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Placing the Meaning of Metaphors in a Wider Sociocultural Context: Enquiring into EFL Learners' Literary Competence

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Introduction

The ability to identify textual features should be developed by English as a foreign Language (EFL) learners to assist their efforts to build literary competence. Studies in relation to understanding a literary text show that language learners focus more on textual features contained in a text. A study by Sopcák (2007) found linguistic features facilitate learners' interpretations of a particular literary text, help unravel meanings of symbolic language, and can bring learners to better understand and appreciate the text. Foregrounded structure is another textual feature significantly contributing to the readers' success in understanding a literary text (Fialho, 2007). Fialho (2007) highlights the importance of such structures in the process of EFL learners' refamiliarisation in the reading of a literary text. Additionally, Badran (2012) argues that there is a link between what is written by the author and what is read by the readers, which is explicitly visible in a text itself. The link prompts uniformity of EFL learners' responses to the meaning of certain metaphors contained in a given literary text.

For learners, mastering literary competence facilitates the enjoyment of literary reading. The main aspect of this literary competence is the ability to relate literature to learners' personal experiences and situate the literary text in a wider sociocultural scope (Spiro, 1991; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017). Existing empirical studies have shown that, by making use of language learners' literary competence, they are able to enjoy and appreciate the entanglements of a graphic novel as a form of literature (Pantaleo, 2011), respond to a particular textual problem based on their interpretive community (van der Pol, 2012), and examine a text outside of its actual context (Edenburg, 2010).

In the Indonesian context, however, the focus of learning English is more on the ability to understand the text (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Cahyono and Widiati (2006) reported that the focus of EFL teaching of reading in Indonesia is more on intensive reading emphasizing text decoding and the use of learners' schemata to enable them to understand expository text of which composition is ordinarily used in text books. As a consequence, literary reading rarely becomes the main focus in reading classes and activities. In other words, EFL learners' literary competence in the Indonesian context does not receive much attention.

This study is aimed at exploring Indonesian EFL learners' literary reading in relation to their literary competence. The literary competence investigated is in terms of learners' ability to place the meaning of metaphors found in a given literary text into a wider sociocultural context. This area of research is useful for the development of Indonesian EFL learners' critical thinking, particularly when providing responses to reading texts both in terms of creative and informative understanding of texts.

Literature Review

Literary Reading

Literary reading, as the name suggests, focuses attention on the way learners as readers experience reading a literary text, which is different from the way learners experience a non-literary text. The experience of literary reading, according to Rosenblatt (2013), is concerned more with learners' affective condition, specifically, the quality of the feelings and emotions they experience when reading a literary text. Rosenblatt (2013, p. 932) refers to this as 'aesthetic stance' in reading and contrasts it to non-literary reading, or 'efferent reading'. For the learner, aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 2013) involves their lived-through meaning and its connection to a text. Literary reading is a more complex process of reading, since it focuses more on what has been lived-through by the learners during the reading of a text (Rosenblatt, 1988), and therefore facilitates access to a broader area of awareness (Rosenblatt, 1981). When a reader aesthetically reads a literary text, a transaction between the text and the reader's lived experiences takes place (Li & Lewis, 2019; Rosenblatt, 1988). In this transactional literary reading, the reader's life repertoires as well as sociocultural experiences are negotiated with the text. The transactional process creates the dialectical movement from the text to learners' own experience (Yandell & Brady, 2016). The literary reading process, in which the process of meaning negotiation is involved, facilitates learners to generate a fusion of thoughts and affective feelings (Rosenblatt, 1994). It accordingly enables learners to experience the aesthetic transaction both cognitively and affectively.

In literary reading, additionally, the concept of reading as a social practice might frame learners' interpretation (Prinsloo & Baynham, 2008) of figurative language. Social conventions may serve as a basis to make sense of such language (Dressman, 2015). The use of figurative language in the literary text can be contextual (Csàbi, 2014) and accordingly its interpretation is contextually dependent (Fernandez, 2007; Zyngier, 1999). However, as a text is not neutral (Ko, 2013), it is possible that learners interpret the meaning of figurative language in accordance with their own value system (Littlemore, 2003) based on their culturally bound ideas and experiences (Chen & Squires, 2011). Additionally, learners' familiarity to a certain figurative language (Li & Lewis, 2019) and their own values (Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017) become factors that affect the meaning interpretation.

Literary Competence

EFL learners as readers need to have adequate literary competence in order to be able to read and enjoy literary works properly. This literary competence, according to Culler (2002), deals with a set of conventions for reading literary texts. In relation to this competence, learners reading a literary text should read the text attentively and thoroughly in order to be able to evoke meaning. Literary work normally comprises literary structure in the form of a set of conventions that allow learners to identify the genres and themes, recognize plots, characterize characters, and gauge the symbolic meaning of figurative languages.

Spiro (1991) argues literary competence is intertwined with linguistics competence in the sense that learners can have an appreciation of literary works when they are able to attend to the meaning of the language in which the works are written. The language constructing literary works is mostly figurative, specifically in forms of metaphors. Such metaphors need to be properly interpreted by the learners in order for learners to have comprehensive understanding about the texts. One of the components in Spiro's literary competence is that learners should have the ability to place literature meanings in a wider sociocultural context. This means learners need to look at a wider sociocultural context in their attempts to decipher the meanings of metaphors contained in a particular literary work and be aware that their own cultural background may influence their metaphor comprehension (Lü et al., 2017).

How learners interpret literary meanings with their sociocultural context is the aspect of literary competence to which the data collected in this study focuses upon.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design. The selection of the participants, data collection, and data analysis are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections.

Participants

The participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Three students, who enrolled at a state university in Indonesia were enlisted as participants of this study. The participants were EFL learners in their fourth semester and majoring in English Letters. They were deliberately chosen as they were considered to be able to provide data for this particular study.

They came from various parts of Indonesia representing various ethnic origins. Participant 1 came from Samarinda, a town in East Kalimantan. He moved to the island of Java to get a better education. As a freshman, he experienced difficulties in adjusting to Javanese sociocultural conditions due to the huge gap in sociocultural conduct between these two sociocultural contexts. Participant 2 came from Jakarta and also moved to East Java to look for a better education. The last participant was born and raised in East Java. All three participants are native speakers of Bahasa Indonesia and speak a local language, especially those coming from Samarinda and Java. Additionally, the participants have been exposed to reading comprehension activities since their first year of university study. They have practiced understanding a text cognitively, in which the activities of identifying, analyzing, and evaluating information are involved.

Data Collection

To collect data in the form of written responses from the participants, a reading task was administered. The task consisted of a reading, Amy Tan's *Rules of the Game*, and a set of questions in which participants were required to interpret the meanings of metaphors contained in the given text. Prior to distributing the reading task, the participants were informed that the task was not part of the class assignment and that their participation was voluntary. They were also informed that they were allowed to read the text and do the interpretation at home as an independent reading activity. Three days after the task was given, the participants submitted their written responses. The written responses were analysed and a follow-up interview was carried out after triangulating the data collected. Additionally, no teaching activitiy took place as the focus of the reading activity was not instruction.

Data Analysis

In this study, there are two kinds of data, namely the data gathered from the reading task in the form of written responses and the recorded data from the interviews. Prior to data analysis, participants' written responses in the form of metaphor interpretations were selected and organized based on the order of individual responses. Each response was then coded for ease of analysis. Subsequently, the data was read heuristically and hermeneutically to make sense of the meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The participants then engaged in interpreting metaphors found in the given text. Then, based on the written data, an interview was conducted with each of the participants to cross-check the written data. After both data showed convergency, further analysis was conducted by determining how the participants placed the meaning of metaphors they found in the reading text in a wider sociocultural context as proposed by Spiro's (1991) literary competence.

Results

Results of the analysis from both data show that the participants were able to make meaning from the identified metaphors found in the text. They were also able to interpret the meaning of the metaphors identified in relation to a particular sociocultural context. Further analysis in terms of placing meaning of metaphor falls within 3 different categories, namely: placing a metaphor's meaning in the participant's own sociocultural context, in the sociocultural context of the text, and in others' sociocultural context. Quotes relating to the meaning of the metaphors are taken from the participants' interview data. Each of the category is presented in detail in the next sections.

Placing Metaphor Meaning in the Participant's Own Sociocultural Context

As the participants were elicited to find the meaning of a certain metaphor in the text, they were looking for some possibilities to situate the meaning of the metaphor in a particular sociocultural context. One of the participants tried to place the meaning of 'chess' as a metaphor in his own sociocultural context. He produced an elaborate response explaining how he unravels the meaning of the metaphor as shown in Transcript 1.

Transcript 1: The meaning of metaphor in the reader's sociocultural context

Interviewer: Is there any metaphor you found in the text that can be related to a certain sociocultural experience?
Participant 1: I tend to particularly pay attention to the meaning of chess. I pay attention to it as it reflects the chess game's strategy. I have personally gone through some changes. I am not originally from the island of Java. I am from Samarinda – Kalimantan. I thought if I stayed the same [the way I was when I was in Samarinda and failed to adapt with the new environment], I would remain static. I then arranged some strategies so I moved forward, strategies to survive in a new place with different sociocultural background. I then joined student organisations at campus and continued socializing with other students from the same department and the faculty.

At the beginning, the participant explicitly mentions that 'chess' carries a deeper meaning than merely a kind of game. For him, 'chess' is emphasized in the passage because of the game's distinctive strategy. He further strived to provide further rationalization of what he means. He reflected on his own personal upheavals when trying to adapt living in a new place of which sociocultural practices are dissimilar from his own. The reflection became the reasoning of his interpretation that 'chess' as a metaphor denotes 'strategies of life'–strategies to be a better person who can adapt well to a new sociocultural environment.

Placing Metaphor Meaning in the Sociocultural Context of the Text

The content of the text itself becomes an important inter-textual reference for deciphering the meaning of symbolic language potentially found in the text. The response of Participant 2 in the following transcript shows that the reading text assisted her in the process of metaphor interpretation. She also highlighted the reference concerning the sociocultural context of the text when attempting to interpret the meaning of 'Chinese library' as a metaphor.

Transcript 2: The meaning of metaphor in the text's sociocultural context

Interviewer: What metaphor can you find in the text? How can you come to a conclusion that a certain phrase or word is a metaphor?

Participant 2: I think Chinese library is a metaphor. That [the interpretation] is helped by the next paragraph. It is stated and explained that, for example, she [Waverly] has found something related to the chess when she borrowed a book from Chinatown library. [By reading the book] I think she wants to maintain her culture, Chinese, although she lives in the US and she learns about the chess values. It proves that as a Chinese [living] in the US, she should still be a Chinese which has a strong will in doing something.

In the response, it is clear that the participant took some sociocultural contexts explicitly written in the text as the basis of her analysis. The in-text sociocultural contexts assisted her to figure out that 'Chinese library' symbolizes something. She thought that 'Chinese library' is not an ordinary library since it is specifically referred to. Accordingly, she interpreted 'Chinese Library' as a place where Chinese descendants could learn about China or Chinese culture and customs. The library provided a means to preserve their connection to their original ancestral culture. She pinpointed the sociocultural context of the text, which was mainly about the lives of Chinese immigrants in the United States, as the grounds for her metaphor interpretation.

Placing Metaphor Meaning in Others' Sociocultural Context

Being informed about sociocultural values of other people from different ethnic origin is essential to attain tolerance and mutual understanding. The following transcript, which is encapsulated from the written response and the follow-up interview, shows that Participant 3 attempted to situate the meaning of 'Chinese torture' as a metaphor in a wider sociocultural scope.

Transcript 3: The meaning of metaphor in others' sociocultural context

Question: Can you explain further the meaning of the metaphor found in the text in relation to a certain sociocultural scope?

Participant 3: Chinese torture is not a torment for the Chinese, but it is a metaphor. Chinese torture is how the Chinese have to work hard. So, it is not about a punishment given because they are bad or do something against the law. But it is the fact that they work hard to get a good purpose and achieve a better life. The Chinese are famous for their hard work until now. So, the mother introduces Waverly to this Chinese culture because she has two cultural identities, Chinese and American. The mother does not want her to take American cultural identity because [according to the mother] it is not good for her.

The meaning of the metaphor 'Chinese torture' was placed in neither the participant's own sociocultural context nor the sociocultural context of the text. The metaphor was situated in others' sociocultural context: the Chinese work ethic. In Indonesia, Chinese descents and culture are influenced by a multicultural context and Chinese are often viewed as hard working and entrepreneurial. This notion became the basis of the participant's metaphor interpretation. He clearly interpreted 'Chinese torture' as 'the hard work' within Chinese values. The meaning encapsulation of such a metaphor was not from the text context but from the general knowledge he was familiar with. The meaning of the metaphor is accordingly placed in Chinese sociocultural context without having reference from neither the text nor his own experience. It is the result of the participant's summarization after reading the text.

Discussion

The findings show that a metaphor can be understood by way of placing it in the reader's own sociocultural context, in the sociocultural context of the text itself, and in other's sociocultural context.

Interpreting metaphors by placing the metaphor in the reader's own sociocultural context requires reflection, the reader's reflecting on his or her own sociocultural values and norms as done by Participant 1. The reflection is made based on his or her own sociocultural experience. Here, there is a logical reciprocal movement from the text, where the metaphor is stated, to the real world, the learner's own sociocultural context and experience. The meaning of the metaphor is negotiated with the participant's own sociocultural context. The negotiation signifies that metaphor interpretation is a complex activity. Further, the learner's ability to situate the meaning of a certain metaphor in his or her own sociocultural context seems to corroborate the findings of the study conducted by Suarcaya and Prasasti (2017) that Indonesian EFL learners, whose sociocultural backgrounds are varied, are able to provide responses to a given literary text based on their own sociocultural values, contexts, and experiences.

Another way of understanding a metaphor is by placing its meaning within the sociocultural context within a text via inter-textual references. The references, however, need to be understood by learners to enable them to place the meaning of a certain metaphor into the proper text's sociocultural context. Besides trying to find some supported in-text references from the text, learners place the meaning of the metaphor in a familiar in-text sociocultural context. The response from Participant 2 "[the interpretation] was helped by the next paragraph" implies that the learner investigated the contextual sociocultural condition presented in the text. The metaphor interpretation seems to heavily depend on her acquaintance with the textual context of the metaphor and the literal context of the text itself.

Finally, to understand the meaning of metaphor, a learner can also place its meaning in others' sociocultural context. In exploring such a wider sociocultural context, literary competence is used to access the general knowledge. The expression "'Chinese torture' is how the Chinese have to work hard" (Participant 3) signifies that one of the learners based his metaphor interpretation on a particular sociocultural value namely: the Chinese principle of hard work. The meaning of the metaphor is interpreted based on the knowledge the learner has previously had and familiarity (Li & Lewis, 2019) with the sociocultural milieu of the metaphor and their culturally bound thought. In the context of this study, Participant 3 situated the meaning of the metaphor in a wider sociocultural context other than the learner's and the text's.

Conclusion

Understanding metaphors can be done by identifying linguistic features and connecting their meanings with extended sociocultural contexts. In this study, the findings show the meaning of the metaphors interpreted by the EFL learners were derived from two sociocultural contexts. The first context concerns their experiences in getting in touch with sociocultural practices either their own or those of others'. These experiences serve as the learners' sociocultural repository that might contribute to the interpretation of the meaning of the metaphors. The second context deals with sociocultural values presented in a text. The values presented serve as a textually grounded source for learners' metaphor meaning interpretations. These two sociocultural contexts can facilitate a transaction between a text and a reader and encourage dialogical movement between the text and the learners' contacts with wider sociocultural circumstances.

Based on the results of the study, EFL teachers can include metaphor interpretation in literary reading activity. The activities should involve meaning making ability by way of giving the EFL learners opportunities to provide critical responses to reading text. In the process of metaphor interpretation, learners may be asked to relate the metaphor they find in a text to a wider sociocultural context so that metaphor meaning making becomes more comprehensive. By promoting learners to respond analytically

to the literary reading of text, learners may experience the text not only from one angle but also from various viewpoints as a result of their intertextual reading.

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