**READING AND ELABORATING LITERARY WORK IN BUILDING GOOD CHARACTERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Certain disciplines such as civic education and religious education are thought to be able to develop human capital in accordance with character building, while other disciplines - among others English language education- could not be able to fulfill the needs to promote it. In this study, the researcher aims to find out whether or not English language education can help building good characters. In seeking for the answer, as many as one hundred participants from a university were given activities to read and elaborate literary works as one of the efforts that language teachers may do in building good characters from their classes. The method used in this research is descriptive method by collecting, processing, analyzing, interpreting, and concluding data. The data were gathered based on the theory guiding of the reader response, known as The Reader’s Response Strategy, and a questionnaire from six pillars of the establishment of the character, as well as collected through interview.

**Keywords:** *Character building, good characters, language learning, suggested literary works.*

# INTRODUCTION

Once getting to the topic concerning education, one may quickly discover that the aims of education should be not only intelligence but also character. This is in line with the goals of Indonesia’s National Education based on Pancasila and the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia Year 1945 at developing students' skills and establishing character and civilization of the nations of dignity in the framework of the intellectual life of the nation. The objective is to develop student’s potential to become a man of faith and devoted to God Almighty, noble, healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, and accountable (The Act No. 20/2003 on Indonesia National Education System, Chapter II of the Basic, Function and Purpose of National Education System, Article 3).

Character of a person identifies a particular person’s qualities. It refers to the kind of a person from the inside. According to Josephson (2007) to answer the question ‘What is character?’ one should comprehend and practice the Six Pillars of Character as follows: 1) Trustworthiness (Be honest. Be reliable. Have the courage to do the right thing. Build a good reputation. Be loyal.), 2) Respect (Treat others with respect. Be tolerant and accepting of differences. Be considerate of the feelings of others. Don’t hurt anyone. Deal peacefully with anger, insults, and disagreements.), 3) Responsibility (Do what you are supposed to do. Plan ahead. Persevere: keep on trying! Always do your best. Be self-disciplined. Think before you act — consider the consequences. Be accountable for your words, actions, and attitudes.), 4) Fairness (Play by the rules. Take turns and share. Be open-minded; listen to others. Don’t take advantage of others. Treat all people fairly.), 5) Caring (Be kind. Be compassionate and show you care. Express gratitude. Forgive others. Help people in need.), 6) Citizenship (Do your share to make your school and community better. Cooperate. Get involved in community affairs. Be a good neighbour. Obey laws and rules. Respect authority. Protect the environment. Volunteer.).

Forming good characters is not as easy as it seems as the breakdown of families and human relationships, the increase in drug abuse, free sex, and violence, the escalation of corruption and human right violations still appear in Indonesia society (UPF-Indonesia, 2011). Looking at the problems mentioned above, it is clear that forming good characters requires repetition and integrated learning.

However, in schools in Indonesia, students are emphasized mostly to develop cognitive, while social, psychological, or emotional developments still receive little attention (Megawani, 2004:1). To develop social, psychological, and emotional developments, character education would be utilized. This is where the teacher of language education, in this case the teachers of English language, can do their part to be involved and to commit to promote character building. It is strongly hoped that by utilizing character education, gradually, their students will be able to take initiative to do good that allows them to support the promotion of faith and piety and noble character.

One of the ways that is proposed to be used in the English language education class is by providing the students with moral-value literary works and activities. Reading and elaborating literary works in building good characters are in line with character-based holistic education model as developed by Megawani (2004) and are also in accordance with the idea proposed by Otten (2002:7) who states that thoughtful teachers can use suggested literature and activities as a means of bringing their students to the commitments that will gradually form character traits and citizenship attitudes that everyone is proud to acknowledge.

The discussion on how the use of suggested literature and activities can form character is also highlighted by Beach and Marshall (1990, as cited in Inderawati, 2012) who propose seven responses which are called Reader Response Strategies, namely: 1) describing, 2) explaining, 3) conceiving, 4) interpreting, 5) connecting, 6) engaging, and 7)   judging. These responses are classified into two groups; describing, conceiving, explaining, and interpreting refer to cognitive aspects and the others belong to affective ones. By *describing*, the students identify the characters; whether the characters are good or bad. By *explaining*, the students will find out why the characters behave in a certain way and conceive what happensto the character. In *interpreting*, the students choose one key word from the story and give reasons for choosing it. In *connecting*, the students link the content of the story to their own experience, other stories, films, books, culture, social life, and religion. They engage what happens to the characters to their own feeling, imagination, and thought; and then they judge whether they get moral values from the story. Beach and Marshall (1990, as cited in Inderawati, 2012) believe that the Reader Response Strategy can facilitate the students to find out and to enhance their cognitive and affective aspects.

From the discussion presented above, it is clear that character building has drawn increased attention from educators; however, the research that elaborates whether or not language learning can promote character building still receives little attention in Indonesia. That is the reason why this study is highlighting reading and elaborating literary works for building good characters.

This study is also dealing with behavior as to measure whether or not language learning can be utilized to promote character building. It is important to have an understanding of the difference between a character and a behavior. A character of a person identifies a particular person’s qualities. It refers to the kind of a person from the inside. Meanwhile, behaviour can be defined as the way one acts. It gives a complete picture of a person by looking at his actions or reactions. Triandis (1994) implies that behaviour is observable and some behaviour change. The behaviour can be changed for different purposes or persons. The human behaviour is highly portrayed by their attitude which is used in their daily basic activities. Based on the above notion, this study also aims to gather the data dealing with the students’ perception toward their changing behaviour before and after reading suggested literary work.

# METHOD

The method used in this research is descriptive method by collecting, processing, analysing, interpreting, and concluding data in accordance with the objectives of the study.

## Participants

One hundred English language learners participated in this research. They are all college students of English language department in one of the universities in Bandung. They are taking *Reading VI* class as one of the compulsory subjects in their university. The reasons for selecting these learners as the participants in this research are based on the aim of the research, practicability, and accessibility considerations. Here, the aim of the research is to find out whether or not language learning can take a place in promoting character building. Practicability in this study means that the researcher has recognized these learners because of having a teacher-students relationship; whereas, accessibility means that the researcher has had the personal data of the participants, covering: names, addresses, and mobile phone numbers. These have made the researcher able to contact the learners easily. These participants do not represent any other learners. Consequently, the results of this research cannot be generalized.

## Data Collection

The data were collected through the reading activities on literary works with moral-value that the participants can select from an assortment of reading materials.The data were being gathered based on the theory guiding of the reader response consisting of seven reader responses: describing, explaining, interpreting, conceiving, engaging, connecting, and judging (Beach & Marshall, 1990 as cited in Inderawati, 2012). Some guiding questions to facilitate the students to response were adjusted from Rudy (2007) who has conducted some research and developments and has already developed guiding questions since 2005. Some of the questions are as follows: “What do you think of the character of the story? Is he/she good or bad? Does the story tell about good things? What event in the story do you think is very important? Why?” these questions deal with describing the characters in the story. By answering these questions, the students identify the characters; whether the characters are good or bad. The other questions are “Is the story valuable? What values do you get from reading the story?” these types of questions refer to judging whether or not the students get moral values from the story.

Meanwhile, the data dealing with the participants’ perception toward their changing behaviour after reading suggested literary works were gathered from a questionnaire using Likert Scale on the six pillars of the establishment of the characters consisting of: 1) Trustworthiness, 2) Respect, 3) Responsibility, 4) Fairness, 5) Caring, and 6) Citizenship. Finally, to find out from the participants the things that cannot directly be observed, especially concerning the participants’ thoughts and experience indicating their better behaviour and/or character after reading suggested literary works, this study made use of interview.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**Data Gathered Based on the Reader’s Response Strategy**

Based on the moral-value literary works read by the participants, there are some interesting data revealed. The data were gathered based on the theory guiding of the Reader Response Strategy that consists of seven reader responses: describing, explaining, interpreting, conceiving, engaging, connecting, and judging (Beach & Marshall, 1990 as cited in Inderawati, 2012) as well as based on The Six Pillars of Character (Josephson, 2007).

Some questions were asked to the participants; among others: “What do you think of the character of the story? Is he/she good or bad? Does the story tell about good things? What event in the story do you think is very important?”

The participants who read “My Name is Flower” stated that the character of the story is a very humble, patient, strong, and honest woman. They continued that the story tells about life; and the important event is when the woman rises from poverty and starts a new and better life. While those who read “Who Ate the Bread?” mentioned that the main character is Han who is a good man as he doesn’t judge people from appearance. They continued that the story tells about good things because it emphasizes on not being a prejudice. They also mentioned that the most important part is when Han chooses a wife. His choice is not based on appearance but based on inner beauty. Next, the participants who read “The Coffee Beans” reported that the main characters are Hridya and her mother. Hridya gives up easily. On the other hand, her mother always tries to make Hridya stronger. The participants answered that the story tells about the importance of listening to other people’s opinion. And the most important part is when Hridya’s mother gives constructive opinion. While, about the story “Until Death Do Us Part”, the participants reported that there are three main characters in the story. The Husband is a good father but wants to leave his wife for Jane (another woman). The wife is a good mother and a strong wife and Jane is a marriage disturber who wants the man to divorce his wife. According to the participants, the story is good as to give lesson in life. They continued that the most important thing is when the husband realizes that he should end his affair and repair his marriage. The last title to be reported was “The Old Man and A Tiger”. The participants stated that the main character is a very brave old man who doesn’t give up even when all the villagers underestimate him. The story, according to the participants, is a good story as it talks about bravery. The most important part of the story is when the old man plans to kill the tiger. This part is important because it takes courage to kill a fierce tiger that has killed several villagers. Based on the answers from the participants, it can be concluded that all of the participants are able to identify the good and bad characters in the story. Thus, when the reader is able to identify the characters in the story, it implies that the reader gains understanding for the literature, understands its value and importance and admires its complexity (Donelson and Nilsen, 2009).

The other questions were to identify the story line and the moral values as follows: “Is the story valuable? What values do you get from reading the story? And “What are the benefits that you get after reading this story?”

Those who read “My Name is Flower” stated that the story is valuable as its message is for the reader to strive for his/her life and never give up until she/he reaches the goals. While those who read “Who Ate the Bread?” mentioned that the moral value of the story is that people should not be arrogant as well as not prejudice. Next, the participants who read “The Coffee Beans” reported that the story is valuable as it tells the reader not to give up easily and that one’s life can become better if there are other people who really care and always be there to support or give constructive opinion. While, about the story “Until Death Do Us Part”, the participants reported that the values which they get from reading it is happiness in a marriage does not depend on how much money you have or how big your house is but on the warmth of your relationship. The last title to be reported was “The Old Man and A Tiger”. The participants stated that the moral value of the story is not to under estimate other people.

Concerning what benefits that the participants get after reading these stories, they responded that after reading these moral-value literary works they realize that in their life they have to change their way of thinking and their behaviour to be better as to build their characters. They mentioned that they have to be more persevered: keep on trying! to do their best, to plan ahead, to be considerate of the feelings of others, to be open-minded; listen to others, to be compassionate and show that they care, to be humble, to help others in need, and -most importantly- they have to respect other people. Based on the results presented above, it seems clear that the Reader Response Strategy collaborated with the Six Pillars of Character has helped the participants to appreciate and to understand the literary works better. This strategy has also helped the participants to have the will to be better people such as becoming more persevered, compassionate, helpful and respectful. When a person has a will to be better, this means that he has the power to gradually achieve the strength of good character (White, 2015).

**Data Gathered from Questionnaire on Six Pillars of Character**

The other instrument to collect the data was a questionnaire dealing with the participants’ character and behaviour. The participants were expected to provide honest answers concerning their behaviour before and after reading suggested literary works. They had to select the following options: 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) uncertain, 4) agree, and 5) strongly agree for the following Six Pillars of Character: 1) trustworthiness, 2) respect, 3) responsibility, 4) fairness, 5) caring, 6) citizenship. The following table shows the participants’ establishment of behaviour before and after reading suggested literary works.

Table 1. The Participants’ Perception of Their Changing Behaviour before and after Reading Literary Work

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The Six Pillars | Before Reading Suggested Literary Works | After Reading Suggested Literary Works |
| Trustworthiness | 71 | 71 |
| Respect | 80 | 86.5 |
| Responsibility | 70.5 | 82.5 |
| Fairness | 80 | 86 |
| Caring | 82 | 90 |
| Citizenship | 77 | 79 |

As presented on Table 1 above, it can be reported that there are a number of differences between the participants’ perception toward their behaviour before and after reading activities on suggested literary works. The questionnaire was based on six pillars of character, namely: 1) trustworthiness, 2) respect, 3) responsibility, 4) fairness, 5) caring, 6) citizenship. The highest change of the participants’ perception toward their behaviour is in terms of *responsibility* in which the point increased by twelve points (70.5 points before reading activity and 82.5 points after reading activity), followed by the participants’ perception toward their behaviour in terms *o*f *caring* that increased by 8 points (from 82 points to 90 points). While in terms of *respect* and *fairness* the points increased respectively by 6.5 and 6 points. In terms of *citizenship* the points increased by 2. Finally, in terms of *trustworthiness* the points remained the same at 71.

From the data presented above, it can be concluded that the activity of reading and appreciating suggested literary works may influence the participants’ behaviour to become better. The data shows that almost all of the six pillars of characters’ points increased, this finding may infer that all of the participants get the benefit from reading and elaborating moral-value literary works. The points increased on the fact that in average the participants responded “uncertain” towards whether or not they were having certain good characters presented in the six pillars of character before the reading and elaborating suggested literary work; whilst after the reading activities, in average their responds turned to “agree” or “strongly agree” on having certain good characters. This shows that the participants get benefit from reading and elaborating moral-value literary works and realize that in their life they have to change their ways of thinking and their behaviour to be better as to build their characters.

**Data Gathered from the Interview**

The type of the questions being used in this study is experience and behavior questions as to elicit experience and behavior of the participants after they read suggested literary works. There were two main questions in this interview, as follows: “Do you think that reading moral-value literary works is able to change your behavior to be better? Explain!” and “Have you ever had experience indicating that you behave better after reading the literary works? Explain!”

All of the participants (100%) believe that reading moral-value literary works is able to change their perception and their behavior to be better than they used to have. Furthermore, about 82% of the participants revealed that they behave much better after reading the literary works, for example one of the participants stated that he tends to be more compassionate and to help other people in need.

## Conclusion

## From the overall discussions above, it seems clear that to a certain extent language learning through reading and elaborating moral-value literary works can gradually form good characters. This study confirms that by using the Reader Response Strategy collaborated with the Six Pillars of Character the teacher can help the students to have the will to be better people such as becoming more persevered, compassionate, helpful and respectful. When a person has a will to be better, this means that he has the power to gradually achieve the strength of good character (White, 2015).

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