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FREEING MINDS: IMPROVING CRITICAL THINKING IN LITERATURE LEARNING USING SPOKEN WORD POETRY

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Abstract

This article explores the use of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an innovative tool of instruction in the teaching of the English Language Literature Component in a Malaysian secondary classroom, which has not been conducted in the past for ESL learning areas in Malaysia. In line with the 21st century learning development which urges schools to hone critical thinking beyond a mere mastery of subject-matters, SWP serves as a revolutionary alternative to aid students in making literature learning meaningful through in-depth discussions and critical engagement- particularly in the learning of poetry. The pre-tests and post-tests employed in this study have been adapted from Linda Elder and Richard Paul's International Critical Thinking Test, consisting of eight semi-structure questions and one short writing question. These were all modified according to the six levels of the Bloom's Taxonomy Critical Thinking model. The study was conducted on 42 Form Four students from a boarding school in Penang. The participants were assigned to one experimental group and one control group. The results suggested that SWP improved the critical thinking of the students in the experimental group which was traced through their patterns of responses in the post-tests after the inclusion of SWP in the learning of poetry.

1. Introduction

Within the education sphere, the Bloom's taxonomy has often become the 'aspired' model adapted into a learning classroom. Given its hierarchical levels of thinking which depict the way people process their thoughts and/or reactions to the phenomena they encounter, the levels encompass six levels. In the 21st century learning development, it is most crucial that one makes thinking visible to students and teachers as critical thinking becomes the soul of learning. In other words, education should be about developing critical minds, not content. The recent National Education Blueprint (2013 – 2025) highlights the role of Literature in English as an avenue to improve one's English skills. However little emphasis is given to its potential beyond being a mere tool of language proficiency (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014). The general aim of the English language curriculum for secondary schools include to enable students to "communicate effectively, read and respond to texts independently, produce well-structured written texts and enjoy and respond to literary works" (The Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, as cited in Kaur & Mahmor, 2014, p. 81). Nonetheless, as the Malaysian education system still, unfortunately, highlights the number of A's in examinations, effective and meaningful learning is considered a questionable area when it comes to gauging the quality of our education. Literature in English classrooms have yet to discard rote-learning which can carry excessive information deriving from literary texts. If quantity is compromised with quality, it may be difficult to produce critical students who can explore their own thoughts and ideas (Figure 01).
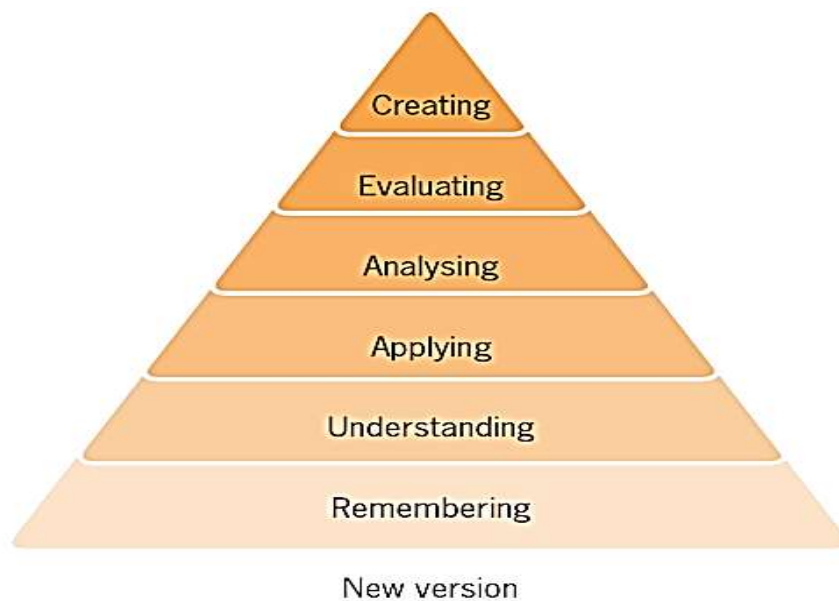
Figure 01. The Bloom critical thinking model, 1956

2. Problem Statement

2.1. The aesthetic nature of poetry

In reality, the study of literature uncovers diverse themes, characters and events that address complex situations that are entrenched within a society. Thus, literature learning should critically engage learners both "emotionally and linguistically" (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014, p. 86). However, due to the

aesthetic nature of the language of poetry, stressing on its linguistics form has mainly been the way poetry is learned and taught in schools, which can be overwhelming for ESL students who are struggling with the basic linguistic forms and functions of the language itself. Unless a more relatable method is provided, the students will continue to view literature in English learning as a hindrance or a challenge.

2.2. Traditional roles and relationships in the learning process

In a situation where grades and rankings are held up as the indicator for academic success, educators and teachers become the main source of knowledge generation with students accepting knowledge passively. Hence memorization and rote-learning occur. Although there have been records of vast improvements since the introduction of the higher order thinking skills (HOTS) type of questions into the curriculum, in which students are provided with more room for personal engagement and responses with the texts, there is still the need for reassurance on how extensive and personal the students can be with their answers when answering each question.

2.3. Rote-learning in the study of literature

Despite the blueprint as well as educators championing the Bloom's taxonomy of promoting critical thinking in the heart of teaching, the education system has yet to mould a thinking generation. With the emphasis on exams year after year, there is inevitably much more emphasis on the number of As each school produces in every national examination. Hence such a system stresses the mass publications of revision books, and the seminars and holiday camps that drill students with examination techniques as well as how to improve memory skills and analyse past questions to predict 'patterns of the national examinations' favourite questions' Hence, students are hard pressed to rote learn materials and answers instead of independently solving problems and coming out with personal responses.

3.   Research Questions

3.1. Does the use of SWP in the learning of poetry improve students' critical thinking ?

3.2. How would the students' patterns of responses evolve after the injection of SWP?

4.   Purpose of the Study

Taking into consideration the problems currently faced within the English language classrooms, this study is proposing Spoken Word Poetry, henceforth referred to as SWP, as an alternative instructional tool to be used in the teaching of literature, specifically in the study of the two poems studied in Form 4: "The Living Photograph" by Kay (2016) and "The Charge of The Light Brigade" by Tennyson (2016).

SWP is a branch of creative writing that "uses free verse to express thoughts from a poet's point of view" (Michalko, 2012, p.34). The features of SWP bear similarities to traditional poetry; however SWP is different in the manner of delivery – it is performed in front of an audience, with emotions and depth conveyed through the poet's tone and body language. It is about sending a message across – a counter-narrative of a particular issue put forth by the poet to engage with the audience (Low, 2011, p. 49).

Emerging research such as Michalko (2012) and Smith (2010) have recorded major shifts in the way students view poetry: from a quiet experience between the reader and the text to an interactive experience between the reader and the text they have responded to (Low, 2011, p.19). They found that using SWP in classroom settings aided the students in seeing not only the author's intention, but also see the text from their own standpoint (Fraise, 2013, p.127). When one's experience is laid bare in and communicated through SWP, the force of the words during the performance would "push for critical thinking" (Smith, 2010, p.73). The space for personal empowerment for one to speak the mind is the beauty of SWP where learners "share a sense of power in a comfortable classroom connecting personal life experiences to the writing and performance processes" (p.134).

With that being said, the primary purpose of the study is to see if the use of SWP in the learning of poetry improves students' critical thinking after the injection of SWP. Besides, the study wishes to fill the existing gap where there remains a paucity of research in Malaysia which have considered SWP as a tool to bridge literature learning and critical thinking due to SWP's novelty in the country. .

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research Design

This research employs an experimental design using pre-tests and post-tests in view of the exploratory nature of this study to analyse how the use of SWP improves critical thinking in a Literature in English classroom. The participants were 42 Form Four students of a boarding school in Penang.

5.2. Participants

The participants were high school students aged 16 who are studying Literature in English as per requirement by Ministry of Education for all high-schoolers in public education. There were 42 students, 20 males and 22 females. The participants are of mixed proficiency levels with average scores between A to B for the English Language paper in the Standard National Examination for Third Formers also referred to as Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 (PT3) 2016. The participants were divided into two groups: (i) the experimental group consisting of 22 students from Class 4Y and (ii) the controlled group consisting of 20 students from Class 4Z. Naturally, a change is injected into the experimental group (Class 4Y) – in this case, using SWP in the learning of poetry.

5.3. Instrument

This study took place in the duration of a 10-week lesson. Two sets of pre- tests and post-tests adapted from the International Critical Thinking Test by Elder and Paul (2014) were administered to both groups. Each pre-test and post-test included nine questions based on the two poems learnt in Form Four: Pre-Set 1 and Post-Test 1 were based on "The Living Photograph" by Jackie Kay (2016) while Pre-Test 2 and Post-Test 2 on "The Charge of The Light Brigade" by Lord Alfred Tennyson (2016). The pre-tests and post-tests bear the same question items as it was the research's intention to trace improvement in terms of how the students' patterns of responses evolve after the injection of SWP, particularly the experimental group. An hour is allocated for an English period and two periods are assigned for literature and /or writing per week. Pre-tests were carried out after the teaching of each poem (the second lesson

after each poem's introduction) and post-tests in the fifth and ninth week respectively. One hour was given for participants to complete both tests. Data analysis began in Week 10.

5.4. The International Critical Thinking Test and Rubric

The test is divided into two parts. In Part I of the test, there are eight questions, each worth 10 points. In Part II of the test, a short writing task question is given with the maximum of 20 points. The total points for the pre-test and post-test is 100. The structure of the question construction rooted from Bloom's taxonomy model (1956), with each question gradually increased in terms of demands for critical thinking skills to be involved, from (i) remembering (ii) understanding (iii) applying (iv) analysing (v) evaluating (vi) creating. The rubric used is adapted from the 'Holistic Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric' (Facione & Facione, 2010). The rubric comprises four levels of achievement:, 'Band 1: Beginning', 'Band 2: Developing', 'Band 3: Accomplished' and 'Band 4: Exemplary'. As the questions asked are open-ended, the marking and scoring is based on the impressionistic approach, given the holistic value and the subjectivity of the questions.

5.5. Treatment of SWP

The treatment of SWP was only applied to the experimental group: Class 4Y, where they were given the tasks of producing spoken word poetry pieces to demonstrate personal engagement with the poems learnt. Initially, the researcher introduced SWP by showing videos from 'Brave New Voices'. In this programme organized by the Youth Speaks Organisation since the early 2000s, youths compete in a National Slam Poetry Competition held in America. Three videos were shown including: "Syria" performed by Amal Kassir (Brave New Voices, July 2012), "Lost Voices" by Darius Simpson and Scout Bostley (Brave New Voices, June 2015) as well as "The Voice of the 21st Century" as an introductory video to spoken word poetry (Brave New Voices, September 2012). Then, the students were given a day to complete the task and their written products were collected after their performance the next day. In total, Class 4Y wrote two SWP pieces, each after the learning of the Form Four poems. Based on their writings and performances which were recorded, it was observed how these tasks influenced the patterns of responses which have evolved from the pre-tests to the post-tests. On the other hand, the controlled group had different instructional tools and tasks which included writing an acronym poem and letter writing.

6. Findings

A comparison was drawn between the results of the Pre-Tests and Post-Tests of the experimental and controlled groups to see the effectiveness of SWP in improving critical thinking. Overall, both experimental and controlled groups marked an improvement from the Pre-Tests to Post-Tests for both the poems studied, although varying in significance.

Table 01. Participants' Pre-Test 1 and Post-Test 1 Scores (The Living Photograph)

Group	Tests	N	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean
4Y Experimental Group	**Pre -Test 1**	22	52	78	68
	Post-Test 1	22	62	88	80
4Z Controlled Group	**Pre -Test 1**	20	55	72	62
	Post-Test 1	20	58	78	70

Based on the lowest and highest scores shown in Table 0.1, there is a notable improvement across both groups in Post-Test 1. However, based on the mean of each group, it is imperative to note that the participants in Class 4Y indicated a higher increase after the treatment of SWP was imposed. The mean increased by 12 points compared to Class 4Z, which marked an eight-point increment. In addition, a significant improvement was recorded in the lowest and highest scores for Class 4 Y from Pre-Test 1 to the Post-Test 1, with a 10-point jump for each. The difference in score range was also noted between Class 4 Y and Class 4 Z, with the prior reaching the 80% range while the latter managing to secure the highest score of 78% in Post-Test 1.

Table 02. Participants' Pre-Test 2 and Post-Test 2 Scores (The Charge of the Light Brigade)

Group	Tests	N	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean
4Y Experimental Group	**Pre -Test 2**	22	70	86	75
	Post-Test 2	22	75	90	85
4Z Controlled Group	**Pre -Test 2**	20	62	72	66
	Post-Test 2	20	65	78	72

Based on the lowest and highest scores in Table 0.2, there was again a significant rise across both groups in Post-Test 2. However, looking at the mean for each group, the participants in Class 4Y recorded a higher increase after the treatment of SWP. In the second round of implementing the treatment, it is vital to acknowledge that Class 4Y recorded substantial improvement even in Pre-Test 2, marking a lower score in the 70th decile. Additionally, participants in Class 4Y reached the highest score of 90%, showing a significant improvement in critical thinking from the first time they were exposed to SWP in the learning of poetry. A mean of 85% is measured in Post-Test 2, a 10% leap from 75% the Pre-Test 2. On the other hand, it should be recognized that Class 4Z also showed increased performance in Post-Test 2 although minimum leap was recorded throughout the teaching of poetry as the majority in this controlled group still maintained their scores within the 60% – 70% range. To understand how the participants' responses evolved in the post-tests, it is salient to first recognize that such an evolution took place when the participants started exploring their abilities to critically engage with the two poems using SWP as an outlet of instruction and interaction.

6.1. SWP improves critical thinking through personalised learning.

When poetry performances were part of their literature learning, it taught the students to analyse text, author and purpose more critically from their own experiences as writers, what more having "to consider from the point of view of a performer for a live audience" (Camangian, 2008, p. 35). One student in Class 4Y, Suria (pseudonym) in her Spoken Word performance for 'The Charge of The Light Brigade' impressed the crowd with her lines:

"And in the name of sacrifice we have died, and our mis-spelled names encrypted in history books of different versions; is all we got in return... No, we did not die in vain – they said".

For these participants, writing poetry and performing their writings to their classmates allowed them to experiment with both written and spoken poetry. This was a novel experience as they learned to interact with the original poems before 'inventing' a personal response to the text- even if it means deviating from the poem's usual theme of soldiers' loyalty to a country to experimenting with a bit of unconventional truth: how soldiers are not always highly treated and honoured.

6.2. SWP provides safe space for exploration

When SWP was presented the first time, the participants were uncertain of "how critical" they could be until they saw how the contestants of the 'Brave New Voices' exploited their own vulnerabilities on topics such as racism and sexism. The participants began to open their eyes to underlying meaning of 'The Living Photograph' as during the performances of SWP, five performances spoke of how the line 'white hand in black hand' resonated with the multicultural feature of Malaysia. For example, Aryan and Asfar (pseudonyms) began their performance with:

"We are all blinded by colour… No, love is not always… colour blind".

Using such a powerful statement to instigate a counter-narrative to a supposedly innocent poem themed around the idea of unconditional family love conveyed the participants' "openness to new ideas", which has resulted in their critical observations through considerations of other points of view, in this case the quiet prejudice underpinning people's personal encounter of racism in Malaysia (Dimitriadis, 2009, p.129). Thus, SWP appeals to adolescents because they "see it as a space for explorations of self and society" (Low, 2008, as cited in Fraise, 2013, p.34).

6.3. SWP challenges students' criticality and comfort zones

The critical perspective and its criticality can only take place when students are aware of the powerful social forces at work in the world which "serve to silence and marginalise others, restricting human freedom" (Davies & Barnett, 2015, p.75, as cited in Wilson, 2016). Based on 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', Firaz (pseudonym) outlined the theme of power struggle faced by soldiers on battlefields with the lines:

"Charged for the guns, he said... And forwarded the Light Brigade, with cannons to the right of them drowning their fears of death... and cannons to left of them silencing their unspoken protest"

Another example that championed the critical pedagogy perspective came from Amal (pseudonym):

"The photograph is the only living memory I have of you... And now I am left with just that and a reminder of what unconditional love felt like in the face of misery"

These lines inspired from 'The Living Photograph' modelled an aspect of a broken family relationships which is often overlooked, unintentionally marginalising the ones whose idea of an ideal family is non-existent.

7. Conclusion

Despite the small number of population in the study (42 participants), the findings obtained are nevertheless of paramount importance to students, teachers and policy makers. For starters, the study of literature has often been forced into the margins with the current emphasis on high stakes testing such as the national examinations of SPM. However, it can be concluded that in the study, the participants did not set the main goal of scoring for exams when learning poetry. In light of this view, although this was the first time SWP was introduced for the learning of 'The Living Photograph' by Jackie Kay, some of the participants had reservations.

Nonetheless, once the need to hone critical thinking to be effective when aesthetic language is used (ie: poetry and SWP), was explained to the participants, they became more open to the idea and were more welcoming the second time SWP was used as the instructional tool in the poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' by Lord Alfred Tennyson. Thus, a resurgence of spoken word poetry has untimely resulted in more positive outlook in how the students appreciate poetry, and on a bigger scale how they appreciate meaningful learning. It is seeming that the neglect of the other aspects of literature such as teaching the students the appreciation of the literature works echo the unfavourable perceptions students have of literature learning, hence discouraging the construction of critical thinking . It is time that literature is treated 'fairly' and be seen from a new angle that is relevant to the biggest stakeholder – the students. It is hoped that the study of using SWP as an instructional tool to foster critical thinking in the teaching of Literature in English will create a new dimension for teachers to come up with new teaching styles.

Undeniably, the Literature in English component syllabus serves the purpose of "bridging and educating young Malaysians not only of their rich literary traditions, heritage and culture, but also provides a sense of empowerment" through its learning (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014, p.83). Therefore, Literature in English should play a more prominent role in the curriculum, especially when it comes to strategies undertaken in its teaching. The study can be described as a humble preliminary attempt to provide more insight into the research of different innovative and current tools used in the setting of English as a second language. The implications of the findings are hoped to be able to pave a breakthrough in achieving an education system that is not exam-oriented and it should start with assisting teachers to impart critical thinking among Malaysian students in the teaching and learning of literature.

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