



Elements of Young Adult Literature in Texts Used in Malaysian Secondary Schools

Jayakaran Mukundan (Corresponding author)

Department of Language and Humanities Education
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 UPM SERDANG, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: 60-3-8946-6000 E-mail: jaya@educ.upm.edu.my

Mallika V.Govindarajoo

Department of Language and Humanities Education
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 UPM SERDANG, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: 012-7692952 E-mail: mallika.vasugi@gmail.com

Received: 22-06-2013

Accepted: 19-08-2013

Published: 01-11-2013

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.2n.6p.118

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.2n.6p.118>

Abstract

This article presents the results of a study to determine the extent to which the themes, issues and portrayal of young adult characters in the novels used in the Malaysian secondary school English Language classroom fulfilled the criteria of Young Adult Literature (YAL). The novels studied were *Step by Wicked Step* (A.Fine, 1996), *Catch us if You Can* (K. McPhail, 2004) and *The Curse* (S.A. Lee, 2010). Sampling was purposeful and data came from participants' journal reflections and qualitative interviews. The findings showed that the themes in all three novels complied to the general list of themes common to YAL with family relationships and determination being the most prominent. The depiction of an adolescent protagonist who is strong and perceptive is evident in all three novels. However the young adult protagonist's voice, conflict between dependence and independence and the journey towards maturing characteristic of YAL is only distinct in *Step by Wicked Step* and *Catch us if You Can*. Description of the young adult protagonists' appearance and mannerisms was also limited in all the novels.

Keywords: Young Adult Literature, English as a Second Language, Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association

1. Introduction

Young Adult Literature (YAL) which also goes by the labels of 'adolescent fiction' or 'teen fiction' is broadly defined as literature that is written for, published and marketed to young adults. (Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association) It could also be as defined by Nilsen and Donelson (2005), 'anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 to 18 would choose to read'. Although its evolutionary path spanning several centuries, has not always been smooth, YAL is now firmly established as a genre of literature among other older and more conventional literary genres. This has been due in part to studies done on young adult development in the past century, (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Kohlberg, 1976) and the defining characteristics of YAL that make it highly relevant to the young adult and the issues he faces in this phase of his life. The combination of young adults' needs and the content of YAL that corresponds to these issues have made YAL a popular choice as reading material for young adult students in many countries. (Reed, 1994)

The possibility of tapping the YAL genre when reading material needs to be selected for Malaysian young adult students has not yet been fully explored. Literary texts were first introduced in national secondary schools as part of the English curriculum in 2001 but studies revealed little enthusiasm and interest shown by students due to a lack of relevance and identification with the texts. (Lian, 2002; Sidhu, 2003; Vethamani, 2004). To address this, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE), stated that the texts used in the 2nd cycle, beginning 2010, would include issues that were relevant to young adults and characters they could identify with. (Ghani et al. 2007) thus pointing towards the direction of the YAL genre.

The novels that were subsequently selected as prescribed reading texts for the Malaysian secondary school student are: *Step by Wicked Step* (Fine, 1996), *Catch us if You Can* (McPhail, 2004) and *The Curse* (Lee, 2010)

Studies on these texts have not yet been conducted to ascertain the presence or extent of these 'teenage issues', the portrayal of young adult characters nor the responses of young adult Malaysian student towards these novels. As the personal histories of the reader sometimes get embedded in the creation and interpretation of the text ((Fish, 1967; Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 1976) any attempt to discover the extent of relevance and interest shown by Malaysian

secondary school students towards these new texts would have to take into account the reality of the young adulthood phase with the issues that come with it and the reality that is constructed during the reading experience. Results of a study in this direction, apart from showing the extent to which the novels contain the elements of YAL would also indirectly explore the relevance of the novels to the young adult student,

A study in this direction would require in-depth knowledge of students' engagement with the texts and their personal experiences of the reading. The current literature on Malaysian students responding as young adults to prescribed literary texts in the language classroom is insufficient. Missing also is research in the Malaysian context of the understanding of the experience of the Malaysian young adult student with YAL which is of an in-depth and reflective nature.

1.1 Objective of the study.

The present study therefore aimed to address these gaps and provide the information needed on how Malaysian students as young adults themselves, relate to, interpret and identify with the elements of YAL in the prescribed novels of the literature component. This information is crucial as it allows all concerned parties access to information about their reading experience at a deeper level.

1.1.1 Research Questions

- 1) To what extent do the novels of the literature component (2nd cycle) prescribed for students in the Malaysian secondary school English Language classroom belong to the genre of YAL?
 - a) To what extent are the themes and events contemporary and meaningful to young adults?
 - b) How are the young adult characters in the novels portrayed?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Young Adults

Although it is not possible to place definite boundaries on the period of young adulthood, a broad definition would refer to the transitory period where a person leaves behind his childhood and embarks on the journey towards adulthood. (Nilsen, 2005). This period which is also referred to as 'adolescence' or 'teenage years' (Bushman & Haas, 2006) could range between 11 to 22 although a narrower span of about 12 to 19 is generally more accepted. (YALSA: Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association.) What is more important though are the distinct features of young adulthood that make it significantly different from both childhood and adulthood thus according young adulthood a status of its own in human development. The works of developmental psychologists such as Erikson (1968), Havighurst (1972) and Kohlberg (1981) confirm this. Havighurst's 'Lifetime Developmental Tasks' refers to young adulthood as the period during which the young adult searches for self-identity and strives to achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults. It is during this period also that the young adult begins to acquire a personal ideology, starts adapting to physical changes and forms a perception of self in relation to the opposite sex. (Havighurst, 1972)

2.2 Defining the Literary Genre of Young Adult Literature

Until the middle of the 20th century, YAL was not favoured for its literary quality due to associations made between YAL and the period of adolescence itself which is fraught with uncertainty, adaptation and angst. (Kaplan, 2005). Attitudes towards YAL began to shift with the publication of novels such as *The Catcher In The Rye* (Salinger J.D., 1951) and *The Outsiders* (Hinton, S.E, 1967) and later on Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968) and *My Darling My Hamburger* (1969). These novels were acclaimed for their literary quality and frank and honest portrayal of young adult issues and teenage protagonists that readers could relate to. The publication of novels such as these are also considered as significant milestones in the history of YAL as they were pivotal in the shift to new realism and the changes of attitudes towards YAL.

As an adolescent market for YAL emerged, separate sections for YAL were created and labeled by different names such as 'Literature for Adolescence', 'Adolescent Fiction' and 'Teen Novels.' In the 1970's and 1980's young adult novels were sometimes referred to as 'problem novels' because they depicted the issues faced by adolescents. (Capan, 1992) In the 1990's the issues and topics explored also began to shift and diversify and young adult novels began to include previously controversial topics and marginalized characters such as gay or transgender characters as protagonists. (Cart, 2004) This was also referred to as the 'golden age' of YAL and the evolution of YAL continued with overlapping of themes. multiple narrators, multilayers, non-linear time sequences and the incorporation of visual elements. (Koss & Teale, 2006 ; Smith, 2007; Cole 2008)

The establishing of the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature in 1999 also signified another milestone for YAL and was significant in the paradigm shift towards considering it as having the same potential for literary value as 'grown-up' novels. (Bickmore, 2008) In the early 21st century YAL became increasingly used to enhance comprehension in content area (Bean, 2003) Throughout the years YAL writing has produced work of increasingly higher literary merit even though controversies regarding its literary worth and genre position still remain. (Cart, 2008) Despite the many links between the issues faced by young adults in this phase of their lives and the issues in YAL, Young Adult Literature is nevertheless not analogous to adolescence in terms of the period of uncertainty and has instead, over the years, become a well-defined and well-crafted body of literature.

2.3 Issues in YAL

Nilsen and Donelson (2001), define YAL as ‘anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 to 18 would choose to read’ but a broader definition of YAL would be literature that is written for, published and marketed to young adults. (Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association) The common ground of both definitions is the premise that young adults choose to read about what is relevant to their own lives and this indeed is a criterion of YAL. Apart from independently choosing to read books that are meaningful reflections of their own thoughts about growing up, young adults may also seek vicarious experiences in the text by identifying with the young adult protagonists in the story. (Reed, 1994, Herz & Gallo, 1996) YAL, thus combines the fact of it being literature written for the young adult and that which the young adult would choose to read independently. (Owen, 2003, Stephens, 2007)

The characteristics that make YAL distinct from other literary genres include most importantly the depiction of a young adult protagonist at the center of the plot who is perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature and independent; Young adult novels are usually written from the teenage protagonist’s point of view and it is the ‘voice’ of the young adult that is projected. The actions and decisions of the main young adult characters are major factors in the outcome of the conflicts. The themes found in YAL are contemporary and meaningful to young adults and include issues that are relevant to the period of young adulthood. (Brozo & Simpson 1995; Small 1992; Wolf 2007) These identifying characteristics of YAL which correspond to the issues faced by young adults and are in line with their developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1972, Kohlberg 1978) strongly indicate suitability when literary texts need to be selected for adolescent students. Being identified with the young adult characters in the novels, young people may actually acquire a sympathetic companion in times of uncertainty and confusion. (Kaywell, 2000, Proukou, 2005, Kaplan, 2007)

2.4 Literary Theory in YAL and Reading Development.

According to the Reader-response theory, each reader becomes an active participant who produces a unique reading experience. This is because he brings into the reading experience his own physical and psychological conditions and thus his personal history becomes involved in the interpretation of the text. (Fish, 1967, Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 1976). The reader’s interpretive ability and the state of mind induced by the texts he reads would therefore play a significant role in determining elements of YAL in given literary texts. This also corresponds to the definition of YAL being what young adults would choose to read independently, (Nilsen and Donelson, 2001), and reinforces the idea that the texts of YAL may either determine their own reading or be determined by the reading (Moore, 1997).

2.5 Literature in the Malaysian English Language classroom

2.5.1 Introduction of the Literature Component

Although Literature in English has always been part of the Malaysian secondary school curriculum as an elective subject, it was only incorporated as a compulsory component of the English language subject in Malaysian secondary schools in 2000. This move also marked a formal acknowledgment and appreciation of the role of literature in English Language Teaching in Malaysia. This component consisted of several prescribed literary texts including poems, short stories and novels. One out of five English teaching periods a week was allotted to teaching the literature component. Among the objectives of this move were the desire to increase students’ proficiency in English, as well as to contribute towards personal development and character building. (MOE document 1999). However, the presence of YAL elements in these texts was scarce. without any distinct voice of young adults or issues related to them. (Lian, 2002, Too, 2004, Subramaniam & Vethamani 2004) Studies also revealed little interest shown by the Malaysian secondary school student towards reading these prescribed texts of the literature component in the English Language syllabus. The texts used were found to be unsuitable to students’ interests, either too difficult or too easy, boring and culturally alien with little relevance to young adults. (Sidhu, 2003; Lian 2002) After the end of the first cycle, (2000-2010) in which the novels used were found to be ‘uninteresting incompatible, and depressing, and without ‘appeal to the targeted students,’ (Ghani et al, 2007) the second cycle of literary texts were projected to include texts with young adult issues that students could identify with and respond to emotionally.

The novels that were selected for the 2nd cycle of the literature component are *Step by Wicked Step* by Anne Fine, .3 *Catch us if you Can* by Catherine McPhail and *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann

2.5.2 *Step by Wicked Step* by Anne Fine

The novel *Step by Wicked Step* was first published by Yearling on May 1st 1996 as a paperback and is classified by the publishers as belonging to the ‘reading-age’ and ‘interest level’ of readers 11 +.

Other publications of the novel include Puffin Books (part of Penguin Books Ltd) UK 2004 and Pearson Education South Asia Pte Ltd 2010. The novel was first published in Malaysia under license by Albaz Publishing and Distribution Sdn Bhd, Selangor.

In *Step by Wicked Step*, five British school children who have been chosen to travel together arrive ahead of their other classmates at Old Harwick Hall, the site for their school field-trip. It is a dark and stormy night and in one of the rooms of the old mansion the children discover a journal written by Richard Clayton Harwick , a boy who had once lived there many years ago.

In his journal which is entitled ‘Read and Weep’, Richard writes about his father’s death and the misery he feels after his mother remarries. He writes also about his resentment of his stepfather and how it prompts him to run away from home, a decision that eventually brings grief to his whole family.

The reading of Richard’s story prompts each of the five children , Claudia, Colin, Ralph, Pixie and Robbo to share their

own stories of coming to terms with the situations in their own families which involve their parents break-ups, remarriages and coping with the new step-parents and step-siblings. It is also at this moment that they discover this common bond they share with each other which is also reason they have been selected to travel together.

2.5.3 *Catch us if you Can* by Catherine McPhail

Catch Us If You Can by Catherine MacPhail was first published by Puffin (Penguin) Books, Limited in 2004. It was classified as being both Juvenile Fiction and multigenerational.

It was also published by Pearson Malaysian Sdn. Bhd. and in 2010 published by license by Vivar Printing Sdn Bhd, Selangor.

In *Catch Us If You Can*, eleven year old Rory has lived alone with his grandfather whom he calls 'Granda' ever since his father walked out on them. Rory and his grandfather have looked after each other for years but when Granda's health and memory begin to fail he needs special nursing care and medication. Rory understandably is not able to meet these increased needs and cope with his schoolwork at the same time. One day Granda accidentally starts a fire in their kitchen and this causes him to be viewed as a danger both to himself and others. The state authorities send Granda to an old folk's home in Rachnadar and Rory is placed in a children's home in Castle Street. This separation is unbearable for both Rory and Granda and affects Granda's mental health further. Unable to stand by and watch his grandfather slowly losing the desire to live, Rory plans for the two of them to escape. The story continues with the 'Great Escape,' a journey which is full of surprises, betrayals and unexpected friendships as they attempt to evade the authorities and the adventures the two of them have trying to evade the police and authorities.

2.5.4 *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann

The Curse by Lee Su Ann was the second place winner of Utusan Group Literature Prize, 2005 (Hadiah Sastera Kumpulan Utusan) under the young adult literature category of the English novel. It is now published by: Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn. Bhd 2010 with the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

The Curse begins with twenty year old Azreen returning from London to her village in an island south of Langkawi when she gets news of her sister Madhuri's sudden death. Secrecy, superstition and hints of foul play surround the circumstances of her sister's death and Azreen is determined to uncover the truth. The headstrong, frank and outspoken Azreen has to contend with local gossip which is sometimes targeted against her, the reluctance of her father to discuss the matter, and the fact of her mother's increasing senility. Apart from that, Azreen also has to come to terms with her own former unresolved feelings of jealousy towards the beautiful and graceful Madhuri who had become the love interest of her old classmate Asraf whom she herself had had a crush on. A shroud of mystery and superstition hangs over the entire village and there is a prevailing sense of belief in a curse similar to the one in the original legend of Mahsuri in Langkawi. Associations seem to be made between the mystery that shrouds her sister's death and the curse of Mahsuri in the original legend. In the midst of all this, Azreen finds consolation and counsel from the Old Lady Of The Forest who though intelligent and knowledgeable has been ostracised by the villagers for having been the cause of her abusive husband's death.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research Design: Why Qualitative Research?*

The aim of the present study was to determine the extent to which the three novels belonged to the genre of YAL and as it is the interpretation and response of the young adult that are significant in defining YAL, the method that best suited the purpose of the study had to be qualitative in nature. (Creswell, 2003, Merriam, 2009 Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2011) In-depth reflective descriptions of the participants' experience of adolescence in relation to the themes, events and portrayal of young adult protagonists were needed and so the approach was naturalistic and the research interpretive.

Qualitative interviews and reflective journals were used in the study to gather the data that was needed.

3.1.1 Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were used as a method in this study as the researcher needed to gather deep information concerning the participant young adults' thoughts, feelings and perceptions related to the YAL elements in the texts in order to determine how meaningful the issues and events in the novels were to them personally. Also, as the portrayal of young adult protagonists in the novel is closely related to young adults' perceptions of themselves, qualitative interviewing allowed the co-construction of the data and knowledge through the dialogue between researcher and participants. (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Mason, 2002; Richards 2010.) Guiding questions were used during the interviews but they were not fully structured to allow the participants free expression of feelings, thoughts, responses and perceptions.

3.1.2 Reflective Journals

Apart from qualitative interviews, the present study also used data gathered from the participants' written reflections during their reading of the three novels. These reflections were loosely based on a set of guiding criteria provided by the researcher in line with the research questions. Reflective journals are important introspective tools which are particularly suited for descriptive and interpretive research and for 'investigating behaviour in context' (Nunan, 1992) Reflective journals also represent a form of self-observation, introspection and retrospection and studies of reflective journals involve systematic personal accounts of feelings, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and reactions over a period of time. (Ortlipp, 2008, Etherington, 2004)

While the qualitative interview procedure sought to elicit responses of the same nature regarding the participants' experiences with the novels, the study took into consideration the possibility that the participants may rather write down than speak about particular thoughts, feelings or experiences in the context of the study especially if they were of an extremely personal nature.

3.2 Procedures

3.2.1 Selection of Participants for Interviews and Reflective Journals

The sampling for the study was purposeful and participants were ten students from the fourth form in a Malaysian national type secondary school with high English proficiency. Participants were briefed about the study and consent was obtained, after which they were supplied with the three novels and a set of guidelines on what was expected from them in the writing of their journals. A semi-structured interview protocol including open-ended questions was constructed to cover the required scope of the research questions and qualitative interviews were then conducted with each participant. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. This was to confirm and triangulate the results of the reflective journal study. Results of a pilot study indicated that guidelines on the journal reflections needed to be modified for emphasis and elaborated again to the participants. Apart from the reflective journals and qualitative interviews, data for the study also came from the field notes of the researcher.

Data analysis in this study was an on-going process. Further reflections and notes of the researcher were added during the reading of the reflective journals, the listening to and transcription of the interviews. The data of all parts of the study were read a few times to obtain a preliminary analysis of general themes and ideas. The emergence of specific units or segments of information were recorded and reduced to themes relevant to the research questions. The data was also examined for clustering of units. Analytic coding was used to develop themes as categories and subtopics emerged.

A thick description was then written based on the themes that emerged during the analysis. A comparison was then done between all parts of the study to confirm the findings and to answer the research questions. Feedback from member checks guided the researcher to examine the data further in case of discrepancies between findings and data and to confirm and triangulate earlier findings.

4. Results and Discussion

The study aimed to answer the following question

To what extent do the novels of the literature component (2nd cycle) prescribed for students in the Malaysian secondary school English Language classroom belong to the genre of YAL?

- a) To what extent are the themes and issues contemporary and meaningful to young adults?
- b) How are the young adult characters in the novels portrayed?

In order to explore the extent to which the novels belong to the YAL genre, which was the objective of the research question, two sub-questions were asked. The first sub-question (a) dealt with the subject of themes and events in the novels and the extent to which these were relevant and meaningful to young adults.

4.1 Themes and Issues

In answering sub-question (a), three aspects were looked at; namely the relevance of the themes, the believability of the story and the presence of a positive resolution, all of which are criteria in the determination of the YAL category. Young adult literature reflects themes commonly experienced by adolescents and although YAL has been known to encompass a diversity of themes, they share some common traits including 'friendship, getting into trouble, interest in the opposite sex, money, divorce, single parents, remarriage, problems with parents, grandparents, younger siblings, concern over grades or school, popularity, puberty, race, death, and neighbourhood' (Wells, 2010). A content analysis of the winners of the Michael L. Printz Award revealed six common content trends: journeys, teenage angst leading to self-actualization, family relationships, romantic relationships, controversial issues within the content, and diversity of story characters. These thematic elements have found to be historically present in the majority of literature for young adults. (Cart, 2008) Young Adult Literature also explores themes that are important and crucial to adolescence such as relationships to authority figures, peer pressure and issues of diversity as it relates to gender, sociocultural, and/or socioeconomic status.

In the three novels that were studied some of these themes and issues emerged and were identified by the participants. The identified themes and number of participants who have identified them is displayed in Table 1

Table 1. Themes in novels as identified by participants.

NOVELS	STEP BY WICKED STEP		CATCH US IF YOU CAN		THE CURSE	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
THEMES						
Divorce and remarriage	8	100	2	25	8	100
Family relationships	8	100	8	100	8	100
Journeys	3	37.5	8	100	2	25
Romantic relationships	4	50	1	12.5	5	62.5
Teenage Angst	5	62.5	3	37.5	2	25
Friendship	8	100	8	100	6	75
Determination/Courage	8	100	8	100	8	100
Forgiveness	5	62.5	8	100	7	87.5

The themes of family relationships and determination were the most prominent in all three novels followed by friendship and forgiveness. The themes or issues in all three novels as perceived by the participants were related or complied to the general list of themes common to YAL mentioned above. While almost all the participants agreed on the family relationships, friendship, courage and determination themes for the three novels, teenage angst which is a common feature of YAL was more identifiable as a theme in *Step by Wicked Step* compared to the other two novels. In the same way the theme of journeys was mentioned most for *Catch us if You Can* and less obviously identified in *Step by Wicked Step* and *The Curse*. The theme of forgiveness also featured rather prominently in all three novels. However it is important to remember that for the purposes of this study what was more important was the way these themes are expounded in the novels and how the young adult relates to these themes personally. A point to note is that in their listing of themes, the participants have focused on the part of the teenage characters in the novels, their lives, 'broken' homes, their acceptance, determination and their courage and hardly anything from the adult characters' perspectives. What is significant about this is that they have read it from where they are and it is their interpretation that gives it the essence of their experience.

At times the participants had difficulty in expressing the general or principal themes of the novels but preferred to hone in on specific issues. This in retrospect seems to be consistent with the task of describing their personal reading journey that was set before them. For the most part they did not look upon the novels in their entirety but rather were describing as a process, parts of the journey. Even after they had finished they did not actually stand back and look in perspective or objectively at the distance they'd covered. This may be the reason the themes were not mentioned much in the journals as a whole except as they occurred as messages in specific parts. This also speaks about the way young adults read. Perhaps they are more interested in what is going on at that moment and do not voluntarily or spontaneously want to do an overall analysis of theme or message.

4.1.2 Believability

As participants' recognition of the themes and issues in the novels are also influenced by the level to which these appear real or credible to them, the believability factor of the three novels was also taken into consideration. Participant responses indicated a higher level of believability in *Step by Wicked Step* compared to the other two novels. While the theme of the strong family bond between a boy and his grandfather in the novel *Catch us if You Can* was highly appealing to the readers, the train of events that followed after the adolescent protagonist Rory plans and executes the 'The Great Escape', leading his grandfather all over the country, though exciting, was considered a little unrealistic.

Likewise *The Curse* had more negative responses on the believability aspect. This could be in part related to the fact that the readers being Malaysians themselves, are familiar with local social discourse and therefore tend to be more judgmental with a story that has a somewhat local context. Although this did not reduce many of the readers' interest and enjoyment of the novel there was still the feeling of a measure of misrepresentation.

4.1.3 Resolution and Closure

As a sense of closure or a positive resolution is also another defining (but not essential) characteristic of YAL this was also studied. The only novel with a definite positive resolution is *Catch us if You Can* while the endings of the stories of the individual characters in *Step by Wicked Step* are left to readers' interpretations and wishes although the novel itself ends on a note of hopefulness and renewed strength. In *Step By Wicked Step* even if there was no definite ending for some of the individual stories, the general feeling was positive and there was a form of closure in the end for all the characters. *The Curse* however had a tragic incident towards the end and although there was no real positive resolution, there was a sense of closure as the protagonist Azreen comes to terms with the many issues around her. However on the whole it is the readers' perceptions of the endings of the novels that are deemed significant in the present study and so looking at closure independently, all three novels had a sense of one and thus in this aspect all of them fulfill the criteria of YAL.

4.2 Portrayal of young adult characters

The second sub-question (b) focussed on how the young adult characters in the novels have been portrayed. The researcher was aware that the research question seems to begin with the assumption that there are indeed elements of YAL including young adult protagonists in the novels. However, based on the researcher's overview of the novels at the beginning of the study, the descriptions of the novels by the publishers and the list of criteria in text selection by the Malaysian Curriculum Development Department which pointed towards their inclusion in the YAL genre, this assumption was justified. It would be useful also to remember that the objective of the study was not so much to establish the novels under the YAL genre but to explore the extent to which these elements are present in the novel.

In answering sub-question (b) the portrayal of young adults firstly dealt with the presence of teenage slang and/or expressions and the extent of description of young adult characters appearances and mannerisms. The portrayal of the young adult protagonists in the novels was also linked to the intensity of their 'voice'; whether their voice could be heard throughout the story. This could to a measure be determined by the point of view from which the novels have been written. The portrayal of the young adult protagonists' personalities whether strong, intelligent, perceptive which are the usual hallmarks of YAL were also studied as were their actions and role in the final outcome. As the conflict between dependence and independence, the period of uncertainty and fluctuations between childlike and adult-like behaviour is another significant characteristic of young adulthood, often accompanied by a maturing or a change, evidence of this would also add to the realistic portrayal of the young adult protagonist and the study looked for signs of all these as well. The extent to which their actions and decisions become major factors in the outcome of the conflict is

also considered significant. As one of the identifying characteristics of YAL include a sense of closure or an ending on a positive note, this was also investigated in the study.

4.2.1 The presence of young adult protagonists

In YAL the primary focus is centered around a main character who is a young adult and it is through this character that the reader in turn experiences emotions and situations and is able to see how conflicts are resolved.

The protagonists in all three novels seem to come closer to the margins of the young adulthood range set by YALSA (12-19), which may cast a degree of doubt on their 'young-adulthood status'. The main characters in *Step by Wicked Step* are anywhere between 12 to 15 in age, Rory the protagonist in *Catch us if you Can* is probably about 12 and *The Curse's* protagonist Azreen is about 20 years old. This would place Azreen just out of the boundaries set by YALSA and the protagonists from the other two novels just about within. However a wider range with boundaries 11-22 taking into consideration other definitions of young adulthood (YALSA) would allow *The Curse* to fulfill the criteria of having a young adult protagonist.

There are also generally two age-range designations for readers in YA fiction which is usually based on the book's content. (Cook, 2011); Ages 12 and above and age 14 and above. This would mean that it was possible for a YA novel with an 18 year old protagonist to be designated '12 and up' if there was no content considered objectionable for younger readers. Young Adult novelist Cook also believes that a general guideline for YA is high-school-age which is somewhere between 14-18 and states that 'putting your main characters in college means going beyond the usual bounds of YA'. But what is more important however is 'the story you're trying to tell, and the maturity of the themes you explore' (Habel, 2008).

Likewise, the older age of Azreen in *The Curse* could be appropriate for the themes of love, jealousy and murder in the novels whereas the portrayal of themes, events and problems depicted in the other two novels are suitable for the age-range of their respective protagonists.

The lack of attention and even importance placed on the chronological age of the protagonists in the novels by the participants may indicate that they are more interested in other aspects of the novels and the exact ages of the characters are not as important to them as what they are doing or what happens in the stories.

4.2.2 Appearance and Mannerisms

The amount of descriptions of the young adult protagonists' appearance and mannerisms in the novels as perceived by the participants was minimal. Also there was not much reference to 'teen-speak' or expressions usually used by young adults apart from certain scenes in *Catch us if you Can* and *Step by Wicked Step*. Besides the actual lack of these elements in the novels which characterize YAL, another reason for the minimal reference to these could be the young adult participant's inability to recognize behaviour that is so usual to them as being representative of their age-group. In other words it was difficult for them to present an objective view of the situation when they were 'on the inside looking in'. Another reason which surfaced had to do with the place and time settings of the novels. Because the novels had been written more than a decade earlier and due to the speed with which teen-speak, slang and language itself evolves, certain expressions that were characteristic of teenagers of that time in the novels no longer had any relevance to the present day young adult participants of the study. *The Curse* with an almost all-adult cast of characters including Azreen the 20 year old protagonist, did not contain any teenage expressions whatsoever. So in terms of the criteria of descriptions of appearance, mannerisms and speech, from the participants' viewpoints this is barely fulfilled in the first two novels and not at all in *The Curse*.

4.2.3 Voice, Personality and Growth

It is however not the mere presence but the portrayal of the young adult protagonists that are of primary importance in YAL. The list of identifying criteria for YAL as stated by Brozo and Simpson (1995) and Small (1992) include the depiction of a young adult protagonist at the center of the plot who is perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature and independent; The 'voice' of the young adult is projected and YA novels are usually written from the young adult protagonist's point of view. The actions and decisions of the main young adult characters are also major factors in the outcome of the conflict and the young adult protagonist goes through a kind of growth or change and develops a higher level of maturity by the end of the novel.

In exploring the portrayal of the young adult protagonists in the story it was important to study how much of his voice could be heard above the voices of the other characters in the story. At times this was conveyed very obviously by the point of view that the novel is written from. A first person (the young adult protagonist's) point of view led quite naturally to the conclusion that an audible teenage voice was present in the story as in the case of *Catch us if You Can*. The portrayal was also studied from their character traits and personalities whether they were portrayed as strong, weak, perceptive, intelligent, and so on and whether there was evidence of a personal conflict of dependence against independence within them at any point which reflected the part-child-part-adult status of their young adulthood. Finally as young adult protagonists in YAL characteristically undergo a change or a maturing towards adulthood which is evident as the novel ends, signs of this were also studied in the three novels.

There was no doubt about the voice of the adolescent protagonist Rory in *Catch us if You Can* as the entire novel is written from his point of view and is seen through his eyes. His portrayal came across as a child who is forced to adopt an adult role but does it willingly because of the bond of affection in the family relationship between himself and his grandfather. The transitory period between childhood and adulthood is very much depicted in this novel as Rory

struggles to make decisions which are too large for him. There are instances in the novel where he is seen as perceptive and sensitive to the situation, being aware of his grandfather's needs, covering up for him when he has to and displays a wisdom beyond his years he makes independent decisions but at other times he becomes the child he still is and wonders whether he is doing the right thing. As the story progresses he matures in both his understanding of the situation, his grandfather and himself. So even though Rory belongs to the lower margin of the young adult range his portrayal fulfills the criteria of YAL in many ways.

Step By Wicked Step, on the other hand, comprises a group of five main teenage characters where each shares the stories of his or her own family situations and it is this that makes up the different chapters in the novel. Therefore for most parts when they are recounting their own stories, it is their voices that are heard. Narration is minimal and the transition from story to story is often done through dialogue between characters. As their individual stories mostly begin with them being thrust in the situation where their parents' marriages break-up and the sometimes sudden introduction of their parents' new partners or step-siblings, the initial reactions of the teenage characters are rebellion, incredulity, and a form of desperation. Their voices of protest are heard loudly as they attempt in their own ways to deal with the situations. Thus the portrayal of the teenage characters in these situations where they have no control over what is happening in their families is seen to be real and elicits the sympathetic understanding of the young adult participants who are not unfamiliar with the issues depicted. Towards the end of each story the characters also undergo a process of maturing as they deal with their internal conflicts, the need to remain loyal to one parent against their love for the other and acceptance of situations they cannot change. Eventually they come to terms with their situations and although the situations themselves may not change very much the changes occur within the teenagers themselves and they grow stronger. *Step by Wicked Step* thus also fulfills this criteria needed for the YAL category.

The Curse is written from the (3rd person) narrator's point of view and the young adult character in the *Curse*, Azreen is portrayed as headstrong, determined, intelligent and perceptive. Her voice is heard throughout the novel in the many dialogues and interactions although the story is not seen through her eyes. There does not seem to be much evidence of any inner conflict or half-child, half-adult phase in the protagonist and the most obvious reason here is her age. At 20 the protagonist may have surpassed that age and from the onset of the novel is quite mature in her manner and speech. There are references to the state of her inner emotions at times especially regarding her past unresolved feelings of resentment towards her dead sister and her romantic interest. However these are not particularly characteristic of young adulthood and thus the character of Azreen as mentioned by the participants is mature from the beginning to the end. Although she does come to terms with her own feelings and prejudices at the end of the novel, again these are not related to a progress in maturity nor representative of a phase of growth.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study have firstly shown that while all three had young adult protagonists, it was in *Step by Wicked Step* where the young adult protagonists lay in the middle age range of the period compared to the protagonists from the other two novels who were at the boundaries of young adulthood. The main characters in *Step by Wicked Step* were between 12 to 15 in age, Rory in *Catch Us if You Can* is probably about 12 and *The Curse's* protagonist Azreen is about 20 years old. The three novels also fall into either category of age-range designations for readers in YA fiction; Ages 12 and above and age 14 and above. (Cook, 2011)

The themes or issues in all three novels complied to the general list of themes common to YAL mentioned earlier. The themes of family relationships and determination were the most prominent in all three novels followed by friendship and forgiveness and marriage and divorce. Teenage angst which is a common feature of YAL was most identifiable as a theme in *Step by Wicked Step* compared to the other two novels and 'journeys' was mentioned most for *Catch us if You Can* and less obviously identified in *Step by Wicked Step* and *The Curse*. Romantic relationships featured little in the novels and even when they did it was between the adult characters in the novels and there was no reference to the awareness of the opposite sex, beginning of romantic interest during the young adulthood phase. It was only in *The Curse* that there was some reference to this.

In terms of believability, *Step by Wicked Step* compared to the other two novels rated highest due to the realistic portrayal of broken homes. *Catch us if You Can* though highly appealing because of the strong family bond between Rory and his 'Granda', was considered a little unrealistic due to the improbability of a young boy planning and executing an 'escape' from the institutions they had been placed. *The Curse* was also considered unrealistic and this could have been in part related to participants being more critical and judgmental due to their familiarity with the actual Malaysian setting of the novel.

The only novel with a definite positive resolution is *Catch us if You Can*. In *Step By Wicked Step* even if there was no definite ending for some of the individual stories, the general feeling was positive and there was a form of closure in the end for all the characters as the novel ends on a note of hopefulness and renewed strength. In *The Curse* the protagonist Azreen coming to terms with the many issues around her provides a sense of closure although there was no real positive resolution. However looking at closure independently, from the readers' perceptions of the endings of the novels all three novels had a sense of one and thus in this aspect all of them fulfill the criteria of YAL.

There was limited description of the young adult protagonists' appearance and mannerisms in the novels and very little evidence of 'teen-speak' or expressions usually used by young adults, all of which are part of the characteristics of YAL. There was also a lack of reference to any social media, information communication technology or networking tools which are rather closely associated with contemporary young adult society.

The voice of the adolescent protagonist Rory in *Catch us if You Can* is distinctly heard as the novel has been written from his point of view and the world is seen through his eyes. The depiction of an adolescent protagonist who is strong and perceptive which is a hallmark of YAL is seen in the character of Rory who makes independent decisions and the instances where he doubts the wisdom of his decisions also portrays the transitory period and conflict between childhood and adulthood which is again another characteristic of YAL. There are also evident signs of his own maturing as the story progresses and he finally comes to face the reality of the situation.

In *Step by Wicked Step* the five main teenage characters recount their own stories and their voices are distinct either in protest over the situations in their families that they have no control over or in a form of acceptance and self-reassurance that things could get better. There is a definite sense of each teenage character's maturing as they come to terms with their individual situations and begin to adapt. Thus *Step by Wicked Step* also fulfills this criteria needed for the YAL category.

The Curse which is written from the (3rd person) narrator's point of view features a strong young adult character Azreen whose voice is heard in different parts throughout the novel. The story however is not actually seen through her eyes. Compared to the other two novels, there is little evidence of the transitory child-adult phase of young adulthood but this was partly justified by the protagonist's age which at 20 was at the upper boundary of young adulthood. The 'coming to terms with her own inner conflicts' was also not seen as representative of this phase of development.

The findings of the study apart from providing answers to the extent of YAL elements found in the novels and how the young adults identified with these elements, also provided glimpses of the many issues that young adults had to contend with at this phase of their lives.

6. Recommendations

Although the objective of the study was to explore the extent to which the three prescribed novels belonged to the genre of YAL, the qualitative nature of the study apart from providing answers to the research questions also reflected the reading journey of the young adults and the essence of the young adult's experience with text. Thus participants' responses to an extent also showed parallels between issues in the novels and what was going on in this stage of their lives. A less introspective approach may not have been as effective in eliciting the emergent deep responses that are so crucial in the study of an experience of young adulthood and text.

What was missing in the novels was the description of mannerisms, dressing, and teenage expressions that are common indicators of YAL. The novels also lacked issues such as teenage angst, body image, sexual development and the young adult's coming to terms with his own identity and place in society. There was also very little reference to any awareness or the beginning of attraction towards the opposite sex which is another hallmark of young adulthood. While these exclusions could have been an oversight or deliberate on the part of the text selection panel, it does reflect a significant gap in the issues that are dominant in the phase of young adulthood.

The setting or cultural context of the chosen novels should not precede the need for the novel to be relevant to young adult issues. This was brought home very clearly in the study where the young adults related most to issues that were familiar rather than contexts and settings that were unfamiliar.

Future research could be done using other novels to determine if there were differences in the way young adults of different sexes respond to the same novels. Research could also be carried out on responses towards specific elements of YAL such as teenage expressions and descriptions.

The findings have significant implications to the Malaysian panel who decides text selection for the young adult Malaysian student in secondary schools because it illustrates the impact YAL can have on the thoughts and emotions of the young adult reader. The cycle of novels in the Malaysian school will eventually change according to administrative policies, nevertheless the issues faced by young adults in this period of development would for the major part remain the same. Although young adult readers are affected by decisions taken by young adult characters in the novels, such as running away from home, texts selected do not have to depict 'model' young adult behavior with 'perfect' young adult protagonists as this would in fact reduce believability and young adults who are able to discern between what is real and contrived may be put off by the too-perfect depiction of young adult characters in the novel. Therefore it is the portrayal of young adult characters whose strengths, and weaknesses they can identify with and who, like them, have conflicts between childhood and adulthood, dependence and independence, who make mistakes but are not devastated; that young adult readers can relate to, identify with and as a result want to continue reading the novel.

References

- Brozo, G.W., Simpson, M.L. (2006). *Content literacy for today's adolescents: Honoring diversity and building competence*. New Jersey: Pearson.
- Bickmore S. T. (2008) It is inexcusable to deny Inexcusable a place in the classroom. *The Alan Review*. 35. 2, 75-83.
- Bean, T.W., & Moni, K. (2003) Developing students' critical literacy; Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 46, 638-649
- Bushman, J. H., & Haas, K. P. (2006). *Young adult literature in the English classroom* (4th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson.
- Capan, M. A. (1992, November). *Multiple voices in young adult novels*. Paper presented at the 84th

- Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English. Louisville, Kentucky.
- Cart, M. (2004). From insider to outsider: The evolution of young adult literature. *Voices from the middle*, 9(2), 95-97.
- Cart, M. (2008). *The value of young adult literature*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Creswell, W.J (2003). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches*. (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cole, P. (2008). *Young adult literature in the 21st Century*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Donelson, K. L., & Nilsen, A. P. (2005). *Literature for today's young adults* (7th ed.) Boston: Pearson.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming reflexive researchers: Using ourselves in research*. London: Jessica Kingley
- Fine, A. (1996). *Step by wicked step*. London: Puffin Books.
- Fish, S. E. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Ghani, A.H., Bakar A.M., Salim, S., & Shukor, M. (2007). *Implementation of the English language literature component for secondary schools: An impact study*. Journal of Educational Research, Educational Research and Planning Unit Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Guba, G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Guest, G, Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2011). How many interviews are enough?: An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18, 59-82.
- Havighurst, R.J (1972) *Developmental tasks and education*: McKay Co, Michigan
- Herz S.K., & Gallo, D.R. (1996) *From Hinton to Hamlet*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York: Viking.
- Holland, N (1968). *The dynamics of literary response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaplan, J.S. (2005). Recent research in young adult literature: Moving beyond traditional constraints and convention. *The ALAN Review*, 11-18.
- Kaywell, J.F. (2000). *Adolescent literature as a complement to the classics*. Norwood: Christopher- Gordon Publishers Inc.
- Kohlberg, L (1981) *The meaning and measurement of moral development*, California, Clark University Press
- Koss, M. D., & Teale, W. H. (2006) *Young adults and their reading materials*. Nashville, Tennessee.
- Lian, H. M. 2002. *Selecting Young Adult Literary Texts for Malaysian Secondary School Students*. Unpublished Masters Dissertation, Universiti Putra Malaysia
- Lee, Su Ann. (2010). *The Curse*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn. Bhd with the Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Mason, J (2002) *Qualitative Researching* London, Sage Publications Ltd
- Macphail, C. (2004). *Catch us if you can*. London: Puffin Books.
- Merriam, B. S., (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ministry of Education, Malaysia. (2009). *Literature component for secondary schools: A collection of short stories and drama Form 4 and 5*, Kuala Lumpur: Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.
- Ministry of Education, Malaysia. (2009). *Literature component for secondary schools: A collection of poems, short stories and drama Form 1 to Form 3*. Kuala Lumpur: Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.
- Moore, J. N. (1997). *Interpreting young adult literature: Literature theory in secondary classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Nilsen, A. P., & Donelson, K. L. (2001). *Literature for today's young adults* (6th ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Nunan, D (1992) *Research methods in language learning*, Cambridge University Press, New York
- Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The Qualitative Report* 1(4), 695-705. <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-4/ortlipp.pdf>
- Owen, M. (2003). *Developing a love of reading: Why young adult literature is important*. <http://www.alia.org.au/publishing/orana/39.1/owen.html>.
- Proukou, K. (2005). Young adult literature: Rite of passage or rite of its own. *The ALAN Review*. Summer 2005.
- Reed, A. J. S. (1994). *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International.

- Richards, L (2010) *Handling Qualitative Data A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1976). *Literature as exploration*. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Salinger J.D. (1951). *The catcher in the rye*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Sidhu, G.K.(2003) Literature in the language classroom: Seeing through the eyes of learners. In G. Subramaniam (Ed.). *Teaching Literature in ESL/EFL Contexts*, 88-110. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Sasbadi Sdn.Bhd.
- Smith, S. (2007). The Death of Genre. *The ALAN Review, Fall 2007*.
<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v35n1/smith.html>.
- Stephens, J. (2007). Young adult: A book by any other name. *The ALAN Review Fall 2007*
<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v35n1/stephens.html>.
- Subramaniam, G. & Vethamani, M. E. (2004). *Teaching of literature in ESL/EFL contexts*. Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur: Sasbadi Sdn. Bhd.
- Too, Wei-Keong. (2004). Young adult literature: An alternative genre in the classroom reading list. *The English Teacher*, 35, 41-59.
- Vethamani, Malachi Edwin. (2003). *Developments in teaching of literature in English*. Serdang: Universiti Putra Press.
- Wells, A. D. (2010) *Themes Found in Young Adult Literature: A Comparison Study Between 1980 and 2000*. University of North Carolina,
- Wolf, L. J (2007). *Young adult novels and the teens who read them*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zindel, P. (1968). *The pigman*. New York: Harper-Trophy.
- Zindel, P. (1969). *My darling my hamburger*. New York: Harper-Trophy.