

Young Adult Literature and Higher-order Thinking Skills: A Confluence of Young Minds

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between young adult literature (YAL) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) as reflected by a group of young adolescents. Focus group interviews were carried out using an interview protocol which consists of questions on students' experiences with YAL. Following purposive sampling procedures, ten avid readers were selected among adolescent students in a secondary school. Two sessions of interview with the students were conducted to discuss the students' reading of YAL and its relationship with HOTS. Using a qualitative analysis method – the content analysis, data gathered through focus-group interview, document analysis and classroom observation were analysed and the themes that emerged were used to answer the research questions. The findings revealed the need to engage students more actively in YAL as it could be instrumental in promoting HOTS in the classroom.

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Keywords: Higher-order thinking skills; Language learning; Young adult literature

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English literature to secondary schools students is not new in Malaysia. The move aims to tackle the falling standard of the English language among students in the country by promoting and strengthening the language position and use among Malaysians. Through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2012), and its recent Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English (MBMMBI) policy (a policy that promotes bilingualism in schools), the government through its Ministry of Education has made bilingual competency among students a top priority. Besides, equipping students with thinking skills is also one of the government aspirations.

Following that, various measures were introduced in schools, and among them, the introduction of literature. In Malaysia, YAL is embedded in the English teaching and learning curriculum. All secondary students have a standardize form of poems, short stories, novels and drama throughout their secondary school years. Moreover, a program called NILAM (a reading project) has been introduced in schools to encourage students to use school libraries and read books of fiction and non-fiction to improve reading habits among secondary school students. The students who read the highest number of books are selected and presented with awards annually. This effort coupled with many others initiative is to integrate YAL in the classroom in promoting and sustaining reading habits among Malaysian students.

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As a result, students have been learning young adult literature (YAL) in the classrooms for a while now. While the effect of YAL on students' general proficiency is yet to be measured, it is vital to consider the role of YAL in students' lives and how it affects them, affectively and cognitively. It is argued that YAL, apart from helping students with their language skills, could also affect them cognitively, in other words, it could make them think. Nevertheless, research on YAL in Malaysian classrooms is scant, and there is a probability of its role in activating the students' thinking skills.

Therefore, this study is conducted to find out the role of YAL in students' learning and its effect on students' higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). The study aims to identify the relationship between YAL and HOTS because the researchers believe YAL provides the right platform to encourage HOTS among young adults. YAL engages students in reading activities through its thematic appeal and offers thinking aloud opportunities.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Malaysian secondary school English language teachers are required to teach YAL to their students. The Curriculum Development Unit has selected a few novels for this purpose, and teachers are required to teach them in classrooms, the learning of which will be tested in the nation's standardized tests. Therefore, it is compulsory for students to read and understand the novels. However, from observations, it was realised that many Form 4 and 5 (K-12) students are not very keen on reading the novels so much so the teachers at times have to prepare synopses of the novels for the students' reading.

That being the case, there is a vulnerability of YAL being taught solely for the purpose of examinations, and students reading it only for a pass in the English language paper. If it happens, it will be a sheer loss for both teachers and students as YAL is more than just a reading text. Alsup (2010) indicates that YAL is capable of promoting students' higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) besides appealing to them affectively and cognitively (Alsup, 2010). The students exhibited HOTS which is one of the national educational goal (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025) during some YAL reading activities. As such, YAL could provide a meaningful platform for the teaching and learning of HOTS to adolescents students in a secondary school.

Therefore, this study focuses on understanding the role of YAL so that it can facilitate teachers in promoting active classroom activities. Besides, if YAL is capable of facilitating students' HOTS, this study intends to find out how it is done. This study hence explores the following two issues:

- 1) What does YAL mean to the students?
- 2) How does YAL foster students' higher-order thinking skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Young Adult Literature

There is no consensus on YAL definition though the genre has existed since 1940 and only gained widespread attention in the 80's. Typically, YAL concerns young adults and issues that revolve around this group of people. YAL is literature written for readers between the ages of 12 and 20 (Bucher & Hinton, 2014). Cart (2001) and Cole (2008) assert that YAL is defined in the same way adolescence is perceived which is a period of uncertainty and without a clear definition. Nevertheless, YAL is generally defined as literature with suitable settings and themes for young adults.

YAL influences students in three ways: engagement, development and diversity (Stover, 2001). Literature can engage students but YAL can be the pull factor in engaging them to read since it deals with teen related issues. Furthermore, YAL could develop students' literacy skills, reading and writing. Most of YAL is of a manageable length for students and contains simple language that does not threaten nor bore them. Even the plot and characters are easy to understand in contrast to traditional, canonical literature, which can put them off at the mere sight of it. YAL provides students with an experience that

is enveloping, current and unthreatening. In terms of diversity, YAL offers a rich and fertile ground through which students could live through many experiences. YAL usually deals with a wide range of topics and this could let students experience diversity through reading.

English as Second Language (ESL) teachers have also found ways to foster HOTS through YAL. In YAL, students encounter different views and beliefs and when they reflect upon them, the students activate their HOTS. In other words, teachers do not merely teach YAL for students to recall or summarise the story. The teachers introduce YAL to elicit students' responses by way of analysing, synthesising and evaluating YAL stories, themes and characters.

While it may be true that reading enhances and improves students' language learning, the teaching and learning of YAL, its effectiveness in pedagogy and the role it plays in shaping students' beliefs and ideology have long escaped a systemic and scholarly examination (Alsup, 2010). Even though there are assumptions on the effectiveness of YAL as a catalyst for improving students' reading skills and enhancing their self-concepts, research-oriented perspectives, the application of YAL particularly in Malaysia, is scant.

Principally, the teaching of YAL in Malaysian schools revolves around two objectives. Students should be able to read, view and respond to literary works and express themselves creatively and imaginatively (Ministry of Education, 1999). Some local studies identified the importance of emphasizing HOTS while teaching literature, either to children or young adults. According to Sidhu, Chan and Kaur (2010), besides improving students' language skills, a literature-enriched curriculum is also capable of promoting HOTS. However, in the study, the researchers regretted the fact that teachers placed no emphasis on the teaching of HOTS. On a similar note, Ali Abdul Ghani, Mohamed Abu Bakar, Sarina Salim and Majeedah Mohd Shukor (2007) also lamented the fact that literary discussions in the classrooms which could pave the way for the activation of HOTS were not being actively pursued. Bakar and Talif (2007) also reported that critical reading (emphasizing on HOTS) of YAL is possible with teacher-centred as well as student-centred teaching approach classrooms. In general, these studies have established a strong link between literature and thinking skills. In fact, the studies also advocate the use of the former for the maximization of the latter.

This paper focuses on YAL and students' cognitive development in relation creative and imaginative literary works. In order to achieve that, students must be taught to activate their HOTS. Needless to say, from the objectives, it is evident that HOTS is already embedded in the curriculum. This is congruent with what Gerlach (1992: 113) has proposed,

When responding to literature, readers should go beyond lower-order thinking skills such as memorizing and summarizing the plot to more advanced thinking skills which also includes critical thinking. . . ., respond, analyse, synthesize, organize, apply, and evaluate, . . .in order to make meaning and demonstrate an understanding of literature as it applies to their own lives.

This means YAL could work closely with HOTS. The two could complement each other to form challenging activities. HOTS could encourage students to read YAL and YAL on the other hand could provide a platform for the activation of HOTS. This study therefore, attempts to see the link between YAL and HOTS. It is proposed that YAL is a potent genre that could promote HOTS among students. The students are tested on their understanding of the YAL through their responses. However questions like how they read, why they read, and how the reading experiences affect their emotional, cognitive and behavior remain to be answered.

2.2 Higher-order Thinking Skills

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation and require mastery of previous levels, such as applying routine rules to familiar or novel problems (McDavitt, 1994). King, Goodson and Rohani (2012) claim HOTS include critical, logical, reflective, metacognitive and creative thinking, and are triggered when individuals are faced with unfamiliar situations, complex problems and uncertainties and dilemmas. HOTS are principally interpreted as cognitive activities that are beyond the

stage of recall and comprehension in the Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). HOTS are essential for problem-solving and critical and creative thinking.

However, according to a report by the Critical Thinking Community (2011), few college students were able to think critically through the content of a subject. Some students could write complete and correct sentences, but they could not prepare arguments (Paul & Nosich, 1992). In Jordan, students' critical thinking skills were not as developed as they were supposed to be, despite the reforms in the education system (Bataneh & Zghoul, 2006). In Malaysia, though the teaching of thinking skills is part of the curriculum requirement, the teachers were not adequately prepared to teach HOTS in the classrooms (Nagappan, 2001). Overall, the studies indicate that both teachers and students were ill-equipped to teach and learn HOTS as they are not adequately exposed to HOTS to encourage its active use in the classrooms. This situation, therefore, warrants immediate concern and action.

The teaching of HOTS also improves students' communicative competence, enhances their cognitive abilities and has a positive impact on their social and emotional development (Bensley et al., 2010; Dewey & Bento, 2009; Klimova, 2009). Hence, the teaching of HOTS should be actively encouraged in classrooms, and the teaching of YAL presents one such opportunity. In YAL, students need critical and creative thinking skills to gain better understanding, and be able to respond to it analytically. Furthermore, the teaching of HOTS and practices enable students to perform better in literary assessment. The literary questions in SPM examination (Malaysia standardized examination) require students to employ HOTS. As such, the teaching of HOTS in a YAL classroom, besides enabling students to do well in the examinations could also enhance their appreciation of YAL.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Participants

The participants for this study were ten Form Five students who were selected from a secondary school. Using a purposive sampling method, the sole criterion for the participants is their reading habit of YAL. Based on the students' responses on YAL and their teachers' recommendation, the students were shortlisted among a group of students who were available for the interview. There were nine female and a male student involved. It was difficult to have more male participants as many were either not familiar with YAL or lack of YAL reading habit.

3.2 Research Instruments

Two instruments were developed to carry out the study. One was interview questions which were conducted using an interview protocol. The questions were developed based on the literature review and used during the focus-group interview. The interview protocol comprised the interview questions to explore the participants reading of YAL i.e. the purposes, benefits, role of HOTS and link between YAL and HOTS. Another instrument was a worksheet on a specific YAL. The worksheet was to identify the thinking skills used by the participants in responding to YAL. The worksheet contained some HOTS questions and required the participants to answer them in writing.

The initial plan to collect data did not include classroom observation. However, in order to triangulate the findings and cement some lacuna which appeared after the data was collected, it became necessary. For this purpose, two classes where YAL was taught were observed. After obtaining prior permission from the school authority and the teachers concerned, the classrooms were observed to see how the students' HOTS were activated during YAL lessons. The observation was conducted with a focus on understanding the teaching strategies employed to teach YAL and the students' engagement and reaction during YAL lessons.

3.3 Research Procedures

The research was conducted in three stages. Firstly, the participants were identified and interviewed in groups. The interview protocol was used for this purpose. Once the oral data was collected, on a designated date and time, the participants were required to sit for a written test involving the worksheet on the novel 'The Curse' (Lee, 2010). The third stage involved classroom observation. Two classes were observed for this purpose.

3.3.1 Focus-group Interview

The participants were divided into two groups. Each group consisted of five students. The researcher assumed the role of a mediator in conducting the focus-group interview based on an interview protocol. The focus group interview technique was used in gathering common views and responses from several individuals from specific people (Creswell, 2005). In carrying the technique, every participant must have equal opportunity to have his/her say (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009). This is to prevent any participant to dominate the discussion. The interview sessions were videotaped and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.3.2 Document Analysis

With permission from the teachers and students, worksheets were distributed to the students for further analysis. The worksheet contained questions that require HOTS on the selected YAL for the study i.e. the Curse. The Curse is a YAL selected by the Curriculum Development Unit of the Ministry of Education for classroom reading and the teaching of literature in English. Content analysis techniques were used to identify the use of HOTS in the students' worksheet. The result of such analysis was used to support what the students claimed during the interview.

3.3.3 Classroom Observation

The initial plan to collect data did not include classroom observation. However, the observation became necessary after the data was collected to triangulate the findings and for in depth investigation. For this purpose, two classes where YAL was taught were observed. After obtaining prior permission from the school authority and the teachers concerned, the classrooms were observed to see how the students' HOTS were activated during YAL lessons. The observation was conducted with a focus on understanding the teaching strategies employed to teach YAL and the students' engagement and reaction during YAL lessons.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data collected through the focus-group interviews, worksheets and classroom observation were transcribed and subjected to content analysis which enabled the researcher to code words or phrases and statements. The findings were subsequently grouped into suitable categories based on the research questions so that the data could be analysed with a focus and within a locus (Merriam, 2009). This would help in trimming the data to a manageable size and guide the researcher into framing the data within the parameters of the research questions.

4.1 Research Question 1: What Does YAL Mean to Students?

4.1.1 General Reading Habits

The participants read extensively. Most of them read at home as they have less or no time at school. During the NILAM project, they read a few pages at random. However, they frequently went to libraries to borrow books. They also buy YAL from book shops. Some borrow books from their relatives. Many were inspired by their family members such as father, mother or relatives to read books. On average, they read five to ten books per year.

4.1.2 Factors that Either Promoted or Inhibited Reading of YAL

The family members or the environment at home is the prime factor in influencing the participants to read YAL. Sometimes, the participants were motivated by their friends to read YAL. In class, they were required to read YAL due to YAL being part of the syllabus. Sometimes, the books themselves may either encourage or discourage them. The participants like certain genres such as horror-fiction and adventure-type novels. The stories and language in YAL determined if the books would be read by the students. There were times when a book is abandoned half-way through due to its complex language and boring plot. Often, such books were not YAL which made YAL more preferable by the participants.

4.1.3 Reasons for Reading YAL

The participants read YAL because they think YAL is ‘interesting’. When asked further as to what is interesting, some found it ‘fun’, ‘humourous’ and ‘entertaining’. Some admitted that they could improve their language skills and vocabulary through reading YAL to increase their general knowledge. At least one participant acknowledged the moral values from YAL.

Most of the participants read YAL either as a curriculum requirement or for pleasure. They considered it as a wise way to spend time. Besides, reading YAL gave them immeasurable pleasure. They saw themselves in the stories as many of the settings were about teenagers, which they could relate to the characters. YAL also gave them hints on how to deal with real life issues. One participant noted that she solved her real life problem of hers after reading a YAL.

Some participants read YAL because it was taught in the classroom and tested in the examination. However, they did not complain as they love reading. The selected YAL (The Curse) drew their interest and often they immersed themselves in it. They liked it even more if the story was discussed in class. They had so much to talk about and even felt for the characters.

4.2 Research Question 2: How Does YAL Foster the Teaching and Learning of HOTS?

4.2.1 Students Think as They Read

The students were aware of HOTS. They have been taught about HOTS in school. When the researcher floated the idea of YAL and HOTS, the students responded swiftly. They perceived literature or YAL closely related to HOTS as the questions in the tests, frequently required them to employ HOTS. YAL even taught them to think critically.

The participants revealed that their thinking did not stop when they read books. They were constantly bombarded with questions that they asked themselves. They questioned “why did the character do that?”, “why did she make that decision?” when reading YAL. Most importantly, they admitted that they thought about the characters and stories they have just read. Sometimes, they even wondered aloud as to the rationality of the decisions made by the characters.

Almost all of them made judgments on the characters or the stories they have read. For example, the participants asked about a familiar character in the novel, 'The Curse' and a particular decision that the character had made. The participants were quick to point out the mistakes and made judgments on the character.

4.2.2 *The Teaching of YAL in the Classroom*

The participants liked the idea of discussing a particular YAL in front of their friends. However, sometimes, the teachers were impatient in getting responses from the participants causing the particular YAL were rushed through instead of discussed which caused disappointments among them.

The participants admitted the activities in the class were at times challenging. They had to crack their heads to answer the questions and some questions really make them 'think'. One of the teachers was very fond of the word, 'why?' and would always ask it at the end of a teaching session. Though annoying, they accepted the challenge and tried to answer the questions. Nevertheless, most of the activities were quite easy and 'manageable' as there were weak students in the class who must also be considered, according to the teacher.

4.2.3 *The Activation of HOTS through YAL*

After analysing the worksheets, some patterns reflecting HOTS were identified. Of the ten worksheets studied, six answers reflected HOTS. In other words, they went beyond the low-order thinking skills of merely summarizing and recalling details. The students analysed the story and evaluated the characters and even shared their own experience and values in judging the decisions taken by the characters. It was absolutely clear that HOTS were utilised as they answered the questions.

Apparently, the questions demanded reasons for their answers. The questions required them to utilize their HOTS namely analysing, synthesizing and evaluating in answering the questions. The other four students merely recalled facts and indicated their preferences, like or dislike. They were not able to analyze the events, characters or bring in relevant views on the matter. They merely regurgitated what they had learned earlier such as;

- S1: I like Azreen. She is Madhuri's sister and studying in London. Sometimes, she behaves like a man. She is brave that she could argue with Asraf.
- S4: I hate Azreen. She is from Langkawi. She finds out the truth about Madhuri but her father does not like her.
- S5: Bomoh Awang is a traditional healer. He is a funny man. He goes around and steals people's things like chicken or eggs. He tells the truth about Madhuri's death to Azreen.

On the other hand, the students who demonstrated higher-order thinking skills answered this way:

- S2: I like Azreen as she was determined to find out the truth. She was not one who would accept gossips and rumours for truth. She, on her own initiative, investigated the matter and realised the truth. I am in no way different from her as I too would find out the truth on my own. I will not simply believe in what people say. I need facts.
- S7: I like the old lady as she remained a very patient person throughout the story. She ignored the villagers' insults and minded her own business. It takes a lot of patience to be in her shoes. I wonder if I could be that patient. That is something that I had learned from her.
- S8: I dislike Asraf as he acted madly after his grandma's death. I understand his feelings but that should not translate into anger against the old lady. Besides, he could easily be influenced by the villagers, which showed his weak character. I will never ever allow myself to be influenced in that way. Whatever happened to rational thought?

4.3 HOTS and YAL in Reality

A classroom observation revealed how YAL was taught to the students. The students were asked to read the YAL beforehand (according to the teacher) and on the day of observation, the teacher had a discussion session with the students. They were asked to sit in groups and discuss whether or not a character portrayed positive values. The teaching approach taken here was a combination of both the personal response and the moral philosophical approaches (Hwang & Embi, 2007). The students worked interactively as they brainstormed and exchanged views. The thinking process was evident and their thoughts were verbalized through their answers. The teaching strategies adopted by the teacher were questioning and deliberation which were mostly student-centred; the students were fully engaged in the discussion.

However, another classroom observation in which the teacher merely provided some low-order thinking skills tasks such as a summary activity and comprehension of details using the paraphrastic and information-based approach was devoid of any HOTS. The strategies that might lead to the teaching of HOTS were not carried out. The students were not drawn to activate their thinking skills for some reasons best known to the teacher. Nobody talked much and nothing on thinking was palpable. The activities which should have been student-centred, activity-based and process-oriented in a literature classroom (Carter, 1996) were not carried out. Understandably, the students were not drawn to the activities and the class represented a dull picture.

DISCUSSION

5.1 Research Question 1: What Does YAL Mean to the Students?

5.1.1 *YAL Engages the Students*

Reading of YAL is prevalent among the participants. The students who read the books were not forced to read them even though some of the YAL books are in the school syllabus. They relish the idea of reading. However, they are very selective when it comes to reading materials for they do not read all types of books. They select books with teenage themes or stories they could relate with their life, in other words, YAL. This is similar to Isa and Mahmud's (2012) findings of the benefits gained by Malaysian students by reading YAL. It was reported in the study that the participants enjoyed YAL as they could identify and relate themselves to the YAL. The same finding was shared in another study by Govindarajoo and Mukundan (2013). Therefore, YAL is an effective source that could inspire many reluctant readers into reading. It engages them.

Realising the role of YAL, the language teachers should use them frequently in their language classes to encourage their students to read extensively. Cole (2002) emphasizes the important to offer students a rich, literature environment in the classroom. In fact, the teachers could introduce some popular titles to arouse the students' interests in the books apart from fully utilizing YAL in the syllabus to successfully promote reading among students.

5.1.2 *YAL Improves Students' Language Skills*

From the students' accounts, YAL could improve their language skills such as reading and writing and expanded their vocabulary. After all, this is the primary motive of introducing the literature component into the syllabus which is basically to enhance the students' proficiency in the English Language (Ministry of Education, 1999). In another study involving Malaysian students, Baba (2008) attested to the efficacy of YAL in language development, grammatical acquisition and vocabulary growth. Stallworth (2006) and Sidhu et al. (2010) too confirmed YAL's contribution in students' language development. Therefore, YAL have the potential to improve students' language skills

5.1.3 YAL Enhances Students' General Knowledge

Additionally, YAL could improve the students' general knowledge and teach them good moral values. Ganakumaran (2003) asserts YAL could help students in personal development and character building and widen their outlook of the world which was concurred by one of the participants.

YAL hence could address some of the serious issues a language teacher might face in engaging his or her students into reading. YAL not only engage students to read, it could also improve their language skills and help them in understanding the world they are in.

5.2 Research Question 2: How Does YAL Fosters Students' HOTS?

The teaching and learning of HOTS does not take place at home. According to some of the students, they do discuss the books with some of their relatives and friends but mostly their discussion revolves around the characters and the decisions they make. These students pass judgments on the characters and the things they do. However, does this constitute the application of HOTS? It depends on how well they analyse the story and characters and what thinking skill or skills they employ in the process of thinking. This might or might not have taken place at home. Although the students say that they think about the novels they read, how this process is done requires further investigation. The interview method was inadequate in substantiating their claims.

Nevertheless, the use of HOTS at school by the students in dealing with YAL is researchable. Based on the worksheets, they wrote about the YAL studied in the classroom. The responses to the literature questions utilised HOTS. Instead of merely recalling the facts or summarizing, the students analysed the characters and decisions. The students were critical in passing judgement on the stories based on their point of views. Some could even put themselves in the shoes of the characters and "feel" them. Throughout the students' answers, there were critical evaluations which would not be possible without HOTS from the students.

The students may be trained to use HOTS while answering the questions but the fact remains that they used HOTS while answering the questions. This is a healthy development as YAL is instrumental in encouraging them to read extensively and at the same time, think. It is undeniable that the students employ HOTS while reading YAL. Nevertheless, the students need to be gauged into thinking either through their own reflection or pedagogical tasks. In this regard, teachers play a pivotal role in involving students into challenging tasks which is classify as HOTS tasks.

However, teaching literature is not a primrose path after all and there are some inherent challenges (Ganakumaran, 2003). The major problem is to make them read extensively, a primary factor in improving students' language literacy skills. Towards this end, YAL could help much. It could pull the students towards it and make them read. Since the themes, settings and even stories may bear resemblance to their own in life, the students may be inclined to read such stories. By teaching interesting and relevant literature, teachers could help students become lifelong readers (Bean, 2002).

However, to activate the students' thinking skills, more needs to be done. The teachers, using YAL, can employ various approaches in teaching YAL. The approaches play an important role in developing students' language and thinking skills. Approaches such as personal-response, information-based, and moral-philosophical could help students to think critically (Hwang & Embi, 2007; Rashid et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there were many factors need to be considered such as exam-oriented culture, students' language proficiency, the selection of literature texts, large group classes, students' attitudes and the training received, on the part of the teachers (Hwang & Embi, 2007). The teachers, therefore, should attempt the approaches that could bring out the most in YAL for the benefit of students.

Moreover, the activities carried out during YAL lessons can also foster HOTS among students. Baba (2008) reported that students prefer communicative activities in YAL classrooms as the emphasis is more on interaction than interpretation of events and characters. Varied activities that engage students and sound approaches that challenge students' minds would invariably foster the students' HOTS.

CONCLUSION

Higher-order thinking skill is a 21st century learning necessity. To either teach HOTS explicitly or implicitly, teachers have to explore it creatively. One such opportunity is available through the teaching and learning of YAL which conveniently occurs in every language classroom in Malaysia. By promoting YAL and teaching it critically using the correct approach and the right activities, teachers can effectively activate HOTS among students.

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