EL Classroom *inquiry*

It is about what works in the English Language classroom

issue
5

Contents

ACTION *research*

By Sanmuga Malar d/o Rathakrishnan, Mars
Lynette Tan Su-Shien (Princess Elizabeth

Developing Close
in the Teaching of Rea

Chin Sau Lai, Level Head/ EL, and Sanmuga Malar d/o Rathakrishnan, Senior Teacher/ EL, from Princess Elizabeth Primary School were reflecting on how to help their middle and low progress Primary 4 students answer literal and inferential reading comprehension questions. Working together with Amir Wahab, Pedagogy Specialist/ EL, they undertook Action Research to inquire into their practice. After using parts of the Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) strategy with middle and low progress students, it was observed that there was significant improvement in their close reading comprehension skills.

elyn Jonatan, Chin Sau Lai, Teng Shin Chee, Primary School) and Amir Wahab (ELIS)

Reading Skills
ding Comprehension

Low and middle progress students faced difficulty in answering reading comprehension questions

In August 2014, we reviewed the customised school-based instructional materials we had been using to develop Primary 4 students' reading comprehension skills. The materials, mainly in the form of graphic organisers, helped to scaffold the process of making predictions and identifying the main points within narrative texts. However, our low and middle progress students still faced difficulty answering reading comprehension questions.

To address the issue, we set up a Special Interest Group (SIG) to focus on the teaching of reading comprehension with the aim of identifying appropriate strategies which would be trialled through Action Research (AR) before being scaled up for application at and across different levels. Together with Amir, we had regular meetings throughout the second half of 2014 to:

Identify students' reading comprehension needs

We collected samples of Primary 4 students' class assignments and assessment tasks to review their responses and find out the root cause of their difficulty. We also interviewed the students to ascertain how they derived their answers to the tasks.

From the review and interviews, we found that the students were able to make predictions about the text but found it challenging to identify the main points. Many of the low progress learners simply

scanned through the text and lifted sentences from the passage. We soon realised that many could not answer the literal and inferential questions correctly. They were frustrated trying to answer the questions.

We looked up the EL Syllabus 2010 to identify the skills, learner strategies, attitudes and behaviour (SSAB) which students need to master for reading comprehension. We realised that we needed to focus more on Learning Outcome 2, which involves teaching students to "process and comprehend age-/year level-appropriate texts at literal and inferential levels" (MOE, 2010, pp.38-39). Here students would need to draw upon a variety of *SSAB, such as:

a. making predictions and inferences using prior knowledge, visual and contextual clues
b. skimming for the gist/ main idea
c. scanning for details
d. drawing conclusions from the gist/ main idea and key details, prior knowledge, and contextual clues

With the above Learning Outcome and SSAB in mind, we went on to conduct a literature review to find evidence of appropriate instructional strategies which would help us to meet these learning outcomes.

Selecting an appropriate strategy

We explored a variety of reading comprehension strategies such as Think Alouds from the Reading Rockets website, Pre-reading Plan (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995 as cited in Tompkins, 2006), Making Connections and Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) in Tompkins (2006).

As we read about the various strategies, we thought that our use of QAR could enable our students to better understand that the answer to a question was directly related to the type of question asked. It enables students to use prior knowledge and contextual clues to identify the main idea and key details, and scan the text to locate the answers (Chien, 2013, Raphael & Au, 2006, Raphael & Wonnacott 1985 as cited in Tompkins, 2006).

* Skills, Strategies, Attitudes and Behaviour (as listed in EL Syllabus 2010)

In QAR, there are four types of questions which progressively develop from literal thinking (Right There), to more inferential thinking (Think and Search), to inferential and evaluative thinking (Author and You), to evaluative thinking (On My Own), Tompkins (2006), as summarised in **Table 1**:

Table 1: A Summary of QAR

In the Book	In My Head
Right There The answer is easily found in the text. The exact words for the questions and answers are located in the same sentence.	**Author and You** The answer is not in the text. The reader combines previous knowledge with text information to create a response.
Think and Search The answer is in the text, but requires gathering information from different places in the selection.	**On My Own** The answer is not in the text. The reader uses previous experience to respond.

Source: Question-Answer Relationships from the Reading Educator website

After reading about QAR, we came to the realisation that the middle and low progress students may not be able to cope with all four question types in QAR – Right There, Think and Search, Author and You and On My Own. This was because many of the students were unable to answer the most basic Right There and Think and Search questions during classwork and assessments. Therefore, we decided to focus on just getting our students to answer Right There and Think and Search questions as they progressed into Primary 5.

Based on our findings from reviewing the students' work, EL Syllabus 2010 and the relevant literature review, we devised the following research question to address the students' needs:

To what extent does identifying Right There and Think and Search questions from QAR enable middle and low progress Primary 5 students to show improvement in answering reading comprehension questions?

Our Research Method

Most of our preparatory work took place in the second half of 2014 with our Primary 4 students. As we were following this same group of students on to Primary 5, we decided to undertake the intervention from Term 1 to Term 3, 2015.

We worked with a team of three other Primary 5 English Language teachers: Lynette Tan Su-Shien, Teng Shin Chee and Marselyn Jonatan. Together, we identified a total of 98 Primary 5 low and middle progress students based on the scores they had attained the year before.

We used a mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) to help us gather evidence for the inquiry. This involved us in:

1. Administering a Pre-test in early January 2015 to get a baseline

2. Comparing the data from Pre-test and Continual Assessment 2 (CA2) in August 2015 to see if there was an improvement

3. Analysing samples of students' work to see if they were able to identify Right There and Think and Search questions

4. Gathering reflections and feedback from the teachers on a termly basis to find out their responses to the intervention

5. Conducting an attitudinal survey of the students to find out their responses to the intervention

Intervention

For the intervention, we used QAR in the teaching of reading comprehension for all the STELLAR units from Terms 1 to 3. We modelled the use of QAR to the students and explicitly taught them to identify the different types of QAR questions so that they would be able to look for their answers. Refer to the example lesson plan in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Lesson Plan

Suggested Duration	Procedures	Resources
Pre-reading Activity 10 minutes	Teacher starts the lesson with Sustained Silent Reading. Teacher shares the WALT (We Are Learning To) statements with the students. • To draw conclusions from the main idea and key details in the text • To use prior knowledge and contextual clues to understand the text • To make annotations in the text • To identify Right There and Think and Search questions (QAR strategy) • To scan the text and locate the answers to the questions Teacher shows a picture to the students to stimulate discussion and make predictions about the main idea of the text.	Storybooks, PowerPoint slides PowerPoint slides
Reading for Understanding 20 minutes	Teacher gets students to read a given text silently and starts to discuss it. Teacher walks the students through the text to draw conclusions and make inferences from it. Teacher elicits responses from the students by asking inferential and prediction questions. Teacher gets the students to annotate the text as they identify the main idea and key details. Students annotate by highlighting and underlining the key details, and making references to the text.	Text
Identifying Right There and Think and Search Questions 20 minutes	Teacher goes through the questions one at a time. Teacher gets the students to identify and underline the key words in the questions. Using the QAR strategy: Teacher explains to the students that for Right There questions, the exact words for the questions and answers are located in the same sentence. Teacher emphasises that for Think and Search questions, the answer is in the text, but requires gathering information from different places. Teacher also points the students to the visual charts on QAR displayed in the class to aid the students in remembering the types of questions and identifying the question type. Refer to **Figure 1**. Teacher gets students to identify the Right There, and Think and Search questions. Teacher has students locate the answers in the text, underline them and write down the question numbers so that students are aware of where to look for the answers.	Text
Post-reading Activity 10 minutes	Teacher gives students time to write down their answers to the questions. Students share and check their answers. Teacher summarises the key learning points and gets students to recall what they have learnt.	Text

Figure 1: QAR Charts

Right There (RT)

The answer is easily found in the text. The exact words for the questions and answers are located in the same sentence.

Think and Search (TS)

The answer is in the text, but requires gathering information from different places in the selection.

Observations

Pre-test results showed that students could not answer Right There questions. Over the course of the intervention, we saw more students gradually applying the strategy in their work. (See sample of student's work in **Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Sample of Student's Work

Section J

Read passages 1 and 2 carefully and answer questions 51 to 57. (10 marks)

Passage 1

It was rush hour. Many people had just finished their workday and stepped out of their workplaces to go home. The bus stops and taxi stands were getting crowded and so were the MRT stations.

John had just boarded the crowded train. He looked forward to having dinner with his family at home. It was his birthday and his wife was preparing his favourite dishes. His two children had also given him his surprise birthday gift that morning.

Suddenly, as the train was halfway through the journey home, the lights started to flicker and went dark. Then, it came to a halt. Everyone looked around and wondered what had happened.

Then, the train driver made an announcement that there had been a power failure. Using the emergency power in the train, the driver managed to reach the nearest station to let the passengers out safely.

As John got out of the train, he wondered how he could get home. His house was still a few kilometres away. John quickly telephoned and informed his wife about what happened. Then, the station control centre made an announcement. There would be free shuttle buses provided for the stranded passengers.

Picture from newnation.sg

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Based on Passage 1, answer questions 51 to 53.

51. What would John be doing when he got home? (1 mark)

RT

John looked forward to having dinner with his family at home. He would be having dinner with his family.

52. Name two items that John received for his birthday.
Put a tick √ in the box beside your chosen answers. (2 marks)

TS

a surprise birthday gift ☑

a birthday cake ☐

his favourite dishes ☑

2

53. How would John get home after the train breakdown? (2 marks)

RT John will ride a free shuttle buses. He would get home by taking a free shuttle bus.

We also compared the pre-test and post-test results, and found an improvement of 88% in the number of students answering the target questions correctly with overall total scores increasing by 13%. However, we realised that some students with learning needs did not show any improvement as they had basic difficulties decoding reading texts.

Teachers' Reflections

"Students are aware that there are different types of questions. This awareness enables them to be more careful and aware in sourcing for the relevant answers in the passage. Students are observed to be more confident in answering reading comprehension questions though they might not score full marks for their answers."
- Marselyn Jonatan

"With the weaker students in my class, the use of QAR helped them in locating answers with Right There as well as Think and Search questions."
- Lynette Tan Su-Shien

"My students are able to identify the key words that the questions require now. They tend to spend more time reading the passage now because they can identify the types of questions."
- Teng Shin Chee

"After joining the SIG and undertaking the AR with Amir, I am motivated and inspired to embark on more projects in the future to further help our students bridge their learning gaps in the other English Language components. I believe that the collaboration with ELIS not only helps to deepen our pedagogy, leads to positive impact on the teaching fraternity when we share our research. Together with the teachers, we can improve student outcomes. "
- Chin Sau Lai

"QAR strategy works on building students' competencies in answering reading comprehension questions more confidently. I am glad that it has raised their self-esteem. Another benefit is that the Primary 5 teachers are now collaborating more closely and supporting one another in their teaching and learning."
- Sanmuga Malar d/o Rathakrishnan

Students' Reflections

Responses to an attitudinal survey:

How did QAR help you in answering reading comprehension questions?

"QAR makes me focus on the words that I highlighted."

"It helps me find the answer without difficulty."

"QAR is useful for comprehension. I enjoy using QAR more than the method I used before."

"It helps me answer questions more confidently."

Will you continue to use QAR next year? Why?

"Yes, it is easier to answer the questions with QAR."

"Yes, it helped me a lot. I like it."

"Yes, I will. I can answer questions accurately without difficulty."

"Yes, it helps me to get more marks and it is easier to search for the answers. It tells me if the answer is located in the same sentence."

"Yes. It will help me to pass my English reading comprehension."

Conclusion

Based on the positive results and feedback from both teachers and students, it is heartening to see the benefits of QAR for middle and low progress students. They are observed to be more focused and actively engaged during reading comprehension lessons. It has also enabled the students to actively participate in the teaching and learning process. This has led to students becoming more confident in reading comprehension.

Since we have found QAR to be an effective strategy for middle and low progress students, we have decided to scale up this practice in 2016 by implementing it across all the levels from P1 to P6.

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CLASSROOM *inquiry*

By Faith Ong (Greendale Secondary

Exploring the

F aith Ong, Senior Teacher/ EL, and her mentee, Gayathiri Illango, from Greendale Secondary School conducted a classroom inquiry to deepen their understanding of the writing process. They collaborated with Shalini Damodaran, Master Teacher/ EL, to explore how the use of pre-writing activities could help students generate and develop ideas for writing. Students were also taught explicitly to revise and edit their own writing using specific learner strategies. The details of the recursive process are shown in **Figure 1**.

School) and Shalini Damodaran (ELIS)

Writing Process

Figure 1: The Writing Process

Prewriting
- purpose and audience
- brainstorming
- form

Writing
- organisation
- voice
- word choice
- sentence fluency

Revising
- clarifying
- reorganising
- refining
- using precise language

Responding
- teacher/ peer conference
- self/ peer evaluation

Editing
- conventions

Publishing/ Sharing
- bulletin board
- website
- performance
- author's chair
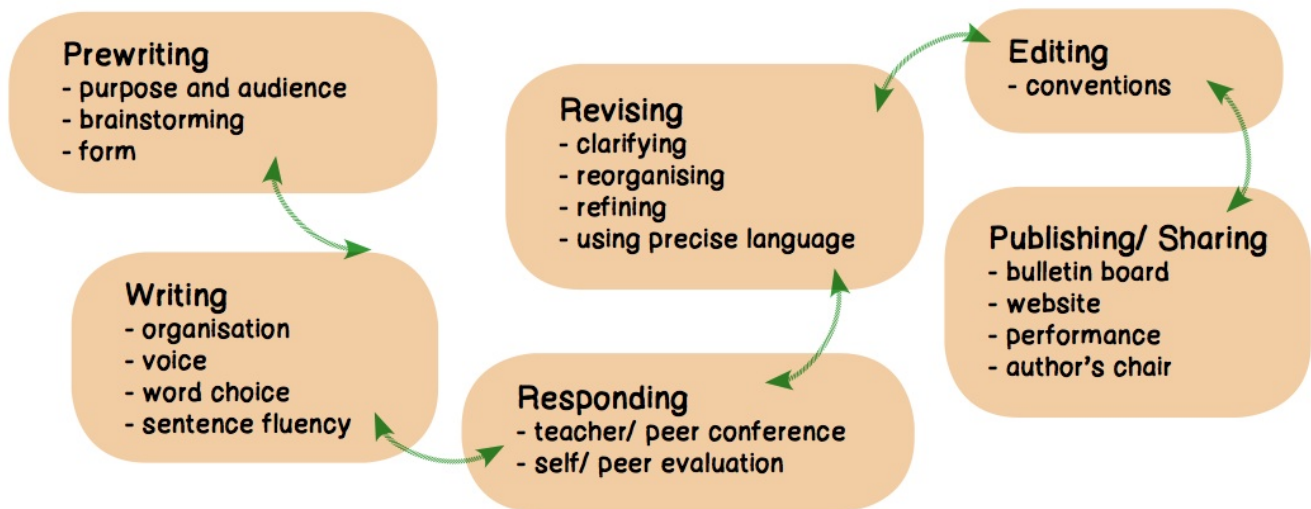
Adapted from Hughes, J. M. (n.d.)

Before the Inquiry Project

The teachers in my department faced the challenge of providing reluctant student writers with the appropriate learner strategies to get started on their writing. After consulting Shalini, I was enthused to try out the pre-writing activities she had presented, such as 'Listing', 'Quick Write' and 'Topic Blast'. These could help students generate and develop more ideas for their writing. Brief descriptions of these activities are provided in **Table 1**.

The second most difficult task that the teachers in my department faced was getting their students to re-read their first draft in order to make the necessary revisions. Often students would, if required, make cursory edits to their writing. They would identify and correct spelling and grammatical mistakes rather than make improvements to their writing for greater clarity, relevance and overall coherence. I observed that students would generally rely on their teachers' written feedback to edit their writing and identify the areas for improvement. Under Shalini's guidance, I explored how best to apply the appropriate strategies, including 'Nutshelling' and 'Say Back' (described in **Table 1**), to address my students' writing needs.

Table 1: Descriptions of Some Writing Activities

Writing Activity	Description
Listing	Listing is a 10-minute pencil and paper activity where students make a list of ideas pertaining to the topic. Students jot down their ideas in single words or short phrases to capture their ideas. After generating ideas, students select one idea from the list that they would like to write about. This activity could lead to a Quick Write.
Quick Write	The strategy requires students to respond in 2–10 minutes to an open-ended question or prompt posed by the teacher. This writing assignment can be used at the beginning, middle, or end of a lesson. Quick Writes differ from traditional writing as students can let their thoughts flow freely without focusing on correctness and revision. It also presents writing as a non-threatening and informal opportunity for students to express their thoughts.
Topic Blast	This strategy requires students to select one topic and "blast" it into as "many pieces as possible", according to Gallagher (2006). It activates students' prior knowledge and experiences and encourages students to write down "a number of smaller, more interesting" details pertaining to the topic.
Nutshelling	Nutshelling entails discovering and laying out the gist of one's ideas in a few sentences. It helps writers distinguish between major and minor ideas, and to identify how the ideas relate to each other. Extended Activity: After students find a sentence or phrase that explains what they want to write about, they copy it on a large piece of paper for their peers to see. In groups of three, peers ask the authors questions about the phrases. The authors do not speak but write down all the questions generated by their peers. The authors then rank the questions and make decisions about how the questions relate to their pieces and if addressing the questions would make their writing better.
Say Back: Descriptive Responding	This strategy helps students to focus their writing. The student author reads his first draft to his peer and says, "Say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at". This activity creates a sense of the audience and helps the writer to clarify with his peer what he is trying to say.
"A Day in My Life" Thinking and Writing about Myself	"A Day in My Life" is used to activate students' prior experiences and knowledge. To increase engagement and relevance to students' lives, the teacher can use prompts about a typical day, such as "What do you see when you wake up in the morning? What do you eat? What do you see on the way to school? What happens when you get to school? What does life look like for you after school?"

For each stage in the writing process cycle, pre-writing activities were carefully chosen to provide reluctant writers among my students with learner strategies that supported them. These learner strategies gave them a way to discover what they wanted to write about. Reading, speaking and listening skills were also integrated into the lesson plan to provide an authentic experience in language use. Furthermore, students gained a sense of purpose in their writing and appreciated how clarity of expression, coherence and relevance to the topic were vital ingredients in effective communication.

"We decided that the focus of our work with the students would be based on the process of writing rather than the final product. We hoped that our students would put aside their insecurities and fears about writing and take baby steps to improve their writing."
- **Faith Ong**

The Classroom Inquiry Project

My mentee, Gayathiri, joined me to embark on an inquiry project that lasted nine months in 2015. We collaborated with Shalini to further investigate the impact of pre-writing activities on student writing in both our classes. The focus of our inquiry was to see if providing students with pre-writing activities would better support clarity of expression, coherence and relevance of ideas in their writing.

We worked with 165 students from one Express Class and two Normal Academic classes. The students were from Secondary 2, 3 and 4. After the intervention, samples of student writing were analysed for improvements in relevance, clarity and coherence.

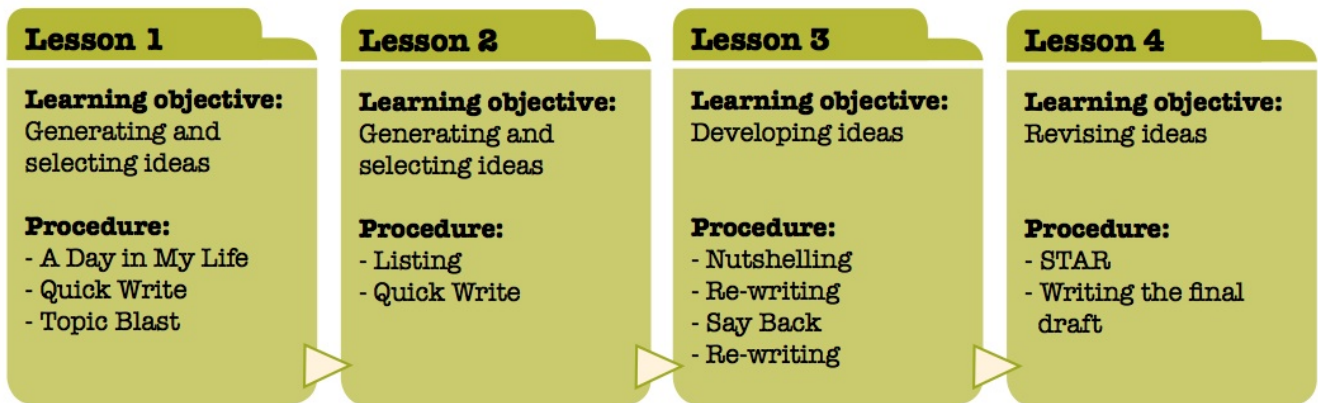We designed our intervention lessons based on the writing process cycle and the profile and specific needs of our students. Shalini also co-taught some of the lessons. After every lesson, we carried out a post-lesson conference guided by the following questions:

- What do we expect our students to learn?
- How will we know they are learning?
- How will we respond when they do not learn?
- How will we respond if they already know it?

These lessons were also video-recorded for analysis. Members of the English Department were invited to view the lessons and to write down their reflections in an observer's log for further discussion on the impact of these strategies on student writing. **Figure 2** shows the plan for the intervention.

Figure 2: Intervention Lessons

Lesson 1

Learning objective:
Generating and selecting ideas

Procedure:
- A Day in My Life
- Quick Write
- Topic Blast

Lesson 2

Learning objective:
Generating and selecting ideas

Procedure:
- Listing
- Quick Write

Lesson 3

Learning objective:
Developing ideas

Procedure:
- Nutshelling
- Re-writing
- Say Back
- Re-writing

Lesson 4

Learning objective:
Revising ideas

Procedure:
- STAR
- Writing the final draft

"In planning for these lessons, Shalini reminded us that the focus for Quick Write was not so much on accuracy, i.e. spelling or grammar, but to provide students with opportunities to activate their prior knowledge and experiences to support the generation of ideas. This strategy helped students to get started in their writing."
- **Faith Ong**

Observations

Listing as a pre-writing strategy was effective in activating students' prior knowledge and experiences as the students penned their ideas in one word or a short phrase. Students began to understand that their personal knowledge and experiences were a rich resource they could tap for their writing. Putting a 'star' against one of the five to seven ideas generated was an important part of the scaffolding that created 'think time' for students to make important decisions on what they wanted to write about. **Figure 3** is a sample of one student's decision-making after listing in response to a given topic. This was followed by a Quick Write as shown in **Figure 4**.

Figure 3: Sample of a Student's List

List 5 different family occasions that you have attended:
- picnic to East Coast Park
⭐ - re-union dinner ☺
- my mother's 60th birthday celebration
- my cousin's wedding
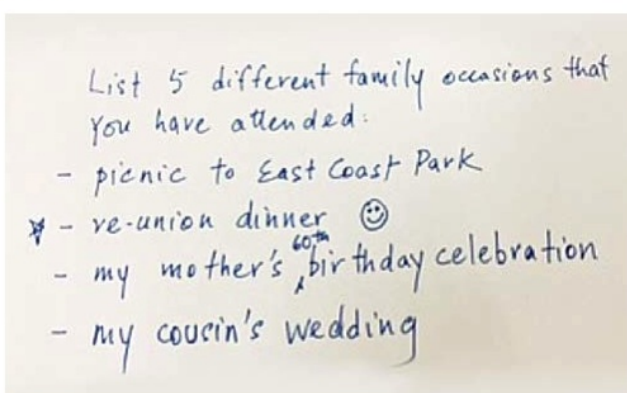
Figure 4: Sample of a Student's Quick Write

The reunion dinner this year was very significant because the family bonded together. We ate together as a family. And this year my grandparents joined us from Penang. <u>Reunion dinners are very important to me as we get to eat together and strengthen our relationship.</u> They also come once a year and we learn about each other's traditions.
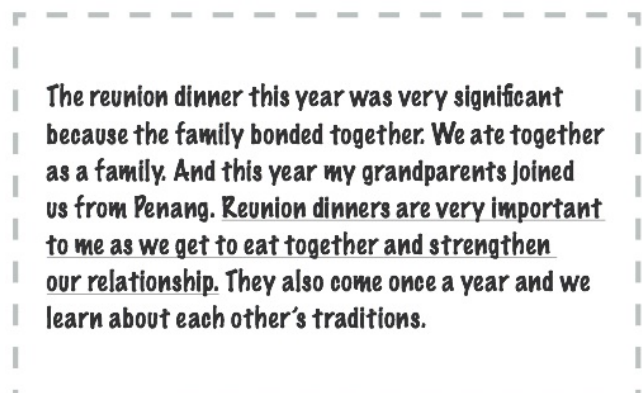
In the **Nutshelling** activities, students were required to highlight one phrase or sentence from their Quick Writes that best captured what they wanted to write about the significance of the family occasion. The underlined sentence in **Figure 4** shows what the student selected from his Quick Write.

An extended Nutshelling activity involved students working in threes to take turns asking the author questions about the selected sentence or phrase. The following were some of the questions fielded by students:

- How do you feel during reunion dinners?
- Who attends reunion dinners?
- What kind of food do you eat?
- Do you eat at a restaurant?
- Do you eat together as a family only once a year?
- How many times a year do you have reunion dinners?

Each student then re-wrote his piece based on the questions asked by his peers. **Figure 5** shows a student's rewritten paragraph, based on some of the questions posed by his peers.

Figure 5: Paragraph after the Extended Nutshelling Activity

The most significant family occasion is the Chinese New Year reunion dinner because we get to eat Suckling Pig, Peking Duck and other special foods which we bought from Carlton Hotel. This year my mother also cooked my favourite double-boiled chicken soup with Chinese red plums. It was also very special because my grandparents from Penang joined our family. It is important to me because almost every day after school I eat alone in front of the TV because my parents are still working. So reunion dinners make me happy as I get to bond with my family members.

We found that Nutshelling activities helped students to identify the main idea behind what they wanted to write about while the extended activity gave students a sense of the audience. Opportunities were also created for students to respond to their peers' writing by asking questions.

Using the **Topic Blast** helped students develop details relevant to the topic. This encouraged them to explore the complexities of the topic and to add more details. **Figure 6** shows how this can give them a better and deeper understanding of a given topic.
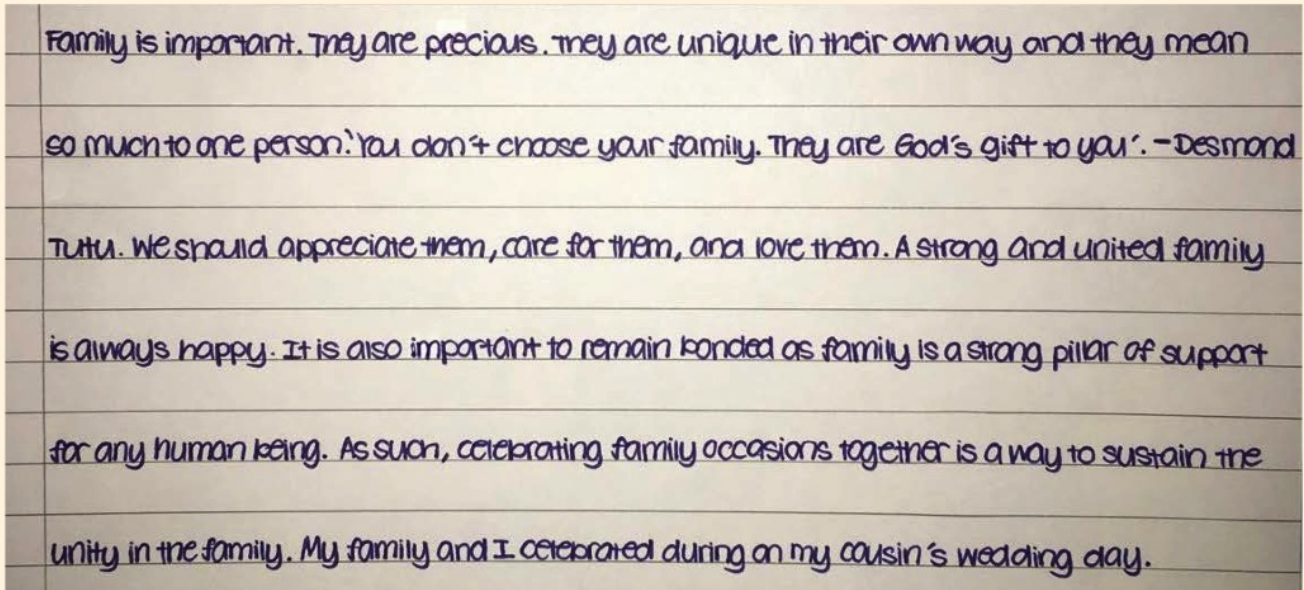
Figure 6: Sample of a Student's Topic Blast
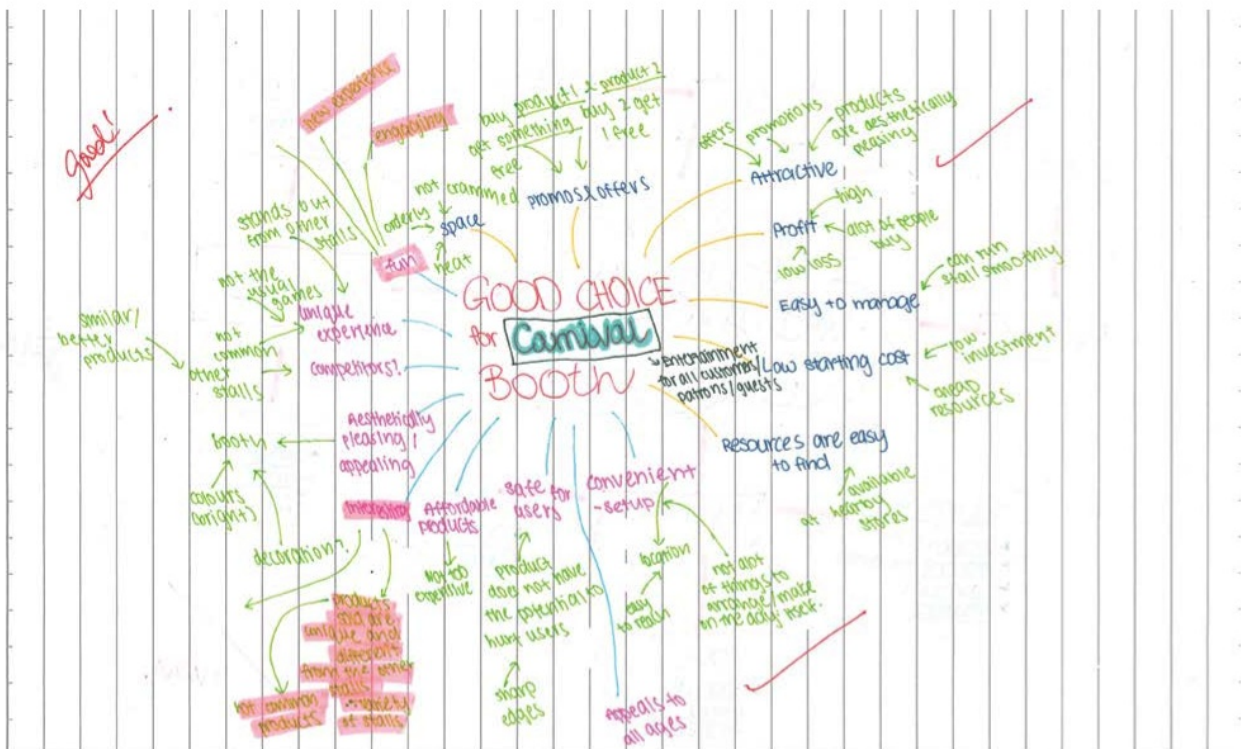
We also used **Say Back** to give students opportunities to read their writing to their peers before inviting their peers to respond to their writing. This activity fostered active listening in students and, at the same time, provided opportunities for them to articulate others point of view. Students liked this strategy as they could see if they had communicated their ideas clearly in the writing.

It was evident that students became more engaged at the pre-writing stage with the introduction of the varied activities. They also showed a deeper understanding of the writing topics assigned to them. An extract of a student's draft after intervention is shown in **Figure 7.**

Figure 7: Extract of Student's Draft After Intervention

> Family is important. They are precious. They are unique in their own way and they mean so much to one person. You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you'. —Desmond Tutu. We should appreciate them, care for them, and love them. A strong and united family is always happy. It is also important to remain bonded as family is a strong pillar of support for any human being. As such, celebrating family occasions together is a way to sustain the unity in the family. My family and I celebrated during on my cousin's wedding day.
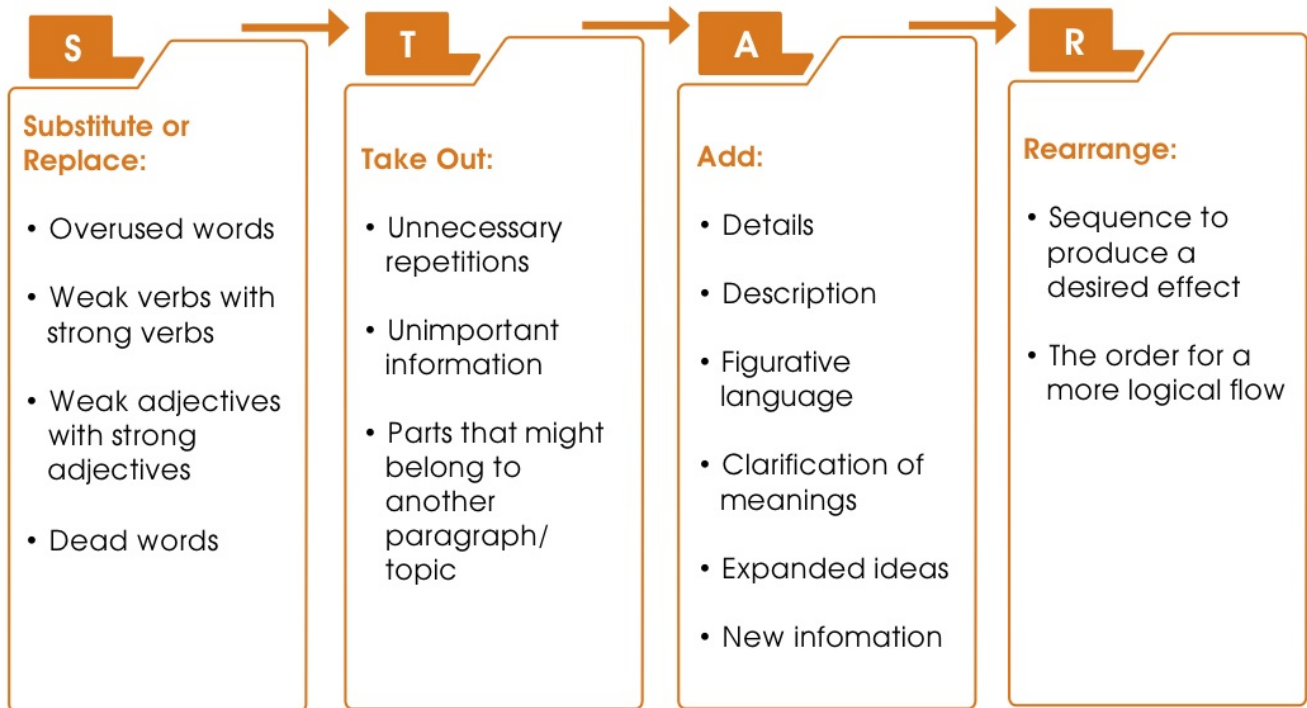
This extract shows the student's draft response to the essay question: Describe how you celebrated an important family occasion and explain why this event will always remain in your memory.

While the student's draft required further revision and editing, it was evident that there was better conceptual understanding of family occasions and their importance in family bonding. He had elaborated on the importance of the family with the following sentences, "They are precious. They are unique in their own ways and they mean so much to one person." In writing the thesis sentence, "Celebrating family occasions together is a way to sustain the unity in the family", the student showed greater clarity and coherence as he related how the observance of family events played an integral part in keeping the family together.

To help the students revise their writing, the **S.T.A.R.** framework, introduced by Gallagher (2006), was taught to them. Details of the framework are shown in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8: S.T.A.R. - A Framework for Revision of Writing

S	T	A	R
Substitute or Replace:	**Take Out:**	**Add:**	**Rearrange:**
• Overused words • Weak verbs with strong verbs • Weak adjectives with strong adjectives • Dead words	• Unnecessary repetitions • Unimportant information • Parts that might belong to another paragraph/topic	• Details • Description • Figurative language • Clarification of meanings • Expanded ideas • New infomation	• Sequence to produce a desired effect • The order for a more logical flow

It was important for students to first understand the difference between revising and editing. When revising their initial drafts, students had to revisit the selection, development and organisation of ideas. They could also incorporate feedback and comments from others. On the other hand, editing refers to the checking and correction of final drafts for mechanical accuracy in spelling and punctuation.

The teachers modelled the use of the S.T.A.R. framework before inviting the students to revise their drafts. With practice, students got better at the revision process. **Table 2** shows a student's application of each part of the framework to make revisions to his first draft.

Table 2: Revision using the S.T.A.R. Framework

Student's Original Writing	Student's Application of S.T.A.R.	Student's Revised Writing
Childhood can be either blessing or curse.	S - Student **substitutes** overused words relating to 'blessing' and 'curse' with 'tender recollections' and 'horrifying nightmares'.	*One's childhood memories can either be filled with tender recollections or horrifying nightmares.*
I had a good childhood experiences in my childhood. However, there are others who do not experience the same childhood as I do.	T - Student **takes out** the sentence as he realises that the ideas in this line are similar to that in the preceding sentence.	
Everyone would like to have a good childhood but it is not up to them to decide their childhood and childhood experience will thus shape your character.	R - Student **rearranges** the ideas in the last sentence by forefronting the last idea for a more logical flow.	*I can vividly recall some key childhood experiences that have allowed me to grow and develop as a person.*
	A - Student **adds details** by defining and describing 'childhood'	*Childhood is a period in a child's life that is filled with many events, special occasions and the development of relationships.*
	A - Student **adds details** and expands ideas; introduces new information.	*One specific memory that I have of my childhood would be the annual festive celebrations that I celebrate with my family and friends each year during Chinese New Year.*

Challenges

We encountered three challenges during the project. These were:

- **A lack of vocabulary:** The students in the lower secondary classes found it difficult to replace over-used and archaic words as they lacked the vocabulary needed. This, however, gave us an opportunity to promote the use of the thesaurus and dictionary. Students felt encouraged when they discovered that these resources were useful for helping them to substitute dead or over-used words.
- **Time needed for pre-writing activities:** Writing an essay could not be completed within a week but required a minimum of 1.5 to 2 weeks. The schemes of work had to be reviewed to provide more time for teachers to include pre-writing and formative assessment activities, and for students to learn writing skills and strategies through the process writing cycle.
- **Learners' lack of familiarity with drafting and revising:** Students were unaccustomed to spending classroom time generating, selecting and developing ideas, and thereafter revising the drafts based on both peer and teacher feedback. Students needed to be convinced that pre-writing activities and revision strategies would help them write better. This challenge was overcome gradually when students saw improvements in their writing over a period of time.

Conclusion

Both Gayathiri and I observed that activities that taught students learner strategies for planning, revising and editing their writing required students to be more cognitively, socially and emotionally engaged in the classroom for longer periods of time. Students enjoyed reading their writing to their peers, listening and responding to their peers' writing, revising and re-writing their work for greater effect instead of merely writing to fulfil assessment requirements. We were very gratified when we were provided with the opportunity to present our project at the ELIS Conference 2015.

Reflections

Gayathiri: I thought that writing was simply about brainstorming and asking students to write. Subsequently, they would just do corrections and edit their work. I did not distinguish between revising and editing. Through this classroom inquiry, I learnt that writing is not a one-off lesson. The pre-writing stage is as important as the writing stage. Likewise, editing and revising are important stages in writing. Also, it takes time for students to understand the writing process.

Faith: As a teacher, participating in this classroom inquiry project has given me better insights into the writing process. The students also indicated positive feelings about writing. As a teacher-leader, I felt more equipped to share these small successes with the teachers in my department and to encourage more to come on board. The impact of modelling the Quick Write, Topic Blast, Nutshelling and other strategies in the S.T.A.R. framework has further cemented my belief in paying attention to writing and the teaching of writing as a process. Improvement in my students' grades has also shown that they now have useful learner strategies that will hold them in good stead, even under examination pressure.

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By Joey Tan-Leo Siew Li, Madihah Binte Mah
Janet Lee Min Yee (Hwa Chong

Learner Strategies for

A team of teachers from the Hwa Chong Institution (College) English Department, consisting of Yasila Vetriveal, Senior Teacher/ EL, Janet Lee Min Yee, Senior Teacher/ EL, and teachers, Madihah Binte Mahmood, Joey Tan-Leo Siew Li and Karen Ong Hui Kiang, investigated the reading methods that students employ at the junior college level. The team, in collaboration with Dr Tay May Yin, Principal Master Teacher/ EL, explored the use of a reading tool kit to teach students learner strategies for academic reading. This study demonstrates that explicit teaching of learner strategies for academic reading empowers students to become effective readers.

mood, Yasila Vetriveal, Karen Ong Hui Kiang, Institution) and Tay May Yin (ELIS)

Academic Reading

Rationale

We chose reading skills as the focus of our inquiry for several reasons.

First, while much emphasis is given to the teaching of writing at the junior college level, there is a lack of focus on the teaching of learner strategies for reading. This is affirmed by Feathers (1993), as mentioned by Varaprasad (2006), that at "the secondary level, reading instruction is not particularly emphasised. There seems to be a common pre-supposition that at some point we stop learning how to read, and having successfully learned how to read, we should be able to read anything, thereby enabling us to read to learn" (p. 63).

Second, it is often presupposed that since students 'can read', they should 'know how to read' and that they would have picked up the necessary reading skills during the earlier years (Varaprasad, 2006). However, reading is often not taught explicitly. Many students are not equipped with a set of learner strategies and they often resort to developing their own ad hoc ways of reading as they confront the demands of academic reading.

Third, the learning needs survey of the English Language teachers at Hwa Chong Institution (College) identified critical reading and reasoning skills as one of the key areas for teacher professional learning. Thus, our team decided to identify the learner strategies for reading that students had acquired and to subsequently intervene students' academic reading using a reading tool kit which consisted of a set of learner strategies that students would be taught.

Inquiry Questions

1. What learner strategies do students employ in academic reading for text understanding and response?

2. How does teacher intervention impact learner strategies for text understanding and response?

Background Reading

We read the literature on the Interactive Model and the Schema Theory of reading. We considered the Interactive Model of reading, which is a combination of the bottom-up approach (that focuses on language elements such as grammar, vocabulary and cohesion) and the top-down approach (that focuses on background knowledge of text and text organisation), as the underlying theory for our project. We also took reference from the Schema Interactive Model of Reading (Simonsen & Singer, 1992). This model considers reading as a communicative act and advocates that readers can interpret text globally (i.e., recognising the purpose of the text) and locally (i.e., identifying the functions of the different parts contributing to the whole). We incorporated the theoretical perspectives from these two models into the design of our reading intervention strategy.

Our collaboration with Principal Master Teacher Dr Tay May Yin helped us see the need to empower students with effective learner strategies which

would make them independent readers. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) define learner strategies as "behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning and that are intended to influence the learner's encoding process" (p. 315). Often, we assumed that students would be able to use learner strategies. However, many of our students did not know how to incorporate learner strategies effectively as they were rarely taught the strategies. Therefore, we designed a reading tool kit for students to apply specific learner strategies when reading. According to Alexander,

Graham, and Harris (1998), the learning of learner strategies is essential, purposeful, effortful, will-ful and facilitative in nature.

In summary, our inquiry focused on empowering our students with learner strategies – in the form of a reading intervention tool kit – which would allow students to engage in "processing over and above processes that are a natural consequence of carrying out a particular task" (Pressley & McCormick, 1995) as they read. An overview of the focus is shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Focus of Inquiry

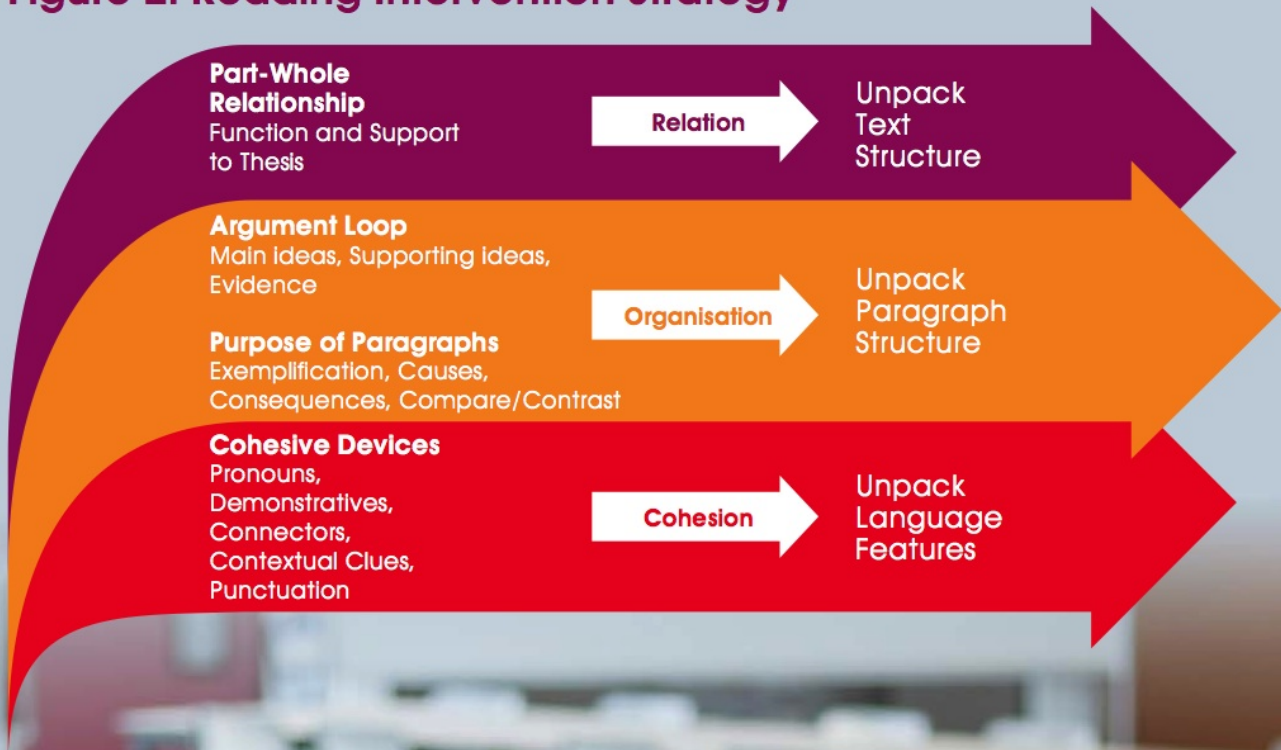|	
Objective	Investigate reading methods that students employ at the junior college level
Problem	Students may have skills but are not strategic readers
Difference	'Skills' refer to repeated practice or simple directives and connote an automatic, mechanical and consistent cognitive behaviour. 'Strategies' are procedural, purposeful, effortful, will-ful, essential, and facilitative in nature
Advocate	Explicit teaching of reading strategies
Goal	Empower students with Learner Strategies to become effective readers
Process	3 phases; 3-stage application of reading strategies

Our Reading Intervention Approach

We conceptualised a reading intervention approach based on the Schema Interactive Model. A range of bottom-up/ content strategies, top-down/ global metacognitive and genre-specific strategies was incorporated in the design of the reading intervention tool kit. We focused on three key elements of a text: Cohesion, Organisation and Relation, forming the acronym COR.

Apart from simple reading and re-reading skills, our aim was for students to learn:

C: To unpack language features in order to understand the relationships between words and sentences;

O: To unpack paragraph structure in order to comprehend the key ideas and purpose of the paragraphs in the overall scheme of a text;

R: To unpack text structure in order to comprehend part-whole relations in a text and recognise how the author moves the text forward to support the thesis and integrate the ideas.

Figure 2 gives an overview of Cohesion, Organisation and Relation (COR) in the reading intervention strategy.

Figure 2: Reading Intervention Strategy

Part-Whole Relationship
Function and Support to Thesis

Relation → Unpack Text Structure

Argument Loop
Main Ideas, Supporting Ideas, Evidence

Purpose of Paragraphs
Exemplification, Causes, Consequences, Compare/Contrast

Organisation → Unpack Paragraph Structure

Cohesive Devices
Pronouns, Demonstratives, Connectors, Contextual Clues, Punctuation

Cohesion → Unpack Language Features

The COR approach was presented in the form of a reading tool kit consisting of learner strategies which, when adequately grasped, could help students process and comprehend a text independently. **Figure 3** explains the reading tool kit.

Figure 3: Reading Tool Kit

Dual-level Reading Strategy	Language Features and Use (Cohesion)					Correlation to Comprehension Questions
	Pronouns	**Demonstratives**	**Connectors**	**Contextual Clues**	**Punctuation**	
Micro-level Reading	It, We, They, Them	This, That, These, Those	Therefore, Yet, Consequently, Hence, In addition, Moreover, And, Furthermore, However, But, Nevertheless	Synonyms Antonyms Contextual clues in all directions: Up, Down, Right, Left	Full-stop Comma Colon Semi-colon Dash Inverted commas	Inferential Short Answer Questions (SAQs) 1. Semantic – word-, phrase-, sentence-level meaning 2. Tone, Attitude 3. Figurative Language 4. Punctuation
	Paragraph Structure (Organisation)					
	Loop of Argument Main Ideas Supporting Ideas Evidence		Purpose and Function Exemplification Cause-Consequence Compare-Contrast Balance-Counter/Rebuttal			1. Purpose and function related SAQs 2. Summary 3. Application Question
Macro-level Reading	**Text Structure (Relation)**					
	Part-Whole Relationship How does this paragraph relate to the earlier paragraph and the next?		Paragraph-Thesis function/support How does this paragraph relate to the writer's thesis?			1. Thesis support SAQs 2. Application Question

With the tool kit, students were to use learner strategies to interpret a text globally and locally so that they could infer and evaluate text at a deeper level. Using the reading tool kit, we modelled to our students a dual-level reading process. At the micro level, cohesion was the first area of focus. We taught explicitly the purpose and function of language features such as pronouns, demonstratives, connectors, contextual clues and punctuation. We demonstrated how to ask relevant questions so that students could themselves replicate the process of examining how language features in a text were used to convey meaning. This focus on bottom-up/ content strategy (i.e., a focus on language) provided students with the much-needed scaffolding they needed for academic reading.

The second area of focus was on understanding paragraph structures and the loop of argument in a paragraph. We identified the main ideas, supporting ideas and evidence in each paragraph and demonstrated to students how to identify the logic in an argument based on paragraph structure. In addition, students learned to ascertain the purpose and function of paragraphs. For example, we asked students, "What type of paragraph is this?" (i.e., what organisational pattern is used? e.g., cause-consequence, comparison-contrast, exemplification).

The third area of focus was on reading at the macro level, to identify part-whole relations in a text. To raise students' awareness about the connections between various paragraphs and the thesis, we posed questions such as "How does this section relate to the writer's thesis?" and "How does this section relate to the earlier section?"

Classroom Application

We modelled the application of learner strategies by thinking and talking aloud the process of text analysis. We showed students how to generate 'Wh' questions according to COR, as outlined earlier. Next, students worked in groups to analyse a given text through discussions and tutor guidance. Finally, students analysed and deconstructed the text independently.

The three stages of Genre Teaching and Learning Cycle for writing (Flowerdew, 1993; Johns, 1997), modified by Varaprasad (1998) as Teacher Modelling, Joint Analysis of Text, and Independent Construction of Text, were the bases for our learner strategy teaching process. The 'Wh' questioning strategy advocated by Nuttall (1996) served as a facilitative tool to support our learner strategy teaching process.

We explicitly taught the learner strategies in three phases: pre-, while- and post-reading (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). As advocated by Rees-Miller (1993) and Tudor (1996), the learner strategies were not taught in a linear fashion as not all were required at all times. Instead, we considered the difficulty level of the text and the language ability of the students to determine the type of learner strategies to teach.

An Example from Our Classroom Application

Pre-Reading Phase

We taught our students to ask 'Wh' questions and to skim a text by reading its title, introduction and conclusion quickly to form a tentative thesis of the text. For example, to activate students' background knowledge of the text, *The Age of Loneliness is Killing Us'*, we asked questions about the title: (1) "What is meant by 'the Age of Loneliness'?" (2) "What does it mean to be lonely?" (3) "Why does it kill and what are its effects?" We then talked aloud: "I will skim the text by quickly reading the introduction and conclusion first to arrive at a tentative thesis statement". We then wrote the tentative thesis statement on the board. Next, we talked aloud again: "I will skim through the paragraphs now to get a better understanding of the content and see if the thesis needs to be made more specific". Finally, we modified and/or refined the tentative thesis statement on the board, where appropriate, and moved on to the while-reading phase of the lesson.

While-Reading Phase

We explicitly taught learner strategies by referring to COR in order to raise students' awareness about cohesion, and paragraph and text structure. We modelled a dual-level reading strategy – micro-level and macro-level reading processes. Below is an excerpt from the text, *'The Age of Loneliness Is Killing Us'*:

> "**Yes,** there are palliatives, clever and delightful schemes like Men in Sheds and Walking Football developed by charities for isolated older people. **But** if we are to **break this cycle** and come together once more, we must confront the world-eating, flesh-eating system into which we have been forced."

We asked the following questions: (1) "What is the purpose of the word 'Yes' at the start of the paragraph… What is the writer trying to convey?" (2) "Why does the writer start his next line with the connector 'But'?" and (3) "What is he referring to when he says 'break this cycle'…. What cycle is that?"

Next, we asked questions to raise students' awareness about the organisational structure at the text level so that they would have better understanding about part-whole relations in the text.

Post-Reading Phase

During the post-reading phase, we referred to the questions which were designed to assess students' comprehension of the text. The teacher correlated the application of appropriate micro- or macro-level strategies with the types of questions, based on the classification of questions indicated in **Figure 3**. For example, we showed the correlation between micro-level reading strategies (Cohesion and Organisation) and the inferential or semantic type of comprehension questions as well as questions that require understanding of paragraph organisation, paragraph function, connection and support of thesis. In addition, we demonstrated how the macro-level reading strategy (Relation) is essential for the selection, critical evaluation and appreciation of issues required for the application question.

Our Reflections

It is evident to us that students who applied the learner strategies in the reading tool kit have moved from being passive readers to active readers. Although it is difficult to draw specific correlations or make causal links between the intervention and its impact, we found through our inquiry that our students' awareness and sensitivity to the various learner strategies for reading have increased.

It is through our inquiry that we now have a set of tools we co-developed to explicitly teach learner strategies for reading. We have become better at identifying and articulating students' specific strengths and weaknesses in reading. We can correlate learner strategies to the types of comprehension questions to ask. We are also better able to differentiate our teaching of reading to meet the different learning needs of our students.

Our inquiry was not without challenges. Time was a crucial factor. We had to plan and manage our time for teaching and inquiry. In addition, our students needed time to comprehend the learner strategies and to use them regularly so that they became part of an automatised process. Therefore, we had to build routines and a culture of self-directed application of learner strategies by our students.

Conclusion

Our inquiry shows us that having basic reading skills alone is insufficient for students to read academic texts at the tertiary level, which requires higher order critical reading and reasoning abilities. Thus, learner strategies for reading must be taught explicitly so that students become independent readers.

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