developing readers.

Reading as a Gendered Practice

The idea that what we read influences who we are and how we negotiate our positions within our culture is not new. Those interested in reader-response criticism, for example, have examined the idea that gender plays a role in the practice of reading (Fetterley, 1986) and in the meaning and interpretation of the text (Flynn and Schweikart, 1988). Reading is a cultural practice that we acquire. Just as children learn how to read from their parents and schools, so too do they learn the values, morals and cultural norms of the society in which they live.

Research in the ethnography of reading in anthropology and in literary criticism illustrates that cultural norms shape our reading, language, meaning-making and definitions of male and female-ness (Ortner and Whitehead, 1981; Heath, 1983; Radway, 1984; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Fishman, 1991). Indeed, reading can have "consequences in (and be affected by) family life, work patterns, economic conditions, patterns of leisure, and a complex of other factors" (Szwed, 1981:20-21). Confirming this idea, for instance, are the ethnographic studies of literacy by Christian-Smith (1993) and Radway (1984) who analyse the influence novels have on women's struggle to define themselves, their identities and their lives through reading.

The conceptual theoretical constructs used for the study is the reader-response theory, schema theory and ideas about literature reading as a strategic and creative, problem-solving activity. In literary interpretation, particularly, in the use of the reader-response theory, the text is not the most important component—the reader is. The reader creates the text as much as the author.
The concentration is more on the reader and the reading process, and the interaction between the reader and the text. For example, in a recent study, Gender differences in responses to texts, David et al. (2001: 74) found that "male and female students impose their own moral values on the characters and their reaction to the characters depend on their approval of their characters' behaviour."

The schema theoretical models of text processing posit a psychological view of reading as an interactive process involving a memory search on the part of the reader in an attempt to link the known with the unknown. According to the schema concepts, a reader brings to a text his own prior knowledge, cultural biases and stereotypes, preconceptions, and viewpoints. The schema theory presents a view of the reader as an active participant in a cognitive approach to reading. Meaning is produced by the interaction of the reader and the text, and the new information obtained is integrated into the prior knowledge, experience and biases of readers.

Research on schema theory and its effect on reading and perception as well as reaction to the text read have focused primarily on cultural/minority groups (Steffenson and Joag-Dev, 1984). The first local research on whether a specific text is preferred by one sex was carried out by Rosli Talif (1992). He concluded that "The Sleeping Beauty" was not favoured by boys. Similar studies on gender and literary texts include gendered preference for reading materials (Lynn Norazit and Su'ad Awab, 2001), gender differences in responding to literary texts (David et al., 2001) and gendered influences of reading and writing fiction (Jariah Mohd Jan, 2005). However, more research in the gender variable and its effects on text should be further investigated.

The Purpose of the Study

In general, this exploratory study is designed to interrogate cultural and gendered representations and consider different interpretations through selected literary texts. This study is an attempt to extend the studies of reading research which examines the behaviour of male and female secondary students. It aims to use the reader-oriented perspective from cultural and feminist critics in analysing literary texts. Specifically, it seeks to examine if perceptual gender differences exist and to identify if any, the salient differences in interpretations of literary texts by male and female students.
This book is a collection of papers produced by academic members of the Faculty, out of individual research projects, or in collaboration with academics within and without the Faculty. The book covers the three main fields of study which forms the foundation of the Faculty, the fields of language, literature, and communication. In the field of language, research has focused not only on developments in the Malay language and English, but also on foreign languages such as Arabic, Japanese and French. The wide-ranging scope of research is focusing on various aspects such as grammar, and linguistic competence, as well as examining the influence and interconnections between language with areas such as politics, society, pedagogy and technology. In the field of literature, research by Faculty members has, amongst others, investigated the connections between literature and culture, and also literature and society. The variety of research areas investigated by faculty members can also be seen in the research papers in the field of communication which look into the role of the media in society, particularly in handling issues related to education, politics and international affairs as well as examining the impact of the media on social and cultural developments. In line with current technological advancements, research by faculty members has also explored the areas of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as well as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).