Conceptualising and implementing an action research project targeted at improving secondary school students' English language comprehension skills through literature

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Abstract

This action research project looks at the effect of using literary texts in English language learning as a way to sensitize students to the effects of language use which are highlighted in these texts. I examine this through implementing a series of lessons involving reading and close analysis of the language in literary texts, and activities in which students develop their confidence in identifying implied meaning and elaborating on the effectiveness of diction in contributing to the meaning of the text. The results indicate that there was an improvement in the comprehension test results of students who underwent the intervention lessons.

I was conscious of the close link between Literature and English language, as literature has been described as an ally of language (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). There is evidence of an increasing prominence being given to the literary use of language in the GCE 'O' Level English Language syllabus in Singapore. In the revised syllabus document, the comprehension paper sets to test 'the use of language for impact,' which involves reading language for connotation and implied meaning. Also, in the specimen comprehension paper, there is an explicit usage of the literary device 'simile,' as well as questions that involve analysing the language in the passage that evokes feelings of fear and suspense. There is thus a need for students to be conversant in basic literary analysis in order to answer questions in the English language examinations. This research project sets out to investigate whether an intervention in the English language classroom involving exposure to different literary genres can improve students' performance in such comprehension activities

within the question range of the new GCE 'O' Level English Language examinations.

The action research framework allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the gaps in my pedagogical practice and how students' needs may be better addressed through an objective study of my actual classroom environment (Henson 1996). Reflecting on classroom practice as an English language teacher at the start of this process, I realised that my students struggled the most with comprehension questions that focused on analysis of inferential meaning of language and connotative language use, which were precisely the aspects that were becoming more prominent in the revised syllabus for the GCE 'O' Level English language examinations. This acted as motivation to explore the critical literature in greater detail and to design an intervention around Literature and English language teaching.

In terms of the pre-existing literature on the subject, there have been numerous authors who have probed the connection between using literary texts as rich language resources and increased engagement in the English language classroom. Collie and Slater (1987) suggest that reading and analysing literature presents authentic and complex language material and foregrounds the central role of the learner by stimulating personal response. The authors also emphasize the increased interaction in the language classroom, as learners draw connections between the literary texts and their own experiences. Literature presents a powerful mode of linguistic utterance, as it impacts the reader not only cognitively, but also affectively. Widdowson (1983) points out the fact that literary texts are multi-faceted and allow for different responses and interpretations. By allowing students to generate different responses to the texts and exploring how language works to create these multiple hermeneutic outcomes, genuine and motivated interaction with the text and language occurs, leading to greater class participation and engagement.

The integration of English language teaching and the teaching of literary devices has been explored by Sinclair (1982), who argues that any competent command of language involves the understanding of literary techniques, and the two cannot be separated from each other. The student should be conversant not only with the denotative, but also the connotative aspects of language use, which literary language can be said to exemplify. As a literary genre, poetry can be particularly

useful for the teacher in promoting sensitivity towards language use. Ramsaran (1983) argues that poetry fulfils this function in the language classroom because it conveys unconventional and creative meanings through syntax, phonology and lexicography. Collie and Slater (1987) also point out that poetry promotes creative expression by students, an indication of their increased confidence in manipulating the language for varied purposes.

In this study, these research questions were considered:

Can exposure to literary texts in the secondary English language classroom improve students' understanding of the effects of the language as demonstrated through comprehension?

1. Is there an increase in the marks of students in a comprehension test after this exposure to literary texts?
2. Is there an increase in student engagement and motivation during English language lessons after this exposure to literary texts?

Methodology

Samples

For this study, I taught two Secondary Two classes of students aged between 13 to 14 years old that formed the intervention and control groups. The control group consisted of 28 students, while the intervention group consisted of 27 students. These two classes were mixed-ability classes in terms of their knowledge of English. All students in both classes had the same socio-economic status and belonged to the same ethnic group. I was also the English Language and Literature teacher of both classes.

Intervention

The intervention was carried out as part of a comprehension unit consisting of a series of eight lessons, each lesson having a duration of 1 hour. The control group worked on a series of comprehension exercises and answered questions based on them. When analysing the questions and going through answers with the control group, I did not draw attention to literary devices and techniques. The materials used for the lessons involving the control group were comprehension texts with no

particular literary merit to them. With the intervention group, the series of eight lessons focused on the reading and discussion of a series of literary texts that comprised both poetry and prose. The lessons focused on developing students' sensitivity to word choice and language use in the literary texts. The outline of the intervention lessons was as follows:

Lesson 1 – Introduction to Literary Analysis. Students explored a series of literary texts and discussed implied meaning.

Lessons 2 and 3 – Effectiveness of Diction and Word Choice. The teacher explored short poems with the class and students discussed word choice in the poems and how it contributes to the effectiveness of poems. Students rewrote poems into prose and explored the differences, thereby understanding the significance of diction.

Lessons 4 and 5 – Introduction and Analysis of Figurative Language. The teacher introduced literary devices such as metaphor, simile and personification to students using poems and short prose passages. Students identified and picked out examples of these literary devices and discussed how they made the poems interesting.

Lessons 6 and 7 – Examining Prose passages. Students looked at selected literary prose passages and discussed how language and literary devices aid the writer in portraying character, setting and the main themes of the passage.

Lesson 8 – Students wrote short responses on questions concerning the effectiveness of literary language in conveying implied meaning, as a summary of what they had learnt to that point. The teacher looked at responses and discussed areas for further improvement with the students. Some suggestions included how students could move beyond summarizing and paraphrasing the literary text towards analysis of literary language in the text, and how students could improve their powers of expression in their responses by choosing more appropriate adjectives and adverbs. The suggestions provided were in the form of written feedback on student responses, and individual consultations with particularly weak students. The students responded to the feedback by rewriting their responses, which generally showed that they were able to consider the feedback given and to use it to

improve their writing.

Data collection

A pre-test (Appendix A) comprised of a 20-mark comprehension exercise that followed the question range of the new GCE 'O' Level English Language examinations was given to the two classes before the intervention lessons. The scripts were scored and marks were recorded. One class was used as a control group while the other class was given intervention lessons involving literary texts carried out over a period of two months.

After the period of intervention, the two classes of students sat for a post-test which was a different comprehension exercise that comprised the same question types and marks as the pre-test. The marks were recorded and compared with the pre-test to establish whether there was any improvement in grades in the two classes after the intervention. Students from the intervention group also responded to reflection questions about the whole process and their learning experience. The data used was thus both a quantitative measure of their performance in the English language and a qualitative evaluation of whether reading literary texts had enhanced their learning of English.

Results

1. Quantitative

Table 1 shows the average marks of students from both the control and intervention classes for the pre-test and the post-test.

Table 1
Average Marks for Comprehension Test (SD in Parentheses)

Class	Pre-Test (20 marks)	Post-Test (20 marks)
Control Group	13.2 (2.23)	12.16 (2.12)
Intervention Group	13.15 (2.54)	13.37 (2.27)

As can be seen from the Table 1 above, the average mark for the two classes in the pre-test was very similar at 13.2 for the control group and 13.15 for the intervention group. The standardized mean difference (SMD) for the pre-test was 0.02, indicating that the difference was negligible (Cohen, 1988). The results of a t test indicated that the marks of the two classes were not significantly different, $t(52)=0.09$, p=0.93. The results therefore establish that the two classes were very similar in ability before the intervention period.

At the end of the intervention, the average mark for the intervention group had increased from 13.15 to 13.37. The SMD for the post-test was 0.57, which indicated a slight increase from the pre-test, but not significant enough to establish a large effect (Cohen, 1988). From the results of a t test comparing the post-test results of the two classes, there was a borderline statistical improvement in the marks of the intervention group, which was contrary to expectations of a noticeable statistical improvement in the intervention group, $t(50)=1.98$, p=0.05.

2. Qualitative

After the administration of the intervention lessons, a post-intervention questionnaire was distributed to the students in the intervention group. The questions were as follows:

1. What are three important things that you have learnt throughout this series of lessons?
2. Are you more confident in analysing implied meaning in texts after this series of lessons?
3. Do you think your comprehension skills have improved?
4. What suggestions for improvements can you make?

Sample student responses for Question 1 are as follows:

"I've learnt the importance of word choice and how they can emphasise certain meanings and make the text more impactful."

"I've learnt that word choice affects the meaning of the whole text."

"Poems have implied meaning which can be quite challenging to find but when you find it you'll feel a sense of accomplishment."

These responses indicate that students felt that they had learnt meaningful lessons about the importance of diction and language use, and how they could contribute towards the impact of the texts that they had read and analysed. In terms of the objectives of the research project, student feedback indicated that they had understood the aims of the project and had increased their appreciation of the importance of implied meaning in texts, and were more confident in analysing implied meaning.

For Question 2, 88% of students felt that their confidence had increased after the intervention lessons, although some indicated that the improvement was slight. For Question 3, 92% of students felt that their comprehension skills have improved after the lessons. Based on their responses, students in the intervention group generally felt that the lessons did have a positive impact on their ability to handle comprehension questions targeting inferential meaning.

For Question 4, sample student responses are as follows:

"Do more comprehension questions with different question types. [I would have liked more] practice on the questions because practice makes perfect."

"[Practise] more analysis under pressure, because we don't always have the luxury of time."

These responses indicate that students felt they needed more practice in answering specific types of comprehension questions in order to score better in a comprehension test. While most students enjoyed the range of activities that involved them discussing implied meaning in literary texts, they also wanted more practice on how to answer examination questions and to provide the 'right' answer under examination conditions.

Discussion

The study and analysis of the results indicated that there was an increase in average marks in the comprehension post-test for the intervention group compared to the pre-test. Comparing the post-test results for both groups, the intervention group also scored higher average marks than the control group for the post-test. Their answers to questions involving analysis of implied meaning were generally more accurate and incisive. However, the statistical analysis of the data indicated that the improvement in marks for the intervention group was only barely significant. Possible reasons as to why the results were not more statistically significant could include not having a large enough sample size to carry out research, due to the fact that I was only in charge of teaching two classes in the level. The period of intervention was also too short, and this did not enable me to revisit and consolidate key learning concepts with students. Also, reflecting on the intervention strategies I put in place, more emphasis could have been given to developing students' competencies in writing and expressing their understanding of implied meaning on paper and in response to various types of questions about the literary texts explored in class.

Qualitatively, the students in the intervention group indicated that they were generally more confident in answering comprehension questions that involved analysing diction and literary techniques. Through their responses to Question 1 of the post-intervention questionnaire, students reflected that they were also more engaged in the lessons and were less apprehensive about handling literary texts like poetry. However, in analysing student responses to Question 4 of the questionnaire, I noted that there was some feedback that students needed more practice in answering specific types of comprehension questions, as there was a danger of misinterpreting the demands of the question and not phrasing their answers in a way that suited the question.

Reflecting on my experience of the action research process, it allowed me to become a more reflective practitioner, motivated to look into my own personal classroom practices and beliefs as an English Language teacher. It was also an extremely useful way to target the gaps in student learning and to systematically examine whether new pedagogical strategies implemented can address and remedy

this gap through quantitative measures like the pre-test and post-test and qualitative measures like the post-intervention questionnaire. Most importantly, feedback from this process as to what worked and what did not can be used to inform further pedagogical interventions, leading to improvements in my teaching.

Conclusion

The results of this action research project support the idea that the use of English language literary texts has a positive impact upon English language learning. An increased focus on using literary texts as rich resources of language could be beneficial in sensitizing students' awareness of the nuances of language use, and developing their confidence in analysing literary language and discussing the inferential aspects of language.

Further studies could look at how the usage of literary texts in the classroom can be blended with more 'traditional' modes of comprehension teaching like analysing the demands of the comprehension question and dissecting the comprehension passage.

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Appendix A

The text below describes the experiences of a young Maori[1] woman working in a bank. Read it carefully and answer Questions 5 – 13.

1   Although Pari had been working at the bank for over seven months, there were times when she felt like quitting her job. It started when she thought she had overheard her colleagues whispering about her being the only Maori in the bank. She would begin to feel as if she stuck out like a sore thumb. In a way, it was all so silly because she got on very well with her colleagues, and, most of the time, did not feel any hostility from them at   5 all. Every now and then however, a casual glance from them in her direction would cause her to grip her seat tightly, and she had to forcibly stop herself from shaking.

2   Once, she overheard a customer comment to the accountant about how surprising it was to see a Maori girl serving as a teller[1]. The remark seemed innocent enough and Pari took no further notice. However, Pari noticed the accountant's raised eyebrows and how   10 he fidgeted, concerned he was not keeping a closer check on the accuracy of her work. Just a few weeks ago, Sharon, another teller, had mentioned to Pari that her boyfriend and she were going to a party. Her boyfriend had a friend who was undecided about going as he did not have a date. To persuade him to go, Sharon had said she would ask her colleagues if anybody would be interested to attend the party.   15

3   Pari knew that Sharon had been intending to ask her but, suddenly, she saw that startled look again. She looked into Sharon's eyes and read her thoughts. She could almost hear Sharon thinking: Oh dear, that friend of Bob's might not like the idea of going out with a Maori. Pari looked down at the ground, pretending that she had never looked at her.

4   Sharon had not asked her. Yet, she was Pari's best friend at the bank. For the rest of the   20 day the two girls avoided each other. The next morning, they grinned at each other again. Pari had become just the girl who worked at the bank once more, part of what the manager, Mr Morley, liked to call his 'team' and not apart from it.

5   Mr Morley was the worst of the lot when it came to making her feel different. For months, Pari had felt his beady eyes drilling into her back, his expression as hard as stone. Each   25 time he walked past her, she would try to remain inconspicuous. She used to imagine that he was waiting for her to make one wrong move or perhaps, even better, to resign. Also, there were times when his eyes would flicker alarm – when her daily cash did not balance or when she joked too easily with customers.

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[1] The Maori are the indigenous people or natives of New Zealand.
[2] A teller is an employee of a bank who deals with customers.

6   After seven months, Pari began to wonder whether she did belong at work. This carried   *30*
on until the day she saw a woman hasten into the bank. She kept tapping her feet on the
floor, shifting one foot to the other and looking round. As Pari called to her, she gave an
audible sigh of relief and stepped quickly to where Pari was standing. However, as she
looked up and saw Pari, her eyes became veiled and she pulled back from the counter.

7   The next thing she saw was Mr Morley approaching the woman. His face was stern.   *35*

8   "Would Madam care to step this way?" he asked, indicating his office.

9   Pari felt a sudden lump in her throat. She stood up and walked past her friends to the
washroom. She ran water into a basin, rubbed soap into her hands and began to wash
her face. Oh dear, why must they make me feel so different?

10   A few moments later, Sharon opened the door and suddenly hugged Pari.

                                                                                          40

11   "Guess what!" she screamed. "Mr Morley wrote a cheque for the woman and shouted:
'We don't need you as a customer here, Madam!' You should have seen her, Pari! Her
face went red! She stormed out in a real temper!"

12   "You mean Mr Morley did that?" Pari asked.

13   "Yes, Pari!" Sharon answered.

14   As Sharon and her other colleagues started crowding around her, grinning and comforting   *45*
her, Pari felt as if at any moment she would start to bawl. She suddenly felt a painful joy
overcome her. Although there would still continue to be times when they might make her
feel different she would at least know they had a lot of support for her too.

Adapted from *A Sense of Belonging* by Witi Ihimaera.

Questions

At the beginning of this text Pari was thinking about her time at work. Explain how the language used in paragraph 1 conveys how self-conscious she was about being different from her colleagues.

Support your answer with three details from paragraph 1.

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…….………………………………………………………………………………………………....   [3]

At the start of paragraph 2, the writer says Pari 'had overheard a customer comment to the accountant about how surprising it was to see a Maori girl serving as a teller' (lines 8 – 9).

What does the word 'surprising' suggest about the customer's attitude towards the Maori race?

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…….………………………………………………………………………………………………....   [1]

'However, Pari noticed the accountant's raised eyebrows and how he fidgeted, concerned he was not keeping a closer check on the accuracy of her work' (lines 10 – 11).

Identify two-word phrases in the above sentence which suggest that

(i) the accountant was startled ……………………………………………………………………   [1]

(ii) the accountant was suspicious of Pari …………………………………………………………   [1]

Explain fully why Sharon gave Pari 'a startled look' (lines 16 – 17).

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In paragraph 5 'Mr Morley was the worst of the lot when it came to making her feel different' (line 24). Is Pari's view about her manager accurate? Give one piece of evidence to support your answer.

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In paragraph 5 the writer says that Pari had 'felt his beady eyes drilling into her back, his expression as hard as stone' (line 25).

What do these expressions suggest about Pari's impression of Mr Morley's attitude towards her?

Expressions	Pari's impression of Mr Morley's attitude
'beady eyes drilling into her back'	
'his expression as hard as stone'	

[2]

In paragraph 6 'her eyes became veiled and she pulled back from the counter' (line 34).

What two things does this suggest about the woman's reaction to Pari attending to her?

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In paragraph 14, Pari 'suddenly felt a painful joy overcome her' (lines 47 – 48).

What is unusual and effective about the phrase 'painful joy'?

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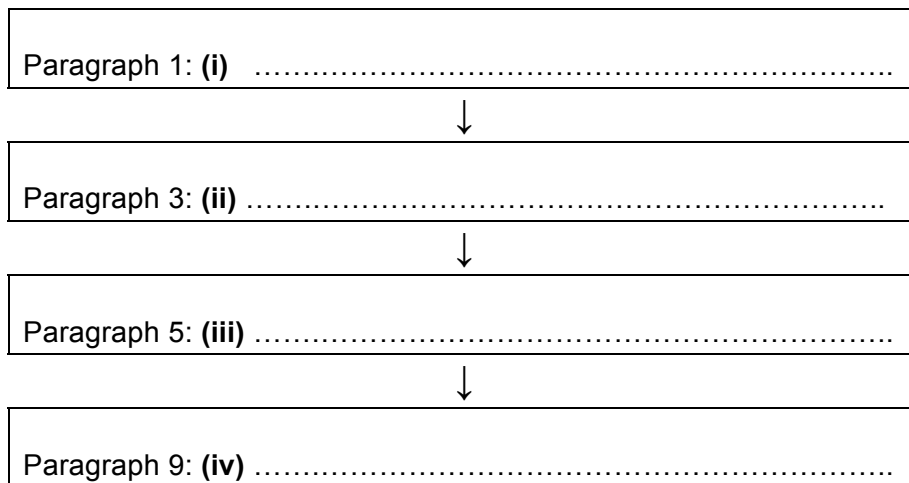......…….…………………………………………………………………….………..…......

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The story reflects Pari's feelings as she reacts to her colleagues, manager and the situation she encounters at work. Complete the flow chart by choosing one word from the box to summarise the main feeling described in certain parts of the story. There are some words in the box you do not need to use.

Pari's feelings

| Embarrassment | Thrilled | Anxiety | Despair | Relief | Timid | Joy |

Flow chart

Paragraph 1: **(i)** …………………………………………………..

↓

Paragraph 3: **(ii)** …………………………………………………..

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Paragraph 5: **(iii)** …………………………………………………..

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Paragraph 9: **(iv)** …………………………………………………..

[4]