

# EL Classroom *inquiry*

It is about what works in the English Language classroom





# issue 2



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# an **ACTION** research on reading comprehension skills

Reading is a complex activity that requires many interlocking skills and processes. Effective readers are able to apply appropriate reading skills and learner strategies to build knowledge from the texts they read. However, less proficient readers lack automaticity in reading as they do not possess adequate skills and learner strategies to help them comprehend what they read.



**Ms Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray**  
Master Teacher/  
English Language (EL)

**Mdm Sharmila Singh**  
Senior Teacher  
West View Primary  
(currently in Sembawang Primary)

**Mdm Kavitha Shanmuganathan**  
St. Joseph's Institution Junior

**Mrs Loh Ho Weng**  
Senior Teacher  
Zhenghua Primary

**Mdm Sheila Ambrose**  
Senior Teacher  
Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (Kellock)

**Mrs Patricia Chua**  
Senior Teacher  
Tampines North Primary  
(currently in Yu Neng Primary)

SIG members and Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray | Master Teacher/ English Language, ELIS

## Making Connections with Texts through Annotations

# How a group of Senior Teachers, together with a Master Teacher/ EL helped students become better readers

As members of a Special Interest Group (SIG) comprising four Senior Teachers (ST) and a potential ST, we shared a similar concern about how to effectively support our upper primary students who experienced difficulty with reading comprehension. These students were able to decode individual words but unable to comprehend the whole text. As a result, they often gave inadequate or incorrect answers to questions about the text. Together with our SIG facilitator, Ms Jeyalaxmy Ayaduray, Master Teacher/ EL, who guided us in examining our practice of teaching reading comprehension and our students' performance in reading comprehension, we asked some searching questions: Why do our students experience difficulty with reading comprehension although they are able to decode? How can we improve through our instructional practices our students' understanding of texts read? What learner strategies do our students need to unpack texts?

Our team embarked on an Action Research (AR) project to investigate how we could scaffold instruction for our students as they interacted with and constructed meaning from texts so that

they could become more effective readers. We were interested in focusing on this area for our AR project because we had learnt about the use of annotations to support reading comprehension from a presentation by Mrs Cecilia Koh, Lead Teacher/ EL at ELIS's Lead Teacher-Senior Teacher Professional Circle sharing session. Therefore, we decided to explore ways to scaffold reading instruction. We read articles that gave us insights into the reading process, the reading difficulties children experience and the use of learner strategies such as annotations.

Regular meetings were held to exchange the nuggets of information which we had gathered from our readings to scope our project, and to familiarise ourselves with the AR process. As a result of our discussions, we began to recognise two important points. The first is the need to explicitly teach our students learner strategies to read and comprehend texts. The second is that good readers interact with texts by constructing, revising and questioning the meanings they make as they read.



As we delved into the literature, we noted that learners with comprehension difficulties are usually unaware of learner strategies such as making connections or inferences and need to be shown how and when to use them (Graham and Bellert, 2004). We also realised that as teachers, we tend to focus more on assigning reading tasks and asking questions after students have read a text. Often

we confuse this practice with teaching reading skills (Allington, 2007). With this realisation, we decided that we would apply the ideas we gathered from our readings and teach our students annotation skills to unpack texts. According to Porter-O'Donnell (2004), annotating texts helps readers attain a deeper level of engagement and promotes active reading. It makes thinking visible through a coding or annotating system that is used to record the readers' thinking as they read a text and construct meaning. It also helps readers monitor their own reading process and enables them to become metacognitive readers. We believed that by getting our students to annotate texts we would be able to 'see' their thinking and also determine what needed to be modelled or taught explicitly to improve their reading comprehension.

## Research Questions

We crafted the following research questions based on our need to understand how the use of annotations supports our students' ability to make meaning of texts and what its impact is on reading comprehension:

1. To what extent will the use of annotations enable upper primary students to think actively about texts they read?

2. Will the use of annotations improve upper primary students' reading comprehension?

## Intervention

A total of 36 upper primary students of similar abilities participated in our AR project. The SIG members who were also the students' English Language teachers taught them the use of annotations to construct meaning from texts.

Guided by our research questions, we embarked on the process of intervention. At the pre-intervention phase, we engaged in professional conversations on how to craft lessons to teach our students annotation skills. We decided on the use of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Routman, 2003) shown in **Table 1** to scaffold our students' learning so that they could use the learner strategies independently. This model shows the steps which teachers can take by explicitly teaching and modelling learner strategies to enable their students to become increasingly independent. As these learners gain confidence and

become competent at using the learner strategies, they take ownership of their own learning. It was also during the pre-intervention phase that we conducted a pre-test before we began teaching the use of annotations.


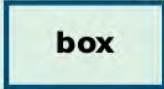
During the intervention phase, we modelled the use of learner strategies and thinking processes so as to make visible to our students the thinking processes they should undertake before they attempted the learner strategies themselves. Our students were taught the five-step annotation process (Refer to **Table 2**). They used a set of symbols to record their thinking while reading the texts.

### Table 1: Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

(Routman, 2003)

- » Step 1: **Modelling**
- » Step 2: **Guided Practice**
- » Step 3: **Independent Practice**

### Table 2: 5-step Annotation Process

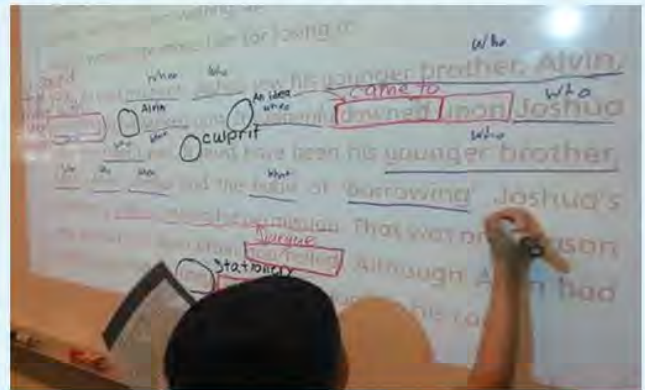
- 1 Preview the passage to get an idea of what it is about.
- 2 Make visible the thoughts that emerge while reading the passage by using the symbols below:
  -  **circle**       **box**      **underline**
  - Use the 5Ws (Who, What, Where, When and Why) and IH (How) to unpack each paragraph.
- 3 Identify difficult vocabulary items and use contextual clues to guess the meaning of words
- 4 Read each paragraph and identify the main idea.
  - Is the paragraph about a place, person, thing or situation?
  - What is the most important idea about it?
- 5 Use prior knowledge to connect with the passage.

Our students learned how to use the symbols as we modelled for them how to annotate a text, articulating our thinking process at the same time. We then gave them guided practice in the annotation of texts. They did their annotations on the white board (Refer to **Figure 1**), with us giving guidance in the form of formative feedback such as cueing or providing hints. This was done to enable our students to identify the appropriate contextual clues and to affirm them when they succeeded. We also used Assessment for Learning tools, such as reflection logs, to check our students' understanding (Refer to **Figure 2**). The students then independently practised their annotation skills on assigned passages. Samples of our students' work are given in **Figures 3** and **4**.

We conducted a post-test at the end of the intervention, and analysed the students' use of annotations and also their performance in reading comprehension. We used rubrics which focused

on criteria such as identifying the main idea, posing questions and understanding vocabulary, to guide us in assessing our students' use of annotations. The students' scores for the comprehension questions were also analysed and they are presented in **Figure 5** (Refer to page 9). To gather qualitative feedback, we interviewed the students about their use of annotations and how it supported them in their reading.

**Figure 1: Guided Practice**



**Figure 2: Reflection Logs**

<p><b>Hi everybody! My name is <u>Sabihah</u> and this is my reflection about using ANNOTATION.</b></p>	
<p>The most important thing I have learnt about annotation:</p> <p><u>The most important is</u> <u>I have understand the</u> <u>passage.</u></p>	<p>The one thing that I am still unsure about regarding annotation:</p> <p><u>The one thing is</u> <u>I am still unsure</u> <u>about main Idea.</u></p>
<p><b>Hi everybody! My name is <u>Niharika Jyoti</u> and this is my reflection about using ANNOTATION.</b></p>	
<p>The most important thing I have learnt about annotation:</p> <p><u>I can understand the</u> <u>whole story properly.</u></p>	<p>The one thing that I am still unsure about regarding annotation:</p> <p><u>After boxing the vocabulary</u> <u>word I do not know how</u> <u>to find the meaning from</u> <u>the passage.</u></p>

Figure 3: Sample of student's work

Read the passage carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Sammy was an eleven-year-old boy who was good in his studies and kind to everyone. Grown-ups as well as children liked him very much.

Sammy had a classmate named Timmy. Unlike Sammy, he performed poorly in his studies and often bullied his classmates. He even ill-treated Sammy by teasing him constantly about his weight as he was chubby.

On his twelfth birthday, Sammy got a beautiful pen as a gift from his parents which he brought to school. When Timmy saw it, he was overwhelmed with jealousy and decided to steal Sammy's pen. When everyone had left the classroom for recess, Timmy opened Sammy's bag and took out the pen. He then hid it inside his own bag and ran out of the classroom.

When Sammy came back and could not find his pen, he informed his teacher, Mr Shan, about it. Mr Shan decided to search the bag of every pupil in the class for the missing pen. The pen was soon found in Timmy's bag and the furious teacher reprimanded Timmy for having stolen it. Timmy ended up in tears.

Seeing Timmy cry, Sammy took pity on him. Despite what Timmy had done, he had no ill-feeling against his classmate. He requested Mr Shan not to punish Timmy. This opened Timmy's eyes. He could now see what a kind-hearted boy Sammy was. From that day, he became friends with Sammy and gradually turned over a new leaf slowly.

*Handwritten notes on the left margin:*  
 Sammy was kind to everyone and good in his studies.  
 Timmy ill-treated Sammy.  
 Timmy stole Sammy's pen and hid it in his bag.  
 Sammy could not find his pen, and the pen was found in Timmy's bag.  
 Sammy requested not to punish Timmy.

*Handwritten notes on the right margin:*  
 5 Unlike → prefix of not.  
 10  
 15 hid → past tense of hide  
 20 furious → another word for angry.  
 Stolen → another word for steal



Figure 4: Sample of student's work

Going off to swim – in the sea, alone. Twelve-year-old Anuri had done it again, without telling her parents.

"Nag, nag, nag," Anuri rolled her eyes at the thought of her mother. "It is a little annoying, though I know she means well," Anuri mumbled. "I just have to get away for a while." To Anuri, getting away meant seeking the calm and quiet of the sea. She was now enjoying a relaxing swim, lulled by the quiet rhythm of the gently lapping waves until she suddenly heard a splash. Anuri glanced around but saw nothing frightening. It was then that it dawned upon her that the shoreline was nowhere in sight. This time, she had drifted much further from the shore than before. Anuri had lost her bearings. Then she felt something bump against her.

Now panic seized her. "Shark!" Anuri thought. Experience had taught her not to make any noise but to swim away softly and quickly. While she did so, she felt it again, more strongly this time. She picked up speed, and when she was bumped yet again, she stretched out her arms, in an attempt to fend off the predator. To Anuri's surprise, she touched something soft and warm – nothing like the cold, hard, sandpaper roughness of the dreaded one.

Anuri was momentarily relieved, but before she could fully regain her composure, the water around her swirled alarmingly like a whirlpool, sucking her towards the middle. Suddenly, a huge form leapt from the water in a graceful arch, whistling shrilly. Pearls of water cascaded from its silky, silvery-grey body before it dived, with the faintest splash, into the water. It was a dolphin, one so incredibly graceful in movement and utterly lovely to behold!

The dolphin came at Anuri continuously, nudging and bumping her, but with no intention to hurt. It wove under Anuri's arms, and encircled her body in a playful manner. It even allowed Anuri to pat its head, stroke its cheeks and ride on its back. The dolphin in turn made a sound of immense pleasure that was somewhere between a purr and a growl. Anuri was utterly oblivious to the passing of time. In a moment, her feet unexpectedly touched something solid – the sea floor! She realised that she was now nearer the shore. Anuri was surprised at how sensitive the dolphin had been to her situation.

Suddenly, the dolphin seemed to have heard something and quickly disappeared into the water. Puzzled, Anuri looked around, and way in the distance, she could see her parents in a canoe, shouting out her name desperately. It was the third time her parents had had to search for her at sea. But in so doing, they had unwittingly terminated what could possibly be a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with a creature of nature.

Anuri sobbed and muttered softly, "Thank you and good-bye, dear dolphin." Soon her parents spotted her. The moment they came near her, she could distinctly hear her mother chiding her again for her recklessness and disobedience which caused much worry to others. Ridden with remorse, Anuri approached her parents...

Anuri goes to swim with her parents' permission  
Anuri is lost

one on top of the other

she thought that there was a shark and tried to escape

she found out that it was not a shark but a dolphin

dolphin helped her to get to shore

parents found her

Anuri was upset

why? she was annoyed her mother's nagging

what happened? realised

she was very far from the shore

shark

what is it? dolphin.

played with the dolphin

do not realize

what situation? lost in the sea

lost

she went to the sea without permission for three times

5

10

15

20

25

30

35

40



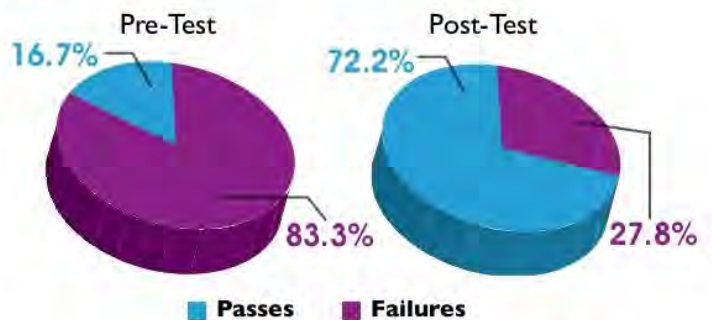
From the analysis of our students' annotated texts in the post-test, it was evident that there was active reader engagement with the texts. Our students' thinking and learning became visible through their 'dialogue' with the text as they used the relevant symbols to indicate the connections made or the unpacking of difficult vocabulary. The annotations revealed the effort made by our students to understand the nuances of textual content. Meaning-making strategies such as summarising, using contextual clues, and asking questions were used by the students as they read the text.

By annotating the passages they read, our students developed the learner strategy of reading texts at a more deliberate pace, and discovering and uncovering ideas that they would not have otherwise surfaced. The pace they were used to prior to annotating texts often caused them to be

careless in their reading of passages. Thus, through the use of annotations, we observed that our students became far more careful and thoughtful in their processing of information in the texts they read. We could see that they were on their way to becoming more active readers and thinkers.

We think that the use of annotations could have contributed to the increased percentage of student passes for the post-test comprehension. A comparison of our students' performance is given in **Figure 5** below.

**Figure 5: Percentage Passes and Failures**



At the post-intervention phase, our students reflected on their use of annotations to unpack texts. They shared with us their learning experiences when we interviewed them. Below are some of their reflections.

## Students' Reflections

### Student A

“ While annotating, I write short notes and simplify the difficult words. I can even simplify some sentences which seemed so complicated at first. ”

### Student B

“ I will read the passage, paragraph by paragraph, and then think about what each paragraph is about and write it down beside it. For words in bold, I will draw arrows to show what they refer to so that it is easier for me to answer the questions later on. For words that I don't know, I will try to look for clues from the passage to get the meaning of the words. ”

### Student C

“ Annotations help me to understand the passage more. So for words you don't really understand, you can read on. After you read on, you may understand the words better because the sentences after the word may be connected to it. ”

## What our SIG members had to say

“ The use of annotations is a scaffolding tool for my students to unpack comprehension texts. It helps them answer open-ended questions with accuracy and confidence. While it may seem time-consuming, the time invested is worthwhile as this is a lifelong skill which students can use beyond the classroom. My students no longer fear attempting the comprehension component in the examination. ”

- Mrs Patricia Chua

“ Annotating texts is a very useful learner strategy to teach students. My students were able to think deeper about the texts they read. For example, some students were able to provide very interesting interpretations and explanations about the actions of some characters in the passage. It was really fulfilling to see my students delving into the passages and asking more meaningful questions. ”

Being part of this SIG and working with ST colleagues from other schools has indeed helped me in my professional development. ”

- Mdm Sheila Ambrose

“ The generative conversations, the co-construction of knowledge and the sharing of ideas among SIG colleagues have helped us grow our expertise in EL teaching. The sense of camaraderie among us is palpable as we have grown very close over the one year of being together. ”

- Mrs Loh Ho Weng

“ Our SIG collaboration helped us to enhance our professional learning and review our practices in teaching reading and viewing. It helped me refine my teaching practice based on the feedback that we shared during our regular meetings. My students are more confident in attempting reading comprehension tasks as they are equipped with the skill of annotating texts. ”

- Mdm Sharmila Singh

“ My students felt that annotating texts was indeed useful in helping them comprehend what they read. Previously, they would read texts superficially, making no connections with the plot. However, as they annotated, they began to think deeper about the plot and characters. They questioned their understanding of the text as they read it. When your students tell you this, you know that they have learnt successfully. Though time-consuming, the success was worth the effort. ”

- Ms Kavitha d/o Shanmuganathan



## Conclusion

The positive results and feedback which we received from our students showed us the benefits of using annotations in reading comprehension. Annotating texts is an impactful learner strategy which encourages active reading and thinking in students, and also serves as a springboard for answering constructed-response questions.

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**Ms Ellen Ang Geok Lian**  
Head of Department/  
English Language

**Mrs Grace Lim**

**Ms Hannah Foo**

**Mdm Dawn Ling**

**Ms Margaret Teo**

**Ms Celestine Ong**

**Ms Joylynn Lim**

**Mdm Jenny See Yian Nee**  
Level Head/  
English Language

Absent from picture  
**Ms Sung Huimin and  
Ms Jennifer Lai**

**Dr Michael Magid**

an **ACTION**  
research  
using drama

In collaboration with Miss Ellen Ang, the Head of Department/ English Language (HOD/ EL), and the Primary Five (P5) EL teachers from Pei Hwa Presbyterian Primary School, I conducted an Action Research (AR) project by implementing an intervention programme to find out whether using drama in the form of role-play would help P5 students improve their writing of stories. According to the EL teachers' evaluation of their students' writing before, during, and after they went through the programme, the use of drama helped them to elaborate on the characters they wrote about in their stories and to link actions in a coherent manner. Based on the teachers' and students' feedback, it was evident that with the use of drama, the students enjoyed the learning of English more, and their confidence in the use of English as well as their motivation towards learning the language increased.

By Michael Magid, Pedagogy Specialist/ English Language, ELIS

# Using Drama as a Pedagogical Tool to Improve Primary Five Students' Writing Skills

# How P5 EL teachers helped their students improve their writing by using drama as a pedagogical tool

After I finished facilitating a Teaching Oracy (Primary) course, Miss Ang and some P5 EL teachers who had participated in the course, approached me and told me that they would be interested in forming a Special Interest Group (SIG) on using drama as a pedagogical tool to teach English. They wished to build a repertoire of skills for teaching drama and to integrate the use of drama into the P5 EL programme. The teachers gave me the reasons for their interest. They said that they had noticed that when their P5 students wrote stories, most of them did not elaborate sufficiently on the

characters. There were also missing links between some of the actions in their stories. They therefore decided to co-conduct an AR project with me to examine whether using drama in English Language lessons would help their students generate more detailed ideas about characters and link the actions within their written stories. They thought that their students would be better able to understand characters and visualise how actions are connected to each other by role-playing. The role-plays would be written by the students based on situations that were provided to them.



According to research conducted by Sun (2003) on the benefits of using drama as a pedagogical tool, it was found that drama had a positive impact on every aspect of literacy development such as knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, discourse and metacognition. In a review of research studies on the use of drama in literacy education, McMaster

(1998) and Tanner (2012) found that drama had a positive holistic effect on students. In terms of specific skills related to literacy, the use of drama enabled students to develop reading fluency and comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, representing, and writing skills, especially with regard to generating ideas. The social effects of drama included an increase in self-confidence, motivation, empathy, collaboration skills, social tolerance, sensitivity, emotional stability, originality, and creativity. Since drama was found to have positive effects on students' academic and social development, the members of the SIG and I decided that we would examine in our AR project whether or not the use of drama would improve students' writing, attitudes, confidence, and motivation towards learning English.

## Research Questions

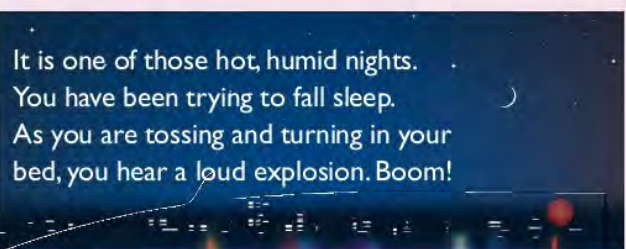
- 1) Does using drama as an approach to teaching English help students to generate more details about the characters in their stories?
- 2) Does using drama enable students to link the actions in their stories?
- 3) Does using drama increase students' confidence in their use of English, and their attitudes and motivation towards learning English?

## Research Method

Serving as their coach and co-researcher for this AR project, I provided the EL teachers with advice on how to collect data from the participants, who consisted of 352 P5 students. I developed a pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaire to measure the students' confidence in their use of English, and their attitudes, and motivation towards learning English. In the post-intervention questionnaire, the impact of the use of drama on the students' confidence in their use of English, and their attitudes, and motivation towards learning English was also measured. I also conducted interviews with the nine EL teachers involved in this project before and after the intervention in order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges their students faced when writing stories, and the impact that they noticed drama had on their students' writing, confidence, attitudes, and motivation. The project lasted a total of six weeks during which time students were assigned three stories to write based on situations that were provided to them by their teachers.

## Pre-intervention

The first time that the teachers gave their students a situation, they brainstormed in groups of five or six what the main stages of the story (i.e. introduction, problem, climax, resolution, and conclusion) could include without the use of drama. The rationale for the group brainstorming activity was for the students to generate more ideas than they could on their own. This was the procedure which the students were used to in their English lessons when they were assigned a story to write. Then they wrote stories individually based on the given situation. These situations were written by the EL teachers. The following is an example of one such situation that was used as a story starter by the students:



Based on the above situation, write a story of at least 150 words.

## Intervention

The second and third time that the teachers provided their students with situations as story starters, they asked them to brainstorm the main parts of the story and then prepare a short role-play to act out the story. They were given about 30 minutes to do this. Following that, each group of students performed their role-play in front of the class.

After each performance, the teacher encouraged students who had watched the performance to identify any gaps between actions in the story. They were also to ask their classmates questions about the characters which they had played, especially if they felt that some important details about the characters were missing. The teacher also added comments after each performance and asked the students who had performed the role-plays if there were any gaps in the actions and details about characters which they would need to be mindful of when writing their stories.

At the end of the entire intervention four weeks later, the students completed the post-intervention questionnaire and the teachers were interviewed. The teachers evaluated how their students' writing had improved over the course of four weeks based on the amount of the elaboration on characters and the coherence between actions.

## Findings

The evidence from the P5 English teachers' evaluation of their students' writing showed that the teachers' use of drama helped students to elaborate on the characters and link actions in the stories that they wrote. The teachers noticed an improvement in the amount of details written about the characters in the students' stories and how well actions were linked to each other:

Based on the teachers' evaluation of the writing of all 352 students, there were three main findings. Firstly, 50 students showed an increase in the number of details they used to describe characters in their stories. Secondly, 26 students showed an increase in the number of links they made between actions in their stories. Thirdly, 25 students demonstrated an increase in both the amount of details they gave and the links they made in their stories.

It is encouraging to all of us involved in the AR project that many of the students were able to improve their writing over a short period of time as a result of using drama to teach writing. We believe that if this approach of using drama is sustained over a longer period of time, the number of students whose writing will improve will continue to increase. **Table 1** gives the students' responses to the post-intervention questionnaire with regard to their confidence in their use of English, and their attitudes, and motivation towards learning English.



Table 1: Increase in the students' confidence, attitudes and motivation towards learning English

The social aspects of language learning	% of students who showed an increase
<b>Confidence in English</b>	<b>84.9%</b>
<b>Attitudes towards learning English</b>	<b>77.7%</b>
<b>Time spent learning English</b>	<b>46.6%</b>
<b>Effort in learning English</b>	<b>51.9%</b>



## Students' reflections on their learning

The following responses from students on six questions from the post-intervention questionnaire are the most representative of the sample:

### Question 1: How did the use of drama help you elaborate on the characters?

"Drama allowed us to step into the characters' shoes and experience how they feel!"

"It made me learn more words."

"It helped me create a vivid picture of what I wanted to write about."

### Question 2: How did the use of drama help you link your ideas to each other?

"Drama helped when we acted out the story we had written and if there were gaps when we acted the story out, we could fill in the gaps."

"It helped me see clearly how one scene linked to the other."

"When I acted, it made me think of what I was going to do next."

### Question 3: Why did doing drama make you more confident in your English?

"I learned to be more confident in my answers because I managed to get over my stage fright."

"I listened better; I knew how to pronounce words I did not know previously."

### Question 4: Why did doing drama make you enjoy learning English more?

"It showed us the beauty of a language."

"It expanded my imagination."

"It was fun and helped us build teamwork!"

### Question 5: Why did doing drama make you want to study English more?

"It helped me build up my interest in English, enabling me to work harder and score well for that subject."

"I realised that English is a fun language and drama helped me to speak more."

"Drama made me feel that English is very important."

### Question 6: Why did doing drama make you want to study English harder?

"It inspired me to write better stories and to do that I have to work harder."

"It made me like reading books!"

"It helped me to speak in the oral exams."





## Teachers' reflections on the benefits of using drama to teach English

“ There are more opportunities for student interaction and more hands-on tasks which are suitable for kinaesthetic learners. ”

**Ms Ellen Ang Geok Lian (EL HOD)**

“ Using drama is an effective strategy to help my students learn English in an engaging way. English has come to life in my classroom. My students enjoy my lessons more and are more confident in expressing themselves. ”

**Miss Jenny See (EL Level Head)**

“ It allows students to get into the characters' thoughts and emotions. By doing that, they are able to use adjectives to describe the characters. ”

**Ms Hannah Foo**

“ Even the shy and more reserved students were able to perform. It really helped in boosting the students' confidence in using the language and in performing for an audience. ”

**Mdm Dawn Ling**

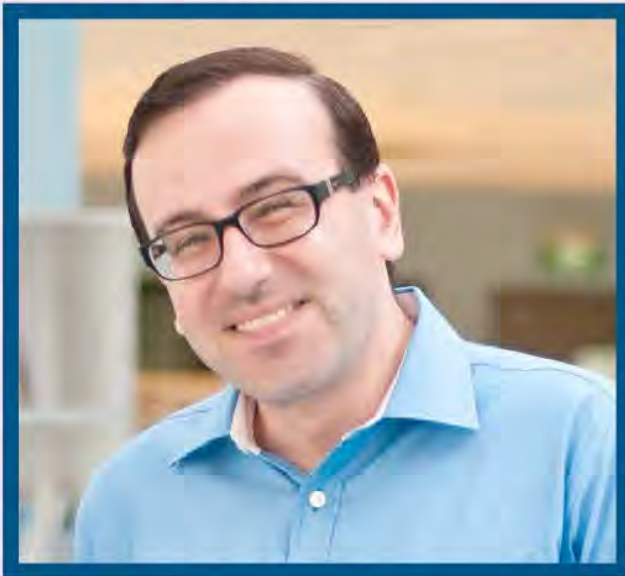
“ Students are more interested in learning the meaning of the words so that they can portray the characters better. ”

**Ms Celestine Ong**

“ There is a heightened level of interest during lessons. Students can understand the characters in greater depth and they can express the feelings of the characters more vividly. ”

**Mdm Grace Chick**

# My Reflection



The results from this AR project have reaffirmed my belief in the numerous benefits of using drama as a pedagogical tool to teach English. Not only does it help students with their writing, but it also gives them opportunities to speak, listen, represent, and read, and improve their grammar and vocabulary. I encourage teachers to use drama in their English Language lessons even if they do not have any specialisation in drama since none



of the teachers involved in this AR project have a drama background. However, they were still able to improve their students' use of English, and enhance their confidence in, and attitudes, and motivation towards learning English by employing basic drama techniques such as role-plays and Readers Theatre.

I suggest that teachers use drama as a pedagogical tool to teach English even if they are worried that their students might not enjoy it or will be too shy to perform. This is because the teachers who collaborated with me on this AR project found that even shy students were able to overcome their stage fright and became more confident in their use of English as a result of being given opportunities to perform in front of the class. Using drama in English Language lessons is not just meant for students who love acting or who want to perform for the entire school. Drama can be enjoyed by everyone, and the process of participation is even more beneficial than the product in the form of a polished performance in a public arena.

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**Mdm Suckjit Kaur**  
Subject Head/  
English Language

**Mrs Cindy Lim**  
Senior Teacher/  
English Language

**Mr William Grosse**  
Master Teacher/  
English Language

# an **ACTION** *research* project on the process of writing

Working together with William Grosse, Master Teacher/ English Language, we conducted an Action Research project at our school. We wanted to find out how incorporating appropriate and effective Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies with focused instruction in idea generation and development could increase student awareness of the gaps in their writing and help them to reflect on and revise their work.

By Suckjit Kaur and Cindy Lim | Chongzheng Primary School

## Generating and Developing Ideas, and Assessment for Learning in the Writing Process

# How two EL teachers incorporated AfL strategies to help students in their writing

One common problem we both faced as teachers was helping students who struggled in writing compositions. Specifically, we felt our students, especially the low progress group, lacked the ability to develop ideas in their writing. After participating in the Assessment Literacy course conducted by Mr William Grosse, Master Teacher/ English Language (EL), we were motivated to inquire into how we could help this particular group of students improve their writing.



## Summary of Literature Review

Writing has long been regarded as a vital skill in the teaching and learning of EL. Writing is a complex skill which involves the interplay of a variety of processes, many of which take place concurrently. Process writing emphasises writing as a recursive process in which writers have the opportunity to plan, draft, edit, and revise their work (Hillocks, 1987; Murray, 1982). The writer is taught to review and revise several drafts, which enables and encourages new ideas. Grammatical changes and conventional editing occur during the revision or editing stage (Ballator, Farnum & Kaplan, 1999; Flower & Hayes, 1981).

After reviewing the literature and discussing the ideas which we gathered, we decided that we should focus on the processes involved in writing as well as the place and function of assessment within these processes as they are taught and learned. We realised that we needed to incorporate appropriate and effective AfL strategies and that the focus on the processes in writing was as important as the product.

After further discussion with William, we decided to embark on an AR project to focus on idea generation and development in writing. In addition, we also wanted to apply what we had learnt in ELIS's Assessment Literacy course by putting in more concerted efforts to practise AfL. We thought we would first review the students' work and together with the students, increase their awareness of the gaps in their writing, thereby helping them to reflect on and revise their work.

We identified the following two learning outcomes:

- Students will overcome their difficulty in generating and developing ideas in the writing process.
- Students will apply AfL through self and peer assessment in the writing process.

## Research Question

**‘Does structured instruction involving idea generation, idea development and AfL in the writing process improve our Primary 5 students’ scores in the area of content for their writing?’**

We decided that the focus of our work with the students would be on the process of writing rather than the product. Therefore, we wanted our students to take concrete steps towards improving their writing. With this in mind, we planned our six-lesson intervention in consultation with William.

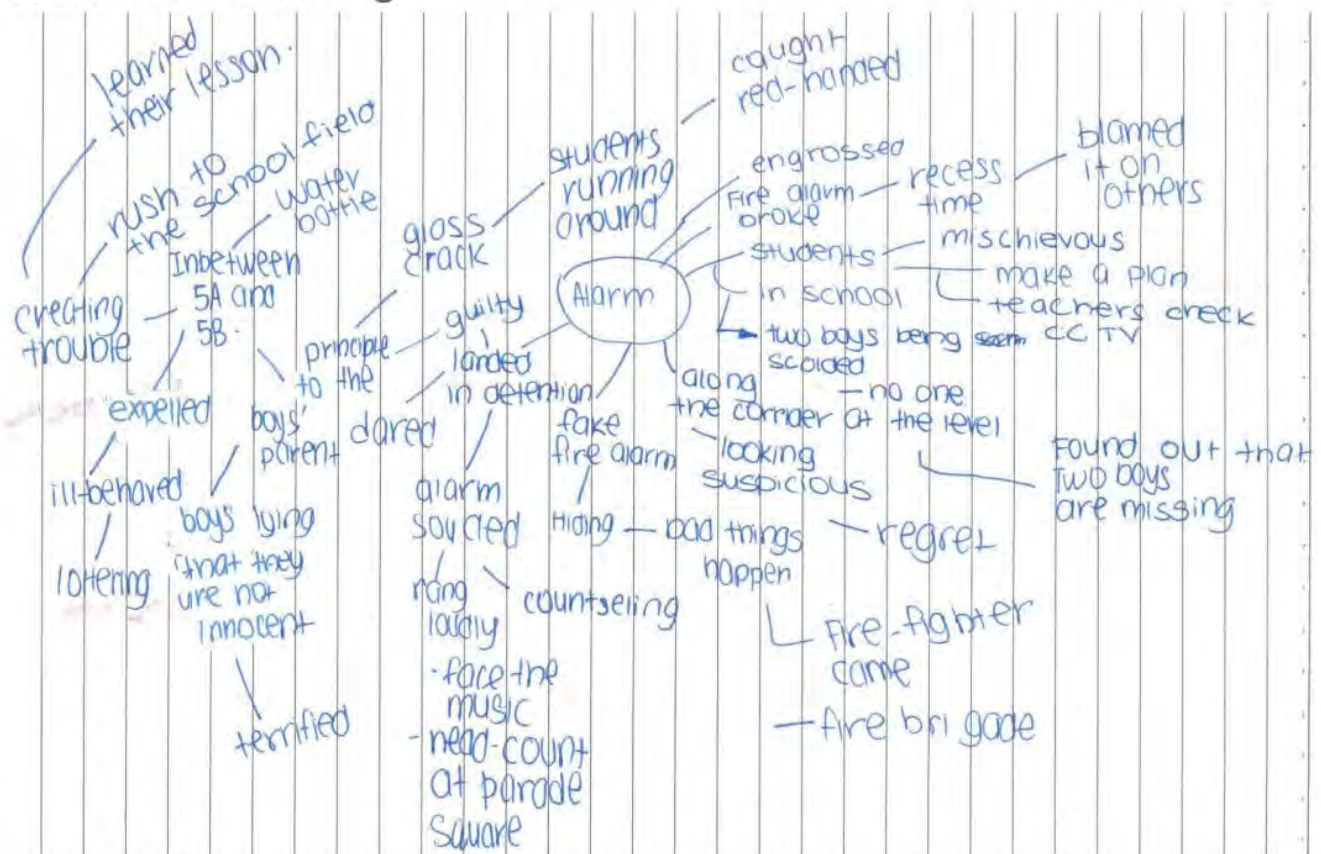
## Intervention

### Lesson 1

Our students learnt how to generate ideas through brainstorming. These ideas were based on a given picture stimulus. The brainstorming involved individual brainstorming first followed by class-based brainstorming. A sample of the semantic map generated from the class brainstorming is given in **Figure 1**. There was teacher modelling for each type of brainstorming process.

We also taught our students how to use rubrics for self-assessment. They assessed themselves based on the number of ideas they had generated and they then used the rubrics to assess where they were in relation to the criteria articulated in the rubrics. In doing this, our students were challenged to see how ‘fluent’ they could be in the number of ideas they could generate.

**Figure 1: Sample of a semantic map generated from class brainstorming**



## Lesson 2

The focus was on the relevance of ideas generated to provide a benchmark for students when assessing their peers' work. There was again teacher modelling before the students embarked on the task. The students then looked at their own ideas and crossed out the irrelevant ones. After that, they did peer assessment. The students gave feedback to their peers on whether the ideas generated were relevant to the question which was given. Peer assessment allowed the students to generate further thoughts about their ideas. They then decided whether they would like to take up their peers' suggestions or adhere to their original ideas. Self-assessment using the rubrics was carried out at the end of the lesson for students to reflect on their own performance and consider ways to improve themselves.


## Lesson 3

Our students brainstormed ideas individually based on a different picture from Lesson 1. By Lesson 3, students showed that they were more aware of how to brainstorm ideas. They did not ask questions on what to do. They knew that they had to look at the picture, interpret it, and write any idea that came to their minds.

## Lesson 4

Our students selected relevant ideas for the first draft of their story, based on the individual brainstorming done in the previous lesson. Using the selected ideas, they completed the planning template. (Refer to **Figure 2** shown below)

**Figure 2: Planning template**

 **Use the story map below to outline your story. Write in point form.**

**Story Map**

TITLE:	
SETTING:	CHARACTERS: (Who the boys were)
PROBLEM: (What the boys were doing there)	
SERIES OF EVENTS LEADING TO RESOLUTION: (What happened after that)	
RESOLUTION:	
CONCLUSION:	



## Lesson 5

Our students were given feedback on their planning template. We also asked them questions to direct their thinking on the writing they were doing. The feedback was meant to make the students think about their responses, and for them to reorganise and replace ideas where necessary to write a complete narrative. This piece of writing was considered as their first draft.

After the fifth lesson and before the sixth lesson, we marked the drafts using different annotations (Refer to **Figure 3**). Ideas which we considered to be relevant and could be further developed were highlighted in yellow. Ideas which were relevant and sufficiently developed were highlighted in green. Ideas which were not relevant, logical or needed to be developed were marked with a triangle symbol. Prompts in the form of comments and questions by the teacher were also included at points of the story where the students could improve.

**Figure 3: Marking with annotations**

Ring! It was recess-time all the PS went for recess time, except Tom and Jim, they were loitering around the <sup>corridor</sup> ~~door~~,

Suddenly they were standing between 5A and 5B's class room, there was a fire alarm, they decided.

To break the fire alarm, to play a prank, when nobody is

around Tom used his water bottle to break the fire alarm, and before Tom break the alarm Tom swing his water bottle and smash the glass. The glass break and the sound of the alarm rang loudly, all the pupils thought it was a real fire so they ran to the field, (when teachers are counting the numbers of students,

Mr Goh found out that Jim Tom are missing.

Mr Goh went to find them and saw them playing with the fire alarm and was caught red-handed and was bring to the

Principle's office, when the principle ask they did not admit so the principle gave them another chance.

But they did not admitted again, they said "we said the

*Annotations:*

- Why were they doing this? What kind of students were they?*
- what? How were they feeling?*
- How did they make sure?*
- There are 2 events here ↓ the action of loitering and the reaction of the school ↓ separate them in paragraphs*
- good to explain*
- Why would they be playing with the fire alarm if it is already ringing?*

## Lesson 6

There was role-modelling of how to develop an idea using questioning techniques that activated students' key senses. Specifically, this refers to describing what was seen, heard, felt and done by the characters in the story. After practising idea development in their groups, the students' work, which was marked, was returned to them.

## Observations

Although there was no significant difference in the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups, we were encouraged that two-thirds of the students in the experimental group had better post-test results for all three sets of test which were given to them. The intervention involving the application of AfL appeared to be impactful as can be seen in **Figure 4**. It was evident that the students demonstrated thought and responded to the feedback provided by the teacher in the pre-AfL draft.

Throughout the intervention process, we were heartened to observe that our students enjoyed the process of writing. They appeared to be more positive, confident and enthusiastic writers. As teachers, we grew in our confidence in teaching writing to students of any progress level. This was in clear contrast to how we felt at the start of the project when we were unsure of how to teach writing to a class of low progress learners. As the students responded positively to our intervention, we were more convinced that our improved practice in the teaching and assessment of writing was worth our time and effort.

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The students then started writing their second draft based on the feedback given and with reference to the annotations in their scripts. As the lessons progressed and our students became familiar with the process, they showed keen interest in the writing process. They were eager to know what kind of improvements they could make. In fact, some of them asked the question, "Are we having a writing lesson today?"

## Our Reflections

What stood out most for us from undertaking this AR project was that our students grew in their awareness of their own writing abilities. They learnt how to become better writers.

However, a challenge we faced was time constraint. We are confident that we would be able to observe greater impact on the quality of our students' writing if there was more time spent on giving our students more specific teacher feedback and more opportunities for them to engage in peer assessment of ongoing writing.



Figure 4: Sample of a student's work pre- and post-AfL

**pre-AfL**

Ring! It was recess-time all the PS went for recess time, *Why were they doing this? What kind of students were they?*  
 except Tom and Jim, they were loitering around the <sup>Corridor</sup> door,

Suddenly they were standing between 5A and 5B's class room, there *→ what? How were they feeling?*  
 was a fire alarm, they decided.

To break the fire alarm, to play a prank, when *→ How did they make sure?*  
 nobody is

*These are 2 events have the action of breaking and the reaction of the school*  
 around Tom used his water bottle to break the fire alarm, and before  
 Tom break the alarm Tom swing his water bottle and smash the  
 glass. The glass break and the sound of the alarm rang loudly, all  
 the pupils thought it was a real fire so they ran to the  
 field, (when teachers are counting the numbers of <sup>students</sup> ,  
*good to explain*  
 Mr Goh found out that Jim Tom are missing.)  
*Why would they be playing with the fire alarm when it is already ringing?*  
 Mr Goh went to find them and saw them playing with  
 the fire alarm and was caught red-handed and was bring to the

**post-AfL**

Ring! It was recess time all the primary five went for recess, except Tom  
 and Jim, they are two very irresponsible boys and they always loiter around the corridor  
 they decided to make up a prank but they did not have any ideas. A few minutes  
 later, they decided to make a prank on the fire alarm when they  
 saw the fire alarm. They felt very exciting, because they think that it will be  
 fun.



ELIS

2 Malan Road, Blk P, Levels 1 & 2,  
Singapore 109433  
Tel: +65 6664 1724 Fax: +65 6278 7145  
Email: moe\_elis\_academy@moe.gov.sg  
Website: <http://www.elis.moe.edu.sg>