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Contents

4 **Video Reflection: Taking the Anxiety out of Classroom Observations**
St. Patrick's School

16 **An Inquiry into the Use of Dialogic Pedagogy to Promote Critical Thinking**
CHIJ Our Lady Queen of Peace

26 **Developing a 'Nose' for Quality: Student Work Exemplars and Formative Assessment**
Townsville Primary School

Video Reflection: Taking the Anxiety out of Classroom Observations

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This is a classroom inquiry into how self-analysis of video-recorded lessons guided by a reflection tool can help teachers improve their pedagogical practices. Instead of depending only on feedback from other observers to identify teaching areas for improvement, two Secondary One teachers from St. Patrick's School collaborated with Mrs Joy Lee, Master Teacher/ EL, to tap the affordance of video technology and a structured protocol tool to glean useful evidence as areas for improvement in their teaching.

Introduction

As one of the prototype Subject-Based Banding (SBB) school teachers, Ruth Zhuo Suyin began in 2014 by teaching 25 Normal Technical [N(T)] students the Normal Academic [N(A)] English Language (EL) course. Two years later, when she was appointed as one of the three SBB Mentors for East Zone schools, she began working closely with Joy Lee, Master Teacher/ EL, to develop not only her classroom practice but also to build her capacity as a mentor. At first, they used the usual pre-observation conferencing, lesson observation and post-observation conferencing cycle to generate feedback on key teaching actions that could be strengthened. As the school was equipped with self video-recording technology, Joy encouraged Ruth to video-record her lessons so that segments of good teaching actions could be used as exemplars for other SBB teachers. In 2018, Joy's interest was piqued by the potential of using a video self-reflection tool for teachers' professional development. Hence, she invited Ruth and her assigned mentee, Chng Siong Hwa, to join her to inquire into the potential of using a video reflection tool to help them improve their classroom practice. The team sought to inquire into the following question:

How useful is the selected video self-reflection tool in helping EL teachers focus on teaching actions they need to improve, compared to in-person classroom observations?

Literature Review

According to Marsh and Mitchell (2014, p. 4), the affordances of video in the classroom can be categorised into three areas:

1. Video can "capture and transmit data reflecting and preserving the complexity of the activities" for observation.

2. The "immediacy and vividness of video" can stimulate discussion and reflection on the part of viewers.

3. Video can be an "effective means of didactic demonstration since it enables the illustration of complex sets of circumstances which may be resistant to verbal representation".

Recognising the fact that video data, being rich and complex, could lead to data 'overload' with so much to see and hear, Joy was determined to look for a video analysis protocol that would help teachers ignore the 'noise' and attend to the important in their reflection-in-action. Better still if the protocol could be used by the teachers themselves to obviate the anxiety of classroom observations by supervisors.

Since the 1980s, the use of videos in classroom lessons was predominantly used for pre-service training (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). Demonstration videos of teaching actions, which were accomplished or developing, were analysed but not by the teachers who had been video-recorded. More recently, video-recorded lessons for use at the pre-service phase is still prevalent, albeit with the student teachers analysing their own footage. In one study involving 73 student teachers who had to video their own lessons for their portfolio assignments, researchers found that the student teachers benefitted with "positive and substantial" outcomes (Lofthouse & Birmingham, 2010). Nonetheless, further search for studies of video self-analysis and reflection by not pre-service but practising teachers led to the Best Foot Forward project by the Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University.

The pilot of this project involved 347 in-service teachers and 101 principals from Delaware, Georgia, Colorado and California (Kane, Hunter, Greenberg, Quinn, & Thal, 2018, p. 3). Teachers in the experimental group used the Teacher Video Selfie tool to analyse and reflect on their own teaching videos. By selecting their best videos for performance evaluations by their principals, they could put their 'best foot forward'. Compared to teachers from the control group, they reported more improvements in their practice after intervention as video provided more detailed and objective feedback to teachers which helped make post-observation discussions with principals less "defensive and adversarial" (Kane et al., 2018, p. 12).

Joy: "Reading about how the video reflection tool had accelerated teachers' pedagogical growth when the Best Foot Forward project was piloted, I was keen to try out the tool with any interested teachers."

Inquiry Process

The inquiry began with Joy's search for a suitable tool, as described above. She found in the Teacher Video Selfie tool (Center for Education Policy Research, 2015a) a self-guided reflection protocol that promoted sound reflection-in-action together with admirable ease of use achieved by clear instructions and ample examples. In particular, "the structured protocol can help teachers look past unimportant details…and focus on the students" (Center for Education Policy Research, 2015b, p. 8). Table 1 below shows the details of the protocol.

Table 1: Structured protocol of the Teacher Video Selfie tool

Stage	Sequence of Activities (as specified in the tool)	Recording
Analysis	1) Watch video clip to jot down on a piece of paper all that the teacher notices without evaluation 2) Review the self-observation notes to identify details that are irrelevant, emotional or reactive, and/or focus mostly on the teacher	On paper
Reflection	3) Step 1: Establish a goal for viewing and write in a log 4) Step 2: Return to self-observation notes to filter out irrelevant and reactive details	On paper
	5) Step 3: Focus on important **Evidence*** after Step 2	In the first column of a five-column table
	6) Step 4: Explain the **Importance*** of the selected Evidence	In the second column
	7) Step 5: Explain the **Context*** of the evidence	In the third column
	8) Step 6: Make **Connections*** between teaching actions and broader teaching principles	In the fourth column
	9) Step 7: Plan for **Next Steps*** for improvement	In the fifth column

This tool is designed to counteract the 'shock' teachers might experience when they first view themselves on video. Not only is there the "complexity of the activities" (Marsh & Mitchell, 2014) which they have to contend with, but their self-consciousness, with thoughts like, "Do I look like that?" and "I look fat in that dress!" can also make it nearly unbearable for them to view the video objectively and dispassionately. These problems can be a stumbling block to the use of video technology for self-reflection. Hence, the protocol addresses the 'shock' effect by guiding the teacher to "look past unimportant details…and focus on the students" (Center for Education Policy Research, 2015b, p. 8).

An example of reflection notes in a given five-column table at the end of the reflection log in the Teacher Video Selfie Tool (Center for Education Policy Research, 2015b) is shown in Figure 1 on page 9.

*Words in bold are the column headings in the reflection log in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Example of reflection notes in a completed reflection log (Center for Education Policy Research, 2015b, p. 18)

Piece of Evidence	Importance	Context	Connections	Next Steps
EXAMPLE: While watching my video, I observed that only 30% of students raised their hands to answer questions about new content.	EXAMPLE: This piece of evidence is important because I need to determine whether 70% of my class isn't following the content, or whether they do not feel comfortable participating in class.	EXAMPLE: • Some of the students raising their hands participated in a quiz bowl about Italy last year. • My wait time for questions is only 5 seconds. It may not be enough time for students to think.	EXAMPLE: From the Framework- *The lesson's structure is highly coherent, allowing for reflection and closure. Pacing of the lesson is appropriate for all students.*	EXAMPLE: • Lengthen wait time. • Use cold calling. • Group quiz bowl students and differentiate their content. • Pair quiz bowl students with students new to material for activities.

The important stage before planning Next Steps (see 'Next Steps' column in Fig. 1) requires the teacher to make Connections (see 'Connections' column in Fig. 1) to pedagogical actions from some recognised framework. As such, Joy decided to make adaptations to the Teacher Video Selfie tool to ensure that it suited the local context. She took reference from the Singapore Teaching Practice (STP) for the pedagogical principles in the 24 teaching areas as they afford a wide range of teaching foci from which teachers could identify as Connections to the Context, i.e. the reasons for the Evidence observed.

Trialling the adapted tool at St. Patrick's School provided some indication of its effectiveness and usefulness. In addition to trying out the adapted tool, henceforth referred to as the Video Self-Reflection (VSR) tool by the teachers, Joy also persuaded Ruth to share with Siong Hwa her own learning process so that she could role-model reflection-in-action to him.

The trialling of the VSR protocol took about three months in Semester 2. The process is explicated in the Action Plan in Table 2 on page 10.

Table 2: Action Plan for VSR trialling

Phase	Action	Time	Data
Pre-intervention	1) Ruth (R) to video-record her pre-intervention lesson 2) Siong Hwa (SH) to observe and write a reflection	Jun	• Video 1 • Reflection 1 (SH)
VSR reflection	3) R (guided by Joy) to a) use VSR tool to analyse and reflect on Video 1 b) plan how 'Next Steps' will be enacted in the next lesson to address the 'Evidence' foci	Jul	• Completed VSR Log 1
Mentoring Round 1	4) R to share with SH her experience of using the VSR tool for reflection 5) SH to write a reflection on R's sharing	Jul	• Reflection 2 (SH)
Intervention	6) R to video-record intervention lesson 7) SH to observe lesson and write a reflection	Jul	• Video 2 • Reflection 3 (SH)
Data analysis of intervention	8) R and Joy to a) use VSR tool to analyse Video 2 for the 'Evidence' foci b) compare the evidence between Video 1 and Video 2 c) analyse student work for any observable change	Jul	• Completed VSR Log 2 • Student work
Mentoring Round 2	9) R to share with SH her experience (post-intervention lesson and reflection using VSR tool) 10) SH to write a reflection on R's sharing	Aug	• Reflection 4 (SH)
Debrief	11) Joy to meet R and SH for debrief of inquiry	Aug	• Audio

When Ruth first analysed her video using the VSR tool (see Action 3 of Table 2), she listed about 16 things she noticed as she viewed a short 15-minute footage which she had considered as most interesting in terms of teaching actions. Examples of the log entries are as follows:

1. My fringe is rather long (This was mentioned verbally)

2. Frequent 'Okay's'

3. Apart from first two rows of students (about 10), the rest were not engaged…

After generating this list, she was guided to review her entries and filter out those that were irrelevant (such as log entry 1), reactive, and centred on self (such as log entry 2). Log entry 3 was the type of entry considered as a good piece of Evidence (see first column in Fig. 1) that warranted further reflection and decision-making. On completing this filtering process which lasted only five minutes, she identified three pieces of Evidence for further reflection using the five-column table in the VSR log. At the end of her reflection, she decided on six Next Steps for incorporation into her follow-up lessons. Figure 2 on page 11 shows her reflection process for one of the pieces of Evidence she identified.

Figure 2: Sample of teacher's reflection for the Evidence (log entry 3) on 4 July 2018

Evidence (WHAT)	Importance	Context (WHY)	Connections	Next Steps (NOW WHAT)
Besides first two rows of students (≈ <10), rest of the class was not engaged in commenting on paragraph	The rest of the class might not have caught AFI	The boys who were engaged were right in front of me whereas the rest were further away, possibly leading to disengagement	Encouraging learner engagement	- Ensure expectations are set (all to participate) - Call students from different parts of classroom

After two weeks, Ruth video-recorded a lesson during which she enacted some of the Next Steps, specifically, in providing more support to a target group of students. During the post-lesson video analysis and reflection using the VSR tool, it was evident from the new video that unlike in the previous lesson, Ruth had circulated very actively around the students as shown in Items 2 to 15 in Figure 3 on page 12.

Figure 3: Video analysis log entries on 18 July 2018

VIDEO SELF-REFLECTION LOG

SELF-OBSERVATION NOTES

What do you notice while watching your video clip? Jot down your observations, without deliberating too much. You should have at least 15 points. (10 mins)

E.g. (1) *I stood in the same spot next to the front table most of the time.*
(2) *Answers that Diana and Sham gave were inaudible to the rest.*

1 – Only moved to a different place during indiv. work
2 – Told student (Shane) to improve on paragraph but did not explain how
3 – Told Troy he wasn't answering qn
4 – Got back to them later
5 – Feedback given to Shane (well done) & Troy (areas to work on)
6 – Checked Sanat's work and gave feedback
7 – Can recap topic sentence w/ Sanat rather than giving it to him
8 – Covered more ground in checking indiv. work
9 – Faraq doing introduction
10 – Checked work of ss who completed
11 – Checked and gave feedback to Manansala
12 – EJ doing introduction
13 – Jaryl was way off track
14 – Asked for report book
15 – Addressed Juan and Adriel, Omesh

Post-Intervention Reflections

During the debrief on 16 August 2018, Ruth was posed the question of how useful the VSR tool was compared to receiving feedback from classroom observation. She felt that the use of video was "definitely more helpful" as it made possible recalling everything accurately. The following quotes were her responses on the use of the reflection tool:

Ruth: "The steps in the reflection tool were very useful, especially at the start when I had to list everything that I noticed in the video segment and then return to filter out irrelevant points. The last two steps when I used STP to help me decide on next steps were important. Some of the steps in the middle were a bit repetitive though."

Ruth: "Overall, I'd still choose the tool instead of observation, even if it was by a trusted colleague."

When the team checked the work of the target group of students, Ruth reported that she could see more of them achieving the learning objectives. Nonetheless, a longer timeframe would be required to see clear and positive student outcomes.

At the very beginning of the inquiry, Siong Hwa had expressed discomfort with the idea of being video-recorded. Hence, the inquiry was an opportunity for him to witness how the use of technology could support teacher reflection as he took on the role of an observer. For Ruth, it was a different way of mentoring by firstly, letting him shadow her in the classroom and video-recording her lesson. This was followed by her relating to him her experiences of using the VSR tool during the pre-and post-intervention phases of the inquiry. In one of his own written reflections, he had intimated that her years of teaching experience was clearly evident in her delivery and provision of scaffolding for low-progress students by the way she had "strategically positioned" the SBB students in the class. In a discussion with Joy on 7 August 2018, he conceded that the use of video reflections was helpful especially after classroom observations when "the Reporting Officer mentions things that I can't quite recall…video would be a good backup".

Siong Hwa: We can always go back to the video to examine different things at different times.

In an interview with Joy 10 days later, he stated that he had become more "neutral" to the idea of using video, although still needing some guidance on the use of the VSR tool. This change in attitude was a good starting point for follow-up in his professional growth.

As to how the VSR tool compared to in-person classroom observations in terms of usefulness, both teachers agreed unequivocally that video recording was helpful in providing the data to recall from or to reflect on. As a source of feedback, the tool itself was preferred over an observer, mainly due to the autonomy the teacher can enjoy. It was gratifying that the tool was found to be promising for self-initiated development of one's classroom teaching actions. Moving forward, the team hopes that as video technology becomes more pervasive, more teachers will welcome the camera into their classrooms to serve as a mirror to reveal the "complexity of the activities" (Marsh & Mitchell, 2014) that take place there. More importantly, they need a sound reflection tool to serve as a percolator, filtering out distracting details and processing important evidence until it becomes a well thought-out solution.

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An Inquiry into the Use of Dialogic Pedagogy to Promote Critical Thinking

BY REGINA ARULANANDAN (CHIJ OUR LADY QUEEN OF PEACE), KERSTIN WONG (FORMER HOD/ EL, ZHENGHUA PRIMARY SCHOOL), AZLINA MOHD NOR (TECK GHEE PRIMARY), DR CHRISTOPHER WARD (ELIS) AND JENNIFER LUI (ELIS)

This study investigated the effects of dialogic pedagogy in improving critical thinking and enhancing quality talk in a Primary 5 Singapore English Language classroom. Fifty-four Primary 5 students were involved in this study – 27 students in the control group and 27 students in the treatment group. The students in the treatment group participated in a series of lessons centred on developing dialogic skills through conversations. The rubrics, adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), were used to evaluate students' competency in demonstrating critical thinking in conversations. 'Let's Talk' cards were also used to teach students dialogic skills and the effectiveness of this was monitored through the students' conversations during lesson observations and video recordings. A qualitative survey was designed to assess the affective outcomes of the approach taken to teach dialogic skills.

Introduction

Regina Arulanandan, Senior Teacher/ EL, observed that her students were lacking in skills that would enable them to have in-depth and engaging conversations with their peers. Conversations often ended abruptly as students were unable to build on one another's responses, elicit responses or elaboration from their peers, seek clarification and/or offer counter views respectfully. She wanted to teach her students how to have dialogic conversations as she strongly believes that classroom discourse, though guided, should be a comfortable and natural exchange of views. Theories on dialogic pedagogy and dialogic conversations further support the need to authenticate classroom talk in order to make it a natural phenomenon.

This led her to form a Special Interest Group (SIG) with Kerstin Wong, Senior Communications and Engagement Officer (MOE), and Azlina Mohd Nor, HOD/ EL. These teachers were introduced to Dialogic Pedagogy during a STELLAR Mentors' study trip to Cambridge University in 2014. They felt that it was suitable to adopt Dialogic Pedagogy to improve critical thinking and enhance quality talk in their own classrooms. They collaborated with Jennifer Lui, Master Teacher/ EL, in consultation with Dr Christopher Ward, Deputy Director, Research at ELIS, to carry out inquiry-based lessons to explore the Dialogic use of Pedagogy – a tool which provides opportunities for dialogic conversations to take place.

Literature Review

A number of studies have discussed the topic of dialogic pedagogy and its effect on children's talk in the classroom. It has been argued that dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to engage students, stimulate and extend their thinking, and advance their understanding (Alexander, 2006). Mercer and Hodgkinson (2008) also presented evidence that children need a careful combination of teacher-guidance (through whole class, teacher-led activities) and group work (in which they can try out ways of using language to solve problems together) for the potential value of dialogue in teaching and learning to be realised. First, using the kind of language we call 'exploratory talk' helps children to work more effectively together on problem-solving tasks. Second, using a specially-designed programme of teacher-led and group-based activities, teachers can increase the amount of exploratory talk used by children working together in the classroom. Third, children who have been taught to use more exploratory talk make greater gains in their individual scores on the Raven's test of reasoning (Raven, Court & Raven, 1995) than do children who have not had such teaching (Mercer, Wegerif & Dawes, 1999).

While discussion initiates the exchange of ideas with the intention of sharing prior knowledge or current information, and solving issues, dialogue allows for the achievement of a common understanding of concepts and principles through structured, cumulative questioning and discussion. However, for this to take place, teachers, besides being skilled and effectively grounded in pedagogy, need to conceptualise a lesson's subject matter well. In addition, teachers must be ready to accord more freedom to children, in order to allow them to explore different perspectives of a subject matter.

Dialogic pedagogy considers students as participants who have equal voices to that of the teacher and, as Matusov (2011) maintains, an authentic dialogic project allows students to be authors of their own learning. Chappell (2013) holds the notion that 'conversation-driven' English Language Teaching (ELT) privileges classroom talk as a primary source of language learning. In fact, when children are engaged in 'natural' conversation, rich, spontaneous spoken language takes place in real time and in a shared context. It is interactive and therefore jointly constructed and reciprocal (Thornbury & Slade, 2006, p. 8). Dialogic teaching is an approach and a professional outlook rather than a specific method and like all good teaching, is grounded in evidence and principles while drawing on a broad repertoire of strategies and techniques.

Planning the Lessons

To assess the students' competency in demonstrating critical thinking in conversations, the team decided to select two mixed progress Primary 5 classes for this study – one as the treatment group and the other as the control group (see Table 1). Each group comprised 27 Primary 5 students who were between 10 and 11 years in age. They were of different ethnic backgrounds and were bilingual. A series of lessons was planned to explicitly teach the students in the treatment group the dialogic approach. These lessons included the modelling of the process by the teacher and practice sessions for the students to acquire dialogic skills. Dialogic skills refer to the conveying of the meaning of the content, building on the views of others, clarifying by seeking information through questioning, summarising information, giving reasons to support views and listening actively and responding appropriately with other individuals. The team also used 'Let's Talk' cards (see Figure 1) and posters to guide and scaffold the acquisition of the skills by the students. Video recordings of both the treatment and control groups for the pre-test and post-test were transcribed and analysed for quality. The rubrics, adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), were used to evaluate students' competency in demonstrating critical thinking in their conversations.

Figure 1: 'Let's Talk' cards

'Let's Talk' cards

The 'Let's Talk' cards were used to guide and scaffold the acquisition of the skills by the students.

The 'Let's Talk' card game was developed by ELIS and designed by students from the School of Design (Nanyang Polytechnic).

The pre-selected 'Let's Talk' cards we used during the series of lessons for the treatment group were good conversation builders, allowing the students to add on to points raised by their peers and to offer alternative views. These lessons helped the students learn more phrases that they could use in sustaining conversations.

Table 1: Summary of this inquiry's process

Activity	Treatment Group	Control Group
Pre-test	Students were divided into groups of three or four and they used iPads to record themselves talking about the signs commonly seen at a park. The number of contributions from each student and the corresponding Critical Thinking Level (using Bloom's Taxonomy) of these contributions were noted.	
Intervention	A series of six lessons using Talking Points was conducted to explicitly teach students in the treatment group the dialogic approach. The following were the Talking Points: 1. Look at this sign board. Do you think it is important to have this sign board at the swimming pool? Why/ Why not? 2. Have you seen people obeying or disobeying the rules on the sign board? 3. What other rules should be included in the sign board? Why/ why not? The six lessons included the modelling of the process by the teacher and practice sessions for the students. Resources such as the 'Let's Talk' cards were used to guide and scaffold students' acquisition of the skills. The class sessions were not recorded.	A series of six lessons was conducted to give students in the control group practice in talking about different topics. These lessons were not based on Talking Points and they did not use the 'Let's Talk' cards. The class sessions were not recorded.
Post-test	Students were divided into groups of three or four and and they used iPads to record themselves talking about the signs commonly seen at a swimming pool. The conversations were recorded on iPads and the number of contributions from each student and the corresponding Critical Thinking Level (using Bloom's Taxonomy) of their contributions were noted. (Only the pre-test and post-test results of students who completed all the stages – the pre-test, the six lessons and the post-test – were analysed.)	
Survey	A survey was administered to find out if students enjoyed the lessons and if they appreciated learning how to hold a conversation.	No survey was administered as the students were not given lessons on dialogic conversations.

Table 2: Rubrics adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Level	Description	Questioning and Response
1	**Remembering**	Able to • recite the discussion topic and related questions • state/ list/ identify main ideas related to the discussion topic • remember and describe the discussion points raised by peers
2	**Understanding**	Able to • explain with example(s) • summarise • classify
3	**Applying**	Able to • build on the responses of others • apply prior knowledge • predict effects based on evidence
4	**Analysing**	Able to • compare and contrast • interpret • infer
5	**Evaluating**	Able to • critique • conclude • justify
6	**Creating**	Able to • create knowledge • hypothesise

Observations

Students in the treatment group demonstrated greater competency in building on one another's views or opinions. This was exemplified by the phrases used by the students to agree with, disagree with or add on to a proposed idea. Some examples of these phrases were:

I agree with you but I would also like to add on that…

Other rules? Oh, no smoking! I mean like we can… (repeating the idea voiced by the peer and adding on to it).

The students in the treatment group contributed a greater percentage of comments at the analysing, evaluating and creating levels of the Bloom's Taxonomy (see Table 2) than the students in the control group. For example, contributions from seven students in the treatment group corresponded to levels 4 to 6 of the rubrics adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy whereas no students from the control group managed to do so.

In the treatment group, 96% of the students indicated that they enjoyed having dialogic conversations and appreciated this learning approach as they improved in their conversation skills. It also built up their confidence in having conversations with others to share their thoughts and listen to others. Some responses given by the students on building their confidence in having a conversation with others were:

It helps me to express myself more.

It gives me more confidence to speak to my teachers.

I can tell them what I feel and I can tell my thoughts.

As a team, we disagree and agree with each other on what we say.

I like to talk to my friends now.

As we grow up, we will have to talk to others and this helps me to have more confidence to talk to others.

Based on the observations from the lessons and tests carried out on the treatment group, we found that dialogic pedagogy does indeed enhance the quality of talk and allows individuals to voice their opinions and views. However, this largely depends on the students' familiarity with the given topic/stimulus and how extensive the individual student's prior knowledge is. Thus, setting an appropriate subject matter for discussion is paramount. The pre-test, intervention lessons and post-test that were carried out support this opinion.

Reflections

Kerstin Wong, Senior Communications and Engagement Officer (MOE)

An effective conversationalist is one who is able to converse and listen well and this goes beyond articulating his/ her views and opinions. It is equally important to develop skills that empower others to contribute constructively in a conversation.

It is heartening to see the students putting in concerted effort to encourage their peers to share their perspectives when they are engaged in a conversation. They are more confident and they clearly enjoy conversing with their peers as they build on each other's views, infer and draw connections to their own experiences to create knowledge.

Regina Arulanandan, ST/ EL, CHIJ Our Lady Queen of Peace

It has been a phenomenal journey – exploring Dialogic Pedagogy and using it as a tool to enhance the quality of conversation among my pupils. It has been phenomenal because in the process of facilitating "Talking Points" sessions, I learnt how best to scaffold conversation using selected strategies which are pupil-friendly.

It was gratifying to watch the girls enjoy the discussion and record segments which captured authentic responses. The pupils' feedback affirmed our belief that classroom discourse should be a natural phenomenon.

Azlina Mohd Nor, HOD/ EL, Teck Ghee Primary School

This SIG collaboration is a collective effort, which has led to improved practices in the classroom. We were well-supported by Jennifer and Dr Ward from ELIS. Every opportunity to meet was meaningfully and purposefully spent as we explored ways to help our students be critical thinkers. Having dialogic conversations in the classroom is certainly a good way to help our students co-construct knowledge and hone their critical thinking skills.

As the saying goes – No man is an island. We hope to continue to work collaboratively and strive to ensure that our students are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The observations made in this inquiry suggest that dialogic pedagogy promotes critical thinking and enhances quality talk in a Primary 5 English Language classroom. When students are equipped with the skills to engage in dialogic conversation, there will be a richer exchange of ideas among them. This kind of classroom talk enables students to collaborate meaningfully to create knowledge and to learn. However, more in-depth studies could be conducted to study the effects of dialogic pedagogy on students of both genders over a significantly longer period of time.

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Developing a 'Nose' for Quality:

Student Work Exemplars and Formative Assessment

BY WILLIAM ANTHONY GROSSE (ELIS)

Student self-analysis of exemplars can help them understand what good work looks like and develop their capacities to make informed judgements. This will enhance their ability and willingness to produce quality assignments. The term 'exemplars' here is defined as carefully selected samples of student work, which are used to illustrate dimensions of quality and clarify assessment expectations. The students engage in a teaching and learning sequence that involves direct instruction, co-construction, and class and group-based dialogue around the strengths and weaknesses of their work and how it could be improved. Through this pedagogical sequence, Mr William Grosse, Master Teacher/ EL develops student understanding of the nature of quality in order for students in Townsville Primary School to gain the experience and competence of making judgements about their own writing.

Introduction

One of the most problematic areas the teachers I work with find in the teaching of writing is how to facilitate student understanding of the process of revision. For most students and teachers, revision is centred around the feedback process, which comes in the form of written comments or conferencing with the teacher on the necessary and relevant improvements which need to be made to the product or draft. Wiliam and Leahy (2015) point out that feedback is supposed to improve the writer and not the writing. Many students fail to apply what they have learned from the compositions they write across time. The learning, in other words, does not feed forward.

The teacher's role in the classroom when carrying out formative assessment is not simply a matter of using feedback to promote learning. The teacher has to help the students understand the learning goals, as well as develop in them the skills of making judgements about their learning in relation to the expected or required standard. Teachers have to facilitate the use of a repertoire of operational strategies to help students regulate their own learning. Sadler (1989) argues that this student ability to evaluate and respond to the gaps in their learning is an essential feature of formative assessment. He explains that if students lack the resources and ability to monitor their own learning and take corrective action, they will always remain thoroughly dependent on teacher feedback as the primary resource for learning and lack the capacity to develop as self-sustaining and regulated learners. In other words, teachers have to help their students develop a 'nose for quality' (Carless & Chan, 2016).

Inquiry Process

Students often see revision as completing corrections or carrying out whatever teachers tell them to do in written feedback. In Semester 1 of 2018, I was involved in the Academy of Singapore Teachers' pilot school attachment programme, and I taught eight periods per week of English Language in two Primary 4 classes. This gave me the opportunity to teach writing lessons incorporating the use of exemplars and to inquire into its impact on student writing, with particular attention on their understanding of the revision process. I first adapted a Pedagogical Sequence (Carless and Chan, 2016), which combined student work in progress; interaction with peers and the teacher; and the support provided by the use of exemplars as well as scaffolded activities. I used exemplars for improving student self and peer-assessment practices. The pedagogical sequence came into play over three iterations of the process writing cycle, providing students with the necessary routines to scaffold their thinking and learning.

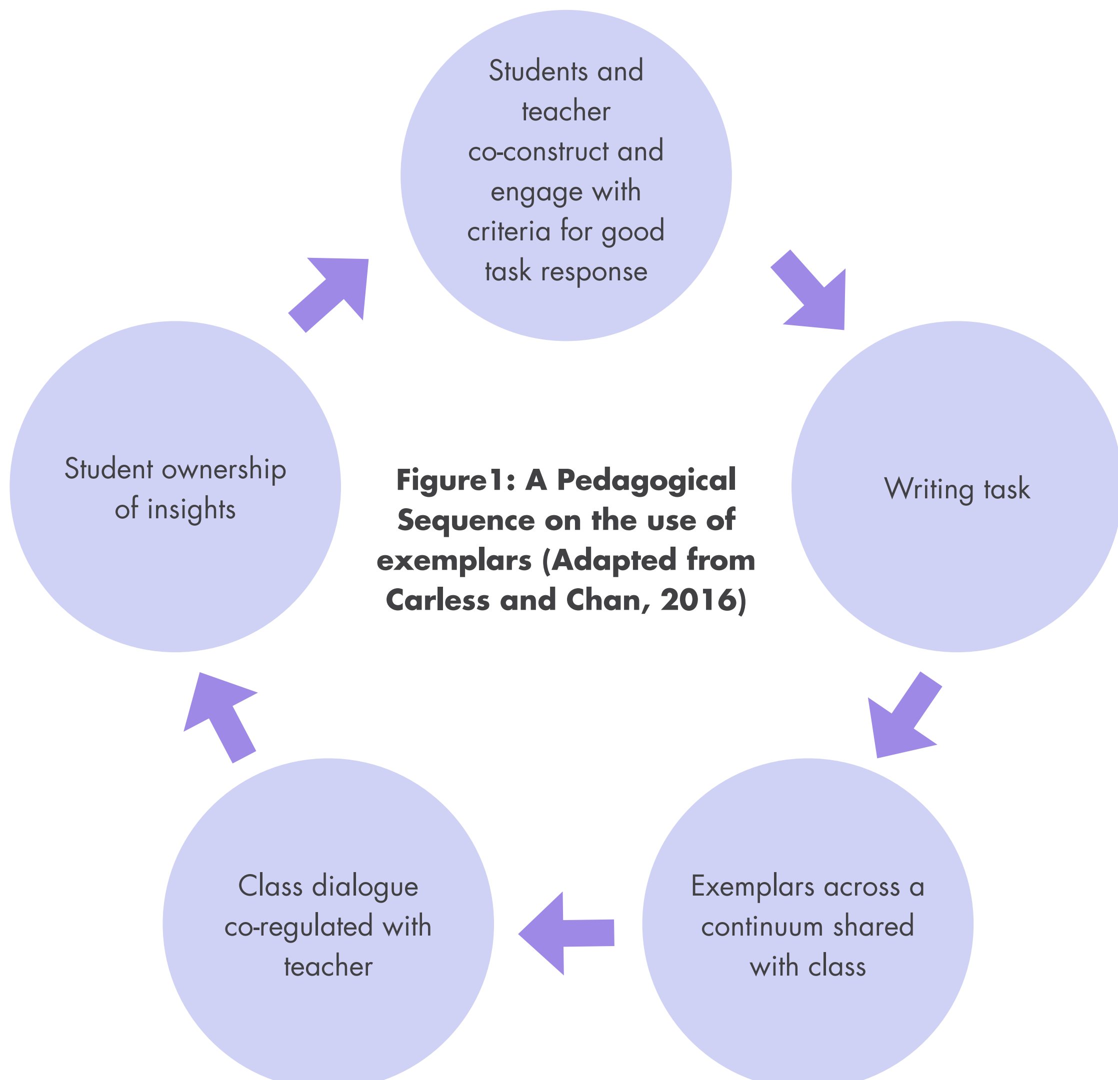

Figure1: A Pedagogical Sequence on the use of exemplars (Adapted from Carless and Chan, 2016)

Developing a nose for quality Phase 1: How do we know when something is good?

The first phase of the pedagogical sequence began with a question for the students: What makes a good story? The Primary 4 students were expected to write narratives and I wanted to know what they thought a good story would need to contain. This was important as the students and I were articulating, sharing and clarifying what we should expect of the pieces of writing the students were required to work on and submit in the coming months. They would also be calling on what they had learned from all the writing assignments they had done in the previous years as well as all the stories that they had been exposed to, in and out of the classroom. The criteria we co-constructed (see Table 1) would be a reference point throughout the semester.

Table 1: Co-constructed criteria

Our criteria for quality: What else can we add?	
• Ok composition (meeting expectations) - includes feelings and actions - elaboration - details – e.g. setting (These are what is expected of us.)	• Good composition (exceeding expectations) - dilemma presented - character's thoughts shown - relevant details - beginning must make the reader want to read on - there is suspense - clues are provided - beginning and end must match (These can challenge us.)

The above captures what the students and I co-constructed on what the students thought a good story should look like. What was important about this 'reference point' was that the criteria were not static but would take on additional criteria or modifications as they read more stories and discussed what made them good. In addition, the stories their peers were writing could also be used in the classroom as exemplars of the qualities we were looking for.

The lessons also involved discussing with the students fundamental questions such as why we read and write. Responses ranged from 'preparing us for examinations', 'helping us to remember' to 'recording our experiences for the future'.

Developing a nose for quality Phase 2: Working on the work that is writing

I conducted a series of lessons that focused on prewriting and the eventual writing tasks. The students worked on pre-writing tasks such as reading and responding to texts and videos, as well as engaging with pre-writing strategies such as Listing and Freewriting that made them think about the content, their relevance to the task at hand and especially how to select and translate these ideas into writing.

Developing a nose for quality Phase 3: Analysing compositions and selecting exemplars

Instead of using a rubric to communicate expectations for a given piece of student writing, I used two or more student work samples for my students to evaluate and discuss. These were contrasting examples that provided students not only with good examples but 'only just' and 'near misses' as well (Lin-Siegler et al., 2015). Wiliam and Leahy (2015) propose that it is only when students struggle to see the differences that long-term effective learning can be brought about.

I facilitated a dialogue with the whole class discussing where three student work samples (see Table 2) lay on a continuum of excellence and why we thought so. The reasons or criteria of quality that each text possessed was unpacked and deliberated upon. This dialogue was repeated for the two other texts.

To make the visualisation of this continuum of excellence more concrete for the students, I selected and used

exemplars of differing quality (see Table 2) for analysis as this enabled a useful comparison of standards. At the same time, multiple iterations of excellent samples were also shown to the students. This was done in order to impress upon them that excellent work could be expressed in more than one way and to help them think and look at their writing more critically. As one student put it, "So, you have to see your work in a different way; a different perspective."

Table 2: Exemplars of differing quality

Not there yet – Below expectations	
3) One stormy afternoon, Tommy carrying his wallet, strolled to the nearby fastfood restaurant. He ordered his food, then reached his hand into his pocket and found out that his wallet was missing. As Tommy could not find his wallet, he had no choice but to go home.	• **Detail** not important = stormy • **Focus** on victim • Victim knew wallet was missing – yet could not locate/find **(Interpret)**
OK- Meeting expectations	
2) It was a blistering hot afternoon. Most people were at Jacob's Fast Food Restaurant. There was a long queue at the counter. "I would like a fishburger and milo please," said the boy. After he paid his money, he put back his wallet into his pocket but it fell out and the girl noticed it. The girl thought: Hey, the boy in front of me has dropped his wallet. Should I return him his wallet or just take it.	• **Setting** presented • **Initiating event** presented – dropped wallet • **Subsequent event** presented – girl noticed it • **Dilemma** presented in girl's thoughts – possibility of dishonest act
Good – Exceeding expectations	
"Hmmm…what should I eat? How about my favourite meal? Ya! First have to check how much I have… $1.50 only? Not enough! Let me just go and buy fastfood then." When she reached the queue, a handsome boy was standing in front of her. Much to her surprise, after the boy picked up his tray, he carelessly dropped his wallet and walked off, not knowing that he dropped his wallet. I started to think hard… "Should I return him his wallet? Or …keep it so that I can buy my favourite meal? Aha! Buy my favourite meal." Jane carefully bent down and took the wallet from the floor.	• Clear link between **sequence of events and character's thoughts and actions.** Relevant details about character's thoughts. Linked to possibility of dishonest act when it is presented. • **Initiating event and subsequent dilemma** presented. • **Details** add to the enjoyment of the story – they make the actions come alive or interesting as well as adding to the readers' understanding of the characters – we know why they act the way they did; because of how they felt or thought – their **motivations** = cause and effect

Using the exemplars, the students discussed the terminology some of their classmates and I brought up to describe the writing, such as 'initiating event' and 'character motivations'. The students analysed the exemplars by asking key questions about particular pieces of work. We talked and worked through what was required and matched them with the success criteria. The students applied the same process on their own work, identified the indicators and made an overall judgement of the level of their work. I wanted the students to own these insights. Through using exemplars, I hoped to motivate them to attain a higher standard or provide appropriate scaffolding if a student was in need of help. As we worked with exemplars, I wanted my students to think about the following questions:

- What am I learning?
- What will it look like when I show that I have learned it?
- What does progress look like?
- How am I doing?
- How good is good enough?

Developing a nose for quality Phase 4: Scaffolding the process with appropriate tools

Exemplars by themselves are insufficient. They need to be interpreted so that insights can be applied to a specific assessment task (Handley & Williams, 2011) or in this case, writing tasks. Therefore, this phase involved a class dialogue during which the students discussed and decided on which text was 'better' or more effective than the other (see Table 3). For the first session, I carried out a Think Aloud Protocol (TAP). With the use of TAP, I modelled the processes in my thinking as I showed them how to improve the piece of writing.

I also used a number of scaffolding tools such as Evaluation Sentences and Directive Sentences cards – (see Table 4) to facilitate student thinking and dialogue. They first worked in groups, before revising and improving on their classmates' work. Finally, they worked on their own drafts individually.

Table 3: Which is better?

<table>
<tr><td>A)
Turner knew Rider was good at doing stunts on his bicycle. Turner requested Rider to teach him how to perform stunts on his new bicycle. Rider agreed and started on his first stunt. Turner followed him and did the same. Turner practised a few times and was now confident.

Turner and Rider went on the road and continued doing stunts. Rider was happy for his friend and forgot about the safety. Turner was in high spirits grinning from ear to ear, also forgot about the danger in front of him.</td><td>B)
"Okay, be careful!" Jim's mother said, "And don't forget your helm-" When she turned around Jim was already gone.

"Okay, I'm going to stop performing tricks now, "Jim said. "I don't feel like performing tricks at a junction."
"Oh come on, "Tom teased, "Stop being a scaredy cat. I will show you."

Just as the green light came on, Tom zoomed onto the road. He turned his head and laughed at Jim, who was making his way carefully across the road. Neither of them were wearing helmets, and it was dangerous to ride too quickly.

He would forever remember that helmets are like 'lifesavers' and he should forever wear one when cycling.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Which is the better piece?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">WHY?
Using our Evaluation Sentences card to help us:
In text A the writer _____, whereas in text B the writer ____.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Which is the better piece?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">REVISION
Revise the piece of writing that needs improvement. Can you get it to a place in which it reverses our judgement?</td></tr>
</table>

Table 4: Evaluation Sentences and Directive Sentences Cards (adapted from Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987)

Evaluation Sentences Card – What I see in my writing	
1. There are too few ideas. 2. Part of the composition doesn't belong with the rest. 3. Part of the composition is not in the right order. 4. This doesn't sound right. 5. This is not what I wanted to say. 6. This is not useful to my story/ideas.	7. This is an incomplete idea. 8. This is a weak idea. 9. Readers may not understand this part as it is not clear. 10. Readers won't be interested in this part. 11. Readers won't believe this part. 12. This is good.

Directive Sentences Card – What I will do with my writing
1. Leave it the same. 2. Say more. **(ADD)** 3. Leave this part out. **(REMOVE)** 4. Cross out and say it in a different way. **(SUBSTITUTE)** 5. Move this part to a more suitable place. **(MOVE)**

I really spent a lot of time and paid much attention to this phase which involved multiple sessions of working with exemplars from drafts for different pieces of writing. I scaffolded student application of tools such as Evaluation Sentences and Directive Sentences Cards (see Table 4) to get students to pay attention to what and how they were revising the writing. This involved me modelling the process, the use of the tools and the thinking aloud while doing so. Later, I invited the class to work together with me. Then groups of students worked with exemplars and shared their revised versions as well as explain how and why they made the revisions. Essentially, the classes and I enacted the 'gradual release of responsibility model' in which I helped them to co-regulate their thinking and learning. I had them continually think about the implications for their own writing, in order to develop their evaluative capacity. Through the discussions I had with the students, I attempted to help them understand what made for a quality piece of writing, that is to develop a 'nose for quality', which relates to Carless's and Chan's (2016) idea of 'connoisseurship'. Together, we talked about why the writing pieces were better, with special attention given to the reasons for our evaluation. I asked them questions such as "What can you 'see' in the writing pieces that inform your judgements about the quality of the writing and its impact on the reader?" This led to further lessons and steps we undertook to revise and improve their written pieces. In their groups, the students worked on making their agreed upon revisions which were then shared and discussed with the class. This was important as I wanted the students to understand two very important points:

- There was more than one way to make a text better.
- We needed to understand the thinking and rationale behind these revisions.

There were three iterations of this phase across three different writing tasks. The classes always worked on how to improve on the 'weaker pieces' that were shared and discussed. This was important to demonstrate to the students that there are different ways to think about and improve a piece. They were also shown multiple iterations of excellent work and we talked about how each piece manifested excellence in its own particular way. It was important for students to be exposed to more than one exemplar, so they could discern that quality can be expressed in different ways (Sadler, 2002). I modelled and articulated my thinking and reasons for my choices or decisions to revise the selected exemplars as students often find it difficult to evaluate samples accurately until they are able to visualise teacher thinking about the rationale for the revisions made.

The students benefitted from this iterative process as it made them see and understand the process of revision from a different perspective. As one student said, "We revise better. Really looking back and thinking deeply about what you want to improve and not just copy everything. After you taught us how to revise, we can slowly look through and know what we want to keep. Once you taught us how to revise, the compos are different now. They are different compos because the ideas all change. Last time it's the same compo except for the mistakes".

Pedagogical Insights: My Ruminations

The use of exemplars should not be a discrete assessment activity. It should be woven into the teaching and learning processes, firmly integrating assessment into all phases of the writing process cycle. The students expressed enthusiasm for the process because they felt they made improvements in thinking about and revising their writing. Students also shared that they felt more confident because they had a better understanding of what quality writing looked like. As one student pointed out, "We know how a teacher feels when they read our compos. Then we know the teacher's expectations about our compos, what the teacher wants."

The concreteness of the exemplars gave them visible ideas to work with and learn from. This is reflected in a survey on students' perceptions of the use of writing exemplars (see Table 5) I carried out with both classes after all the lessons for the semester. The survey also reflects the students' struggle in understanding what makes for quality writing and applying that understanding to the pieces students write there and then and in the future. The responses point to the necessary struggles that writers continuously make in order to become more competent writers. Lastly, the survey responses highlight the difficulty in developing student evaluative capacity to make sense of feedback and the varying iterations of quality that their writing presents.

Table 5: Survey on student perceptions of the use of writing exemplars in class

	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Agree/ Strongly Agree
The use of other students' writing exemplars during class and group discussion, and group work has helped me to revise my work better.	14%	86%
The use of other students' writing exemplars has helped me understand what makes for good writing.	9%	91%
The use of other students' writing exemplars has helped me to become a better writer.	20%	80%
I learn more about my own writing by thinking and talking about other students' writing exemplars.	16%	84%

However, one area that remained difficult for several students was how to integrate ideas or learnings from the exemplars into their own writing. Students shared that inquiring into and discussing their classmates' writings was useful, but found it difficult to incorporate these ideas into their own writing. One of my students said out loud with some frustration, "How do I use this information in my writing, Mr. Grosse?" This highlights that exemplars may be an effective way for students to appreciate what constitutes quality but translating that into practice may remain a challenge. I am still trying to figure out what I can do as a teacher to facilitate the dialogue or to design scaffolded tasks that enable effective transfer of learning.

Conclusion

At the end of the semester, the students shared that they wanted more practice in analysing, talking and thinking about exemplars as seen in this student's comment, "You should show peoples' work more so that when the writer sees it, he can correct it and then when you and we talk about it, the other people can see whether they did the same thing and improve." I have seen a change in students' perceptions and understandings about writing and the revision process. This change provides an impetus for me to further inquire into the place and power of exemplars and to learn from all that we have done together. This was truly a co-constructed and collaborative teaching, learning and assessment process.

However, I realise that my work far from being completed, is just beginning. The dialogic and improvement process still continues as the students and I continue our inquiry with exemplars and their understanding of quality. During one of the lessons, a student put up his hand to speak about his dawning realisation. He said, "I think Mr. Grosse you are actually trying to help us improve our writing and improve ourselves as writers. Correct?"

Correct!

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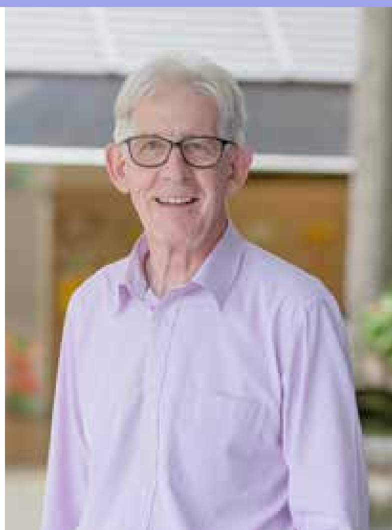

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