

EL Classroom *inquiry*

It is about what works in the English Language classroom





issue **4**



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CHIJ Secondary





an ACTION research project

Setting: (Where)
At home

Character: (Who)

Jane and her father

Problem:

Jane's father has been away for a long time (10 years).
Jane is worried about him coming back. Anne is worried about the delay.

This project explored how freewriting, a pre-writing technique, helped students in the generation of relevant ideas for writing. The aim of this project was to improve the quantity and quality of ideas in their compositions. These students had been struggling in idea generation and not fulfilling the requirements of their writing tasks. After freewriting was introduced, there was an improvement in terms of how much and how well they wrote. This was evident in their content scores. Students also became more motivated to write.



Jaisree Appoo (East Spring Primary School) and Shakila Vasu (ELIS)

Developing Ideas Through Freewriting

How a primary school teacher helped her students enjoy writing

Introduction

As Head of Department/ EL, I was concerned that many students at the Upper Primary level wrote compositions that lacked good ideas and that provided me with the impetus to embark on this Action Research (AR) project. My observation was confirmed when I conducted a perception survey to determine my Primary 5 students' feelings and attitudes towards writing. Although 78.3% claimed that they liked writing compositions, 91.8% reported that they faced

difficulties in writing. One of the key difficulties cited was the generation of relevant and sufficient ideas for writing, based on a given picture stimulus. Even students who claimed that they did not have problems developing their stories had limited ideas, as reflected in their content scores. The lack of ideas contributed to a dislike of writing in about 21% of my students, which I felt was alarming.

Planning the Lesson

When I consulted Shakila Vasu, Master Teacher/ EL, she suggested using freewriting as a strategy to generate ideas during the pre-writing stage. The EL Syllabus 2010 advocates freewriting using visuals and realia as a learner strategy to stimulate imagination and generate ideas for Learning Outcome 3 of Writing and Representing.

Freewriting is a technique in which a person writes spontaneously on a topic for a limited period of time, say five to ten minutes, without worrying about accuracy or relevance. With practice, it can build fluency and confidence. As a pre-writing exercise it can help students generate ideas prior to the first draft. According to Peter Elbow, Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts: "The goal of freewriting is in the process, not the product." (Elbow, 1998)

The new format for Paper 1 of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) requires students to write a composition based on a given theme and three picture stimuli. To get started, Shakila and I brainstormed relevant themes which were within the experience of Primary 5 students. We also sourced appropriate visuals to complement the themes and found a YouTube video which demonstrated freewriting. Then we created the question papers and began to plan the lessons based on the writing process of planning, writing and reviewing.





In planning the lessons, Shakila reminded me to incorporate some key pedagogical approaches in my teaching. These were: explicit instruction, scaffolding and teacher

modelling. I adapted the idea of freewriting to suit the profile and needs of my students. I decided that they would be given a fixed time of four minutes, for a start, to freewrite based on each picture. For the first lesson on freewriting, I began explaining what freewriting was, assuring my students that the focus was not on grammar and spelling as the objective was to generate as many ideas as possible. Students were then shown a video on freewriting. As this was a new learner strategy for them, I explicitly taught how to freewrite by modelling the process of freewriting. Using the PSLE format for continuous writing, I showed the students a question paper based on a theme and three pictures (see **Figure 1**). During the four-minute modelling, I used Think Aloud to make my thinking visible to the students, while freewriting based on one of the pictures.

Figure 1: Question Paper used for Freewriting Lesson

East Spring Primary School

Primary 5 CW

Name: _____ ()

Date: _____ Class: 5 _____



Write a composition of at least 150 words about a surprise.

The pictures are provided to help you think about this topic. Your composition should be based on one or more of these pictures.

Consider the following points when you plan your composition:

- What was the surprise?
- How did it turn out?

You may use the points in any order and include other relevant points as well.



Next, the students did their first piece of freewriting using the same picture. As they wrote, I walked around to facilitate the process offering support to anyone who looked a little lost. I reminded them to write words and phrases, not complete sentences. This was one adaptation that I had made to freewriting because students' flow of ideas would be hampered if they had to deal with sentence construction during idea generation. When the four minutes were up, I asked for three volunteers to present their freewriting to the class. Using the visualiser, they showed what they had written while the rest of the class were encouraged to note any ideas they found interesting. Finally, the students sat in their groups to compare ideas, choosing those they liked to include in their own pieces.

I followed up by repeating the freewriting process three times in subsequent lessons and by the end of the week they were more spontaneous in their generation of ideas. This was consistent with

the advice that "most people need to practise freewriting several times before they are able to make it work for them effectively." (Nordquist, 2011)

After my students had completed the three pieces of freewriting, I went on to the next stage which was the selection and organisation of ideas. Using a story map as a graphic organiser (see **Figure 2**) to scaffold the process, I first showed how I chose the piece of freewriting that I would base my writing on before modelling the selection of ideas. As I had planned for them to write a narrative, I indicated the elements of narrative on the story map. I also demonstrated how to use 5W1H (Who, What, Why, When, Where and How) questions to elaborate on the ideas. After my demonstration, students worked in their groups to put into practice what they had learnt before they wrote their final piece. An example of one student's work is shown in **Figure 3**.

Figure 2: Story Map Graphic Organiser

East Spring Primary School Writing Resource (Primary 5 & 6)

Name: _____ () Class: _____ Date: _____

Story Map

Theme :	
Setting: (Where)	
Characters: (Who)	
Problem: (What)	
Complication (if any):	
Events leading to resolution: (How)	
Resolution	
Conclusion/Coda:	

Note: Write in point form.

Figure 3: Sample of Student's Final Work

Annabelle GG5

CWB, English ✓

Date 17/2/15 No.

I cowered in fear against the wall as they bullied me. I was new to the school and it was my first day ~~at~~ had at the school. I accidentally offended the school bully by bumping into him. He had a gang and they were punishing me. I did not know what to do as I crouched on the floor, protecting myself from Tom's blows. I was covered with bruises when stopped and Tom said, "I will see you again, boy." I was crying in pain and fear as I saw him stalk out of the room. His gang followed behind, glaring at me.

down

I sat on the floor and tears streamed down my face. I angrily thought, "Who are they? Why are they doing this to me?" My head was in my hands when I heard a voice, "Are you okay?" I looked up, tears were blurring my vision but I still could see him. I wiped away my tears and I told him what happened. He promised, "I will help you but I need to know who the bullies are." He smiled, that and comforted me. I thought, "Perhaps he can help me, nobody so has ever been kind to me." I smiled back thanking him for



Lesson Outcomes

The learning outcomes for this AR project were for the students to be able to generate sufficient and relevant ideas. Furthermore, I wanted to develop in them a more positive attitude towards writing. It was quite obvious from the students' reaction during and after each session that they enjoyed freewriting and their responses to a survey after the fourth session showed they also found it interesting. Student collaboration struck a positive chord with the majority as they found they generated more ideas when they worked together. The quality of ideas also improved, with most of them receiving higher scores for content.



Reflection on Learning

In addition to the improvement in their content scores, the use of freewriting as a strategy to generate ideas for writing a narrative also served to motivate the students to write better. The best part about freewriting seemed to be that they were beginning to enjoy the whole writing process. This information was captured through the students' reflections. I have been encouraged by their positive feelings about writing. Many do not dread writing lessons anymore – in fact, they look forward to them. Their confidence has also been enhanced because of the collaborative learning experiences.

Personally, I have realised the importance of explicit instruction through teacher modelling. The impact that my modelling of freewriting, as well as the other parts of the writing process, has had on my students has affirmed my belief that I am moving in the right direction. In addition, scaffolding the learning has also given them structures they can use whenever they write, even under examination conditions.

student writing task Announcement of details

References

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an inquiry into the use of noticing

When students actively notice sound devices such as alliteration, assonance and consonance used in literary texts, they are able to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the writer's craft by connecting rhyme, rhythm, meter and tone to meaning. However, students tend to avoid commenting on sound devices in their analysis of literary texts as they are unsure about the definition and application of these devices in the texts they encounter. Working together with Philip McConnell, Master Teacher/ EL, Ian Tan explored strategies aimed at getting students to notice sound devices in literary texts, and how this knowledge could improve their learning of Literature in English and their overall appreciation of the subject.



By Ian Tan | Raffles Institution

Developing Students' Appreciation of Sound Devices in Poetry

How a Literature teacher helped his junior college students develop an ear for poetry



Introduction

In my work as a Literature teacher at the secondary and Junior College (JC) levels, I have found that the subject can evoke powerful intellectual and emotional responses in students. More than being a testament to the power of literary language to engage both mind and heart, their responses show that great literary texts speak about fundamental human concerns which are deeply personal in scope and universal in reach. Students understand that in order to properly appreciate the full impact a text has on them, they should be conversant with basic literary devices such as figurative language and rhetorical tropes. These terms provide them with a lens through which they can explore the writer's use of language and how meaning is constructed through the skilful use of these devices. However, I have also found that students might not be so comfortable with analysing sound devices in literary texts, and how these contribute to the significance of the texts.

As I reflected on this issue, I realised that one key reason could be that students were not familiar with the use of sound devices, such as assonance and consonance, and the types of rhymes in literary texts, such as full rhyme, pararhyme and eye-rhyme. They had come to the study of Literature at the JC level unfamiliar with how to perform scansion on a line of poetry and how to determine the metrical pattern in verse. As such, their close analyses of literary texts were limited to commenting on the rhyme scheme in poems. They were missing out on appreciating new layers of meaning in literary texts.

In my conversations with Phil, we decided to try out strategies in the Literature classroom which involved paying attention to the sounds in poetry and describing the effect of these sounds using terms like assonance and consonance. Through the use of these strategies, I wanted to enhance my students' understanding of how sounds and rhythm in literary texts shaped meaning, and how their appreciation of the themes in texts could be enhanced by a focus on the sounds used.

Research Question

What is the effect of using the noticing approach on students' ability to appreciate the sounds of poetry?

Planning the Lessons

For my classroom inquiry, I conducted a series of lessons focusing on poetry and the sound devices used in poetic texts with a class of 25 JC students who were studying Literature. Some of them had taken the subject throughout the secondary level whereas others had not studied Literature since Secondary 2.

As they were focusing on the close reading of poetry as part of their curriculum, these lessons fitted nicely into the Scheme of Work for the term. As they were also moving on to study Shakespeare's Hamlet, the last lesson dealt with part of a scene from the play.

Lesson 1

The first lesson involved the whole class in choral reading of a short ballad by Charles Causley entitled *What has happened to Lulu?* (see Figure 1). In groups, the students practised reading aloud to one another individual stanzas of the ballad, paying attention to where they placed their pauses within each line, how fast they read each line and their intonation of particular words and phrases to bring out the character of the speaker and her responses to the situation.

After this, each student group had to recite assigned stanzas to the whole class. At the end of each reading, I invited responses from the class on their impressions of the recitation, and how they might do it differently. When the whole class had finished the reading, I facilitated a discussion on how the rhythm and tone of the reading contributed to the meaning of the ballad. Students commented on how the change of pace in each stanza demonstrated the change in the feelings of the speaker as she responded to the disappearance of Lulu and her mother's reactions to the disappearance.

Figure 1: What Has Happened to Lulu?

by Charles Causley

What has happened to Lulu, mother?
What has happened to Lu?
There's nothing in her bed but an old rag-doll
And by its side a shoe.

Why is her window wide, mother,
The curtain flapping free,
And only a circle on the dusty shelf
Where her money-box used to be?

Why do you turn your head, mother,
And why do tear drops fall?
And why do you crumple that note on the fire
And say it is nothing at all?

I woke to voices late last night,
I heard an engine roar.
Why do you tell me the things I heard
Were a dream and nothing more?

I heard somebody cry, mother,
In anger or in pain,
But now I ask you why, mother,
You say it was a gust of rain.

Why do you wander about as though
You don't know what to do?
What has happened to Lulu, mother?
What has happened to Lu?

Lesson 2

I started this lesson with a presentation on the types of sound devices used in poetry. I focused on consonance and assonance, and how consonance could be differentiated from alliteration. For consonance, I highlighted the different qualities of consonant sounds, emphasising the distinction between light sounds, like sibilance and fricatives, and heavy plosive sounds. For rhyme, I introduced the difference between full rhyme and pararhyme. Finally, I briefly touched on enjambment and end-stopped lines.

I then had students look at a short poem entitled *I Hear* by Berlie Doherty (see **Figure 2**). In groups, students picked out examples of consonance, assonance, full rhyme and pararhyme in the poem. After that, they presented their answers to the class.

Figure 2: I Hear

by Berlie Doherty

When I think of school I hear
High shouts tossed
Like juggled balls in windy yards, and lost
In gutters, treetops, air,
And always, somewhere,
Piano notes waterfall
And small sharp voices wail.
A monster-roar surges - GOAL!
The bell.

Then doors slam.
There's the kick, scuff, stamp of shoes
Down corridors that trap and trail echoes.
Desk-tops thud with books, kit-bags.
A child's ghost screams as her chair's pushed back.
Laughter bubbles up and bursts.
Screech-owl whistles, quick-fox quarrel flare
The voice barks QUIET!

All sit. All wait.
Till scraped chalk shrieks
And whispers creep,
Cough. Ruler crack. Desk creak.

And furtive into the silence comes
A tiny mouse-scrabbling of pens.
Scamper. Stop. Scamper. Stop. Tiptoe

And there, just outside the top window
As if it had never ceased to be
But only needed listening to
A scatter of birdsong, floating free.

Lesson 3

This lesson focused on the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost (see **Figure 3**). After an initial reading of the poem, I elicited students' responses to the poem, specifically their impressions of it, and what mood was created through the long vowel sounds and the unique rhyme scheme which Frost used. I then played two different readings of the poem, first by Frost himself and then by Susan Sarandon. After this, I facilitated a discussion on which version students preferred and the reasons for their preference.

The second half of the lesson was a general discussion of the themes of the poem and how the sounds contributed to Frost's portrayal of these themes. In the course of the discussion, students focused on the last stanza of the poem and how the rhymes changed, bringing a tentative closure to the poem. They also discussed how the speaker talked about the responsibilities and promises he had to keep before sleeping, displaying the tension between the burdens of life and the easefulness of death and the cessation of time.

Figure 3: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Lesson 4

I started this lesson with a practical demonstration of how to perform scansion on a set of lines in poetry. The poem I used for this exercise was *Suicide in the Trenches* by Siegfried Sassoon (see **Figure 4**). By writing the first two lines of the poem on the whiteboard, I demonstrated how to annotate the poem by marking the heavy stresses. Students were able to notice that the basic metrical foot was iambic and that there were four heavy stresses in each line. The class was thus able to describe the meter of the poem as iambic tetrameter.

Figure 4: Suicide in the Trenches

by Siegfried Sassoon

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy

(parts in bold represent heavily-stressed syllables)

Next, I gave the class an extract from Act 1 Scene 1 of Hamlet (see **Figure 5**). As I had already given a lecture on Shakespearean verse, the class was familiar with analysing Shakespeare's lines. In groups, students role-played the given scene, paying attention to where they placed pauses in their delivery of the lines. After the groups had a chance to practise, I called on two groups to perform the scene for the class. After each performance, I briefly asked students to share with the class why they read their lines the way they did, and how this contributed to the dramatic tension of the scene. To end the lesson, I showed a clip from the BBC television dramatisation of Hamlet and invited the students to reflect on the differences between their dramatisation and the one they saw.

Figure 5: Extract from Hamlet, Act 1 Scene 1

HORATIO

But soft, behold! Lo, where it comes again!
I'll cross it though it blast me. Stay illusion,
If thou hast any sound or use of voice,

It spreads its arms

Speak to me.

If there be any good thing to be done
That may to thee do ease and grace to me,
Speak to me.

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
Which happily foreknowing may avoid,
O, speak!
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,
Speak of it. The cock crows.
Stay and speak!—Stop it, Marcellus.

MARCELLUS

Shall I strike it with my partisan?

HORATIO

Do, if it will not stand.

BARNARDO 'Tis here.

HORATIO 'Tis here.

Ghost exits.

MARCELLUS

'Tis gone.
We do it wrong, being so majestical,
To offer it the show of violence,
For it is as the air, invulnerable,
And our vain blows malicious mockery.

Lesson Outcomes

Before embarking on this project, I was concerned about how students would respond to learning about sound devices and whether they would feel bogged down by too many technical terms. However, as the intervention lessons progressed, I observed that learning these devices enabled them to start noticing the intentional use of sound, rhythm and tone in the literary texts they analysed. They were also more motivated to share their opinions on how their understanding of the use of sound made their reading experiences richer.

In terms of a writing exercise on the poems 'The Tiger' by William Blake and 'The Kraken' by Alfred Tennyson which I gave to them before and after the intervention lessons, there was evidence to show that they were better able to explain the effectiveness of the use of sound devices after the intervention lessons (see **Figure 6**). However, some students' ability to express their ideas and the depth of their analysis still hampered the quality of their responses, as they were not able to convey their point as insightfully as possible. These areas can be improved by more practice in essay writing and focus on essay writing skills in future lessons.

Figure 6: Comparison of Students' Analyses

Pre-Intervention Paragraph on 'The Tiger' by William Blake	Post-Intervention Paragraph on 'The Kraken' by Alfred Tennyson
<p>Another aspect of the use of sounds in this poem was the eminent rhyme scheme. It is a regular rhyme scheme, with masculine rhyme endings in each line. It is also written in rhyming couplets, each conveying a different purpose. In most cases within the poem, each couplet is made up of a question that Blake asks, with the motive of demonstrating the tiger's creation, and hence its majesty and power. These questions, together with the regular rhyme scheme, offer a steady rhythm to the poem, helping to bring across the reliable and omnipresent power of the tiger.</p>	<p>The presence of alliteration helps emphasize the illustration of the Kraken in the reader's mind. For instance, the phrase 'shadowy sides' suggests a mysterious and ambivalent side to the Kraken, some part of it that has not been let known to the reader. This amount of uncertainty in the Kraken would make its existence unsettling to the reader, stirring a fear of the unknown about it. The uneven rhyme scheme throughout the poem brings across an erratic feel, as the reader is unable to grasp for sure the way each next line of the poem is supposed to come out. This highlights the unpredictability of the Kraken and its movements, as we are unable to predict what would come next from the creature.</p>

Pre-Intervention Paragraph on <i>'The Tiger'</i> by William Blake	Post-Intervention Paragraph on <i>'The Kraken'</i> by Alfred Tennyson
<p>In 'The Tiger', Blake employs sound as a means to portray the tiger as an entity of creation which is definitive yet seemingly impossible to comprehend. The poem is generally trochaic in rhythm. Such regularity creates a steady pulse that carries the poem, mimicking the beat of a blacksmith at work. This in turn suggests that the Creator is confident and certain in his approach in forming the tiger, even ensuring the minute details such as framing it with 'symmetry', where there is no hesitation or error in his art.</p>	<p>In 'The Kraken', Tennyson employs sound to vividly portray the Kraken as an immense creature that has great might beneath its seemingly unthreatening and peaceful appearance. The depiction of its colossal physique is hinted in the use of long vowels at the end of lines such as 'deep', 'sea' and 'sleep'. Such pronounced sounds bring to mind the Kraken's long and large tentacles and their ability to engulf anything in the creature's path, signalling its massive nature that overpowers and dwarves all things else. Also, the iambic pentameter used underscores a looming build-up of the destructive power that the Kraken is concealing through the steady and suspenseful rhythm. This further suggests the potential strength the Kraken has to destroy, which is preserved until the last line where there is an eruption of such ability.</p>
<p>'The Tyger' has a trochaic meter, with both the beginning and end of most of the lines having a masculine ending. The effect is to emphasize those lines, as the lines end forcefully and have more impact. Coupled with the rhetorical questions used, the effect is to call attention to the greatness of the creator of the fearsome tiger, and to these lines, as they express Blake's awe at beholding the animal and wondering about its creator.</p>	<p>'The Kraken' employs sound devices like sibilance and plosives to help convey certain ideas regarding it. The first idea is of it as a sea creature, fluid and flowing. The sibilance in 'abyssal sea' and 'faintest sunlights flee' set up the aquatic nature of its habitat through mimicking the sounds of waves at sea. The sibilance also adds to the flow and fluidity of the sea, adding a layer of vividness to the description of the Kraken and its environment. The plosive sounds in 'thunder' and the verb 'battering' convey a certain force of impact, underlining the force and power of the Kraken. Additionally, the assonance in 'wondrous grot' and 'unnumbered and enormous polypi' slows the reading pace and draws out the words, stressing the Kraken's majesty and stateliness, a huge entity that is hard to encompass.</p>



Reflection on Learning

Like many Literature teachers, I had my reservations about teaching sound devices as students tended to be less adept in analysing how the use of sound contributes to meaning-making in literary texts. Indeed, in Tan (2013), I had argued in an essay that students could access poetry through teaching literary devices such as metaphor and symbolism without any focus on sound devices.

This project has shown me the benefits which can be reaped in the classroom from allowing students to notice and explore how sound devices may be used to enrich texts. Through casual conversations with some of my students during the intervention phase, I was delighted to hear that they were intrigued to note how listening to the sounds in literary texts allowed them to uncover another layer of meaning in the texts. I believe that if we sensitise students to read not only with their eyes but also with their ears, literary texts will become that much more resonant, appealing not only to their imagination and conceptual faculties, but also to their senses. In this way, reading literature becomes a more complete aesthetic experience.



References

- Tan, I. (2013). Issues and challenges involved in designing a structured framework to teach unseen poetry for upper secondary. In C. E. Loh, D. Yeo & W. M. Liew (Eds.), *Teaching literature in Singapore secondary schools* (pp. 130-141). Singapore: Pearson.



Five Secondary 3 EL teachers from CHIJ Secondary (Sec) formed a Special Interest Group (SIG) to improve how they selected texts and set questions for reading comprehension. Working together with Varalackshmi Durai,

Master Teacher/ EL, the teachers developed a better understanding of the principles of assessment and learnt how the application of these principles helped to improve the fairness, validity and reliability of school-based assessment.

By: Maimunah bte Ithnin, Wendy Lee, Claudia Ng, Anita Tiwari, Geraint Wong (CHIJ Secondary) and Varalackshmi Durai (ELIS)

A Teacher-led Inquiry into School-based English Language Assessment

How a Master Teacher worked with an SIG to develop an assessment resource package

Vara

In January 2012, I facilitated the Assessment Literacy (Secondary) Professional Learning Programme (PLP) for the EL Department of CHIJ Sec. Subsequently, I met Puja Dada, HOD/ EL, to discuss how ELIS could offer Extended Support to the department to transfer learning from the PLP into practice.

One area of concern expressed by Puja was the anxiety teachers felt over the assessment changes that came with the implementation of EL Syllabus 2010. The staff demographics had

changed and younger teachers did not know where or how to begin the process of selection of texts for reading comprehension.

We agreed that I would first work with a group of Sec 3 teachers who would form an SIG to conduct a teacher-led inquiry into current assessment practices. To ensure the work had focus and to create an authentic learning experience for the teachers, we decided that the SIG would work towards setting comprehension papers for the Mid-Year and End-of-Year school examinations.

Literature Review

We focused on some of the principles of language assessment from Brown (2004) to guide our work:

- **Validity:** There is test validity when a test measures what it is supposed to measure. When setting questions, therefore, teachers need to be very clear about what the assessment intent of the question is. A question can have more than one assessment intent and being aware of the assessment intent ensures that the skill that students are required to demonstrate is indeed the skill that the setter intends to test.
- **Reliability:** Reliability in a test ensures that the test results are consistent and dependable.
- **Fairness:** Fairness is ensuring a level playing field for all pupils to display their learning. It involves making sure that there are no potentially emotive or controversial issues, such as death, divorce, religion, race and sexuality, in a test. Assessments impact the affective state of test-takers as well and

for an assessment to be fair, care should be taken to avoid interference with the cognitive responses of students.

- **Authenticity:** Authenticity refers to the likelihood of the assessment task being enacted in the real world. Texts for assessing reading comprehension need to be selected from real-world sources that test-takers are likely to have encountered or will encounter. The language used must be as natural as possible, and the content should be meaningful, relevant and interesting.





The SIG

When we started working as an SIG with Vara, we had little idea of what to expect.

We had assessment processes in place that had served us well for many years, and we had come to accept that our more experienced colleagues somehow knew what to look for when it came to selecting texts and setting questions for the comprehension paper. It was as if the experienced teachers in the department had an almost instinctive skill.

However, as we discussed the scope of work, we began to see that our current assessment

processes for selecting, setting and vetting examination papers could be improved. While these processes had served us well in the past, changes in the staff demographics, as well as changes in the assessment items, had created some uncertainty for us.

As the work of the SIG progressed, we became more aware of the principles behind selecting texts and setting questions. We also realised how important it was that care be taken when selecting texts, as the quality of questions set depended on the suitability of the text for assessment purposes.

Text Selection

The SIG

We worked with Vara for two years from 2012 to 2014 and conducted three cycles of inquiry (see **Figure 1**). In the first two cycles, we focused on selecting an expository text. In the third cycle, we worked on selecting a literary text. Each cycle of inquiry consisted of the following processes:

- (i) Selecting a text
- (ii) Adapting the text for assessment purposes
- (iii) Setting questions

Vara began each cycle with a review of the principles of assessment. This helped to deepen our understanding of the factors we needed to consider in the selection of texts as well as the setting of questions. She also set us homework to

analyse the 2012 Specimen Paper to see how the principles of assessment could be applied in the setting of the comprehension paper.

Following this, Vara guided us in applying the principles of assessment and other factors for evaluating the suitability of the texts we had selected for setting the comprehension paper.

Through these critique sessions, we built up a checklist that we could use to assess the suitability of texts (see **Figure 2**). We also developed a better awareness of the reading skills we needed to teach our students to enable them to be better prepared for the comprehension paper.

Figure 1: Cycles of Inquiry (Tables 1-3)

Table 1: Cycle 1 (July 2012)

Session	Work Done
3 Jul 2012 Term 3, Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We defined the scope of work, expectations and deliverables.• Vara recapped the principles of assessment.• The SIG analysed the 2012 Specimen Paper as homework.
10 Jul 2012 Term 3, Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vara led the SIG in analysing the assessment tasks in the 2012 Specimen Paper to understand the assessment intent of the tasks.• Vara facilitated a discussion on the setting of assessment items.• We analysed the expository texts which had been selected in the light of the principles of assessment, to select the best option and state the rationale for selection.
27 Jul 2012 Term 3, Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vara facilitated a discussion of factors for consideration in selecting expository texts and setting questions.• Vara led the SIG in critiquing the selected expository texts and discussing the stated rationale.• We generated questions as homework.
1 Aug 2012 Term 3, Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vara led a discussion of the set questions. We rephrased questions as needed.• We re-worked some of the questions as homework.
8 Aug 2012 Term 3, Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vara led a discussion of the summary question.• We crafted the marking scheme.

Table 2: Cycle 2 (July 2013)

Session	Work Done
31 May 2013 Term 2, Week 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We reviewed the factors for consideration in the selection of expository texts. • We drafted a checklist on factors to consider in the selection of expository texts. • It was agreed that before the next meeting, we would collate the expository texts submitted by Sec 3 EL Teachers for analysis.
10 Jul 2013 Week 1, June Holidays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We critiqued the expository texts submitted for the examination, selected the best and stated the rationale for our selection. • We annotated the expository texts we had rejected as well as the one we had selected to document our learning. • We wrote questions for homework.
22 Jul 2013 Term 3, Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We continued our critique of the selected expository texts in light of the factors for consideration in the selection of expository texts.
29 Jul 2013 Term 3, Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We emailed the questions we had written and Vara provided online consultation to critique and suggest better rephrasing of the questions. • We reworked the questions based on Vara's feedback.
7 Aug 2013 – 28 Aug 2013 Term 3, Week 3 – Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vara provided online feedback on the questions we had written and suggested improvements. • We met to discuss the summary question. • We sent the final draft to Puja for vetting.

Table 3: Cycle 3 (March 2014)

Session	Work Done
7 Mar 2014 Term 1, Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vara reviewed the principles of assessment as well as the factors for consideration in the selection of texts as we had new teachers joining the SIG. • We reviewed the literary texts we had identified in light of the checklist we had created.
14 Mar 2014 Term 1, Week 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vara led us in analysing the literary texts we had identified, selecting the best option and stating our rationale. • We analysed the 2013 GCE 'O' EL Paper 2 to understand the assessment intent of the assessment tasks. • We generated questions as homework.
28 Mar 2014 Term 2, Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We compiled the questions and Vara led us in a critique of the questions.
4 Apr 2014 Term 2, Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We continued our critique of questions and re-crafted some questions. • We annotated the literary texts that we had rejected as well as the one we had selected to document our learning.

Figure 2: Checklist for Selecting Texts

We created the following checklist as a means of ensuring common understanding of expected standards within our department.

No	Considerations	Remarks
1	<input type="checkbox"/> Reading ease of the text.	
2	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear theme with meaning intact if text is an extract from longer text. External knowledge is not required to understand the text.	
3	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear, coherent text structure suited to the purpose of assessment.	
4	<input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient degree of content elaboration for item-setting. Meaning is not too dependent on the need to make sense of what could be ambiguous language.	
5	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear signposts that show starting of new ideas or line of argumentation.	
6	<input type="checkbox"/> Useful supplemental explanatory features.	
7	<input type="checkbox"/> No bias and/ or sensitive issues.	
8	<input type="checkbox"/> Authentic text that is within students' in-school and out-of-school experiences.	
9	<input type="checkbox"/> Interesting content and inviting style of writing.	

Vara

A big satisfaction for me was seeing the teachers in the SIG grow in confidence in critiquing texts and setting questions.

By the time we were into the second cycle, the texts that the teachers brought into the selection process had improved in quality. This led to them setting better questions as the texts they were working with were rich. The teachers also grew in their confidence in recognising issues of bias.

It was also gratifying to see that when the teachers understood the assessment intent of questions, they broke away from parroting the question stems used in the Specimen Paper and were able to generate a wider range of questions.



Question Setting

The SIG

Sometimes we used to struggle in setting questions to fulfil the number of questions needed for the paper. When we shared this difficulty with Vara, she told us to 'write questions' and not 'set the paper'.

This was a surprisingly simple instruction which changed the way we set questions. What this meant was that each of us wrote as many questions as we could without thinking about

whether it was a 'language for impact' question or inference question. Writing as many questions as possible resulted in our having a pool of questions to choose from.

While previously we used to think of setting questions according to question type and format, through the work we did in this SIG we learnt to consider the assessment intent of questions instead, as well as how each question should be better phrased so that students could demonstrate to us their comprehension of the text. This different way of setting questions helped us improve the validity of the items we set.

Sharing the Learning

The SIG

We learnt so much through our work in the SIG that we thought it would be a waste if we did not share it with our colleagues. We wanted to capture our learning and make these skills of selecting texts and setting questions more explicit and accessible to all the teachers in the EL Department.

Puja and Vara helped to create platforms for us to share. To date, we have shared our learning at the S3 Cluster Sharing Session in March 2013, the ELIS Symposium in September 2013 and at the English Language Teaching Seminar in February 2014.

Vara also encouraged us to capture our learning by putting together an Assessment Resource Package (ARP). In the ARP we detailed the steps to be taken for the selection of texts and the setting of questions as well as the rationale for these steps, so that the department as a whole can adopt a more streamlined approach to setting school-based assessment. We also made annotations to show the strengths and weaknesses of a sample of the texts we had selected to document our learning (see **Figure 3**).

The ARP serves as a useful resource for the department. It seemed like a daunting idea at first and indeed it did involve a great deal of documentation, but we felt a great sense of accomplishment at the end of the process.

Figure 3: Sample of Annotated Text in the ARP

		Para 5: The team moved the last paragraph from the original text to paragraph 5 to provide a more immediate background on Sadie's tutoring job. It would also help students to understand how Heng's parents controlled Sadie's movements because they
5	<p>The young woman had had to heed the whims of Heng's parents, and they had decided that Sadie should not go out to work, but should stay in the back bedroom tutoring drop-ins. There were many college students who came by to see Sadie, believing that learning English, especially spoken American English, was a ticket out of poverty. But, if she taught English classes at the college, it would bring unwanted attention to the family.—Heng, respecting tradition, agreed with his parents.</p>	
6	<p>They strolled through the work unit to the large parking shed, where Heng and everyone else who lived and worked at Wei Teachers College stored their bicycles. And then they dragged their feet to the apartment block, where on the second floor they shared a small apartment with his parents.</p>	
7	<p>"We must make this work," he said. "Or my friends and students will laugh at me and not just because my wife has big feet." Sadie scowled at him.</p>	



Reflections

The SIG: Previously, the main factors that influenced our choice of texts was whether the text would be interesting to the students and whether we could set certain types of questions, namely, the summary and the 'language for impact' questions. Our work as an SIG made us aware of assessment needs beyond the interest of students, such as text complexity, text coherence and whether the text raises issues of bias.

As young teachers, we used to lack confidence in setting comprehension papers and we had had the experience of students giving us answers that we had not expected. We realise now that in such cases we had not been clear about the assessment intent of the questions we had set.

Working in the SIG gave us the opportunity to clarify our doubts and experiment with setting questions and crafting marking schemes. This made us more confident when marking students' scripts as we had a clear idea of what the assessment intent of our questions was and as a result why an answer should be accepted or rejected.



Vara: Although the SIG worked over a period of two years, each cycle was limited to a stretch of four to six weeks, during which time we met for one and a half hours every week. The support given by Puja in terms of timetabling and negotiating the teachers' workload was invaluable in helping the teachers set aside time to meet regularly. Despite their heavy workload, the teachers in this SIG were also committed to their professional growth in assessment literacy. Their willingness to put in extra time and effort was commendable.

Reference

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