

EL Classroom *inquiry*

It is about what works in the English Language classroom



Foreword

Teacher inquiry in the English Language (EL) classroom is an integral aspect of our role as EL teachers. Improving student learning is central to what we do, and this is the reason for us to engage in systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of our practice. We need to inquire into the effectiveness of what we do on a daily basis by observing our students to see what they have learned well. Then we need to inquire into what we can improve to help our students overcome the difficulties they encounter. We also need to understand what in our current practice needs to be reviewed, modified and changed, and when we have changed our practice, we need to continuously evaluate whether those changes have been effective. The process of planning and carrying out classroom inquiry, especially in collaboration with EL colleagues and partners such as Master Teachers/ EL and Pedagogy Specialists/ EL, enables all of us to develop deeper understanding of EL teaching and learning.

Let us grow together as inquirers of our practice!



C R E A T E

Co-construct learning

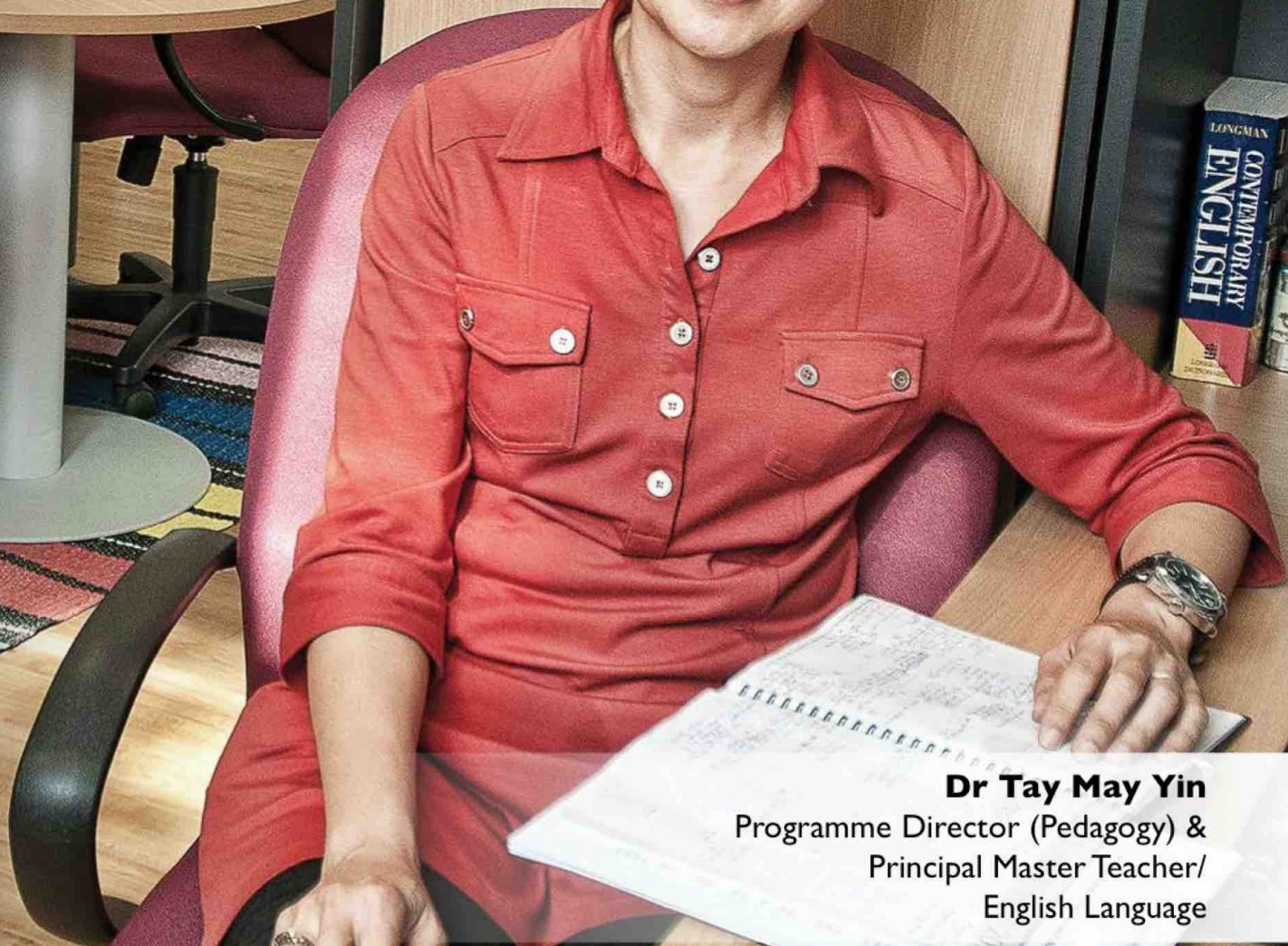
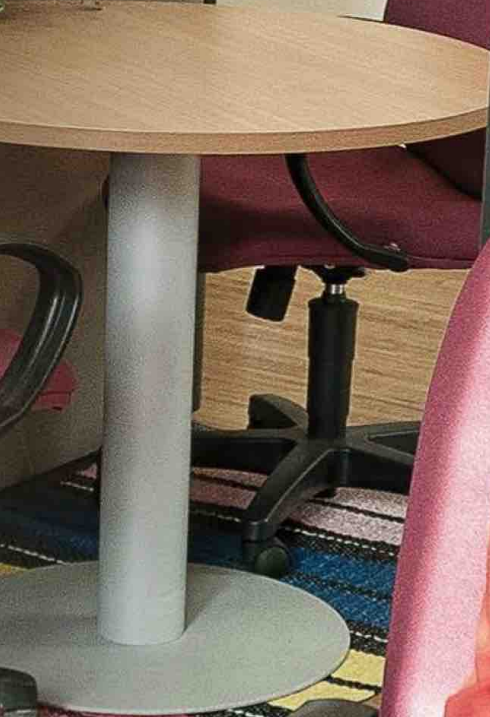
Role-model skillful teaching

Encourage professional growth through self-directed / continuous learning

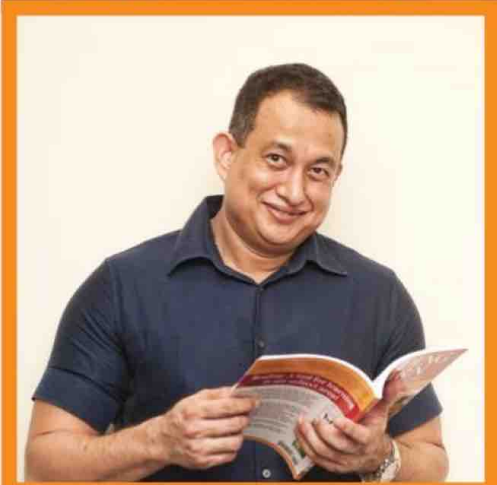
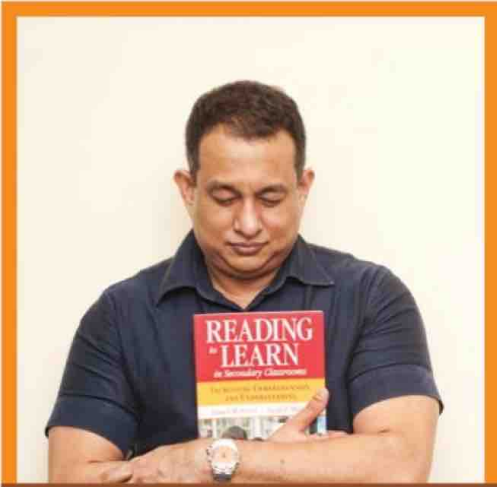
Address teachers' beliefs, attitudes and values
Assess their learning through reflection and feedback

Theory to be applied to practice

Empower teachers to become active learners



Dr Tay May Yin
Programme Director (Pedagogy) &
Principal Master Teacher/
English Language



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A Special Interest Group involving Seven Primary Schools



The image shows the cover of a book. On the left, a man (Mr. P. Ragulan) is smiling, wearing a dark blue polo shirt and a watch. On the right, a woman (Mrs. Vimala Alexander) is smiling, wearing a red top. The background is a library or classroom setting with bookshelves. The title is written in a mix of fonts: 'an' in orange, 'ACTION' in large brown block letters, 'research' in a brown script font, and 'on viewing skills' in orange block letters.


an **ACTION**
research
on viewing skills

Mr P. Ragulan
Secondary School Teacher

Mrs Vimala Alexander
Retired Master Teacher/
English Language

By P. Ragulan | CHIJ Secondary (Toa Payoh)

**Facilitating the Learning
in the**



Pragulan, an EL teacher at CHIJ Secondary (Toa Payoh), decided to find out whether helping students to develop their metacognitive skills would improve their ability to respond to pictures in more depth. He approached Vimala Alexander, Master Teacher/ English Language from ELIS for guidance, and with her support, he embarked on an action research project. The results were encouraging as they indicated that student responses improved.

of Viewing Skills EL Classroom

How a secondary school teacher helped his Secondary 4 Normal Academic students improve their viewing skills

I had noticed in the past that when I taught my students how to discuss a picture, very few of them could do so at length. Most of their responses tended to focus only on surface aspects of the picture. Their responses also often lacked structure and cohesion. After attending an oracy course facilitated by Vimala Alexander, I began to look more critically at the challenges my students faced in responding to a picture stimulus. From my discussion with Vimala on how I could improve their skills, I realised I could provide them with a structure to scaffold their responses.

After Vimala and I reviewed the literature on this subject, we decided on Barrett's Taxonomy which is given in **Table 1**. This taxonomy was originally devised for reading comprehension but we felt it could be used for the teaching of viewing skills.

Using the taxonomy, students could be encouraged to give and explain their responses to the picture stimulus.

Cycle 1

With Vimala's advice, I decided to embark on an Action Research (AR) project. The following was my research question: 'Does providing students with a metacognitive structure improve their ability to analyse and interpret a picture?' With this question in mind, I carried out the AR project to find out if the use of Barrett's Taxonomy would help Secondary 4 Normal Academic students respond to picture stimuli with greater depth, organisation and structure.



Table 1: Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension (used for the teaching of viewing skills)

Level	Associated Functions or Outcomes
Literal Comprehension – focuses on ideas and information which are explicitly stated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition or recall of details • Recognition of main ideas • Recognition of sequence • Recognition of comparisons • Recognition of cause and effect relationships • Recognition of character traits
Reorganisation – requires students to analyse, synthesise, and/ or organise the ideas or information explicitly stated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classifying • Outlining • Summarising • Synthesising
Inferential Comprehension – demonstrated by students when they use the ideas and information explicitly stated in the reading selection, their intuition, and their personal experiences as bases for conjecture and hypotheses	<p>Students may infer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • main ideas • sequence • cause and effect relationships • character traits • predicted outcomes
Evaluation – requires responses from students which indicate that an evaluative judgement has been made. Students may compare ideas presented in the reading selection with external criteria such as their own background knowledge	<p>Evaluative thinking can be demonstrated by asking students to make the following judgements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reality or fantasy • fact or opinion • appropriateness • worth, desirability and acceptability
Appreciation (Affective Domain) – calls for students to be emotionally and aesthetically sensitive to a text and respond to the worth of its psychological and artistic elements	<p>Appreciation involves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giving an emotional response to the content • identifying with characters or incidents

Adapted from Barrett, T. C. (1972)

Research Question

Does providing students a metacognitive structure improve their ability to analyse and interpret a picture?

Intervention

This is what I did for my project:

- Conduct a pre-test to determine the abilities of my students before instructing them using Barrett's Taxonomy.
- Teach six one-hour lessons over two weeks during which my students learned how to use guiding questions based on Barrett's Taxonomy (Refer to **Table 2**)
- Do a post-test to assess my students' improvement in their responses to pictures
- Elicit student feedback on their attitudes towards learning how to use Barrett's Taxonomy
- Code and analyse data

Table 2: Questions adapted from Barrett's Taxonomy

Level 1: Literal

- What are the main things in the picture that catch your eye?
- Who are the people in the picture?
- How is the person on the left different from the others?

Level 2: Reorganisation

- How are these people related to one another?
- What are the different groups in this picture?
- What is the sequence of events that might have led to this scene depicted in the picture?

Level 3: Inferential

- How does the picture relate to your personal knowledge and experience?

Level 4: Evaluation

- What is your opinion of this picture?

Level 5: Appreciation

- What are your feelings about this picture? Do you like the picture? Why or why not?

Findings

Vimala helped me to code and analyse the data I had collected. Comparing the pre-test and post-test results, I was pleased to find that instructing my students on the use of Barrett's Taxonomy did indeed help them to respond better to a picture stimulus in terms of depth, organisation and structure. For example, the data showed that 66.6% of my students were able to infer meaning from the picture, while at least 46.6% of them could provide evaluative comments about the picture (Refer to **Table 3** for the detailed findings). My students' positive feedback in the survey also showed that they felt they had benefitted from the learning.

Data Analysis

Table 3: Ragulan's test findings (comparing pre-test and post-test results)

The elements in the students' responses	% of students that showed improvement in the post-test
Length of speech	86.7%
Literal	66.6%
Reorganising	33.3%
Inferential	66.6%
Evaluation	46.6%
Appreciation	60%

Students' reflections on their learning

“ I have learnt how to pick out the main details of the picture, summarise the main ideas, use information in the picture and relate it to personal experience or knowledge. ”

- **Mageswari**

“ I have learnt that there is a need to talk about the feelings of people and events in a picture. I am also able to talk about what angles the photographer shot from, and why he took it the way he did. Another thing I learnt was to talk about why these events have taken place. All these points have made me talk more about the picture. ”

- **Claudia**

“ I learnt how to talk about a picture from the viewpoint of the photographer. For example, the purpose of the photographer in taking a picture of that scene; how to pick out the main details; summarise the main idea; relate the information of the picture to my personal experience; give my opinion and talk about how I feel. ”

- **Shalom Jireh**

“ I have learnt that a picture discussion is not only about saying what you see but also about describing, elaborating and giving examples. There is no right or wrong answer. ”

- **Farah**

What I improved on for my AR Project

Cycle 2

After Cycle 1, I took time to review what I had done. I decided to modify the intervention for a new group of Secondary 3 Normal Academic students. It was modified in the following ways:

- Provide longer instruction time for my students to internalise the input
- Select and use pictures that would elicit evaluative and affective responses
- Involve my students in group work before setting them individual work

My reflection:

I found this AR experience very useful both for my students and me. For my students, they were able to use Barrett's Taxonomy more effectively. I could also see that at the affective level, my students became more confident and relaxed after learning how to apply the taxonomy in their picture discussion. This state of mind would certainly be helpful, especially when they undergo examination stress.

While taxonomies can be useful as my study has shown, they can be counter-productive if pictures are over-analysed by teachers as cautioned by Griffin (2005). Thus, I believe it is important for teachers to always seek to be clear about our intent when using any chosen taxonomy, and conscientiously teach our students to apply it appropriately.

“ I have learnt that a picture discussion is not only about saying what you see but also about describing, elaborating and giving examples. There is no right or wrong answer. ”

– Farah, a Sec 4 Normal Academic student

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3. Griffin, L. (2005). Strategic Questioning for Sound Literacy Instruction. *Delta Education Journal*. Spring 2005. Cleveland: Delta State University. Retrieved on 18 October 2013 from <http://www.deltastate.edu/PDFFiles/DJE/Delta%20Education%20JournalSpring05.pdf>



A person is shown from the side, reading a book. The background is a blurred bookshelf filled with books. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of brown and beige.

an ACTION *research* on writing skills

In collaboration with Chitrakala G.Arumugam and Mindy Wong, both Literature teachers from Innova Junior College, Philip McConnell, a Master Teacher/ English Language from ELIS, conducted action research at Innova Junior College to find out whether a genre-based approach to teaching writing could improve 'A' Level Literature students' confidence in writing essays. The students' feedback suggested that the genre-based approach increased their confidence.

By Philip McConnell | Master Teacher/ English

Writing with the



Ms Mindy Wong Min Yin
Subject Head
New Media

Ms Chitrakala G. Arumugam
Subject Head
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Language, ELIS

Reader in Mind

How a Master Teacher helped two teachers bring a greater sense of audience, context and culture (PACC) into their Literature class

It all began with a conversation.

I was chatting with Chitrakala, Subject Head of Literature at Innova Junior College (JC), and her colleague, Mindy, and they shared with me a problem they had encountered in their teaching of Literature. They had noticed that even when their students had quite a good understanding of their set texts, they still struggled to express themselves effectively in essays, which in turn undermined their confidence.

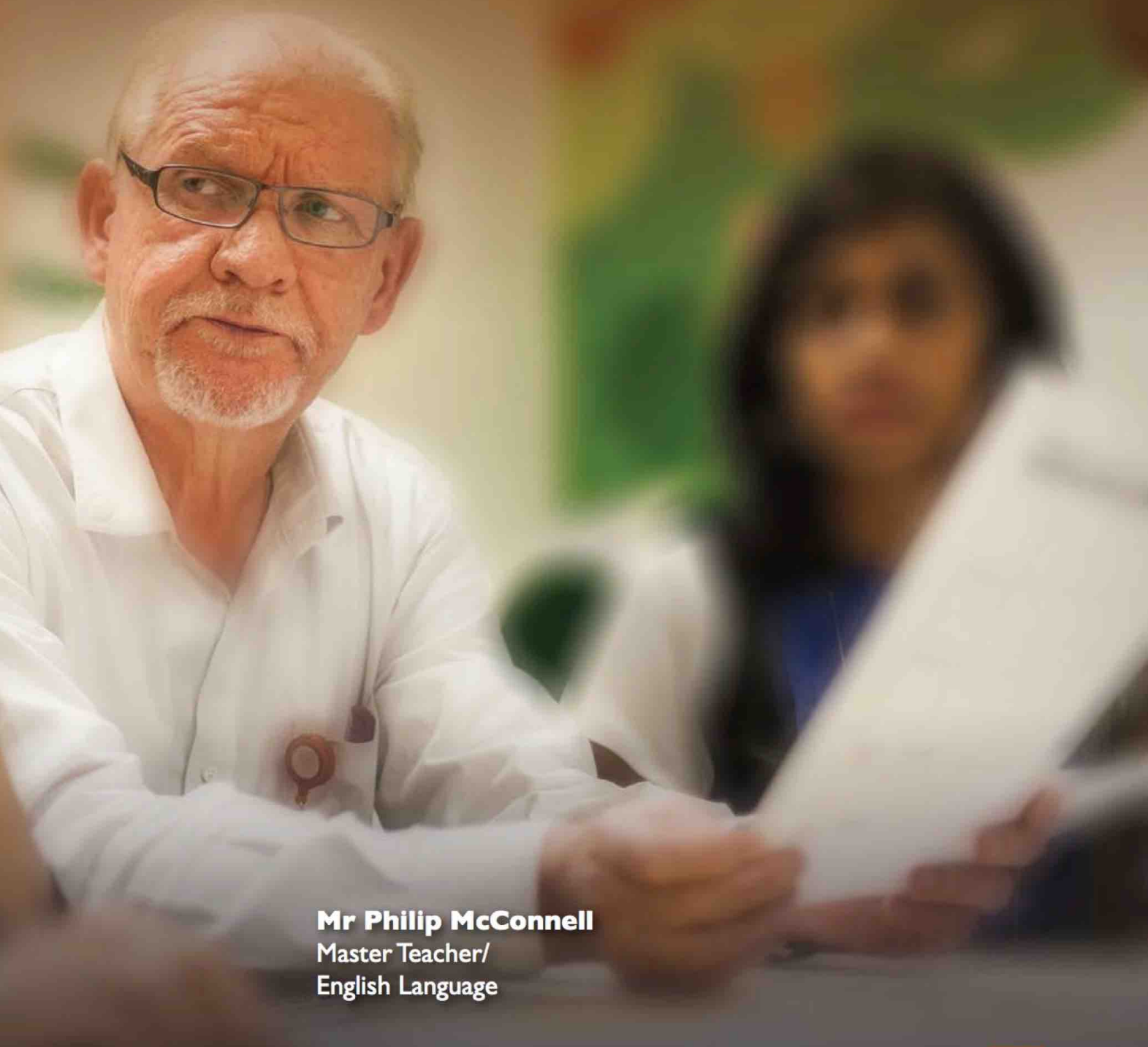
My sense of their problem was that their students had only a fuzzy idea of essay writing, and was very likely focusing narrowly on the technicalities of writing. I told them that a growing body of evidence suggests that developing writers' understanding of complex writing needs to go beyond emphasising the mechanics of planning, drafting and revising.

I shared with them Lavelle's (2002) findings that writers at the pre-university level need to be encouraged to see writing in terms of how well they meet the readers' expectations of the genre, anticipate their own prior knowledge, answer likely questions and consider other possible points of view.

At the end of our conversation, I decided to collaborate with the two of them to try out the genre-based approach to teaching writing which focuses on purpose, audience, context and culture (PACC). The use of the genre-based approach was part of an Action Research (AR) project in a JC2 Literature class that both of them taught.

**Research
Question**

Can the genre-based approach to teaching writing improve 'A' level Literature students' confidence in writing essays?



Mr Philip McConnell
Master Teacher/
English Language

What is the genre-based approach?

The genre-based approach to teaching writing is based on a view of writing as a form of social interaction in which the writer intends to have an effect on the reader – to inform, explain, persuade. Both reader and writer have certain shared understandings of various types of text which are constructed to perform specific functions.

The teacher guides students towards an awareness of how the language used in different types of text, including paragraphing, register and tone, is shaped by the writer's purpose and sense of audience, as well as the context and culture. The emphasis is on teaching students to meet the reader's expectations of the type of text to be read by considering what the reader brings to the text and anticipating specific questions the reader may have about the content.

The three of us began preparing for this project by reviewing the literature on the genre-based approach to teaching writing. We then decided together on the following research question: 'Can the genre-based approach to teaching writing improve 'A' level Literature students' confidence in writing essays?'

Serving as their coach for this AR project, I provided advice and direction to them as a co-researcher, and also co-taught with them as a fellow practitioner.

- **Pre-intervention reflection**

For this reflection task, students wrote a short reflection on themselves as writers. Here is an example of a student's reflection:

“ I used to have some confidence writing literature essays, but that dwindled as time went on. ”

Our observations: The problems they mentioned were, in part, quite predictable – getting started, finding the right words, and organising ideas in paragraphs – but what we found surprising and revealing was the way they referred to their feelings, ranging from 'challenge', 'lack of confidence and unsure' to 'worry', 'fear', 'scares me', 'daunting', and 'panicking excessively'. Very few referred to PACC.

Intervention

- a. Stage 1:** Students were tasked to explore different genres of writing in literature. They were given five short samples of writing about their set text – a review, a publisher’s blurb, an appraisal of its historical significance, a plot summary and a student’s essay. Using a checklist, they worked in small groups to explore the content, language and use of evidence in each sample in order to identify its purpose and intended audience.

Our observations: They soon grasped the idea and began to make detailed comments on differences in language and the scope and nature of the evidence. They noticed in the process how the student’s essay differed in various significant ways from the other types of text.

- b. Stage 2:** We modelled the process of building up an introduction from a basic point, bearing in mind what the reader’s questions and prior knowledge would be and paying attention to the use of appropriate expression. After this demonstration, the students used success criteria based on Cambridge examiners’ reports to rank five introductory paragraphs taken from students’ essays. Following this, they did two more of these ranking exercises, focusing on the use of evidence and expression.

Our observations: What we found as we went on was that these samples of students’ essays could be used as a shared reference point for teachers and students, so that later when providing effective feedback, there was a common sense of why one piece was preferred over another, and what steps a student might take to communicate more effectively.

- c. Stage 3:** Students were tasked to use band descriptors to assess whole essays as a kind of mock standardising exercise. The aim was to build their metacognitive awareness. The students were told they were doing what teachers do, which we think added a sense of authenticity. They were also asked to provide written feedback that would help the writer to improve.



Our observations: From the students’ written feedback, we could see that they were gradually improving in both their confidence and ability to assess the merits and quality of a text.

• Post-intervention reflection

For this reflection task, students wrote a short reflection on how they felt about writing following the three lessons.

Our observations: Their comments were all positive, some extremely so. (Refer to Table 1 for a comparison between the pre-intervention and post-intervention reflections)

Table 1: Comparison between pre-intervention and post-intervention students' reflections

Pre-intervention reflections

- I love writing. I love it so much but the problem is that I only do so for stories and not much else. I used to have some confidence writing literature essays but that dwindled as time went on. I tend to write too much about nothing. I have acquired a fear of topic sentences.
- I tend to focus on what's happening at a surface level and I find it difficult to use literary devices effectively. I feel my essays lack depth and supporting evidence for my ideas.
- It's hard to organise what you want to say into a cohesive argument.

Post-intervention reflections

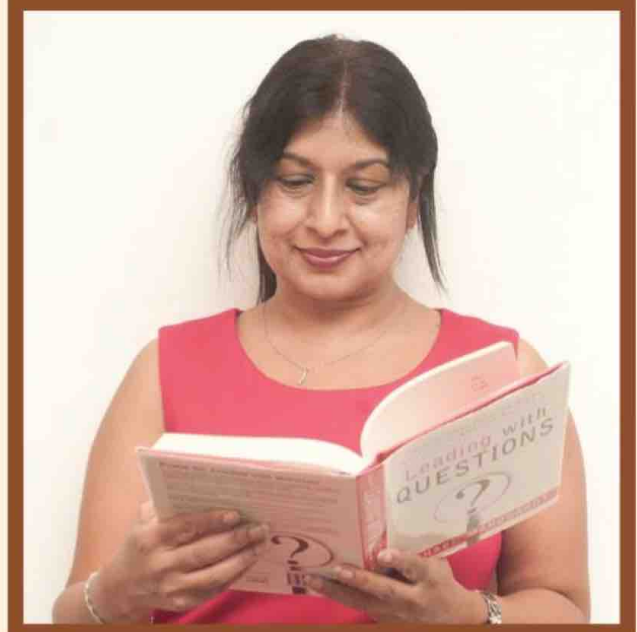
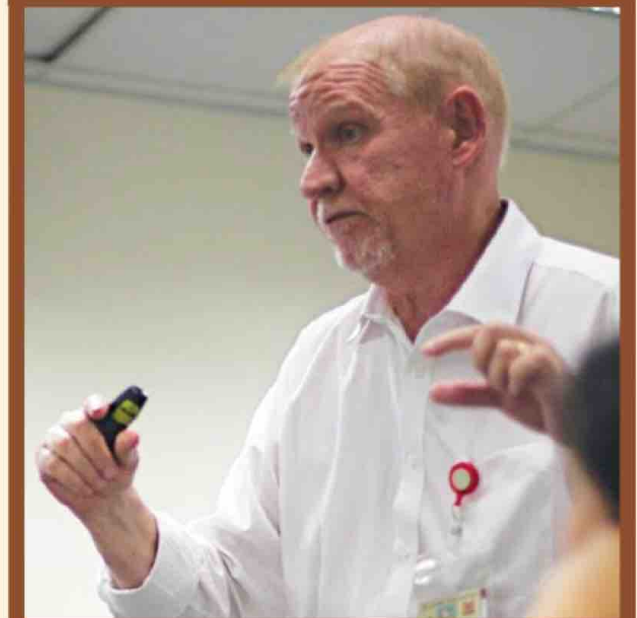
“ I have a better understanding of what makes a good essay especially finding out what to do and what not to do when writing an essay. Also, I have really benefitted from all the lessons teaching me how to use evidence, and to make my essay more concise for the reader. It was really interesting evaluating introductions and essays as if I am a marker. ”

- Now I understand what is necessary and have a whole new way of thinking.
- I finally know why sometimes I get an average grade and why sometimes I get a good grade.

Findings

From this project, it seems to us that focusing on the reader is indeed a very effective way of making students understand the writing process. In addition, extensive practice in the discussion of language through ranking exercises and peer marking develops a stronger sense of what makes for effective writing.

On my own, I have since repeated what I did with Innova JC at two other JCs, and I am pleased to see similar positive student feedback.



References

1. Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. London: Longman.
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an **ACTION** *research* on vocabulary

Absent from picture:
**Mdm Gladys Ng
Wai Heng**
Senior Teacher
River Valley Primary

**Mdm Chong Fing Ying
(Mrs Irene Teh)**
Senior Teacher
Rosyth School
*(currently in Compassvale
Primary)*

Mrs Diana Lim
Senior Teacher
Compassvale Primary

Mrs Lata Menon
Senior Teacher
Gongshang Primary

By Prisca Lee | Master Teacher/ English

**Marzano's Six-Step
to**

Seven Senior Teachers started a Special Interest Group (SIG) after attending a presentation by Prisca Lee, Master Teacher/ English Language, on the use of Marzano's Six-Step Process to enable students to understand and remember new vocabulary. The group then sought her help in conducting action research in the area of vocabulary instruction. The entire cycle lasted two terms, and the results showed that the students improved significantly in their ability to acquire new vocabulary.



Mdm Tay Chiew Pio Susan
Senior Teacher
Shuqun Primary
(currently in Princess Elizabeth Primary)

Mrs Prisca Lee
Master Teacher/
English Language

Miss Lim Wan Cheng
Senior Teacher
Jing Shan Primary

Mdm Lim Lee Joon
Senior Teacher
Northland Primary

Language, ELIS

Process Vocabulary Instruction

How a Master Teacher led a group of Senior Teachers from a special interest in their teaching to a distinct improvement in their students' learning

As EL teachers, we know that explicit vocabulary instruction has a positive impact on students' learning of words and long term reading comprehension. How to go about doing it effectively though is something many of us are less familiar with.

This was what led a group of Senior Teachers to approach me after attending my presentation at ELIS's Lead Teacher-Senior Teacher Professional Circle (LT-ST PC) on Dr Robert J. Marzano's Six-Step Process to Vocabulary Instruction, which is given in **Table 1**.

In my presentation, I had emphasised how students from disadvantaged backgrounds often have the toughest time making the grade in school. I also shared my experience of how I found Marzano's Six-Step Process to be especially helpful for low progress students to acquire new vocabulary.

Based on what they heard, the seven Senior Teachers, who are from different primary schools, told me that they were keen to form a Special

Interest Group (SIG) to explore the use of Marzano's explicit vocabulary instruction process in their own classrooms, and that they would like me to be the facilitator of their SIG. As someone who loves working with other teachers, I readily agreed.

What impressed me most about this group of teachers was that they did not unquestioningly accept Marzano's Six-Step Process simply because it had worked for me. Rather, they wanted to ascertain for themselves in a more rigorous way if this approach would truly work in their own classrooms as well. They eventually decided to embark on an Action Research (AR) project to determine whether Marzano's process would help their students to better understand, remember and use new vocabulary.

We then met on four occasions to deepen our understanding of Marzano's process, as well as to make concrete plans for the AR project. After much discussion, the group agreed on the following research question:



Research Question

To what extent does the use of Marzano's Six-Step Process contribute to students' improvement of vocabulary acquisition?

However, in view of the different schools' concerns and contexts, the teachers decided it would be best to adopt slightly different approaches in their research. Here I highlight the work of four of the teachers who chose to employ Marzano's process to teach their Learning Support Programme (LSP) students.

Table 1: Marzano's Six-Step Process to Vocabulary Instruction

Step 1: Teacher gives an explanation, description or example of a new word.	Steps 1-3 involve the teacher in direct instruction
Step 2: Teacher asks students to give an explanation, description or example of the word in his/ her own words.	
Step 3: Students draw a symbol/ picture or locate a graphic to represent the word.	
Step 4: Teacher provides students with an opportunity to learn new vocabulary in greater depth. For example, students are shown the antonym of the word, prefix or suffix for the word, and/ or additional meaning(s) of the word.	Steps 4-6 provide learners with practice and reinforcement
Step 5: Students discuss the meaning of the word with other learners.	
Step 6: Teacher uses games to reinforce the use of the word.	

Intervention

What the four Senior Teachers did with their LSP classes over the course of eight weeks

- They first decided on the use of four passages/ Big Books for teaching over four cycles, each lasting two weeks.
- For each cycle, they did a pre-test of the target words, an intervention which involved explicit vocabulary instruction using Marzano's Six-Step Process, and a post-test of the same target words. The pre-test and post-test consisted of a cloze passage with 10 blanks for students to fill in using the 10 target words taught in each passage or Big Book. For the intervention, explicit instruction using Marzano's process lasted 30 minutes per session. **Table 2** gives an example of a worksheet completed by a student during the learning process.
- After the four cycles of pre-tests, interventions, and post-tests, the teachers interviewed their students to get feedback on their experience of learning vocabulary using Marzano's Six-Step Process.



Table 2: An example of a student's work

Name _____ Class P2. 8 Date: 4-4-2012

Chicken Food

Word	Meaning	Drawing
7) frantic	worried or frightened about a situation	
8) chirp	short high sounds made by birds	
9) digger	a large machine that digs and moves earth	
10) spade	a tool for digging that has a long handle and a broad metal blade you push into the ground	
11) squiggle	a short irregular line in writing or drawing	
12) crickets	small brown jumping insects that makes noise by rubbing its wings together	

Findings from the AR Project

From the marked improvement seen in students' work over the four cycles, the teachers who had participated in this research were all very encouraged. The analysis of the results showed that their students had developed better understanding of the meaning of the words and were able to use them in context.

The teachers were also heartened by the positive feedback from the student interviews. Many of the students said they enjoyed the learning process, and felt they benefitted from this approach to vocabulary learning. Students' feedback on Marzano's process is shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Students' feedback on the use of Marzano's Six-Step Process

"I enjoy learning using this method."
"Easier to learn more new words through drawing."
"Helps you to understand the meaning of words better."
"When we draw on the worksheet in order to understand better, it really helps."
"It is easier to remember new words."

My Reflection

As a firm believer in teacher collaboration, I am glad I had the privilege of collaborating with the passionate Senior Teachers in this SIG. From our collaboration, the following aspects stood out clearly for me – experience, expertise, exchange.

- **Experience** – because I saw each teacher sharing her own unique classroom experience with the rest of the group
- **Expertise** - because I saw each teacher using her expertise to contribute pedagogically sound ideas to each discussion
- **Exchange** – because I saw each teacher giving generously and receiving graciously in the professional exchange of ideas



My hope as a MasterTeacher is that we will continue to see more teachers involved in exchanging their experiences and expertise.

In the group reflection at the end of the project, the four Senior Teachers also indicated that this AR project had proven to be immensely helpful, both for their students' learning as well as their own teaching. The other Senior Teachers who had conducted separate studies echoed the same sentiments.

Teachers' Reflection

Table 4: What the teachers in the SIG had to say

“ Marzano's Six-Step Process is an effective way of building vocabulary. The students are actively engaged in the learning process. They acquire vocabulary in an enjoyable way. As many of the students are visual learners, the drawings help them to remember the meaning of the vocabulary better. ”
- **Lim Lee Joon (Northland Primary School)**

“ Through the use of the six steps, my students were able to remember the vocabulary learnt and use them in their compositions. ”
- **Susan Tay Chiew Pio (Princess Elizabeth Primary School)**

“ My students enjoyed the Bingo game and were more confident in using the phrases taught in their compositions. ”
- **Irene Chong Fing Ying (Compassvale Primary School)**

“ My students were excited and looked forward to the learning of new vocabulary using Marzano's Six-Step Process. They could better remember the new vocabulary learnt and they enjoyed illustrating the new words taught. My students' reading comprehension also improved. ”
- **Lim Wan Cheng (Jing Shan Primary School)**

“ My students took ownership of their learning as they created meaning for themselves with guidance and clarification from the teacher. ”
- **Gladys Ng Wai Heng (River Valley Primary School)**

References

Marzano, R. J. (2004). Building background knowledge for academic achievement: Research on what works in schools. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

“ This SIG AR project has provided me with an avenue to work collaboratively with a group of STs to better support my students in enhancing their vocabulary which leads to a better understanding of comprehension passages. I am happy that my students have shown improvement in the use of vocabulary through Marzano’s Six-Step process. ”

- **Diana Lim Kim Luan (Compassvale Primary School)**

“ I truly enjoyed the whole SIG AR learning journey initiated by Master Teacher, Mrs Prisca Lee, and I am thankful for having participated in this SIG. My teaching skills have been enhanced and I am glad to have been able to share my learning with other teachers. ”

- **Lata Menon (Gongshang Primary School)**





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- Compassvale Primary School
- Gongshang Primary School
- Jing Shan Primary School
- Northland Primary School
- River Valley Primary School
- Rosyth School
- Shuqun Primary School
- CHIJ Secondary (Toa Payoh)
- Innova Junior College





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