

Using rich literary texts in the English language classroom to improve students' understanding of the effects of language in comprehension

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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 implied effects of language use which are highlighted in these texts. The author examines 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.

Introduction

The author was conscious of the close link between Literature and English language, as literature has been described as an ally of language (Brumfit & 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 comprehension.

Literature Review

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.

The research question of the present study was:

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

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

Methodology

Samples

For this study, two Secondary 2 classes of students taught by the author 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 the English language. All students in both classes had the same socio-economic status and belonged to the same ethnic group. The author was also the English Language and Literature teacher of both classes.

Intervention

The intervention lessons were carried out as part of a comprehension unit of work. 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, the author 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, a series of eight lessons was conducted where the students read and discussed 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 – 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 how students could improve their responses.

Data collection

A pre-test comprising a comprehension exercise (20 marks) 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 underwent 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

i. 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)

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

As can be seen from the table 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, $t(50) = 1.98$, $p = 0.05$.

ii. 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 had 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. They also scored higher 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 significant statistically could include not having a large enough sample size to carry out research, due to the fact that the author was only in charge of teaching two classes in the level. The period of intervention was also too short, and this did not enable the author to revisit and consolidate key learning concepts with students. Also, reflecting on the intervention strategies the author 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, the author 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.

Conclusion

The results of this action research project support the idea that the use of literary texts in the English language 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. The potential of incorporating creative writing lessons with the intervention strategies could also be examined, so as to further develop students’ capabilities in expressing their thoughts about the literary texts they have discussed in class.

This study was undertaken with support from the ELIS Research Fund (Grant number ERF-2013-11-TXL).

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