

Of monsters and mayhem: Teaching suspense stories in a Singapore classroom

Peter Teo & Anneliese Kramer-Dahl

National Institute of Education | Singapore

Abstract: This paper draws on the findings of a three-year, observation-cum-intervention research project that focuses on the textual practices of middle school teachers in Singapore. Specifically, the focus here is on the teaching of suspense narratives to a class of average, lower middle school students as part of the 'text-type' syllabus adopted in Singapore's schools since 2001. The paper will reveal, through close analysis of a unit of work and two lesson transcripts, how one English teacher constructs, scaffolds and implements a series of lessons to develop her students' awareness of and competency in the construction and deconstruction of suspense in narrative writing. It argues that it is the teacher's ability to make use of connected learnings and explicit instruction to raise the overall intellectual quality of her lessons that contributes to the development of her students' textual competence. The paper closes with a critical appraisal of the lessons and a discussion of the implications this study has for writing teachers and researchers.

Keywords: suspense stories, classroom discourse, intellectual quality, Singapore



Teo, P., & Kramer-Dahl, A. (2011). Monsters and mayhem: Teaching suspense stories in a Singapore classroom. *Journal of Writing Research*, 3(1), 19-49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17239/jor-2011.03.01.2>

Contact: Peter Teo, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Nanyang Walk 1, Singapore 637616 – peter.teo@nie.edu.sg. Copyright: Earli | This article is published under Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported license.

1. Introduction

Writing is often perceived to be a most formidable task feared and dreaded by many a language learner trying to grapple with the complexities of marshalling their thoughts and ideas, moulding and shaping them into appropriate form and finding the right words to express them in a clear, concise and cogent enough manner that will allow them to engage their target reader. As Marlene Scardamalia observes:

Even a casual analysis makes it clear that the number of things that must be dealt with simultaneously in writing is stupendous: handwriting, spelling, punctuation, word choice, syntax, textual connections, purpose, organisation, clarity, rhythm, euphony, the possible reactions of various possible readers, and so on. To pay conscious attention to all of these would overload the information-processing capacity of the most towering intellects. (quoted in Bereiter, 1980: 80)

Because of these multifarious cognitive and linguistic demands and the added challenge of motivating students to want to master such a complex skill, language teachers often find teaching writing one of the most challenging tasks that they have to grapple with in their professional lives. What this paper seeks to do is to shed some light on this difficult and often daunting task of teaching writing by focusing on the classroom practices of one English teacher in Singapore, and how she manoeuvres around these difficulties in an attempt to help her students come to grips with the abstractions of suspense narrative.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first provides a description of the educational context within which this present study is situated, followed by a brief summary of the research framework which undergirds the study. The second section begins with a description and examination of the macro unit plan that the teacher has designed in collaboration with her colleagues and the researchers involved in the study. It then focuses on two pivotal lessons within this larger unit of lessons to highlight the processes by which the teacher attempts to develop her students' competency in reading and writing suspense narratives. The final section of the paper discusses the implications of this study for reading and writing teachers and, more broadly, teachers who are keen to develop their students' literate competencies and expand their textual repertoires.

2. Context of the study

A common assumption that many lower middle English teachers in Singapore hold is that when students come to them from the primary level they would already have a fairly strong foundation in the basic literacy skills of reading and writing including proficiency in basic grammar, and all they need to do is to revise and further develop these skills. With the exception of a small handful of students from highly exclusive

schools or those with privileged literate backgrounds, the reality could not be more different. The transition from primary to middle school not only makes enormous intellectual demands on students in terms of a much broader range of disciplinary knowledge and deeper conceptual understanding but also opens up a more diverse and complex discursive landscape in which they need to navigate in order to succeed in and progress beyond their middle school education. As Moje and Sutherland (2003) observe:

Middle school is the time when young people may first encounter different discourse communities in all their complexity [as they encounter different discourses and disciplines, and different teachers across the school day]. In fact, a significant body of research indicates that most middle schools are inadequately matched to the developmental needs of early adolescents (Eccles et al, 1993), a point which underscores the need to attend to how middle school students experience the different discourse communities they encounter each day. (p. 156)

While more competent students learn quite rapidly without explicit instruction on how to 'cue' themselves into the 'thinking-reading-writing-speaking-viewing-listening demands' (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming, 2003, p.51) which their different classroom activities require them to negotiate, others are often left to struggle on their own. Although it may be true that the kind of literate knowledge and skills expected in middle schools may not be altogether new to most students as they would have been introduced to them in some form at the primary level, these knowledge and skills are now revisited at far higher levels of technicality and/or conceptual complexity. For instance, while many students in Singapore would have been drilled in the conventions of letter and report writing, few may have actually grasped the subtleties and nuances of persuasion. Similarly, while most would typically have experienced writing simple stories and descriptions following a prescribed pattern, few may be prepared to grapple with the abstract and abstruse skill of suspense building. This learning gap especially among low-achieving pupils as they move from primary to middle school education is something that the Ministry of Education in Singapore has acknowledged in its 2010 syllabus where it states that: 'low progress learners ... require more scaffolding [as they] may not be equipped with an adequate language background or prior knowledge for the completion of tasks and so may need more time than their peers to attain understanding and mastery of skills' (CPDD, 2010, p.6). Quite apart from these general cognitive and discursive demands made on lower middle students as they move up from primary school, the particular school syllabus prescriptions can also exert additional expectations on teachers and their charges.

Since 2001, the English language syllabus in Singapore has made a decided move towards a context-sensitive, functional approach to language learning. Organized loosely around three areas – language for information, language for literary response and expression, and language for social interaction – the syllabus focuses on language

use through the study of a wide range of text types (Lim, 2002). A key feature of this syllabus is the emphasis on grammar, where the teaching of grammar goes beyond the sentence level to emphasise an explicit teaching of grammar at the text level (Goh, Zhang, Ng & Koh, 2005; CPDD, 2001). Commonly referred to as the 'text-type' syllabus by teachers in Singapore, its key concern is not merely correct mastery of the linguistic code, which had been the priority of earlier curricular directives, but students' ability to act relevantly in real-world situations. This means making explicit the text-context relation so that learners are given access to the linguistic resources that enable them to both decode and encode meanings in the sorts of text and discourse which are valued in a variety of educational and other contexts. This focus on language usage and application in real-life contexts is further reinforced in the 2010 'Language Use Syllabus' which aims to 'provide pupils with ample opportunities to use language in a variety of contexts, to revisit language structures and skills and to see how language works "according to purpose, audience, context and culture"' (CPDD, 2010, p. 9). This official thrust in language learning is one which many educational linguists would consider forward-looking and responsive to the communicational demands in an increasingly globalizing world. These curricular pronouncements and prescriptions in the English syllabus reflect and attempt to reinforce a broader and more fundamental paradigm shift in the educational landscape in Singapore, which was first started in 1997 when the Singapore government announced its pro-active agenda called 'Thinking Schools Learning Nation' (TSLN) (Goh, 1996). This reform attempted to redirect a profoundly transmissionist education system to one that is future-oriented and acknowledges the need to provide students with the knowledges and skills necessary for participation in an increasingly globalized and information-saturated world. It is perhaps this focus on skills that go far beyond decoding meaning at the word or sentence level towards a more holistic and deeper understanding of how texts work to communicate meaning in the real world that has enabled Singapore students to achieve international recognition for their literacy prowess. In the 2006 Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (PIRLS, 2006) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, which tested the reading skills of students from countries including England, Canada, Australia, Sweden and the US, Singapore emerged among the three top-performing countries (the other two being Hong Kong SAR and the Russian Federation). The study also highlighted that Singapore (together with the Russian Federation) had the highest percentages of high-achieving students, with nearly one fifth of students (19%) reaching the Advanced International Benchmark, which meant that students could provide and support interpretations, integrate information across texts, and understand literary and organizational features (PIRLS, 2006, p. 3).

While such accolades bring much pride and sense of achievement to Singapore schools, the enormous pressures faced by teachers to produce such high-achieving students are real and must be acknowledged. Teachers function as the interface between the abstract and often idealised curricular statements, on the one hand, and

the real needs, inadequacies and anxieties of students in a classroom, on the other. In simple terms, ultimately it is teachers who have the final say about what is going to count in what students learn. What looks like a 'top down' system of centralised curriculum control ultimately is one where teachers reformulate and reinterpret centrally cast messages in ways which make sense to them. In this sense, teachers can be said to be the ultimate curriculum makers, as they mediate and (re)negotiate the official discourse, translating broadly construed ideals and ideologies and operationalising them into locally situated classroom discourses and practices. Teachers are the arbiters who select, shape and determine what counts as knowledge, which texts, fields, discourses will be picked up and actually taught through what tasks and which modes on a daily basis. They are not mere curriculum 'technicians' or 'implementers' – rather they are, to borrow a phrase from Luke (2001, p. 9), 'micro politicians' of the curriculum.

In Singapore's context, it has been argued that teachers, because of the rapidity with which reforms tend to be implemented and because of their lack of a firm knowledge base, are often underprepared for such curricular changes (Foley, 1998; Kramer-Dahl, 2004). Furthermore, since teachers continue to be primarily measured in terms of their students' achievement in high-stakes examinations, which contradict and undermine the skills-and-process-oriented focus of the curriculum and the TSLN agenda – such pressures affect the successful implementation of these revised syllabi (Kramer-Dahl, 2004; Koh, 2004). A pertinent question that this present study asks is therefore: to what extent does the enacted curriculum and knowledge in the English Language classroom align with the curriculum and pedagogy goals and desired outcomes advocated in the syllabus and TSLN initiative? After all, as Luke et al. put it, 'it is in the face-to-face modulations, changes, contours at work in classrooms', not policy statements, curricula, and standardized examinations, 'that the "differences that make a difference" in performance, achievement, outcomes and consequences ... are shaped' (Luke, Cazden, Lin and Freebody, 2005: 2). This study will therefore seek to examine the classroom discourse represented in lesson transcripts to tease out procedures, processes and practices in order to construct a composite picture of how one teacher attempts to operationalise the 'text-type' syllabus.

3. Design of the study

This study draws on a larger observation-cum-intervention research project, 'Literacy Practices in Secondary Schools: Expanding Textual Repertoires' (ETR), conducted in three average-performing secondary schools in Singapore (Kramer-Dahl, Teo, Chia and Churchill, 2005). The project aimed to study the range of opportunities teachers provide for their students to interact with varied textual resources, not only as a pedagogic strategy to develop their literacy competencies but also as a means to shape their epistemological stance towards the knowledge constructed in and through texts. The word 'text' is here conceived as 'any artifact that is constructed as a representation

of meaning using a conventional symbol system' (Wells, 1990: 378), which therefore goes beyond print materials to oral presentations, diagrams drawn on the board, and videos or other semiotic resources. The focus on 'textual repertoires' (Rogoff, 2003; Tuyay, Jennings & Dixon, 1995; Freebody & Luke, 2003) is premised on the belief that schools and classrooms are enabling spaces which allow teachers to shape and develop students' practices, dispositions and attitudes towards the various forms of texts consumed and produced in the classroom. It is precisely this process of enabling, of scaffolding learning with a view of expanding learners' textual repertoires and of empowering them to engage with textual practices that this present study focuses on.

The ETR project was designed as a two-phase study. The first involved observing and audio recording 18 teachers in three subject areas – Science (3), Social Studies (4), and English Language (11) – conduct a unit of work, with each unit comprising a number of lessons ranging from three to over ten. The decision to focus on larger pedagogical units or 'curricular macrogenres' (Christie, 2002) was premised on our belief that it is in and through a unit of lessons, rather than isolated lessons, that we can properly observe the planning and macro-staging of different activities and how they build on one another to scaffold students' learning and development of skills, the importance of which has also been highlighted by several classroom researchers (Gibbons, 2003; Christie, 2002; Green & Dixon, 1993). Focusing on ongoing sequences of lessons allowed the project team to examine how the teachers managed different stages of learning, how the theme of the unit and its various tasks were introduced, if and how connections between various teaching and learning activities and texts were made across lessons, and how new learning and language were accumulated and taken up by students as the unit progressed. This baseline observational data provided the basis for the second phase of the study, which involved designing an intervention programme aimed at drawing the teachers' attention to the literacy demands of their respective curriculum areas and ways of making them explicit to students. Working collaboratively with the teachers to redesign, trial and reflect on their unit of lessons through the broadened perspective afforded by the lens of the intervention programme, the team assembled more data which comprised further lesson recordings, student artifacts and interviews with both teachers and students to provide a more holistic picture of the entire teaching-and-learning experience. It is from this post-intervention databank of recordings that the data for this present study is drawn.

A key imperative which underpinned the ETR project was the need to develop a theoretical position to inform our approach to the study as a whole, and to allow us to analyse and interpret the huge volume of data collected in a consistent and theoretically grounded way. The resultant coding framework that was developed is adapted from and builds on the 'productive pedagogy' matrix developed by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) research team (Lingard et al, 2000). One key dimension of this matrix – *Intellectual Quality* – looks at how students are given intellectually challenging tasks to develop skills that enable them to construct

knowledge and produce discourses that have meaning or value beyond success in school. This relates closely to Newmann and Associates' (1996) notion of 'authentic pedagogy' which refers to intellectual work that involves original application of knowledge and skills rather than the learning of routine facts and procedures (see also Newmann, Lopez & Bryk, 1998). A second dimension – **Explicit Instruction** – relates to the degree of explicitness with which instruction and assessment are carried out in classrooms, providing students with explicit access to how texts are put together, how they work to create what effects for which audiences, and the criteria by which texts produced by the students themselves are to be evaluated. The value of this explicit teaching and assessment has been linked to students' academic success and, more importantly, intellectual growth by writers like Delpit (1988, 1995) and Freiberg and Freebody (1995, 2001). A third and final dimension – **Connected Learnings** – stems from a recognition of the sense of disconnect and disengagement that students experience between what they learn in school and their outside of school experiences (Dewey, 1899/1998). A lesson characterised by 'connected learnings' would be one that encourages students to find links and points of contact not only within the same subject but across other subjects and disciplines so that students are able to see the interdisciplinary, and indeed *transdisciplinary*, nature of knowledge. These three dimensions – Intellectual Quality, Explicit Instruction and Connected Learnings – and their constituents are further elaborated in Table 1 below. Rather than viewing these three dimensions as discrete and independent as the table might imply, they are better construed as integrative and inter-locking gears of a system, with one ideally working in synchrony with the other two in order to propel one another, and hence students' learning, forward.

With this background of both the educational context and the broader research framework of the ETR project from which this study is derived, let us now turn our attention to one particular English teacher (subsequently referred to as Miss T) and her endeavours at expanding her students' textual repertoires with respect to a unit of lessons based on the text type of suspense narratives. I will do this by first examining the macro-structure of her redesigned and expanded unit of lessons before analysing more closely extracts from actual lesson transcripts collected during the intervention phase of the ETR project.

4. Macro-analysis: the unit plan

The purpose of this macro-analysis is to construct an understanding of what counts as doing and knowing English Language, in this case the suspense narrative genre, in the classroom and, more specifically, to document what opportunities they offered for student learning of higher-order cognitive and linguistic work with texts, and to examine the extent to which these constructions align with what the syllabus advocates. Figure 1 below is a schematic representation of the various stages of Miss T's unit plan based on the text-type of suspense stories.

Table 1. Summary of the dimensions of Connected Learnings, Explicit Instruction and Intellectual Quality (adapted from Kramer-Dahl, Teo, Chia & Churchill, 2005, p. 109-110)

<i>Connected Learnings</i>	<i>Explicit Instruction</i>	<i>Intellectual Quality</i>
<p>a. Connections made to students' background knowledge and experiences as they are being introduced to the 'new': Activities and lessons regularly build on students' previous knowledge in subject, previous knowledge in other subject areas and everyday knowledge /experience</p> <p>b. Connections/value of lesson activity or task to competencies/ concerns beyond the classroom: In some sense the temporal converse of the earlier element, here activities and lessons regularly demonstrate links to get students to recognize present and future significance and utility to knowledge in other subject areas as well as to world of outside school (social issues, events, work)</p> <p>c. Coherence: Interrelatedness of individual activities, tasks, talk, reading and writing materials, etc. within a lesson, across lessons in unit and across units within curriculum</p>	<p>a. Explicit, focused instructional talk: Lesson/unit structure presented progressively and contextualized so that content, process and outcomes are signalled clearly to students, with systematic, cumulative review with and by students of what has been learnt</p> <p>b. Explicit teaching of strategies for thinking & doing: Elaboration of enabling strategies: how to work with text, to plan and organize reading and writing tasks, as well as recapping of, and reflecting on strategies used</p> <p>c. Explicit criteria of quality student performance and assessment/feedback on products in line with these criteria: Provision of explicit criteria for the quality of work which students are to produce, spoken and written, in and out of class, and the extent these criteria are used as regular reference point for the development and assessment of their work</p> <p>d. High expectations with instructional support: Setting of high but realistic expectations and consistent encouragement of students to attempt more challenging tasks. Supported with careful scaffolding, targeted at those parts of the tasks students are not quite able to do on their own. Gradually and steadily increasing literacy demands as the unit/term/year progresses (length, complexity of topic, genre demands etc)</p>	<p>a. Manipulation of knowledge: Students involved in manipulating information, ideas, text by synthesizing, generalizing, hypothesizing, drawing conclusions; students as producers/sources, not mere transmitters, of knowledge, or mere 'doers' of the pedagogy</p> <p>b. Deep knowledge and understanding: Addressing central idea of topic/text with thoroughness to explore connections and relationships to other knowledge, and to produce relatively complex understandings; includes reading and discussion of sufficient text to gain in-depth understanding</p> <p>c. Metalanguage: Explicit naming and analyzing of knowledge as a specialist language, and frequent commentary about how language, different texts and genres work</p> <p>d. Substantive communication: Extended exchanges, rather than procedural display, in talk and writing about topic/text in a way that builds a rich and improved understanding of topic/text both between teacher & students, and among students in group discussion/work</p> <p>e. Problematic knowledge: Approach to knowledge/text as socially constructed, as open to question, with multiple, at times conflicting viewpoints and/or solutions given</p>

It should be said at the outset that the unit represented is an interdisciplinary one: integrating both History and English, an initiative put forth by the department head. By getting her lower middle students to tap on their concurrent lessons on the history of Singapore during World War 2 (WW2) as a backdrop against which their suspense narratives are constructed, Miss T and her colleagues in the English Department were effectively drawing on the specific historical facts and circumstances as the yarn for weaving an imaginary tale with a strong suspense element. This not only provided a convenient context for the students' creative efforts, a context to which they all have equal access through their History lessons, it also represented a creative way of getting the students to appreciate the value of lessons across different disciplines.

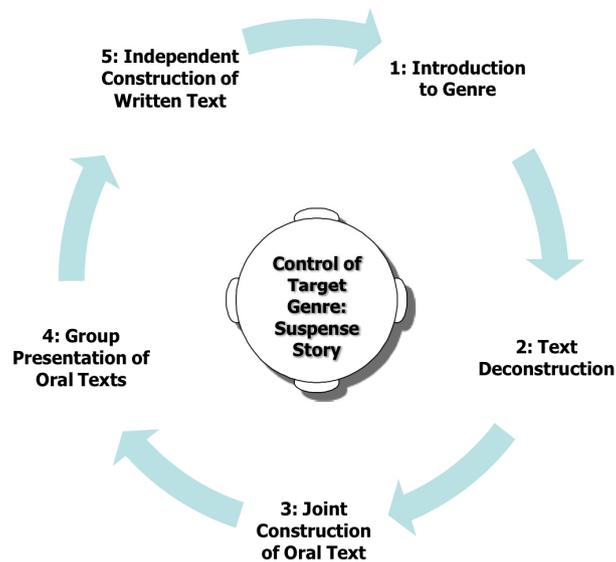


Figure 1: Unit on Suspense Stories conducted by Miss T.

The staging of her unit broadly parallels the 'Teaching Cycle', which typically has four stages – Genre Familiarisation, Text Deconstruction, Joint Construction and Independent Construction – represented in a cycle directed at control of the target genre (Hasan and Williams, 1996; see also Teo and Chua, 2008). In 'Introduction to Genre', Miss T shows her students a key scene from the animated movie, *Monsters Inc*, and gets them to articulate how they felt as they watched the suspense being played out. More importantly, she asks them to explain what specific element heightened or contributed to this sense of suspense and anticipation they experienced. At one point, she even asks them to close their eyes so that they can concentrate on the aural elements (sound effects, including silence) of suspense-creation. In the 'Text Deconstruction' stage, which constitutes seven out of the 11 lessons in the unit, she

introduces her students to more texts, both print and visual, to get them to deconstruct the generic features of the narrative, moving from macro-structural to micro-linguistic features like lexical and syntactic choices. Instead of merely delineating these features for her students, and thereby doing the thinking for them, she engages them in interesting and meaningful activities like jigsaw tasks in which students in small groups compete to unscramble chunks of texts to form a coherent story. In one lesson, she shows her students another movie-clip, this time from *The Last Samurai*, and instructs them to deconstruct a climactic scene in terms of suspense-creation, this time by using the metalanguage – like ‘complication’ and ‘climax’ – which she had introduced in an earlier lesson. What is noteworthy in this stage of the unit is Miss T’s careful selection of texts which exposed her students not only to a range of authentic texts for them to better appreciate how suspense is expressed in and through various modes, but also to texts that are progressively more complex in terms of their features as well as closer in form and content to the final product she wants her students to produce at the end of the unit: a suspense narrative set during WW2 in Singapore. In ‘Joint Construction of Oral Texts’, Miss T moves from text deconstruction to (joint) text construction, by getting her students to work in small groups to create a script for a suspense story set in Singapore during WW2. As Vygotsky points out, talk or oral speech is the half-way house between the maximally compact inner speech of thinking and the maximally elaborated written speech of writing (1986: 182). Thus, what Miss T is attempting here is to scaffold her students’ movement from thinking to writing by getting them to first structure their thinking in the form of an oral script. The small group setting in which this task took place provides further support for her students as they can learn to articulate and defend their ideas in a relatively non-threatening environment. Once the groups have developed their oral scripts, they take turns to orally present their co-constructed scripts to their classmates in ‘Group Presentation of Oral Texts’. To actively involve the whole class during the presentations, as groups take turns to present their scripts, the rest of the students are tasked to listen attentively so as to analyse how suspense is created and evaluate the extent to which their peers are able to develop suspense through their scripts. This not only aimed at keeping the students engaged during the presentations, it also brings the students’ awareness to the vital role that audience plays in the appreciation of texts, especially one aimed at creating suspense *in* the readers. This unit culminates in the last stage – ‘Individual Construction of Written Texts’ – in which students work individually to compose their own suspense stories based on the scripts they had jointly constructed with their group mates and the feedback received from their peers and teacher.

As can be seen from this elaboration of Miss T’s unit plan, she scaffolds her students’ learning by first arousing their interest through a movie, and using it to stimulate their thinking of how suspense is created through sound effects and how this can be translated into words, thereby exploiting the movie as a vehicle for developing her students’ multimodal awareness of the aural-verbal connection. One striking feature in the tapestry of lessons woven together by Miss T is her effort in employing a variety

of modes and media in terms of both teacher input and student output to engage her students' interest and scaffold their learning of the target genre. This plays a significant part in expanding her students' textual repertoires of the suspense narrative through the engagement of a range of textual experiences and practices. What is also significant is that Miss T devotes a considerable proportion of lesson time to deconstructing the suspense narrative to provide explicit enabling skills so that her students understand how suspense is discursively constructed before they endeavour to construct their own suspense narratives through an oral and then written mode. This was a marked departure from her pre-intervention unit in which she used a variety of texts for different purposes, ranging from vocabulary building, punctuation teaching, explication of narrative text structure and content development, without any clear progression of skills development. Consequently, although Miss T expended much time and effort in deconstructing and explicating various texts for her students, these piecemeal efforts added little to the scaffolding process to enable her students to appreciate the meaning of suspense and how it can be staged. At best, the texts represented an aggregation of interesting suspense stories; at worst, they were a random mix of confusing texts with no clear pedagogic purpose or direction. That her teaching was less than coordinated and her selection of texts did not seem to take into account how they build on one another to contribute to her students' appreciation of and ability to produce suspense stories, especially in terms of providing them with explicit strategies for thinking and doing, was a point that was highlighted to her during the intervention. The use of the 'Teaching Cycle' as a framework to steer and stage her lessons in terms of scaffolding student learning was something to which Miss T had already been introduced during her pre-service teaching but whose value she did not fully appreciate until the intervention. The idea of incorporating multimodal and multimedia resources to enhance her lessons is, however, a credit to the creativity and resourcefulness of Miss T and her colleagues.

Since the deconstruction stage is pivotal to her entire unit, it is to this stage that we will now return to look more closely at a couple of lessons in terms of the specific enabling strategies Miss T uses, and how these relate to the dimensions of 'Connected Learnings', 'Explicit Instruction' and 'Intellectual Quality'.

5. Micro-analysis: lesson transcripts

Lesson 3 (see Appendix A) is the second in the 'Text Deconstruction' stage of Miss T's unit. In this lesson, we see Miss T making connected learnings at various levels. She begins by getting her students to recall the various stages of the narrative genre introduced in the previous lesson. What we notice here is that she is not simply getting her students to recite the metalanguage – 'orientation', 'complication', 'climax', 'resolution' – in a perfunctory manner. Rather, she is keen to help them arrive at a better understanding of these functional categories that define the narrative genre. She does this by asking probing questions that go beyond the 'what' to the 'why' (turn 16),

so that students appreciate the *role* that these stages play in the overall purpose of the narrative.

More significantly and interestingly, Miss T connects with the students' prior, non-specialist knowledge/experience as a way to move them towards the new, specialist knowledge and understanding she is trying to develop in them. She does this by first using the analogy of the onion (in turn 9) and its 'layered' nature to help students understand how a story is similarly constructed: in order to arrive at the 'core' of the story, we need to peel off the outer layers, layer by layer. This relates to an important concept in genre theory, in which the structure of a story (or any genre for that matter) is not a straightforward, linear linkage of different parts that make up the whole; rather, the structural elements are more accurately construed as 'stages' in which one stage prepares the reader for the next, and so on (Derewianka, 1996). They can therefore be said to exist in an embedded or 'layered' relationship where one structural component is embedded within another, much like the way the Russian Matryoshka dolls are constructed. Although Miss T does not say this explicitly, this idea of 'layering' is also pertinent in the suspense narrative, in that suspense is created precisely by slowly revealing bits of information so that the reader's sense of anticipation and excitement is gradually and deliberately heightened. This delaying of reader gratification, by the use of various strategies like incorporating a misleading clue, equivocation or partial answer, is in fact one of the techniques used in crafting suspense narratives (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 126-127).

Miss T also relates to the students' prior knowledge/experience when she alludes to the way the heart beats according to the tempo of different music genres (turn 21) and how this heart-rate is represented graphically in the electro-cardiography (ECG) graph that plots the electrical activity of the heart (turn 25). Here, she attempts to deepen her students' understanding of the effect of suspense on the emotions, as represented by a quickening of the heart rate, by connecting to their sensory experiences with rock or pop music (aural) and the ECG graph (visual). By alluding to a genre of music that teenage students are typically familiar with, she is tapping into their prior knowledge to connect with the notion of suspense and the sort of emotions it produces in readers/viewers. Although ECG is probably a less familiar notion for the students, Miss T bridges the gap by making reference to the movie, *The Last Samurai*, which the students had watched the day before to contextualise the various stages of the narrative and how these stages correspond to both the movie's emotional ebbs and flows as it builds up to a crescendo and the ECG's graphic fluctuations:

First part is where you are introduced to the orientation. This is number one, orientation. Subsequently, the complication came. You had that problem number two. Complication, your heart rate goes up, because you know you are expecting something to happen, the story is going to turn and going to change. It's going to un... it's unfolding before your eyes. Thirdly, when you reach the climax, the waves just go haywire. Your heart is beating so fast that as if you are

a character in the scene, as if you were the one, you were Tom Cruise, ah was about to be speared, right or not? You felt that way. This is the climax, this area is the climax. K, resolution, the samurai came of course. (turn 25)

By actually drawing the zigzag lines on the board as a visual representation of the emotional highs and lows that the different stages of a suspense narrative are likely to produce in a reader/viewer, Miss T effectively helps her students to visualise the emotional undulations that parallel the development of a suspense narrative. Thus, by connecting movie, ECG and narrative structure in this manner, Miss T is able to bridge prior knowledge with new knowledge, and link the concrete with the abstract. Such efforts are clearly aimed at connecting with the students' out-of-class knowledge/experience with what they were being presented in class, in an attempt to facilitate their learning and understanding of what suspense is all about and the effects it produces on people. Thus, arguably, it is not only 'connected learnings' that is evident here, but also deep understanding, which is a key aspect of 'intellectual quality'.

In lesson 6 (Appendix B), we see a different aspect of Miss T's teaching on display: explicit instruction. This lesson is situated towards the end of the 'Text Deconstruction' stage of the unit before the students are tasked to work in small groups to jointly construct the scripts of their own suspense narrative set during WW2 in Singapore.

A key textual resource Miss T uses for this lesson is a short story by a local writer (Goh, 2004) set during the racial riots in Singapore in the 1960s (see Appendix C for a reproduction of the story). The choice of this text is predicated on a number of reasons. First, being a story set during a specific period in Singapore's history, it serves as a useful exemplar for her students' subsequent crafting of their own historical narratives. Secondly, the story being told from the point-of-view of the protagonist offers Miss T the opportunity to highlight to her students the importance of perspective in story-telling. As Miss T explained to her students in a later part of the lesson not shown in the transcript, telling a story from the perspective of the protagonist allows the readers to see, hear and feel as the protagonist does in the story, thereby giving the readers the opportunity to experience the suspense more directly and palpably. Finally and most importantly, the story was chosen as it contains a distinct suspense element (from lines 50-72), which Miss T highlights to draw her students' attention to the specific language features that contribute to suspense-building.

The strategy Miss T employs in this lesson is to get her students to highlight words in the story that evoke an emotional response in them (turn 3). After eliciting some of these words from her students, Miss T gets her students to re-read the story with these crucial words removed (turn 31). This effectively allows her students to appreciate the import and impact of these words in terms of the excitement and suspense that they contribute to the story. As the students realise themselves, the story stripped of these crucial words becomes 'very dull' indeed (turn 41). In addition, Miss T also highlights the role played by 'action words' (turn 28) and how they 'describe the action that is

happening and build the suspense in the story' (turn 44), something which the students appear to have grasped (turn 43).

This close attention to the language features in the exemplar story represents the sort of explicit teaching that is integral to the text-type approach to language teaching advocated by the syllabus. It works by drawing learners' attention to these features so as to allow them to see the role and function played by these features in the text. In so doing, the relationship between the form of the language features and the functions they serve in the text is made explicit. The manner in which Miss T elicits the words her students have highlighted and gets them to think about the difference these words make in the story also exemplifies the sort of explicit, focused instructional talk that is part of the dimension of 'explicit instruction' in the ETR framework. More importantly, Miss T's efforts in highlighting not just adjectives like 'bloodthirsty' (turn 11), but also verbs – 'action words' – like 'trampled' (turn 23) and adverbs – 'words that describe action' – like 'ruthlessly' (turn 21) represent an explicit teaching of strategy for writing an effective, engaging suspense story. This focus on verbs and adverbs is noteworthy because it shifts the focus from adjectives that 'dress up' a story to make it more descriptively rich and vivid to the verbs and adverbs that constitute the engine of a story, driving it along and controlling its pace to engage and entice the reader to want to continue reading. Together with her emphasis on writing a story from the perspective of the protagonist, this represents a powerful 'enabling strategy for thinking and doing' that the dimension of 'Explicit Instruction' embodies. These strategies also implicitly become the quality indicators that the students look for and use in judging the quality of their own and others' suspense narratives in subsequent lessons.

Stepping back to look at the unit as a whole, one can appreciate how this lesson has moved quite a long way from the first lesson, in terms of the specificity and complexity of the skills and understandings that Miss T has taken her students along. From talking generally about what makes an animated movie like *Monsters Inc* suspenseful to the close and systematic examination of the language features that help heighten the sense of suspense in a story set in Singapore's history, Miss T's students have certainly come a long way in the expansion of their textual repertoires and their appreciation of how texts work. In this respect, we can see how Miss T's scaffolding throughout the unit dovetails with the progressively higher but realistic expectations that she sets for her students and prepares them for.

6. Discussion

What follows is a critical discussion of the unit and lessons we have just examined in terms of the lessons they hold for reading and writing teachers and, more generally, the implications they have for literacy educators and researchers, curriculum developers and language teacher educators.

One important lesson that we can draw from Miss T's unit plan relates to the value of 'Connected Learnings'. We have already discussed how the various activities and tasks

build on students' previous knowledge in the subject, previous knowledge in other subject areas and everyday knowledge/experience. In addition, reference has also been made to the way Miss T shuttles between the various modes of meaning-making, moving from the visual-aural to the oral-written. What is significant in these instances of 'connectedness' that she weaves is that she does not merely move in a lateral fashion between these various 'affordances' (Bearne and Kress, 2001: 90), but also *progressively* from more basic, general forms of knowledge and understanding towards more cognitively demanding and linguistically specific ones, as she gradually prepares her students for producing the final written product. For instance, when Miss T chooses to induct her students into the suspense genre with a movie about monsters, by helping them to understand how a well-timed and modulated sound or lighting effect heightens the sense of anticipation and thereby produces suspense in the audience, she is only appealing to their basic sense of sight and hearing. When she moves to the written mode of suspense creation, the focus inevitably shifts to the linguistic expression of suspense: words that encode action and emotion. The appreciation of how these well-chosen and well-placed words contribute to the sense of violence and the creation of tempo and mood in a key passage re-enacting the mayhem of racial riots stems from a more sophisticated knowledge of what these words mean and how they are used. Although 'action' or 'emotion' words can be said to parallel sound and lighting effects in terms of how they both create a particular atmosphere or mood that produces suspense, the understanding of how words function in a particular context arguably entails a higher order of cognitive development, moving from an intuitive, sensory awareness to more context-embedded and language-specific understandings. This progressive and purposive process of enabling evident in Miss T's lessons approximates what Cazden (2006) refers to as 'weaving'. In contrast to 'shuttling' (Gibbons, 2003) which only describes the nature but not the purpose of connections being made in a class, the goal of 'weaving' is the students' ability to engage with concepts at a higher cognitive level. What Miss T does as she moves across various modes and media to explore with her students how suspense is created is therefore more an act of 'weaving' rather than mere 'shuttling'. In a similar vein, when she makes the connection between the layers of an onion and the staging and nature of suspense to help students better understand how suspense is conceived and constructed in a narrative, Miss T can be said to have gone beyond 'shuttling' to 'weaving'. Likewise, if by connecting the graphic fluctuations of an ECG with the emotional ebb and flow that a suspense story is able to produce in a reader, students are able to see that the key to suspense building lies in the writer's ability to control the reader's emotional response and that therefore a suspense story is as much about the reader as the writer, then 'weaving' as opposed to mere 'shuttling' can be said to have taken place. However, in spite of these acts of 'weaving', when students come to creating their own written texts, the test is whether they are able to translate the different 'affordances' that different modes of meaning representation provide into words – verbs, adverbs, adjectives, even punctuation, etc. – that allow the reader, without the aid of sound, lighting or oral 'effects', to imagine and

hence experience the suspense as intensely and richly as they would in a multi-sensory environment.

'Connected learnings' is not only about making links within a lesson or unit; it is equally about emphasising the value of a lesson or activity to competencies or concerns *beyond* the classroom, where the focus will be on the extent to which the talk and tasks in a lesson help learners to recognise their value and meaning beyond the instructional context, i.e. to see their future significance and utility. These two types of connections can be interpreted as existing in a bi-directional but complementary relationship. The first – connections to the learners' prior knowledge and experiences – can be seen as bringing the learners' *outside* knowledge and experiences *into* the classroom, hence 'outside in'. The second – connections between what is taught in class and the value or applicability it has beyond classroom walls and examination halls – can be construed as bringing what is *inside* the school textbooks/classroom *out* to the real world, hence 'inside out' (Teo, 2008; see also Cooke and Wallace with Shrubshall, 2004). Both 'outside in' and 'inside out' connections can be construed as a conduit that facilitates the exchange and interaction of ideas and experiences that lead to the construction of meaningful knowledge and practical learning. In the context of Miss T's lessons, the pertinent question is: what is the value of learning how to read and write suspense stories beyond the immediate curricular prescriptions and examination requirements? In attempting to answer this question, one must go beyond the texts consumed and produced in class to the thinking skills and understandings underpinning the effective reading and writing of such texts. Although Miss T never makes it explicit to her students, the value of understanding how texts work as an interaction between writer and reader and the relationship between form and function goes a long way towards enriching her students' appreciation of texts. In this sense, suspense stories are merely a medium for the teaching and learning of how language works in texts, and a vehicle for expanding their textual repertoires, a distinct advantage in our increasingly text-mediated landscape.

The interdisciplinary and multimodal nature of Miss T's lessons can also be seen as anticipatory of the multi-literate competencies and the transdisciplinary epistemological dispositions that are likely to be demanded in the new media age of the 21st century (Kress, 2003). By exposing her students to an interdisciplinary and multimodal learning environment, she is manifestly shaping their thinking, attitudes and dispositions – teaching them how to work collaboratively and think outside of disciplinary boundaries instead of merely how to read and write – the value of which clearly goes well beyond classroom walls and examination halls. Looking at this more critically, however, it is arguable that the transition of raw ideas ('inner speech') into oral speech first and later writing is a process that requires careful and explicit instruction, something which Miss T does not seem to provide, unfortunately. It is interesting that in Hallidayan theory the spoken and written modes are typically held in opposition, in that it is their differences rather than similarities that are often highlighted (Halliday, 1985; see also Halliday, 2002). This may lead language and literacy teachers to regard them as binary opposites

rather than complementary modes that exist on a continuum of meaning-making (see Elbow, 2000, p. 149-167, for a discussion on the shifting relationships between speech and writing). Writing teachers working within this paradigm may therefore frown at students who produce speech-like writing and actively discourage their use of speech-like features. In this regard, Miss T's endeavour to get her students to first produce an oral script that paves the way for a written product at the end of the unit is an enlightened move that seems to recognise the value of oral resources that can be used to scaffold writing. However, what is lacking is the explicit instruction – on the features that oral and written versions of a suspense story share and, crucially, how they differ, how a script written to be read aloud is both similar to and different from a written story, and so on – without which students are likely to become confused and end up producing a potpourri of texts that are neither effective oral scripts nor written stories.

Another key lesson lies in the systematic and explicit manner of teaching exemplified in Miss T's lessons. It is believed that explicit instruction is especially important for average or low-achieving learners and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who, more than other students, need the teacher's explicit instruction in order to learn how to read and write academically valued genres which would otherwise remain a mystery to them (Cope, Kalantzis, Kress & Martin, 1993). However, it is sometimes easy for writing teachers to model good writing without being explicit about what makes the writing good; even if qualities of good writing are explicitly highlighted, teachers may not sufficiently equip learners with the proper enabling strategies to work towards the target. The use of the 'text-type' approach to teach writing, as recommended by the English language syllabus in Singapore, requires teachers to be explicit about the structural and linguistic features of particular types of text, such as the recount, narrative, procedure, argument and report. Indeed, the syllabus clearly states that '[e]xplicit teaching of grammar in a meaningful context is advocated so that pupils will know how to use grammatical items and structures to communicate meaningfully' (p. 64). However, while as many as 90% of middle school teachers claim to understand the genre-based approach and are explicit in highlighting the language features of text-types (Goh et al, 2005, p. 38), what they sometimes fail to do is to be explicit about the *role* these features play in the text-type. Without being explicit about this form-function connection, the emphasis on these formal features can and do often degenerate into prescriptive drilling in which teachers drill their students on these features and subsequently 'police the text' to ensure that it conforms to these features, a phenomenon observed by Watkins (1999) in the context of Australia. This reductive view of genre teaching, which has been referred to as a kind of 'new formalism' (Barrs, 2004), stems possibly from a heavy reliance on a transmissionist mode of pedagogy, as represented by the 'Teaching Cycle', which genre advocates believe is an effective way of inducting learners into unfamiliar generic structures (Derewianka, 1996; Hassan, 1996). Another critique of the genre-based approach is that the emphasis on form is sometimes done at the expense of meaning or content.

After all, according to Halliday (1994), a language is a system for making meaning and learning to write is therefore learning how to mean. And so without a concomitant focus on meaning, form becomes a skeletal artifice devoid of life and purpose.

Put simply, explicit instruction is not just about being explicit about what features characterise a particular text-type, but *why* they do and *how* they contribute to the meaning and purpose of the text-type. In this regard, Miss T's effort in highlighting the language features of the 'Chinese Boy in Melee Malaise' story, which contribute to its sense of excitement and action, is a laudable one. What is significant is that instead of merely telling her students about the verbs and adverbs that heighten the readers' emotional response to the story, Miss T *shows* them how they work by getting them to first highlight these words on their own before getting them to read the story after erasing these words from the story. This is aimed at helping them to *discover* and appreciate for themselves the role that these words play in the context of a suspense story, which the students appear to have grasped (turn 43). Furthermore, by tapping on the history of Singapore during WW2 that her students have learnt from their History lessons, Miss T is also able to help her students 'flesh out' their suspense narratives more easily while affording them sufficient room for creativity. In these ways, Miss T is able to fulfill the what, why and how of explicit instruction.

What must be apparent to the reader by now is that such a process of coaxing the understanding of the role of structural features from learners and attending to both form and function can be a long and arduous one, one which teachers in Singapore can ill-afford in the face of the demands of an overcrowded, ambitious and assessment-oriented curriculum (Cheah, 1996; Ow and Ho, 1993). Consequently, from personal observation it is not uncommon to see teachers galloping through the stages of the 'Teaching Cycle' and deconstructing the features of the target genre in a perfunctory and prescriptive way for their students instead of helping them to discover the role and purpose of these features on their own. What Miss T has managed to accomplish in her enacted curriculum can be said to be commendable in terms of its alignment with the curricular goals of the 'text-type' syllabus and the broader TSLN goal of cultivating a generation of thinkers and not merely doers. For instance, her explicit instruction on the functions of certain features of the suspense narrative goes beyond teaching her students how to read and write suspense stories, and effectively gives them access to the linguistic resources and cognitive structures to understand and work effectively with language. That Miss T has devoted more than fifty percent of the entire unit to the text deconstruction stage also speaks of her recognition that this is a pivotal stage in genre teaching (Martin, 1997; Derewianka, 1996). However, this means that other stages of the unit would have to be compressed in order to work within the time and curricular constraints and assessment demands placed on her. As such, the lack of adequate attention to the transition from the oral script writing process to the final written product, as observed earlier, is something that is lamentable yet perhaps inevitable under the given circumstances. That the students are assessed mainly on the final written product and that prior activities and tasks are all geared towards this goal,

which is what counts in high-stakes examinations, makes it more regrettable that Miss T did not or could not afford to devote more time and resources to helping her students craft the final written version of their suspense stories. In fact, throughout the entire unit, it is observable that much of the classroom talk and tasks prior to the last stage, in which students had to write their stories individually, do not focus on any substantive writing. A re-imagining of assessment strategy that gives equal emphasis to product and process (of constructing drafts of mini-paragraphs and revising them through negotiated feedback from peers, for instance) would send the right signal to teachers like Miss T that the teaching and assessing of writing need to be carefully staged and scaffolded (Martin, 1997). As Vygotsky once noted, putting thoughts into writing involves 'the longest journey that thought has to travel' (1986: 182). While getting her students to jointly produce an oral script goes some way in helping them make this journey, as discussed earlier, the cognitive and linguistic distance that remains to be traversed is still considerable and formidable.

Finally, the challenge for many teachers is not only to make their lessons coherent, relevant and focused on specific enabling skills, but to deliver 'high stakes knowledges, complex discipline and field-specific discourses, higher order thinking, critical meta-languages and intellectual engagement' (Luke, 2000, p. 137). In terms of the intellectual quality of Miss T's lessons, reference has already been made to her use of analogy in an attempt to 'weave' everyday knowledge/experience with less familiar and more abstract concepts aimed at producing deeper understandings of what suspense means and how it is constituted. In this sense, Miss T is not only teaching her students how to read and write per se but how to think. She has gone beyond 'connected learnings' to 'intellectual quality', as her 'weavings' contribute to the promotion of her students' 'deep knowledge and understanding' (a sub-category of 'intellectual quality') of how suspense is operationalised in various texts and modes of meaning-making. In addition, through simple tasks like jigsaw activities or even getting her students to re-read a story with some key words removed, Miss T is arguably providing them not only with the structures for writing but for thinking and, ultimately, understanding how language works. The collaborative nature of some of her small group activities like the jigsaw tasks and joint construction and critique of oral scripts also facilitates the sort of 'dialogic talk' (Alexander, 2004; Haworth, 1999) which emphasises reciprocal and cumulative classroom interactions which lead to a shared and purposeful building up of knowledge and understanding. This aligns closely with the quality of 'substantive communication' which is another of the categories that constitute the dimension of 'intellectual quality'. Although the lesson transcripts discussed earlier show a largely monologic structure of classroom discourse dominated by teacher talk, there are significant portions of her unit (not presented here) which afford considerable opportunities for her students to work together in small groups to generate and discuss ideas and to solve problems, all of which represent occasions for them to co-construct knowledge and understanding. For instance, in deciding which chunk of text belongs where in relation to other chunks in the jigsaw task, students would have to observe the

structural patterns and cohesive links among the chunks, articulate a clear rationale for using them to order the chunks, and defend their reasoning against possible alternative views from their group members. This provides a rich environment for them to develop their cognitive and linguistic abilities in an interesting and collaborative way. More importantly, such a task also provides learners with the platform to manipulate the information or ideas presented to them by synthesizing, generalizing, hypothesizing, drawing conclusions and ultimately making meaning out of these otherwise meaningless textual fragments. This meshes with yet another category in the 'intellectual quality' dimension: 'manipulation of knowledge'. In this way, students are empowered as text producers and sources of knowledge, and not mere text receivers or transmitters of knowledge.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that while Miss T's unit of lessons does offer tremendous opportunities and potential for learners to develop not only their linguistic competencies and expand their textual repertoires but also develop their cognitive capacities, they remain as unactualised potential if these opportunities are not actually taken up by students. In the lesson transcripts examined, evidence of student uptake is regrettably limited and uneven. For instance, while Miss T's students do appear to have grasped the value of action words in making a story 'exciting', evidence of their ability to transfer this knowledge and apply it to their own suspense stories is less clear insofar as their classroom talk and self-constructed texts are concerned. Student uptake depends in part on teacher encouragement and support, so that initial false steps and stumbles made by students do not deter them from persevering in their journey. In this regard, it is especially important for middle school teachers to be cognisant of the huge cognitive and linguistic demands exerted on lower middle school students as they move up from the primary school level, and to be patient and forgiving of the seeming incompetence that such students may display. Equally important is the institutional support given in terms of initial teacher training, which needs to be directed at explicit instruction and aimed at developing understandings away from a transmissionist mode of teaching that equips teachers with strategies without a deep understanding of the underlying principles that would allow them to manipulate and adapt these strategies flexibly and effectively. Finally, curriculum planners and teacher educators need to provide strong but not heavy-handed guidance especially to beginning teachers to help them translate broadly construed 'desired outcomes' into concrete classroom activities, tasks and practices that enact the curriculum in such a way that due emphasis is given to both assessment of learning and assessment *for* learning (Neal, 2010). Perhaps, then, we may be able to equip learners with the range of knowledges, skills, understandings and aptitudes necessary for participation in an increasingly globalized and information-saturated world.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Alexius Chia and the research assistants involved in the ETR project team, for without their efforts in the data collection and coding, this paper would not have materialised. The author is also grateful for the probing comments and helpful suggestions provided by the two anonymous reviewers which have contributed towards the sharpening of focus, enhancement of argument and refinement of writing in this article.

References

- Alexander, R. (2004). *Dialogic teaching: Rethinking classroom talk*. Cambridge: Faculty of Education.
- Barrs, M. (2004). Writing and thinking. *Teaching thinking*. Spring 2004, 6-11.
- Bearne, E. and Kress, G. (2001). Editorial. *Reading literacy and language*. November 2001, 89-93.
- Bereiter, C. (1980). Development in Writing. In Gregg, L.W. and Steinberg, E.R. (eds.). *Cognitive Processes in Writing* (pp. 73-93). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cazden, C. (2006). *Connected learning: Weaving in classroom lessons*. Keynote address, Pedagogy in Practice 2006 Conference. Held in the University of Newcastle, Australia, January 18, 2006.
- Cheah, Y.M. (1996). 'But that's our system, we can't change it': implementing new literacy practices into the Singapore system. Paper presented at the World Conference on Literacy, organised by the International Literacy Institute, Philadelphia, March 12-14.
- Christie, F. (2002). *Classroom Discourse: A Functional Perspective*. London: Continuum.
- Cooke, M. and Wallace, C. with Shrubshall, P. (2004). 'Inside Out/Outside In: A study of reading in ESOL classrooms'. In Roberts, C., Baynham, M., Shrubshall, P., Barton, D., Chopra, P., Cooke, M., Hodge, R., Pitt, K., Schellekens, P., Wallace, C. and Whitfield, S. (Eds.). *Research Report: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) – case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources*. (pp. 94-113). Institute of Education, University of London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy.
- Cope, B., Kalantzis, M., Kress, G. and Martin, J. (1993). Bibliographic Essay: Developing the Theory and Practice of Genre-based Literacy. In Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. *The Powers of Literacy: a Genre Approach to Teaching Writing* (pp. 231-247). London: Falmer Press.
- Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) (2010). *English Language Syllabus 2010: Primary (Foundation) & Secondary (Normal Technical)*. Retrieved on 30th January 2011 from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/syllabuses/languages-and-literature/files/english-primary-foundation-secondary-normal-technical.pdf>
- Curriculum Planning & Development Division (CPDD) (2001). *English Language Syllabus: Primary & Secondary*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children, *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 280-298.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New York Press.
- Derewianka, B. (1996). *Exploring the writing of genres*. London: United Kingdom Reading Association.
- Dewey, J. (1998). School and society. In *Dewey on education*. New York: Teachers College Press (Originally published in 1899).
- Elbow, P. (2000). *Everyone can write*. Oxford: OUP.
- Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Midgley, C., Reuman, D., Maclver, D., & Feldlaufer, H. (1993). Negative effects of traditional middle schools on students' motivation. *Elementary School Journal*, 93, 553-574. doi: 10.1086/461740

- Foley, J. (1998). Moving from 'commonsense knowledge' to 'educational knowledge'. In S. Gopinathan, W. K. Ho, A. Pakir & V. Saravanan (Eds.). *Language, Society and Education in Singapore* (pp. 245-268). Singapore: Times Academic.
- Freebody, P. and Luke, A. (2003). Literacy as engaging with new forms of life: The 'four roles' model. In G. Bull and M. Anstey (Eds.). *The Literacy Lexicon*. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson.
- Freiberg, J. and Freebody, P. (1995). Analysing literacy events in classrooms and homes: Conversation-analytic approaches. In *The literacy practices in and out of school in low socio-economic communities*. Canberra City, ACT: Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, Curriculum Corporation, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Freiberg, J. and Freebody, P. (2001). 'Re-discovering practical reading activities in schools and homes', *Journal of Research in Reading*, 24(3), 222-34. doi: 10.1111/1467-9817.00145
- Gibbons, P. (2003). Mediating language learning: teacher interactions with ESL students in a content-based classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 247-272. doi: 10.2307/3588504
- Goh, C. C. M., Zhang, L. J., Ng C. H. & Koh, G. H. (2005). Knowledge, beliefs and syllabus implementation: A study of English language teachers in Singapore. Monograph, National Institute of Education, Singapore.
- Goh, C.T. (1996). "Prepare our children for the new century: Teach them well." Address by the Prime Minister at the Teachers' Day rally, 1996. In Tan, J., Gopinathan, S., & Ho, W.K. (Eds.). *Education in Singapore: A Book of Readings*. Singapore: Prentice Hall.
- Goh, S. T. (2004). Chinese Boy in Melee Malaise. In *Walk Like a Dragon: short stories* (pp. 26-31). Singapore: Angsana Books.
- Green, J. & Dixon, C. (1993). Introduction. Talking knowledge into being: discursive and social practices in classrooms. *Linguistics and Education*, 5, 231-239. doi: 10.1016/0898-5898(93)90001-Q
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985). *Spoken and written language*. Burwood, Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Second edition. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2002). *On grammar*. New York: Continuum.
- Hasan, R., & Williams, G. (Eds.) (1996). *Literacy in society*. London: Longman.
- Haworth, A. (1999). Bakhtin in the classroom: What constitutes a dialogic text? Some lessons from small group interaction. *Language and Education*, 13(2), 99-117. doi: 10.1080/09500789908666762
- Koh, A. (2004). Singapore education in 'new times': global/local imperatives. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 25, 335-349. doi: 10.1080/0159630042000247917
- Kramer-Dahl, A. (2004). Abuses of grammar teaching: the role of crisis discourse in appropriating a potentially innovative language syllabus for Singapore schools. *The Curriculum Journal*, 15, 69-89. doi: 10.1080/1026716032000189489
- Kramer-Dahl, A., Teo, P., Chia, A., and Churchill, K. (2005). Three dimensions of effective pedagogy: Preliminary findings, codings and vignettes from a study of literacy practices in Singapore middle schools (observation phase). Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education, Singapore.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203164754
- Kwek, D. (2005). A literature review of weaving as a pedagogical device. Singapore, National Institute of Education, Centre for Research on Pedagogy and Practice, Ms.
- Lim, S.C. (2002). Developments in the English language syllabuses in Singapore. *Asia - Pacific Journal of Education*, 22(2), 81 - 95. doi: 10.1080/0218879020220208
- Lingard, R., Ladwig, J., Bahr, M., Mills, M., Hayes, D., Christie, P., Gore, J. & Luke, A. (2000). *Queensland school longitudinal restructuring study: Final report*. Brisbane: Education Queensland.

- Luke, A. (2000). The Queensland 'New basics': An interview with Allan Luke. In *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 9(1), 132-141.
- Luke, A. (2001). A preface and introduction to course notes. Lecture notes on ED7021: New Basics and Curriculum Reform, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland,
- Luke, A., Cazden, C. Lin, A. and Freebody, P. (2005). *A coding scheme for the analysis of classroom discourse in Singapore schools*. Unpublished Technical Paper. Singapore: National Institute of Education, Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice.
- Martin, J. R. (1997). Analysing genre: Functional parameters. In J.R. Martin & F. Christie (Eds.). *Genre institutions: Social processes in the workplace and school* (pp. 3-39). London: Cassell.
- Moje, E. B. & Sutherland, L. M. (2003). The future of middle school literacy education. *English Education*, 35, 149-164.
- Neal, Michael R. (2010). Assessment in the Service of Learning. *College Composition and Communication*, 61(4), 746-758.
- Newmann, F. M. & Associates. (1996). *Authentic achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Newmann, F. M., Lopez, G. and Bryk, A. S. (1998). *The quality of intellectual work in Chicago schools: A baseline report*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Ow, A. and Ho W. K. (1993). Teachers' views of English language teaching. Paper presented at the 7th Educational Research Association's Conference on 'Education and the Environment', Singapore, 23-25 September.
- PIRLS (2006). *PIRLS 2006 International Report*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Lynch School of Education, Boston College. Retrieved from http://timss.bc.edu/PDF/P06_IR_ExecSummary.pdf
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002). *Narrative fiction: contemporary poetics*. Second edition. London: Routledge.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Teo, P. (2008). Outside In/Inside Out: Bridging the gap in literacy education in Singapore classrooms. *Language and Education*, 22(6), 411-431. doi: 10.1080/09500780802152721
- Teo, P and Chua, A. (2008). Connected Learnings: Teaching text-types using project work. In Tay, M.Y., Ho, C. and Teo, P. (Eds.). *Teaching Reading and Writing: Supporting learners in the Singapore classroom* (pp. 150-184). Singapore: Pearson/Longman.
- Tuyay, S., Jennings, L. & Dixon, C. (1995). Classroom discourse and opportunities to learn: an ethnographic study of knowledge construction in a bilingual grade three classroom. *Discourse Processes*, 19, 75-110. doi: 10.1080/01638539109544906
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and Language*. London: MIT Press.
- Watkins, M. (1999). 'Policing the Text: Structuralism's stranglehold on Australian language and literacy pedagogy'. *Language and Education*, 13(2), 118-132. doi: 10.1080/09500789908666763
- Wells. G. (1990). Talk about text: Where literacy is learned and taught. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 20, 369-405. doi: 10.2307/1179876
- Wyatt-Smith, C. & Cumming, J. (2003). Curriculum literacies: expanding domains of assessment. *Assessment in Education*, 10, 47-59. doi: 10.1080/09695940301690

Appendix A: Excerpts from Lesson 3

1. T What are the four different features? Let's do a quick recap. First one?
2. SS Orientation.
3. T Orientation, very good. K, let me draw it in a different fashion where you know it. First layer, known as orientation. (writes on the board) What is this method known as to you?
4. S (xxx) [inaudible]
5. T Yes, I hear something.
6. S Layering.
7. T Layering, very good. This is called 'layering'. (...) Why layering?
8. SS [silence]
9. T An onion? When you peel the layers, do you actually see what's inside before you peel it? No, right? It's only after you have peeled the first layer, then second layer is exposed. Suspense story does this. Ok? It's always layer by layer, it doesn't give you the information all at the same time. K? Layering. After orientation, what do you get?
10. T Complication. (writes on the board) Peng Xiong, what is a complication?
11. S Problem.
12. T Problem in the story. Who faces the problem?
13. S The character.
14. T The character, very good. K. The character is the one. Keith, what comes after the complication?
15. S (xxx)
16. T Climax. (writes on the board) Keith, why is there a need for a climax in a suspense story?
17. T Because what?
18. S (xxx)
19. T It's the most exciting part of the story. K, last one, k, we all know is what you call that?
20. SS Resolution.

21. T Resolution. Good. (writes on the board) K, so this is your structure for writing your suspense story. It goes up this way. Next, I want to draw you a diagram which I want you to include in your, the paper you have been taking notes on. Now, listen ah, the diagram goes like this. I'll use red pen. (...) Ok, we all know your heart beats according to the music. You all know that right? If you listen to the music which is very slow in bits, you will also feel very relaxed. But when you go into, when you put on a CD that's got pop rock music, pop or rock music, beating is very fast, likewise your heart rate goes up, right or not? K, what does suspense story do to your heart?
22. S Very curious.
23. T Correct, yes. Yesterday, we watched "The Last Samurai", ok, did you realize that your heart was actually beating and pounding towards the climax?
24. SS Yes.
25. T What you went through was this, when the opening scene came on, you saw the movie, your heart went like that. (drawing on the board) Ok, for the moment, you heart is beating, you heart is still beating. If you are not sure, better check. Your heart is still beating, but the moment you reach a certain point, you realize the waves go like these. K, the samurai came, then in the end, not that you died ah. (students laughing) But, as in, it tapered off. Ok, maybe this shouldn't be so long ah. K, here, like this. What does this mean? Very simple, I will break it up to sections for you. First part is where you are introduced to the orientation. This is number one, orientation. Subsequently, the complication came. You had that problem number two. Complication, your heart rate goes up, because you know you are expecting something to happen, the story is going to turn and going to change. It's going to un... it's unfolding before your eyes. Thirdly, when you reach the climax, the waves just go haywire. Your heart is beating so fast that as if you are a character in the scene, as if you were the one, you were Tom Cruise, ah was about to be speared, right or not? You felt that way. This is the climax, this area is the climax. K, resolution, the samurai came of course.

Appendix B: Excerpts from Lesson 6

1. T Yes, what happened?
In Singapore then.
There was the what riots?
2. SS Racial riots
3. T Yes, racial riots, very good.
With this picture of the boy in mind, imagine this person is the boy ok;
now you have your highlighter in your hand, highlighter in your hand; I
want you to highlight words ok that strike you as feelings and emotions
that the person went through.
That's first thing, his emotions; the second thing would be action verbs.
What were some of the action verbs?
I want you to highlight them.
Can you do that quickly now on your piece of paper?
[students work on their own for a few minutes]
4. T Ok, come.
Have you already finished this?
Yes, yes or no?
Yes, ah.
Can you tell me some of the words you've highlighted?
5. S Horror.
6. T Horror.
7. S Bloodthirsty.
8. T Bloodthirsty.
9. S Assailants
10. T Assailants
11. T Ah ok, so what does the word, 'bloodthirsty' describe about the
assailant?
12. S They have the urge to kill.
13. T It's not just killing because of necessity ah, but he is bloodthirsty means
what?
14. S He wants to kill.
15. T Is it?
Yes, he really wants to kill; the intention is there; the deliberate
intention to kill is there; bloodthirsty.
Ok, what else?
What other words strike you?
16. S Ruthlessly.

17. T Ruthlessly, very good.
Ruthlessly.
18. S Mercilessly.
19. T Mercilessly.
Did you all highlight the word, 'horror?'
20. SS Yes
21. T Did you mention that?
Very good, must mention this ah.
Horror, ruthlessly, bloodthirsty.
22. T There are some things that you actually have not mentioned.
23. S Trampled.
24. T First paragraph, there's one word there that you all have missed out.
25. S Bashed.
26. T Yes, what kind of word is that?
27. S Action word.
28. T Yes, action words.
What are some of the other action words?
Dashing.
First paragraph, what also, what did the boy do?
Read the first sentence. The boy?
29. S Stared.
30. T Stared.
31. T Ok, what else?
.....
Ok, very simple; with just these words on the board; these are the words you have actually taken out from the text, ok.
If I were to erase all these words from your text, can you read your text now without the words that you have highlighted?
32. SS (students reading passage)
33. T Keep the nouns there; keep the nouns but erase all the fanciful words, action words.
34. T Ok, tell me does your story make sense?
35. SS No.
36. T It does?
Does it?
Do you, can you follow what is happening?
37. S Yes.
38. T You can still follow what is happening right?
But does it give you the details of how it happened?
39. SS No.
40. T Is it exciting?
41. S Very dull.

42. T It's very dull.
What makes it interesting?
What makes it exciting?
43. S Words that describe action
44. T Words that describe action, so these are actually words that describe the action that is happening and build the suspense in the story. Because of the presence of these words, it gives you a context of how, what kind of violence was seen here, in the text; what sort of violence; how violent was it? Thereafter, when he was captured and taken away, the mood changed into a more? What kind of mood was that?
45. S Calm mood
46. T Yes? Jonovan, a calmer mood. Ok, the fighting was all gone. This is exactly what happens in your suspense story. Your heart, physiology ah, what happens in your body is very important as well. That's why yesterday I made you close your eyes and listen to the sounds, the clanking of the swords, the sound of death.

Appendix C: CHINESE BOY IN MELEE MALAISE

"IT WAS 21st July 1964. I was only five then. But I'll never forget the day. That chaos - that riot. The sudden, mad violence of it all. And for a long time, a hangover of prejudice. The aftermath of that nightmare melee festered in me. Till it became a malaise that consumed me.

5

"Can you blame me? There I was on that fatal day, a defenseless child trapped on the spot, in that genesis moment of the infamous racial riots of 1964 - panic-stricken, caught plumb in the eye of a twister about to whirl the whole country into a spin!"

10

My friend, Mark Chin, a successful professional today, began to pour out, almost compulsively, his riveting story. I had merely mentioned to him I was going to give a talk to some schoolchildren on racial harmony. That triggered him off. What happened to him in that riot? What brought on the trauma and hate that ulcerated in him after that melee experience? And how was that hate resolved?

15

THE riot was a most shameful moment in our history. We Singaporeans snapped. We ran amok. We began killing our fellow-citizens. Singapore was part of Malaysia from September 1963 to August 1965. It was not a harmonious union. Some Malaysian Malays were increasingly apprehensive about some articulate Chinese Singaporeans getting more and more involved in Malaysian affairs.

20

In July 1964, tensions edged close to a flash point. On 12th July, the Secretary-General of UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) came down to Singapore for a meeting of Malay organisations here. He made a fiery speech against the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. He alleged that there was enough evidence to send Lee to prison for "oppressing and suppressing" Malays. The meeting resulted in an ominous decision: the formation of an "Action Committee."

25

The pot was set to boil. Elements in the two majority races in Malaysia, Malay and Chinese, were incensed to the extreme. The situation was becoming ugly. All that was needed now was one physical act of hostility - someone to throw the first stone. And someone did.

30

Following a gathering to celebrate Prophet Mohamed's birthday on 21st July 1964, the customary Malay procession began to wind its way through the streets of Geylang where many Malay people lived. But it had also to pass through some Chinese areas. And these places were also the haunts of Chinese gangsters. As they walked along beating their drums in solemn religious celebration, stones were suddenly thrown into their midst! And in a flash, sticks appeared out of nowhere, brandished by strong and ready arms. All hell broke loose.

35

40 Mark and his family, although not Muslims, had come out to enjoy what promised to be a colourful show, something they had watched and enjoyed every year. They were caught in the crossfire of street fighting.

The transformation was instantaneous.

45 One moment, there were only pious participants in religious procession and happy spectators; Chinese and Malay and others, including many families with children. The next moment, it was commotion and chaos! People scrambled for sanctuary. They went back into their houses or into the nearest places of shelter: shops, drains or back-lanes.

50 Mark had wandered off from his family. In the sudden blur of rushing bodies, he could not find them. He managed to push his way back to his home not far off. But he found the door closed tight. And there was already scuffling and exchange of blows going on right outside his house. He banged desperately on the door, yelling and screaming with fear. Perhaps, the people inside could not hear him, or they could not recognize him
55 from his shrieks amid the roars and cries of the people battling away outside the closed door. The boy stared in horror as he witnessed bloodthirsty assailants bashing their victims. Arms and clubs were swinging about ruthlessly. And that one picture he would never forget: a Chinese neighbour, an innocent spectator, mercilessly set upon by a group of Malays.

60 In that numbing terror of a child confronted with brutality and bloodshed, Mark did the only thing he could do. He squatted down. He hid his head between his knees. He shut his eyes tight. He shut out the world. Suddenly, he felt strong hands grabbing his body.
The bad people had got him? Was that the end of him? Any second he would be
65 *dashed to the ground, and battered or trampled to death?*
He did not dare open his eyes.

He felt himself lifted up, carried away in muscular arms. He did not resist. He was paralysed with fear anyway. He could not open his eyes even if he had wanted to. The
70 man carrying him was running very fast. He heard the knocking on a door and the door opening. Voices spoke words that he could not make out. Then, he felt himself put down on the floor.

When at last he could open his eyes, he found himself in a dark hall. And there were
75 other children with him, sitting on the floor too.
How long he stayed there he could not remember. He and the others with him waited, each wrapped up in his own fear, moaning and whimpering, not daring to talk. He was exhausted. He fell asleep.

80 The next thing he knew, he was home! Safe and sound, back home with his parents.
Had it all been just a bad dream?

No.

85 His Dad told him what had happened. A racial riot had started right outside their house, and it was still continuing. He had been carried to safety by a good man who had also rescued other children like him, and carried them all to the safe haven of a nearby friendly house. And, as soon as things quietened down, the man had brought Mark back to his home.

90 The riot spread further afield. Curfew was imposed, not lifted till 2nd August, although things went back to normal within a week. By then, 22 people had been killed and 461 injured.

Mark and his family knew some of those injured. In the days and months that followed, the boy learnt more about the agitation by extremists that had fueled the violence. Unconsciously, he became less open with his Malay friends whom he now treated with suspicion.

95 *People so easygoing and gentle- yet able to change into such bloodthirsty people with no feeling for anyone!*

100 Of course the boy, traumatised by his bad experience, was overreacting, equating the actions of fringe ultras with the beliefs of the majority. Mark's Dad, like most Singaporeans, was more balanced. He knew the big picture better. When Mark excused himself from going with the rest of the family to visit their Malay friends at the next annual *Hari Raya* (New Year) celebration that confirmed to Dad: Mark had developed a malaise, a phobia that needed to be expunged before it really set in.

105 Dad had a frank talk with his son. In the exchange, Dad said something he assumed Mark knew all along, something that happened on that scary day.

But Mark was surprised by his Dad's revelation.

"How could you have been unaware? You were there yourself!" Dad said.

"I was confused. I was terrified. I was so tired out. I was in a daze. I had my eyes closed all the time..." Mark, embarrassed, came out full of reasons.

110 What Dad told him now truly opened his eyes.

It made a world of difference. He had also matured a good deal in that one year, despite his initial aftermath of hate feelings. He was ripe for his Dad's eye opener revelation. It spelt finis to his racial prejudice.

115 "After all," my friend Mark concluded his story to me, "that stranger who carried me away, the one who risked life and limb to save me from the melee - that man, that saviour of mine: he was a Malay."

(Note: This story is told with fictional details. It was inspired by an actual childhood experience of Mark Chin, today an architect | Published with courtesy)