

# EL Classroom *inquiry*

**It is about what works in the English Language classroom**





# issue **3**



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# an ACTION research on the use of rubrics

When students have a good understanding of the criteria used to grade their work, they are better able to revise their writing to meet the expected learning outcomes. Working together with Varalackshmi Durai, Master Teacher/ English Language (EL), Darren Chong, then Head of Department for English and currently Vice-Principal of Henderson Secondary School explored the use of analytic rubrics derived from the GCE 'O' Level band descriptors to communicate the expected outcomes of sentence quality and paragraph unity to his students.



Darren Chong | Henderson Secondary School

## Using Analytic Rubrics as an Assessment for Learning Tool to Enhance Students' Writing

# How a secondary school teacher helped his Secondary 3 Express students improve their writing skills

I was stumped. Despite my best efforts to scaffold the writing process for my students, the outcome did not commensurate with the time I had invested in teaching my students. My school had a range of Assessment for Learning (AfL) practices in place and I had tried a number of the strategies I had learnt. I taught them question analysis skills. We also studied model essays, and brainstormed and planned the content. I got my students to study the assessment rubrics. I had them edit each other's drafts. Why then had the quality of writing not improved?

I recollect that Guskey (2007) suggested that the success of formative assessments hinged on a qualitative change taking place in the instruction in the classroom. Such a change can be manifested in the format, organisation or method of presentation in the classroom.

I wondered whether my efforts had been misdirected and if I had been too pre-occupied with helping students identify the content needed for their writing and correcting word-level features such as their choice of words and spelling. As a consequence,

perhaps I had overlooked teaching the seemingly more difficult skills of effective sentence construction and paragraphing. However, I was not confident that I had either the knowledge or the time to teach these more technical aspects of language.

The opportunity to address this problem presented itself when I attended the 'On Your Marks: Assessment Literacy (Sec)' learning programme facilitated by Varalackshmi Durai. When we met to plan the extended support for the school, Vara invited me to extend the existing AfL practices in my school through the use of analytic assessment rubrics. She suggested that instead of using the GCE 'O' Level band descriptors which were holistic, I could deconstruct the criteria in each band and create my own analytic rubrics written in student-friendly language. She also encouraged me to first unpack my own understanding of the criteria and select samples of students' writing that would illustrate the criteria to my students. Students could then be taught to use these analytic rubrics to recognise the gaps in their writing and strive towards their desired goals by bridging the identified gaps.

## Literature Review

According to the Assessment Reform Group, when teachers use AfL purposefully, students become clearer about where they want to go, where they are at the moment and how they can get to their destination. Teachers are also compelled to examine and articulate their professional knowledge in language that their students can understand, assess the learning gaps of the students more expediently and provide focused feedback to help students improve.



## Research Questions

Based on my understanding of my students' needs in writing and the research literature on the use of success criteria, I crafted the following research question: *Can the use of analytic rubrics enhance the quality of sentences and paragraph unity in students' writing?*

I also learnt that rubrics are useful only when the students actively use them in evaluating and revising their writing. Therefore, a second question I was also interested in exploring was: *Can the use of analytic rubrics assist students in self- and peer-evaluation of their writing?*

## Pre-Intervention

Before embarking on my classroom inquiry, Vara and I met to discuss the literature, design the inquiry and firm up the details of how I would conduct the lessons. In my planning I was guided by the rubric design process outlined in Andrade (1999).

I first assessed the compositions written by my students in the Secondary 2 end-of-year examinations and used this as diagnostic assessment to identify the gaps in the writing that had prevented my students from achieving better quality grades. Two prevalent issues I noticed in the students' writing were a lack of unity within paragraphs and monotony in sentence construction – for example, almost every sentence would begin with 'Then I...'.

I decided to focus on sentence construction and paragraphing as the two skills that would be most

efficacious in helping my students improve the quality of their writing.

Vara encouraged me to question my own understanding of the criteria pertaining to sentence structure and paragraphing in the GCE 'O' Level band descriptors before I began crafting the rubrics. What does 'sentence structures are varied for particular effects' mean? What does 'variety of sentence length and structure' look like? How do I recognise that paragraphs have 'unity' and are 'appropriately linked'?

I looked for examples in my students' work and re-wrote the rubrics in student-friendly terms (Refer to **Table 1** on page 6). This was a rigorous process and it was time-consuming, but as I worked on my own understanding of the rubrics, I began to form a clearer picture of how I could help my students understand and use the rubrics more effectively.

**Table 1: Extract from Analytic Rubrics and Exemplars Derived from GCE 'O' Level Band Descriptors**

Band	Criteria on Sentence Structure in Student-Friendly Terms	Criteria on Paragraphing in Student-Friendly Terms	Model Paragraph
1	<p>Varied for particular effects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Varied sentence structure</li> <li>Varied sentence lengths</li> <li>Varied ways to start a sentence</li> <li>Used sentences effectively to focus readers' attention on main points to be conveyed</li> <li>Used sentences purposefully to foreshadow content to be covered</li> <li>Used sentences to create an appropriate tone that suits Purpose, Audience, Context and Culture (PACC)</li> <li>Used appropriate conjunctions to create a unity and flow between sentences</li> </ul>	<p>Have <u>unity</u>, are linked and show <u>evidence of planning</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintained flow in the construction of sentences within a paragraph</li> <li>Used appropriate conjunctions to ensure unity and flow between and within paragraphs</li> </ul> <p>E.g.</p> <p>Next/ Subsequently/ Then/ Finally/ Eventually/ Additionally/ In addition/ Moreover/ Furthermore/ Also/ Similarly/ Likewise/ In comparison/ In contrast/ Comparatively/ However/ Nonetheless/ Nevertheless/ Conversely/ Otherwise/ But/ Since/ As/ And/ Consequently/ As a result/ Hence/ Henceforth/ Thus/ Therefore/ Meanwhile/ Now/ Undoubtedly/ Fortunately/ In fact/ Notably/ Namely/ Uniquely</p>	<p>Fortunately, I could fill in some of the answers for the questions. As I was going to answer the next one, I felt something land on my shoulder. <u>Casually</u>, I looked to check what it was. I froze. I could not believe my eyes. It was a lizard, staring straight at me! <u>Even though</u> it was a small one, <u>due to</u> my fear of lizards, size did not matter. Lizards are lizards. I wanted to scream <u>but</u> no voice came out. <u>There I was</u>, stuck between a test <u>that</u> would never end, <u>and</u> my biggest fear.</p>

Note: This is a sample of Band 1 rubrics only.

## Intervention

I carried out four double-period lessons over two weeks. We video-recorded the lessons for our discussion as well as a means of sharing the practice with my department teachers. The lessons were designed to fulfil three conditions to ensure student improvement as set out by Sadler (1989). These conditions were to familiarise students with:

- what good performance is,
- how current performance relates to good performance,
- how to act to close the gap between current and good performance.

In addition, the lessons were structured in accordance with the rubric design process outlined in Andrade (1999) (Refer to **Table 2**), to first orientate and familiarise students with the grading rubrics and ensure that they fully understood the criteria described in the rubrics.

The lessons also featured 'exemplars' as championed by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) to illustrate the criteria and outcomes in the analytic rubrics as well as to serve as a reference tool that students could use to evaluate their own work.

**Table 2: Schedule of Lessons according to Andrade's (1999) Rubric Design Process**

Lesson	Steps	Andrade's Design Process	What I Carried Out in the Classroom
Pre-lesson meetings	1	Look at exemplars comprising model paragraphs exhibiting qualities related to sentence construction and paragraphing for different grading bands	I assessed and selected two model paragraphs from students' Secondary 2 end-of-year scripts where sentence construction and paragraphing clearly placed them as Band 3 exemplars. I re-wrote the selected paragraphs to exhibit the qualities related to sentence construction and paragraphing as exemplars for other bands. I discussed the work with Vara and we agreed on the exemplars to be used.
1	2	List the criteria	In the first lesson, I facilitated a discussion of the writing rubrics focusing on qualities related to sentence construction and paragraphing. The focus of this lesson was to familiarise the students with the success criteria as stated in the rubrics.
	3	Articulate gradations of quality	I deconstructed the writing rubrics and re-phrased them in student-friendly terms to define the qualities related to sentence construction and paragraphing for the different grading bands. I used sample paragraphs to illustrate these qualities to the students.
	4	Practice on Exemplar 1	Students were placed in groups to use the deconstructed rubrics created in Steps 2 and 3 to assess Exemplar 1 used in Step 1 and to justify their responses by using the criteria listed in the rubrics. This was to ensure that what I had demonstrated had been understood correctly by the students and that they became familiar with the language of the rubrics.
	2	Practice on Exemplar 2	We reviewed the content covered in Lesson 1.  Students were placed in groups to use the deconstructed rubrics created in Steps 2 and 3 to assess Exemplar 2 which was used in Step 1. Students had to justify their responses using the terms of reference in the rubrics. This was to reinforce their learning using a second sample of writing.
3	5	Use self-assessment and peer assessment	We reviewed the content covered in Lessons 1 and 2.  The students were now tasked with assessing their own work individually using the deconstructed rubrics to identify the gaps in their writing that had prevented them from securing their desired grade. Then they consulted their peers to get them to confirm their own assessment.
4	6	Revise	Students revised their work individually to bridge the gaps that had been identified to improve the quality of a selected paragraph they had written previously in their Secondary 2 end-of-year exam.
	7	Use teacher assessment	I assessed and analysed students' improvements through the paragraphs they had revised, the subsequent essay they wrote for a class assignment and the essay they wrote during the mid-year examination.

## Observations

I had initially wondered how my students would respond to examining their own work and their peers' work in a different way. However, both Vara and I noted how, as the lessons progressed, the students demonstrated an increase in confidence in the way they applied, interpreted and communicated the criteria in the rubrics to their peers.

I also noted that in the paragraphs that the students revised following the lessons on the use of rubrics, the students generally invested more effort in varying the sentences they constructed in terms of sentence types, sentence lengths and in the way they started sentences. This continued to be apparent in the subsequent writing assignment and the mid-year examination as shown in **Table 3**. This showed me that the students had internalised the learning outcome and that the change in their writing style was sustained.

**Table 3: Samples of Students' Writing**

Student	Pre-Intervention Paragraph [obtained from Secondary 2 End-of-Year Exam 2012]	Post-Intervention Paragraph
Gerald	<p>I reached the point where I would break down in tears when suddenly, my best friend, who was right behind me, confronted them. Soon, they broke out into a fight and I could not do anything to help. At that point in time, I was shocked that someone would help me. The fight slowly expanded and more people joined in. Suddenly, we heard a domineering shout by our school's principal.</p>	<p>I reached the point where I would break down in tears when suddenly, my best friend, who was right behind me, confronted them. Soon, they broke out into a fight and I could not do anything to help. At that point in time, my mind was in a disarray. I could not believe the fact that anyone would stand up for me. The fight slowly escalated and more people joined in. <b>It was violent, gory and brutal.</b> Blood was shed and the fight concluded when a blood-curdling shout was heard. <b>It could only be one person. Mr Simen, our school's principal.</b></p> <p>[Revised paragraph completed during the intervention]</p>
Nadiah	<p>It was a normal school day, monotonous and boring. Every lesson was making me sleepy and Science class soon arrived. The teacher walked in and announced that there was test. I started panicking, like everyone else but they were calmer than me because they had studied and I had not. We separated our desks and the test started. I just stared at the questions, not knowing how to answer most of them. The class was dead silent, and the tension added on to my anxiety.</p>	<p><b>My eyelids felt droopy. I yawned for the twentieth time.</b> The teacher's words kept going on and on like a broken record. The classroom became blurry and finally, I gave in.</p> <p>Darkness engulfed me and all of a sudden, I found myself having a basketball match with an opposing school. <b>The clock ticked. My school was down by one point.</b> I had to do it! I snatched the ball from my opponent and made the final shot. Only one thing bothered me; I heard laughter everywhere. The darkness dissipated and in a daze, I slowly came to realize that I was grabbing my teacher's head like how I grabbed the ball for that final shot.</p> <p>[An excerpt from post-intervention class assignment]</p>

Student	Pre-Intervention Paragraph [obtained from Secondary 2 End-of-Year Exam 2012]	Post-Intervention Paragraph
Jasmine	<p>How to maintain a healthy lifestyle? That is a question that is probably at the back of even the fittest of people's minds. Believe it or not, it is actually possible, but of course, it takes quite a bit of will power. I learnt this from experience. I tried going on numerous diets, took diet pills and tried many different workouts but to no avail. They were too hard to keep up due to my work. I did not have all the time in the world to focus on my weight. I then went to get a personal trainer. He taught me these three steps.</p>	<p>In my opinion, whether or not teenagers are mature enough to make their own decisions depend on their situations, beliefs and upbringing. <b>It is impossible to justify what the right decision is.</b> No matter how old you are, you are always going to find yourself making difficult decisions and caught in seemingly unsolvable predicaments. <b>It is just part of being a human being.</b> While some teenagers, especially those brought up in the face of adversity, have learnt from the mistakes of those around them, there are other teenagers who make immature decisions.</p> <p>[An excerpt from post-intervention Secondary 3 Mid-year Exam 2013]</p>



## Reflections

Like many teachers who are beleaguered by the battles we confront in school, I was not immediately keen to take up Vara's suggestion to change the way I had been conducting my lessons. I was mortified by the thought of actually planning and carrying out a series of lessons, and on top of that I would be video-recorded for analysis and dissection! Nevertheless, buoyed by the hope and belief that a deeper understanding and integration of AfL in my classroom practice is key to better academic outcomes for students and professional development for teachers, I took up the challenge.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised. Through the lessons conducted, the students were better able to understand and use the assessment criteria in the rubrics to determine and identify the gaps in their own work and make the necessary refinements to improve the quality of their writing. They were also more motivated to invest time in planning and crafting their sentences as well as in organising the content to create the desired effect on the reader. I believe, with continued practice and sustained use of the rubrics, the students are likely to become more familiar with self-evaluation and confident in revising and improving their own writing.



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# an ACTION research on the use of news articles in the teaching of writing

Students in Tanuja Suraj's Primary 3 class faced issues with the generation of ideas for their compositions. With the help of Shakila Vasu, Master Teacher/ EL and later Amir Wahab, Pedagogy Specialist/ EL, she applied the Afl Cycle to a series of lessons which incorporated the use of rich texts in the form of news articles.



By Tanuja Suraj | Jiemin Primary School

## Using Rich Texts to Teach Content in Composition Writing

# How an EL teacher used news articles to help her high progress Primary 3 students develop content in their writing

I attended the 'On Your Marks – Getting Ready for Assessment' learning programme in 2012 conducted by Master Teacher/ EL, Shakila Vasu and learnt about the Afl Cycle. The Afl Cycle features assessment as an integral aspect of teaching and learning. When I apply the Afl Cycle, I would need to collect and interpret students' work and then make adjustments to my instructional strategies.

Using the Afl Cycle, I reviewed my students' writing, and discussed with Shakila concerns about how to get them to write on given situations such as the following:

One evening, you and your friend were strolling in the park when you heard someone screaming in pain. You turned around and saw a wild monkey attacking a little girl. Write a composition of at least 120 words based on the situation.

Here, I realised that many of the high progress Primary 3 students in my class would not have experienced such an event in their own lives. As a result, they would find it challenging to think of appropriate content for the writing task.

During our conversation, Shakila described how she had used news articles to help upper primary students develop content in their compositions. Under her guidance, I planned to use news articles in the teaching of writing through an Action Research (AR) project.

Later, with the assistance of Amir Wahab, Pedagogy Specialist/ EL, I identified literature to help develop my understanding of the use of news articles in teaching content for compositions.



## Literature Review

Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive model of the composing process highlights the importance of having knowledge about a topic in order to generate ideas for writing. Ideas can be generated in many ways through research and reading (Tompkins, 2012). This is also asserted by Deng (2003), who explains that reading from a variety of 'topic-related' texts stimulates thinking and helps in the development of ideas.

Also, the EL syllabus 2010 advocates the use of rich texts. These include informational texts, such as news articles, which contain concepts and language that can be used for the development of writing skills. In doing so, Jesson, McNaughton, and Parr (2011) suggest the strategy of 'intertextual borrowing' which allows students to study a variety of texts and use the ideas and language in their own writing.

## Research Question

Does using news articles help improve the content of high progress Primary 3 students' compositions?

## Intervention

We decided to focus on the teaching of the following Skills, Strategies, Attitudes and Behaviour (SSAB) from Learning Outcome (LO) 3 of Writing and Representing:

- Studying ideas in models of good writing
- Gathering and selecting facts and ideas from one or multiple print and/or non-print sources

I conducted my classroom inquiry with a class of 39 high progress Primary 3 students who at the time of this research were at their reading age group.

I developed a series of three lessons using the Modified Language Experience Approach (MLEA) based on the STELLAR programme. I used news articles which were related to the topics outlined in the composition titles. They were age-appropriate and potentially of interest to the students from the Teaching Kids News website (See image of homepage in **Figure 1**). Furthermore, I used the AfL Cycle to help design the lessons after reflecting on my observations, reviewing samples of students' work, and taking into account feedback from Shakila to help develop the next lesson.

**Figure 1: Teaching Kids News at <http://teachingkidsnews.com/>**

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Teaching Kids News website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for About Us, Archives, How to use this site (Grades 2-8), Contact, and social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and RSS. Below the navigation is a search bar. The main header features the "Teaching Kids News .com" logo with a newspaper icon. The date Friday, September 12, 2014, is displayed. The menu bar includes links for HOME, NEWS, ENTERTAINMENT, SCIENCE, ARTS, SPORTS, POLITICS, and MEDIA LITERACY ACTIVITIES. A "BREAKING NEWS" section highlights "Apple Unveils Exciting New Products" from 1 day ago. Below this, there is a large image of a sandwich with Nutella and a headline: "Don't Bother Stockpiling Nutella Just Yet". Other news items include "Movie Stars In Toronto For Annual Festival" and "Pan Am/Parapan Am Games To Be Held In Toronto In July 2015". On the right side, there is a sidebar with a woman holding a laptop, advertising "TRUSTED. CURRENT. RELEVANT.", and a call to action to "Learn more about our special offers for the 2014-15 school year". It also includes links to Classroom Connection.ca and Twitter, and a "SUPPORT TKN" section with a "Donate" button.

## Lesson 1

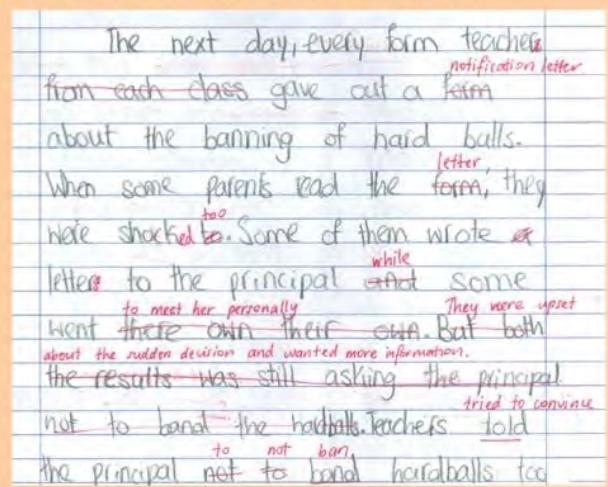
In the first lesson, I introduced my students to a news article which was about road accidents, a common composition topic. I chose the article "13-Year-Old Hero Saves School Bus", which was about a child saving a bus from an accident. Building on the students' prior knowledge of accidents, I wanted them to think about how to use this idea in their compositions.

At the beginning, the students were not used to reading about current affairs although they enjoyed the article. I decided to provide them with more scaffolding by having students:

1. read silently and write their thoughts
2. work in groups, assigning them different roles to discuss the text by using guiding questions
3. write down their discussion on paper and present to the class

By undertaking these processes, I was able to get students to have a debate on the topic of the text in the next lesson. The students were highly engaged and managed to extract ideas to incorporate into their compositions. (See Figure 2)

**Figure 2: Sample of student writing providing different reasons not to ban balls**



The next day, every form teacher from each class gave out a form about the banning of hard balls. When some parents read the form, they were shocked. Some of them wrote letters to the principal not to ban balls to meet her personally. They were upset about the sudden decision and wanted more information. The results was still asking the principal not to ban the hardballs. Teachers told the principal not to ban hardballs too.

## Lesson 2

I used the article, "Toronto School Bans Balls" to get students to write a composition about a parent who had been hit by a ball. Based on that article, the students had to decide on what action the school should take in response to the situation.

As the article provided multiple perspectives on possible actions, I invited the students to debate on the banning of balls in school by assuming different roles of students, parents, teachers and school leader. By drawing a chart on the whiteboard and dividing it into four parts for the four roles, I modelled the role of the school leader and completed that quarter of the chart. I then assigned the other three roles to groups of students. They then had to include the different perspectives in their compositions.

## Lesson 3

Students were asked to write a composition based on the following situation:

One afternoon after school, you went home. As soon as you entered the kitchen, you screamed. Your mother heard you scream and ran into the kitchen. She found you crying.

Here I decided to use a news article entitled "Nutella is not a Health Food" to help students think about the importance of objective explanations. To do that, I led the students through a variety of activities so that they could engage with the text before writing.

The writing task required students to use the familiar setting of home. Many students chose to relate their personal experiences and wrote that cockroaches and rats had caused the child to scream (See Figure 3). However, ideas from the "Nutella" article helped students explain the situation in other ways. (See Figure 4)

**Figure 3: Sample of student writing using a familiar idea about cockroaches**

Kitchen to find something to eat. That was when she saw two feelers popping out of the trash can. She knew ~~what~~ it was, a cockroach!

The cockroach came out of the trash can and Lily screamed in horror. Mother, who was ironing in the room heard Lily's scream and ran into the kitchen. That was when she saw the cockroach too. "Stay calm and don't move!" Mother shouted.

**Figure 4: Sample of student writing using ideas about Nutella**

One afternoon, after school, I went back home. As when I entered the kitchen, I screamed because I saw two jars of ~~me~~ Nutella. My mother heard that ~~I was~~ screaming so, she ran into the kitchen. Then she found me crying.

After the intervention, I checked on the students' progress by assigning them the following topics:

- A Diary Entry on School National Day Celebrations
- A Wild Monkey Attack

In this instance, I decided not to use news articles to see what difference this would have on students' writing.

## Observations and Reflections

From my observations and Shakila's feedback, I reflected on some learning points (See Figure 5):

**Figure 5: Sample of Teacher's Reflective Entry**

Using news articles for students to gather ideas for compositions proved to be effective. After doing a round of marking, only four students in my class did not use ideas from the articles. However, since the majority were able to use the ideas from the articles for their compositions, I felt that doing this every week will definitely broaden their perspectives. This motivated me to do more for my students.

Today's lesson on Nutella was quite interesting. I started the lesson by asking the students how many of them liked Nutella and wrote the number on the whiteboard. I wanted to check if they understood the article and had opinions about the findings. Initially, the majority said they liked Nutella but by the end of the lesson, the majority agreed that it was unhealthy.

Showing the class a Nutella advertisement got them thinking about the claimed benefits of Nutella. By using a number of scaffolding questions and the responses from each group, the class managed to see the link between the advertisement and Nutella. Using visuals really helped and it made it easier for me to ask higher-order questions. I was also pleased that my class put in the effort to think.

My students' written work after the intervention confirmed my earlier assumptions that they were able to draw upon their experiences to write the diary entry. However, they found it more challenging to write about a monkey attack (See **Figure 6**). Therefore, I decided to use a news article about a wild boar attack which had occurred locally and conducted class writing on the same composition topic. Their subsequent compositions showed that the students could include new ideas and vocabulary such as 'a shotgun', and 'officers from the wildlife reserve' from the news article in their writing. (See **Figure 7**)

Therefore, I decided to re-visit the compositions which students had written earlier and started to use news articles to help them develop their ideas.

**Figure 6: Sample of student writing about a monkey attack**

We quickly called the ambulance to come to Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park. Soon, the ambulance arrived. The paramedics officer carried her using a stretcher to the ambulance and drove to the hospital.

**Figure 7: Sample of class writing about a monkey attack incorporating ideas and vocabulary from a news article**

Soon the ambulance arrived. The little girl and the lady were sent to the hospital. As Jarlyn and I were about to leave, we saw officers from the Wildlife Reserves. An officer was carrying a shotgun. They wanted to capture the wild monkey.

## Students' Reflections

I interviewed my students who participated in this AR project and asked them if they enjoyed reading the news articles, the class discussions based on the news articles, and how the news articles helped them to generate ideas for their compositions. I also asked them what difficulties they faced when reading the articles. Below are some responses from my students.

### **Did you enjoy reading the articles?**

"Yes, I enjoyed the articles because it is about real life. They make me think deeply."

**Did you enjoy class discussions on the articles?**

"Yes, I like to talk about what's happening in Singapore."

**How did the articles help you in generating ideas for the composition?**

"I could use the appropriate words or phrases in the composition."

"I can also use the story in the composition."

**What difficulties did you face?**

"Sometimes I don't understand the words in the article."

"Sometimes I don't know if I have used the words/phrases from the article in my composition correctly."



## My Reflections on my Students' Learning

In general, my students enjoyed reading the news articles. However, some felt that some articles were not easy to understand because of the vocabulary. They generally preferred local articles about Singapore as most would have already heard about the news reported in those articles prior to the lessons.

The use of the news articles provided many opportunities for my students to read true stories, and to generate ideas for use in their writing. However, the vocabulary within the articles was challenging for them.



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# a LESSON *study* on reading skills



Developing students to become critical readers requires us to think through how we can use effective questioning in our lessons. This Lesson Study involved a team of Secondary 3 teachers from Queensway Secondary School in honing not only their questioning technique, but also the planning of lessons to develop critical readers. The teachers' learning is evident in the improvements made to the planned lesson and the realisation that teaching is indeed more than just about applying a reading strategy or tool.

By Surinder Kaur, Buganeishwari Yoganathan | Queensway Secondary & Jay Pillai | ELIS

## Developing Critical Readers through Teacher Questioning

# How a group of Secondary 3 teachers conducted Lesson Study to inquire into the teaching of critical reading skills

The Secondary 3 EL teachers in Queensway Secondary School wanted to address a problem that had been long plaguing us - how to teach students to be critical readers. We observed that students did not think deeply about the issues they encountered in the texts they read. We realised that just asking our students to "Think about the text you are reading!" - an exhortation that most of us are guilty of - was not enough.

One of our colleagues directed us to Paul's Wheel of Reasoning to help us better understand what it means to develop critical readers. We decided that Paul's Wheel would be an ideal framework for us to use to teach our students as the eight elements define thinking through reasoning (Refer to **Table 1**).

**Table 1: The 8 Elements in Paul's Wheel of Reasoning**

- Point of View
- Purpose
- Question at Issue
- Information
- Interpretation and Inference
- Concepts
- Assumptions
- Implications and Consequences

Elder and Paul, 2007

We realised, however, that we needed to teach explicitly the various elements in Paul's Wheel in order for our students to become critical readers. Before we could get our students to develop their reasoning skills, we needed them to understand the various elements one by one.

The challenge though was breaking each element down for our students.

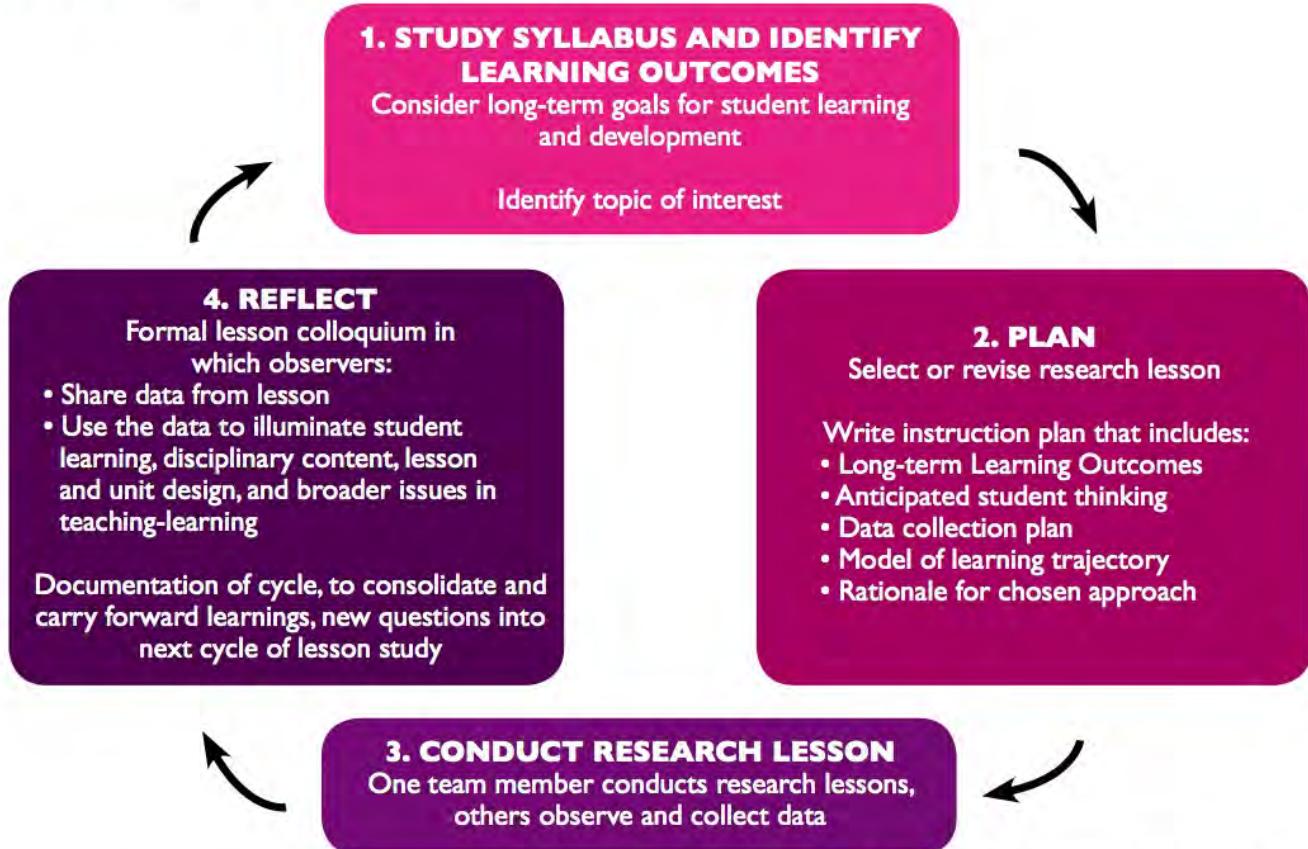
We knew that if we wanted to use Paul's Wheel in our classrooms, we would have to adapt it in a way that would be easy for our students to relate to. We also had to contextualise the teaching of the elements. Apart from that, it was clear to us that eight elements were too many to introduce to our students at one go.

## Planning the Lesson

The team decided that we would plan a two-period lesson that would focus on some aspects of the elements in Paul's Wheel. We also agreed to conduct Lesson Study (Refer to **Figure 1**) to examine if we were explicitly teaching critical reading skills to our students. The two-period lesson would focus on teaching our students how to be critical readers of expositions. Jay, Pedagogy Officer/ EL, partnered us, as a critical friend to think through how we could approach the teaching of the particular elements of Paul's Wheel in a two-period lesson.



## Figure 1 Lesson Study Cycle



Adapted from Lewis and Hurd, 2011.

### A Critical Friend's Voice:

**Jay:** Through our conversations, the teachers realised that while they wanted to use elements in Paul's Wheel to guide their teaching of critical reading skills, they first had to determine which specific skills their students needed to learn. Together, we referred to the Reading and Viewing Learning Outcomes (LO) in the EL Syllabus.

LO3: Apply critical reading and viewing by focusing on implied meaning, higher order thinking, judgement and evaluation

Skills, Strategies, Attitudes and Behaviour (SSAB):

- Read or view a text closely and offer interpretations of it
- Recognise writer's intentions
- Provide and interpret evidence to support understanding
- Respond to a text with examples and reasons
- Identify and present points of view in a text

During the planning stage the teachers decided that the lesson would only focus on the first three SSAB as they were aligned to two elements in Paul's Wheel (Refer to **Table 2**). They agreed that after the Lesson Study, they would apply their learning from their observations to future lessons introducing the other elements to their students.

While much of the teachers' professional learning was initially focused on understanding the elements in Paul's Wheel, as they began developing the lesson, they discovered other rich learning experiences. They began to apply key teaching processes which they realised were important for sound pedagogical practices.

**Table 2: Alignment of SSAB with Elements in Paul's Wheel of Reasoning**

Reading and Viewing SSAB from LO3	Adapted from the elements from Paul's Wheel of Reasoning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read or view a text closely and offer interpretations of it</li> <li>• Recognise writer's intentions</li> <li>• Provide and interpret evidence to support understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose: What is the main purpose of the article?</li> <li>• Information: What information/evidence does the author use to support his purpose?</li> </ul>

## Reflections on Learning

These were some of our key learning points as we planned our lesson for the Lesson Study:

### Selecting and adapting texts that suited the purpose of our lesson

We surfaced many expositions and videos on various topics and had discussions on why we thought each text would be suitable for the lesson. Through our discussions, we realised that in order for the critical reading skills to be taught, we had to analyse the difficulty level of the content, the familiarity of the context and the length of each text. We finally

decided on a video on internet safety from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThxmgXMBpoM> and an article with a focus on media literacy, entitled 'The cost of getting too personal online.' While we initially wanted the students to read the entire article, upon further analysis of the article, we realised that we had to shorten the text and edit some of the vocabulary to suit the purpose of the two-period lesson. We did not want to veer off from the focus of the lesson by spending too much time unpacking the text with the students.





### Crafting questions that aligned with the learning intentions

As we crafted questions to ask during the lesson for both the video and the article, we started considering possible responses from students. We did that to fine-tune the questions that we had from Paul's Wheel and the SSAB. This led to a process of learning for us because some of the questions we had crafted would have led to too many possible answers. Students may also not know what was expected of them if we had asked, 'What questions do you have after watching the video clip?'. It was too open-ended.

This led us to reflect on how to craft more specific questions. We also had to bear in mind to use student-friendly language so that students could have easy access to these questions on their own. We ultimately narrowed it down to two questions that focused on the writer's intention and on the evidence to support one's intention (Refer to the lesson plan in **Figure 2**).

### Teacher modelling

While we originally thought that we could get students to work in pairs to analyse the article after viewing the video, we discussed further and saw the need to help students transfer their learning from the viewing of the video to the reading of a text. Hence, we decided that after viewing the video, we would model the process of how to identify the author's intention and the supporting evidence from an article, to make thinking visible to the students. We needed to instruct explicitly and guide them to transfer their learning. It was at this juncture that we decided to identify the specific teaching processes of ACoLADE (Refer to **Table 3** below) to include in our lesson plan (Refer to **Figure 2** on the next page).

**Table 3: Teaching Processes**

- **A** Raising Awareness
- **Co** Structuring Consolidation
- **L** Facilitating Assessment for Learning
- **A** Enabling Application
- **D** Guiding Discovery
- **E** Instructing Explicitly



**Figure 2: Lesson plan (with comment boxes)**

SUGGESTED DURATION	LEARNING EXPERIENCES	SPECIFIC TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES
PRE-ACTIVITY 20 minutes [Guiding discovery]	<p>Teacher starts the lesson by informing the students of the objectives of the lesson.</p> <p>Teacher shows a video to the students. The board is divided into 2 sections, with each section headed by a question below.</p> <p><b>The 2 Questions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the director's intention in this video? What is his purpose in creating this video? (Intention/Purpose)</li> <li>2. What evidence is there to support your answer? (Evidence)</li> </ol> <p>Teacher poses these questions to the whole class. Teacher writes responses on the board</p> <p><b>Possible student responses:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the director's intention? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to show that what we do online has consequences offline</li> <li>• to raise awareness of internet safety</li> <li>• to serve as a warning</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Why do you say that? What evidence is there to support your answer? People recognise Sarah everywhere she goes.</li> </ol> <p>Possible evidence students may cite: 'Love the new tattoo, Sarah.' 'What colour underwear today?' 'Tagline – Think before you post.'</p> <p>Teacher can probe further with questions like:</p> <p>So why do people recognise her?</p> <p>Possible student responses: She must have done something really interesting online.</p> <p>Points to note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give students time to think.</li> <li>• If students go off on a tangent talking about what she could have done online (eg. Cyber bullying), return to the intention of the video and ask for evidence.</li> <li>• Replay the video if students request to see it again.</li> </ul> <p>Teacher informs the students that they will now use the same questions to analyse a written text, instead of a visual one.</p> <p>The team found it helpful to state the teaching processes so that there was clarity in the pedagogical reasoning for the activities.</p>	<p>Teachers identified specific questions to ask so that students were introduced to the questions they themselves should ask when reading.</p> <p>During lesson planning the teachers thought through possible student responses. This helped them to check if the questions asked would elicit the kinds of responses students should be giving.</p>
MODELLING 10 minutes [Instructing Explicitly] [Raising Awareness] [Guiding discovery]	<p>Teacher tells students to refer to the reading article given earlier.</p> <p>Teacher models how to answer the two questions using a section of the article.</p> <p>Teacher inductively questions students to identify the type of question.</p>	PowerPoint slides

Here are some quotes from our discussions to show our learning and how we would improve on the lesson:

Observations	Learning points / Improvements to be made
<p>"The teacher was role-modelling (to the students) and she said 'I think this is the answer...why do I say that?' She then went back to the evidence in the paragraph and highlighted it...it was very clear to the students."</p> <p>"The students were engaged and copying down what was being role-modelled."</p>	<p>The need to explicitly instruct through the think aloud method so that students are very clear of how they should do it without the teacher's guidance.</p>
<p>"The teacher asked the students what kind of a question it was and one of the students said 'Inference'... Then the teacher asked, 'How do you think you came to this answer?' This led the student to say 'based on evidence'. That is exactly what we were trying to accomplish – what is the intention and what is the evidence."</p>	<p>Through observations, it became evident how learning was taking place for the students.</p>
<p>"I think it would have been good for the students to have written the answers down...there wasn't much space in the article...a worksheet would have been good so that the students (could have been directed) to write down all the notes."</p>	<p>The improved lesson would have guided worksheets. This would allow students to make references when needed.</p>
<p>"Student C was trying to rephrase the answers that were on the board (with reference to the video), and match the answers when she was reading the article ...I was thinking should we have chosen a video on the same topic for the pre-activity as the student was influenced by the answers on the board to help her in her answer for the article."</p> <p>"The student was trying to force fit the answer"</p>	<p>There was a need to check if students were applying their learning. Sometimes explicit instruction on its own is not enough. Teachers need to enable application of learning and check if learning did in fact take place.</p>
<p>(For the last part of the lesson, it was a summary by the teacher) "Teacher talk...the students were just listening (laughter) I don't know if they were listening really."</p>	
<p>"We need to hear from them, whether they have learnt and understood what they have learnt as opposed to the teacher wrapping up because it is easy for students to tune out"</p> <p>"We may have a good lesson but how do we know the students got it? We need to consider more AfL techniques."</p>	<p>The improved lesson would factor in more AfL tools to check on student learning.</p>



## Reflections

**Jay:** From a critical friend's point of view, it was evident that the Lesson Study team was determined to improve on their practice. During the lesson planning stage, they were up to the challenge every time there were questions asked about the text selected or the purpose of the teaching activity planned. They were reflective and would not just accept questions at face value. This was a team of teachers that would question the questions and not just wait for advice. They were confident practitioners who were very open to stretching themselves to improve their craft. When the idea to conduct Lesson Study was suggested, they approached it with a positive spirit. While they may have learned about Paul's Wheel of Reasoning, they went beyond critical reading to focus the Lesson Study on investigating their teaching processes as well as the pedagogical reasoning behind the learning activities. The teachers themselves stated that "we thoroughly enjoyed observing the students because it allowed us to reflect on our own teaching practices" and that is the power of Lesson Study.

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# a LESSON study on the use of questions in pre-writing



This Lesson Study explored how formative assessment, using questions based on the Bloom's Taxonomy framework, was made an integral aspect in the teaching of Primary 5 English composition writing. The main aim of this study was to enable students to present their ideas logically when developing the plots in their narrative writing. This would address the many gaps in their thinking and ensure coherence in their compositions. Upon completion of the study, an analysis of the data collected revealed an improvement in the students' writing, in particular in their plot development. Their test scores showed a marked increase as well.

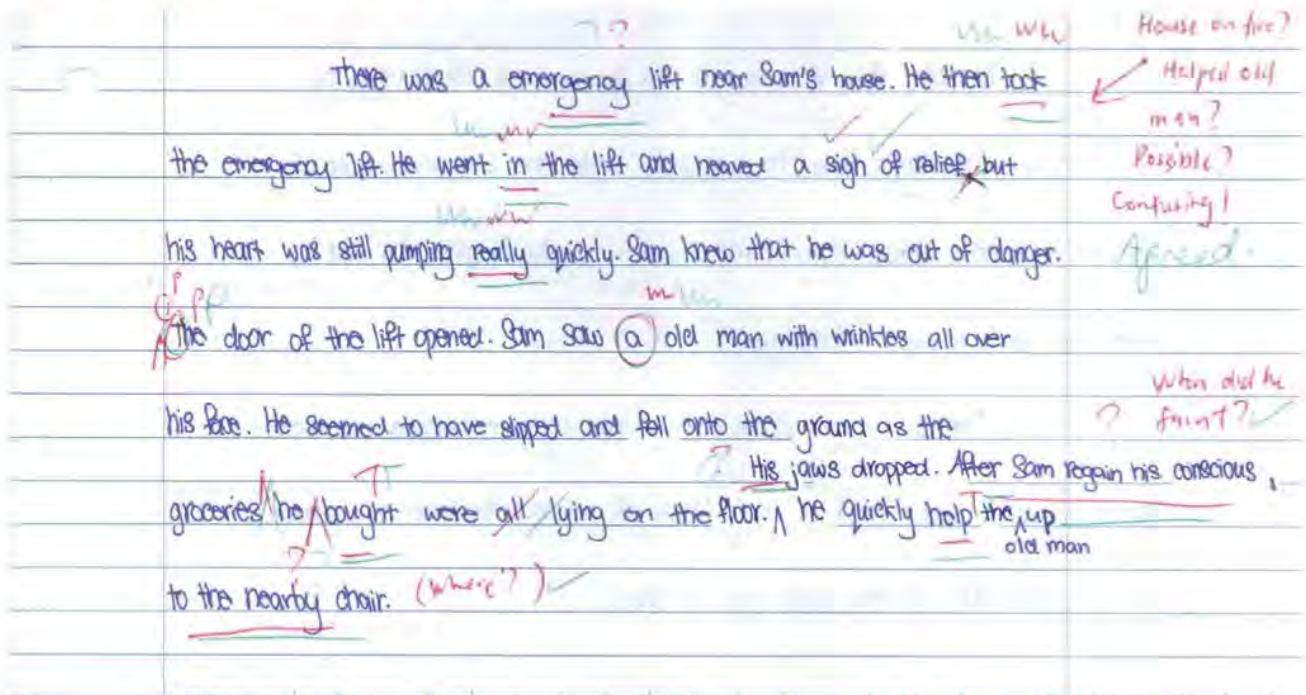
By Shanti Marion Prakash, Noraini Mohamed Ali, Thio Lay Lay and Jaclyn Low | Tao Nan School

## Assessing Formatively when Teaching Composition Writing

# How the Lesson Study team, together with a Master Teacher/ EL, helped students to bridge gaps in their writing

We were concerned that our Primary 5 students had missed out crucial information while developing their narratives and created gaps between the problem and resolution when developing their story plots despite all the writing skills exercises and composition practice which we were providing them with. **Figure 1** is an example of missing information in a student's composition.

**Figure 1: Extract from student's work**



We realised that we needed to check on their understanding of the demands of their writing task. We decided to use a more effective questioning technique to guide them during the pre-writing stage. Questions which we grappled with as we planned to scaffold their pre-writing process were:

- What was causing the students' misconceptions about plot resolution?
- Did our students know where in their writing they created gaps when developing the plot?
- Were they equipped with the skills to write without gaps?

To find answers to these questions, we decided to put into practice what we had learnt from the ELIS learning programme 'On

Your Marks - Getting Ready for Assessment' conducted by Joy Lee, Master Teacher/ EL. With the extended support provided by her, we embarked on a Lesson Study project to use formative assessment to help our students bridge the gaps in their writing – particularly between the problem and the resolution in their compositions. Joy suggested that we consider using thinking frameworks and we decided on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in the Cognitive Domain. We were also keen to find out the effect of using Bloom's questions on the coherence and cohesion of students' compositions when the specific gap between the story problem and resolution was addressed.

## Planning the Lesson

**“Questions are tools for both information seeking and information processing.” (Hunkins, 1995 cited in Walsh & Sattes, 2005, p. 31)**

The Lesson Study team had regular weekly meetings of an hour each to plan the lesson and create the teaching and learning resources. During our discussions, we realised that we had to craft a set of questions. These questions would allow us to find out what was causing the gaps in our students' thinking when writing their story plot resolutions. We were mindful of the advice from Walsh and Sattes (2005) that “when we consider all the good work that quality questions can do, we begin to see them as the ‘muscles’ of classroom instruction. As we build these muscles, we increase their power to lift our students’ learning and thinking to new heights.” However,

like powerful muscles, quality questions are seldom created by chance. We recognised that asking quality questions was time-consuming and arduous, just like building muscles. In our attempt to ask questions, we had to figure out if we were asking enough questions, and whether the questions were appropriate. This spurred us to do more research on how to ask good questions to scaffold the writing process in the belief that our students would then realise what questions to ask of themselves when writing. We read books and articles by Stepanek and Appel (2007), Walsh and Sattes (2005) and Haynes (2009) and learned much about how to ask questions. As a team, we shared the information that we had gathered from our readings, and used our learning to strengthen the scaffolding we intended to provide. Working with Joy, we also learned to scope the lesson, and became more familiar with the lesson study process.



After the lesson was developed, we decided that two of the team members would teach their two classes using the lesson plan and resources that the team developed. The two classes were made up of 70 middle progress students. While planning the lesson resources, we realised how powerful Bloom's Taxonomy was in helping us formulate quality questions. We spent a long time carefully examining Bloom's Taxonomy in order to craft probing and leading questions to scaffold students' thinking as they planned their story resolutions. We wanted to empower our students with questions which would allow them to gain a deep understanding of the content required of their compositions.

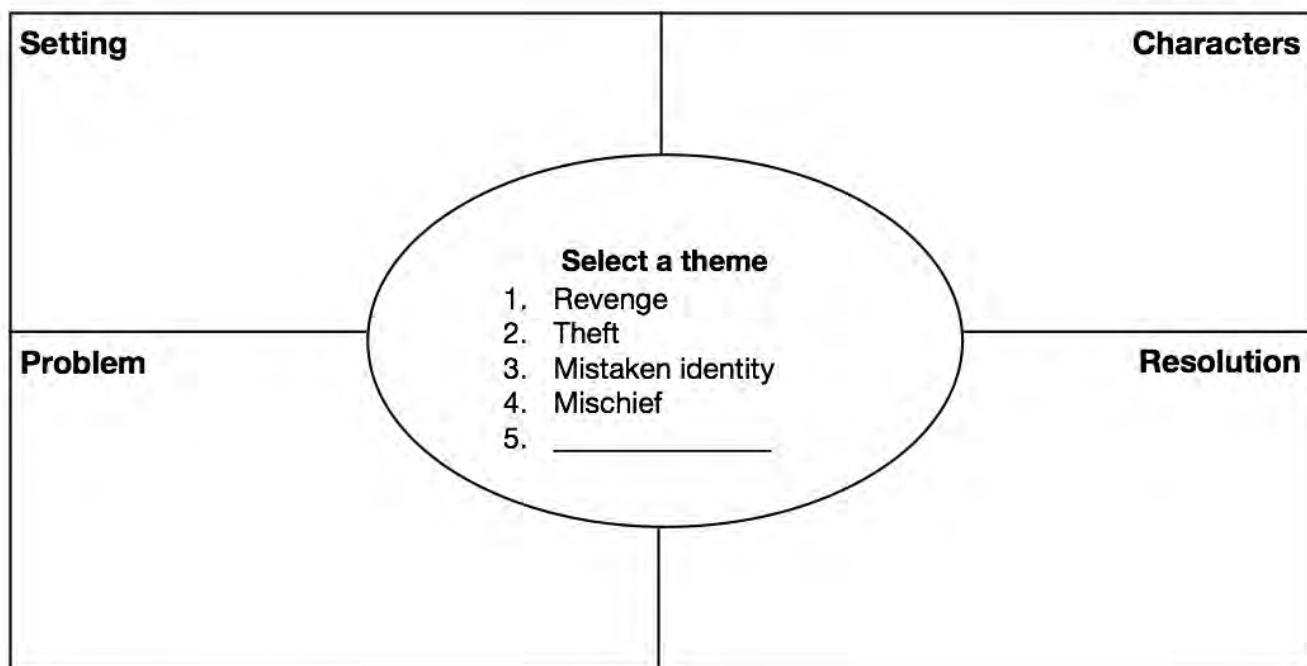
The following were the steps that we took in planning the lesson:

- Using data from the students' SA1 composition scores (in particular their content scores because they reflected students' ability in plot resolution)
- Designing a worksheet to provide scaffolding for the logical development of ideas (see **Figure 2**). This worksheet had many more questions than the typical graphic organisers we gave students. It focused on the problem and the resolution of the problem in the story. It was later revised for the second lesson after we reviewed the first lesson and decided that parts of it needed more focus and clarity.
- Conducting a class discussion after students completed their worksheets using pairwork. This provided an opportunity for the teacher to clarify any misconceptions and to reinforce the importance of developing their story parts coherently. The difference between this discussion and the usual pre-writing discussions was that it was more interactive because of the use of questions. This was unlike the previous practice in which we spent more time 'showing and telling'.



**Figure 2: Extract from the worksheet**

**Plotting your story**



Characters' reactions:

- What did you (and \_\_\_\_\_) do?

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- Give me one reason that explains why you (and \_\_\_\_\_) did what you did?

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- Using what you know (evidence from previous question) how would you deal with your situation?

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## Lesson Outcomes

During the lesson debrief, we were pleased that the worksheet and subsequent class discussion generated deeper thinking in the students. Noraini, one of the teachers who conducted the lesson made the following comment:

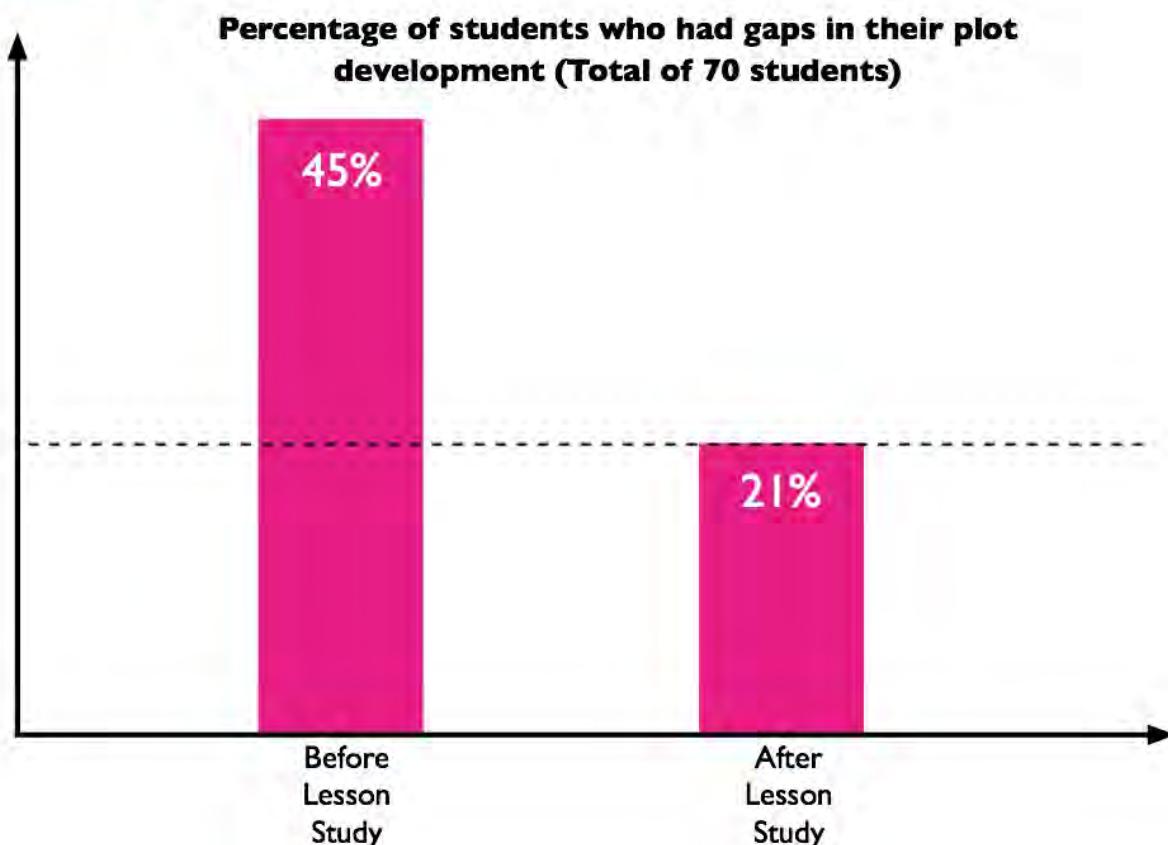
"My greatest takeaway is the impact this Lesson Study had on my students. Not only have we helped shape their thinking into clear frames, we have also sparked their curiosity through our questioning techniques."

Although some teachers were already very skilled at questioning and were able to almost instinctively ask the higher-order questions in

Bloom's Taxonomy, others needed to refer to the questions more closely. This helped them to enhance their teaching competencies. What was of great benefit was that the strategies and templates used in these lessons could be replicated for future composition lessons.

We analysed the performance of the 70 students and found a drop by 24% in the number of students who still had problems developing their story resolutions. (See Figure 3) Informally, teachers in the level who were not in the Lesson Study team commented that marking the P5 SA2 compositions of these two classes was much easier than marking their P5 SA1 compositions. They observed that there was an improvement in the coherence in narratives as well as grammar at sentence level.

**Figure 3: Comparison of performance before and after Lesson Study**



The positive results and feedback from teachers who marked the compositions after the Lesson Study demonstrated the benefits of formative assessment, in particular, effective questioning, in helping students to write better. In addition, we saw the power of Lesson Study as a pedagogical tool and benefitted from its ability to allow us to take control of our own professional learning.



## Team's Reflections

In addition to the improvement made in the students' plot resolutions, our Lesson Study gave us the opportunity to gain a better understanding of how to motivate students and help them to think logically as they create composition plots. We also collaborated in thinking through (prior to the lesson) the expected outcomes of the students, how they might react to the questioning and to the responses we would give. This increased our level of preparedness during the lesson. Psychologically, Lesson Study has boosted our confidence in carrying out our lessons.



“ I feel that Lesson Study is a good professional development tool for us. It serves as a platform for us to plan lessons to help our students learn effectively. At the same time, it also provides us with the opportunity to share our thoughts and experiences with our fellow colleagues. Such exchanges enable us to grow professionally. ”

-Mdm Thio Lay Lay

“ What I remember with fondness are the energetic and intense dialogues that I had with my colleagues. Being a part of this team was an amazing privilege and I am confident that my students will continue to benefit from the sharing that we did during this Lesson Study project. ”

-Mrs Jaclyn Low

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