

HOOK ON TO THE FIGURE

(A strategy to the Teaching of Narrative Essay Writing)

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Abstract

We experience amusement, the sublime, sorrow, joy, pleasure, and awe in our ordinary life. These are the starting point for aesthetics, the starting point for reflecting on the nature, the value, and the quality of our experiences of the natural and constructed environments and of various aspects of ordinary life. This has led to the theme of this research study – To empower students' Narrative Essay Writing skills using Malay Language with a view that they put their experiences in words and associated them with ideas of creativity and contrasted with reason and logic. This research study responds to this challenge by doing three things. First, it adopts the "Making Thinking Visible" approach by Ritchhart (2011) as the main framework for the derived Narrative Essay Writing programme in this study. Second, it uses the thinking routine of "See-Think-Wonder" for students to experience in a multitude of ways for a given object, event, or a series of events. Third, it incorporates my personal teaching strategies on how to induce richness in narrative writing by ensuring students include "See", "Hear", "Smell", Taste, "Feel", "Think" and use "metaphors" and "poems" in their writing. Finally, experiences and knowledge gained for teaching "narrative essay writing" are described as a series of five action research cycles with a view to show other fellow teachers what it would be like in their class with their students.

Keywords:

Making Thinking Visible (MTV), Thinking Routines, See-Think-Wonder (STW)

Action Research Cycle 1: Understand the "Making Thinking Visible" Approach

See-Think-Wonder (STW) of Making Thinking Visible (MTV) was first introduced to the teachers in the school in 2013. It was first incorporated into secondary 1 (lower secondary) and secondary 3 (upper secondary) lessons in all lessons including Malay Language class. It was extended to all levels in year 2014.

Making Thinking Visible (MTV) is a part of Harvard's Project Zero's¹ work in teaching for understanding and STW is the primary thinking routine used for scaffolding students' thinking and make thinking visible in the classroom. STW guides students' thought processes and encourages active processing. Questions such as "What do you see?" "What do you think about that?" and "What does it make you wonder?"

¹ Project Zero (<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/>) is an educational research group at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University.

which teachers use with the view to raise the quality of student conversation and feedback.

Besides, the gathered literatures also suggested that MTV could help my class of year 2014 in the following ways.

First, MTV enables me to see or hear students' thinking, and to find out how they are learning, what they learn and their misconceptions. As pointed out by Tishman and Patricia (2005), making students' thinking visible requires some sort of organizing structure. A distinctive feature of thinking routines is that they encourage what cognitive psychologists call *active processing*. They do not ask that students simply list facts. Rather, they encourage students to actively engage with a topic by asking them to think with and beyond the facts they know--- asking questions, taking stock of prior knowledge, probing the certainty of their ideas, and visibly connecting new knowledge to old.

Visible thinking has a diagnostic function. By providing a visible record of children's thinking, it allows teachers to see what students are learning and where they need help. However, it also goes beyond diagnosis to actively support good thinking in a number of ways. When I worked to make thinking visible in lessons prior to this research study, the mood in the classroom was palpable. The visible representations of their developing ideas and even the tone of interaction in the class all sent a message that thinking is highly valued. In this kind of classroom culture, students have ample opportunities to express and explain their ideas. This in turn encourages students to become more alert to opportunities to think things through for themselves, and helps them become active, curious, engaged learners.

Second, it enables me to introduce a thinking language as suggested by Lee (1997), and Tishman & Perkins (1997) in my Malay Language lessons for inducing my students to think actively in class. Language shapes our thinking. Students learned to talk about their thinking and to reflect on their learning as they developed the words to do so. Hence, by building a thinking culture in the classroom, MTV can contribute to the assessment of students' thinking and learning in ways that support a positive learning culture. Student's readiness to think and respond to questioning that leads me to incorporate STW in my lessons.

Thirdly, See-Think-Wonder (STW) has a transparent structure by presenting a visual stimulus and asking students to observe closely and make note of what it is they actually "see." Based on these observations, students begin to make interpretations with justifications as they explain what it is they "think." The routine concludes with students posing questions and "wondering" about their observations and interpretations. STW encourages students to make careful observations and thoughtful interpretations. It helps stimulate curiosity and sets the stage for inquiry. I use this routine at the beginning of a new topic to motivate students' interest. Students are able to apply their new knowledge and ideas.

Fourthly, the attractiveness of STW and its quick spread throughout the school might in part be due to its accessibility to teachers and students and its ability to engage students in an open-ended exploration. There is no right or wrong answer. The routine is identified as being useful for encouraging self-direction and personal involvement in learning for both strong and weak participants. It empowers the usually silent students

to participate. It gives them a voice. This simple question of elaboration and justification increases their understanding of students' responses and enhances class discussion.

Fifthly, MTV implementation promotes critical thinking in the classroom. I can make students' thinking more visible. We can be strategic in allocating thinking routines in specific topics that require students to think deep. Results will show that thinking routines can impact student learning. However, it will not be immediate.

Action Research Cycle 2: Derivation of "Narrative Essay Writing Program"

There is a set of clearly identifiable forces that shapes the culture of thinking in us and at the same time help us to understand the context in which the use of thinking routines to make thinking visible flourish. The forces at work are: expectations, opportunities, time, modeling, language, environment, interactions and routines. I adopted these forces to craft out the narrative essay-writing program for my research study.

Expectations provide the focus and directions for thinking. Expectations include the goals and purpose of learning. My students have been routinized to be aware of the expectations of the lessons taught for them to make connections and synthesize their thinking which will lead to rich reflections. For example, one student is to talk at one time in their groups and there should be active participation by all students. This is one of the expectations that I have of them, to be independent learners and collaborate closely with their classmates. The routine is conducted over a few days so that the students are conditioned that every time they entered the classroom, they had to commence the STW routine.

Opportunities are a mechanism by which those expectations will be realized. In all lessons, opportunities for the students' thinking are created through proper selection of teaching and learning resources. Selecting good content is a cornerstone of creating rich opportunities for thinking. At the same time, the selected content challenges the students to think creatively. Employing the different methods of learning such as discussing a descriptive picture is the powerful opportunity given to the students. Besides the descriptive pictures, I also chose suitable online tools that can document the students' feedback and reflections which are considered to be one important component of MTV. These opportunities are appreciated by the students as they could use the similar platforms for other subjects.

Ample time is given to students to think through the task or question given before deriving the answer in every lesson. Good thinking will lead to fresh insights and develop understandings. All these require time. I give a lot of time to my students to practice deep thinking before they give their answers. I see the effect of this provision of time as the students develop their reflective thinking over the years I teach them. To quickly complete the syllabus is too easy but will the students learn in the long-term? To achieve understanding, students should be given the time to think and come out with deep thinking ideas. For instance, I allocated more time discussing with students using STW thinking routine to acquire meaning in the selected passage rather than learning the passage by mere reading. Time is spent on making the students comprehend the

techniques taught and to reflect with their peers. I incorporated Web 2.0 online tools as platforms to capture the discussions. This has enabled open and free discussion among students, and has in turn promoted the message that learning can be a group process to students.

Modeling is good for the students as students learn from the teacher who will show to the students how to do a task or an assignment. However, the showing of how to think and learn is more crucial in modeling. Students can sense the teacher's seriousness in teaching the subject. Modeling by teacher is critical for the successful implementation of this thinking routine. I show the students how to start searching of figurative language in the Web and how to use the Web 2.0 online tools. Good facilitation comes with practice. With experience of more modelling and practice in conversation, it can be seen that the students' ideas start to flow together, from thinking to wondering.

Through language, teacher draws students' attention to the concepts learnt and practices in the process. My students reflect a lot on the tasks given to them. This shows how learning unfolds itself during the reflection time. The students' nuance of language has improved tremendously with the interaction with each other. Figurative language that is the essence in narrative essay writing is being re-teach to 'hook' the readers. Such figurative language used are simile, metaphors, onomatopoeia, etcetera and the various components of narrative writing such as descriptive words - adjectives, power words - vivid verbs, and different ways of saying when using dialogue. Students were given the opportunities to experience online examples of figurative language and using the different innovation online tools to create their own figurative language.

The physical environment of one's learning is another factor that shapes the learning culture. With the existence of a teacher as a facilitator during lessons, students can discern more about the learning and thinking that goes on during the lessons compared to, for example, e-learning where there is no teacher around to communicate their queries. Sometimes, students are asked to sit in pairs or groups, depending on the requirement of the task given. With shared documentation, students learn better as they can check with each other or the teacher on new questions raised. For the intended program, I use pictures as my main subjects to trigger discussion with my students. I complement the pictures with Web 2.0 online tools such as *Wordle*, *Padlet* and *Classflow* that acted as documentation platforms to conduct the discussion. I started this AR in Term 2 in 2014 and it lasted till end of Term 4 with 5 cycles. The target group was eight Secondary 3 Express Malay Language students whom I have taught since Secondary 1.

Interaction is just as important as the environment. The interaction that is going on in the classroom will certainly show that thinking is being practiced. During the interaction, students are expected to listen to their friends as a gesture of respect. Interactions need to facilitate individual and group learning to ensure the participation of all students. This Narrative Essay Programme requires close interactions amongst the students. The discussions held using the STW thinking routine provide a structure that engages students deeply with content, fosters their understanding, and uncovers their thinking in the process. Elaborating on the structure of the discussion, students were able to be more objective by having the "see" as the first step. It stopped them from

jumping to conclusions. They learned to see the descriptive pictures more closely. Also, the “wonder” section gave the students a voice, and it was just as important a step as the observations and thoughts. Perhaps, most significantly, the use of STW has changed the way the students viewed the lesson of learning narrative essays through their interactions. Depending on their form, these forces can support or undermine the rhythm of thoughtful learning (Ritchhart, 2002, 2007).

Routines are patterns of behaviour in the classroom which teacher tries to cultivate in the students. I, too, ensure that in every lesson, students know what to do to show that they are learning everyday. After discussion, students will present their findings. Giving reasons after discussion has always been a norm in my class. This routine has been set in the class since Sec 1 when I first taught them.

With these eight forces in place, I proceeded to the next action research cycle to apply the narrative essay-writing program in class.

Action Research Cycle 3: My Intervention In Class

This Action Research harnessed the use of Web 2.0 tools such as *Wordle*, *Padlet* and *Classflow*. These resources were chosen due to their ability in collating ideas and collaborating online. The target group was eight Sec 3E Malay Language students. Each lesson was conducted for two periods of 50 minutes each. In between each period, I would reflect on the lessons and check the students’ works, whether there were improvements to their narrative writings and whether figurative phrases were suitably used. The lessons were spread over two terms (Term 2 – 4) in 2014 as described below.

Lesson 1

1. Teacher started the lesson with a descriptive setting picture of a waterfall (See Annex 2 - Figure 1). Using *Wordle* (an Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) online tool), students give different descriptive words such as adjectives, power words like vivid verbs and different ways of saying when using dialogue (See Figures 2-3). This helps them to acquire both the language (vocabulary and structures) and narrative skills (making an interesting beginning, using dialogue skilfully, weaving in contemporary, everyday events to sound more natural, etcetera) that they need. They use their 5 senses which include “see”, “hear”, “smell”, “taste”, “feel” in their writing that appeal to the senses and narratives that relate ordinary events in an extraordinary way.
2. Teacher introduces various types of figurative language such as simile, metaphors, onomatopoeia, etcetera. Descriptive pictures and sounds were given to the students to encourage them to be critical, creative and innovative when interpreting a piece of composition. Students then write a short paragraph on the picture using ‘Word Splash’ (See Figure 4).
3. Teacher then integrated *pantun* (Malay poem) cards to introduce *pantun* in the essays (See Figure 5). (Figure 6 and 7 show examples of students’ works on integrating *Pantun*.)
4. Teacher obtained feedback and reflection for Lesson 1 (Refer to Annex 1). There were 7 students who wrote the reflections whom I will name them as Student A - G. One student was absent for the lesson and the reflection.

After lesson 1, I conducted a personal reflection and felt that students should be given more descriptive pictures so that they could describe more. Another online documentation platform, *Padlet*, was chosen to reinforce the concepts taught and for more collaboration with the class. Thus, Lesson 2 was planned to reiterate the STW thinking routine.

Lesson 2

1. Using *Padlet*, an online bulletin board, students described in sentences what they saw in the picture (See Figure 9). Students integrated STW thinking routine in this activity. Another picture description was given to the students to practice their STW routine. It was a picture where a taxi had hit a cow. Students wrote what they saw and their thoughts on what had happened; and wondered what would happen next. Students were tasked to describe the scene (See Figure 9) with adjectives and descriptive verbs using *Padlet* as their writing platform (See Figure 8). (See Figure 10 - This time, students were able to describe more on the picture given as there were many things to describe in the picture). I guided my students to develop their ability to write stories using the techniques of re-telling a story by giving their readers pictures to see, sounds to hear, or things to taste, feel and smell. Creative writers usually look for words that help the readers to see and hear what they have seen, heard or imagined. So, the students are encouraged to be like one.
2. Students visited various websites on their own for samples of the different types of 'hooks'. Various examples of figurative phrases were shown to the students to trigger the students to develop alternative ways like searching the Internet for more figurative phrases. These 'hooks' could be used in their essays as I enhanced my students' ability to write creatively through the technique of shared writing or work in pairs. Students can tell the readers about the things he or she has seen or imagined by using descriptive words such as *efficient*, *reliable*, etcetera. Students may also use phrases or expressions like *pompous words*, *pale in comparisons*, etcetera. Expressions like these will definitely 'hook' the readers.
3. Next, pictures like the sun shining brightly in the desert and the shadow of the moon reflected on the surface of the sea were presented to the students (See Figure 11 and Figure 12).
4. By using the skills taught, the students wrote what they thought had happened and wondered what would happen. This activity was to enable the students to familiarize themselves with STW thinking routine. After visiting various websites for suitable figurative phrases or different types of 'hooks', the students wrote a short paragraph based on the pictures given in Figure 11 and Figure 12.
5. Teacher conducted another lesson using *Scamper*, a useful creativity tool (See Figure 13) to encourage students to modify the paragraph from a chosen website based on the theme given which was "tears". This activity encouraged the students to be creative (where students are able to use imagination or original ideas to write something) and inventive (where students are able to combine concepts or elements from different realms that would not normally be put together).
6. By using the Tablet (iPad or laptop), students accessed *Classflow*, an online tool (See Figure 14). Students modified the short paragraph found in the website

- based on the theme given which was “tears” (See Figure 15) and created a new paragraph, integrating figurative language (See Figure 16 and Figure 17).
7. Students shared their creations in the *Classflow* online presentation tool. Students provided comments for each other to improve on the paragraph. (This individual effort that was shared on the shared platform and then been commented on, should be conducted frequently to improve the students’ narrative essay writing.)
 8. Next, artefacts were chosen from Singapore’s National Library Board website (See Figure 18) to add authenticity to the lesson.
 9. Students wrote a short paragraph on the chosen artefacts such as the *keris* (Malay dagger), *kebaya* (Malay traditional costume), *tepak sireh* (Malay traditional metal container for storing betel leaves used for chewing), traditional blender, spices that can be found in Singapore and *Batik Sarong* (Malay women traditional skirt). This writing activity of the chosen artefacts was to incorporate authentic assessment.
 10. A final activity for this Lesson Study was a narrative writing prompt to see how well the students used the components taught in this lesson. The narrative essay writing would be used as an assessment, using the national examination essay criteria. Once completed, students’ feedback and reflections were then obtained from this Lesson 2 (Refer to Annex 1). In this interaction, the teacher fostered thinking and made it visible in multiple ways.

Action Research Cycle 4: Data Collection and Interpretation

Students were given personal reflection worksheets after each Cycle for them to note down their “noticings” and “wonderings” on the lessons conducted according to STW routine (Refer to Table 1). Most of the students just noted their weaknesses in the language and what they are able to do after going through the lesson by the teacher. Their wonderings give the teacher a chance to work upon them by encouraging the students to make their “wonderings” real.

From the student reflections (Refer to Table 2), it is evident that the students could apply the STW thinking routine (picture description and the Word Splash). All the students were surprised that they could come up with interesting figurative phrases and used them in their narrative essays.

Through the Reflection Sheet (Refer to Table 3), it can be seen that the students clearly enjoyed the Web 2.0 tools that have been introduced to them in the lessons. They were more engaged with the learning tasks given using the online tools. Some possible reasons for this are the online activities and the pair work allowed in this activity. The tasks were sufficiently challenging enough for the class to motivate them to write a short paragraph integrating the *Pantun*. There was a need to collaborate especially the lower-ability ones. Students seemed happy and enjoyed the peer support and group collaboration. One or two students even took charge of directing the flow of discussions and helping to clarify what needed to be done. These routine and online tools have clearly helped the students to be critical and make them realize that they do possess creative and inventive thinking, given the opportunity to do so.

Table 4 is a closure for the students' activity in the whole Action Research (AR) study. Students are to reflect their thoughts about what they have completed in this AR study. The students compared their works before the start of the AR study and after. There is a remarkable difference for all of them. They learn that they can do better with the STW routine, thinking through their answers and then try all the platforms introduced by teacher to create a better narrative essay.

The survey in Table 5 gave the teacher a chance to know whether the action research study benefits the students on the whole. There are five statements given and the students are to give their comments to each of the statement. 100% of the students agree with all the statements. From the comments stated by the students, it is an enlightening experience to them. They have learnt many strategies that could help them create interesting narrative essays. The STW routine has indeed guided them in improving their linguistic skills.

I am glad that the students have learnt a lot during the AR study. The qualitative data gathered from the reflections and survey in Annex 1 shows that the students seem to be more collaborative in their learning style. The peer activities have helped the lower-ability students in understanding the lessons and complete the tasks given to them. The Web 2.0 tools also garnered active participation from the students as the tools scaffold learners in learning how to interpret the figurative language. The students' works evidently show how MTV is used to develop the thinking culture of the students and be competent in the STW thinking routine.

This routine encourages students to make thoughtful interpretations and helps stimulate curiosity. It sets the stage for inquiry as students try to create an interesting narrative essay from the figurative language they learn. STW has certainly encouraged students to further apply their newly acquired knowledge, skills and ideas to other subjects.

Action Research 5: Personal Reflection

Since thinking routines are designed to scaffold and support thinking, it is this sense of independence for engaging the thinking that we want to look for over time. To facilitate these content-based cultural forces, the teacher and students used these routines to structure learning interactions.

The Web 2.0 tools provided a place for individual documentation of learning. Teacher's language supports and advances students' learning. During lesson, teacher shows students on how to do something: a process, procedure, task or assignment. This kind of modeling – one of the cultural forces - that creates culture is more subtle, ubiquitous and embedded. It is the modeling of the teacher as a thinker and learner. Students know if a teacher is passionate about a topic, interested in ideas, engaged as a learner, thoughtful and deliberative and so on. However, to achieve insight and understanding, one must still have the time to think about and with ideas. Thus, the use of thinking routines offers a common structure for discussion, thereby, enabling a high degree of autonomy and efficiency for the students.

The STW thinking routine and the chosen Web 2.0 tools to teach figurative language might have been well received by the students. Ultimately, it is what students

are asked to do with the content that makes it a rich opportunity for learning. The continual push to make connections and synthesize one's thinking in turn leads to rich reflections.

My personal take for conducting these AR study is that it has been an enriching experience, creating the platform for the students to think deeply, creatively and inventively. It is also aligned to the Singapore Ministry of Education 21st century Vision whereby schools provide the means and opportunities for preparing their students for the future. By integrating MTV in classroom teaching, as demonstrated in this AR study, students were encouraged to be self-directed learners and were able to work collaboratively with their peers. On the other hand, teacher became an active facilitator who could allocate time to help weak students in class.

This Project Zero Project has indeed engaged the students to delve in substantive thinking. STW is easily and flexibly integrated with content learning, and representing areas of thinking such as understanding, creativity, self-management, and decision-making.

Conclusion

As this lesson demonstrates, making thinking visible benefits the teacher by providing an important assessment tool. At the same time, it helps to advance students' understanding.

As individuals, not only should we have the thinking skills for good thinking, we must also have the disposition to use our thinking ability. Culture of the classroom sets the tone for learning and determines what a student gets to learn. To promote cultures of learning for students in classrooms, the school must first encourages the cultures of thinking among teachers. This will in turn fosters the cultures of thinking in students.

The use of the Thinking Routines in the teaching of the figurative language based on the MTV allows students to be more engaged in their learning. For instance, students were observed to be interested in the figurative lesson as reflected in the survey done afterwards. They were able to come up with various paragraphs and were able to come up with pertinent points relating to the Thinking Routines.

Easy access of information from the Internet also makes learning easier. Students could use the Web 2.0 tools to share information with the rest of the class and get feedback from them. The various groups seemed earnest to share what they have learnt and understood. The picture-description activity gave sufficient challenge to engage the students. This could also be due to the fact that when they were put in pairs, they accountable to each other for contributing ideas. In addition, this could also be due to their ability level and thus the need for discussion and peer support in completing the tasks. Therefore, to promote collaborative learning further, tasks have to be challenging enough to motivate collaboration. For learning to take place, there must be the necessary conditions for learning the specific object of study such as scaffolding in the tasks given with gaps that are within the ability of students to derive the key learning points. As a teacher conducting this lesson, I personally feel that I have to strategically select scaffolding techniques to maximize growth in the students' vocabulary. I have to rehearse the skills as often as possible with the students by adjusting the lessons to

ensure students move toward mastering the thinking routine. As Student A commented in one of the reflections given,

“It is an effective method to teach the students how to write a narrative essay successfully. It uses the power of technology, making it a much more fun and engaging lesson.”

There were several challenges during this action research study such as the availability of the computer laboratory during the specific Malay Language lesson and the need for technical assistance for internet accessibility, and there were also the login issues with the Web 2.0 tools. However, teacher could overcome these challenges by liaising with the Information Technology personnel in school.

I hope that MTV has helped our students learn how to think and develop the disposition and attitude towards thinking. This could lead to a shift in classroom culture towards a community of enthusiastically engaged thinkers and learners. Thus, our long-term goals for the student development will be to take initiative as learners, learn with desire and work collaboratively with others.

This AR study will be continued with the other Mother Tongue Language (MTL) departments. Other thinking routines such as Circle of Viewpoints will be used to replicate the success of this study. Thus, I hope that all the Mother Tongue department teachers could use the thinking routines as an overarching construct in the teaching and learning of narrative essay writing.

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