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Chapter 3

Technical Students' Perceptions on the Use of Thinking Tools in the Literature in English Classroom

Subarna Sivapalan

Ena Bhattacharya

Literature and Critical Thinking

The body of knowledge contained in literature espouse essential traits of critical thinking. While Dewey (1933) briefly defines critical thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p.118), thinking critically, as discussed in the arenas of philosophy and education, is touted as an essential component of education (Bailin, et al., 1999; Hemming, 2000). According to Facione (2006), critical thinking "is the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. This process reasoned consideration to evidence, context, conceptualisations, methods, and criteria" (p.17). Facione further adds that critical thinking is 'a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life' (Facione as cited in Wegerif, 1990, p. 6).

There are abounding advantages of using critical thinking tools for the purpose of learning as mentioned above. Nevertheless, the most prominent would certainly be the use of critical thinking for the promotion of effective learning. According to Paul (2005), being able to think about what one is learning while interpreting and making relations is an important part of the learning process. Critical thinking skills in addition, allow students to more quickly assimilate subject-

students to engage and respond to less-well defined problems (Kurffss, 1988; Tsui, 2000; Tsui 2002). As a result, students are better prepared to confront both personal and professional challenges (Kurffss, 1988; Tsui, 2002).

Literature is an indispensable element of tertiary level language courses in the Malaysian English Second Language (ESL) context. Many innovative measures could be undertaken to make this subject more appealing for the technical learners. Although the teaching of literature is often considered to be a way to introduce students to the cultural knowledge, the great thoughts, and the high culture of our society (Langer, 1990; Bloom, 1988; Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch & Finn, 1987), its role in the development of the sharp and critical mind is sometimes overlooked.

This study is drawn along the lines of Edward De Bono's established critical thinking framework. De Bono (1993) advocates the importance of the use of thinking tools in developing synthesis and evaluation abilities. The tools create a framework for defining a situation and giving broad and inclusive viewpoints. A brief description of each thinking tool is provided in Table 1.

Although there is abundant research on critical thinking and its impact towards literary studies, research on the use of thinking tools such as Other People's View or OPV, Consider All Factors or CAF and Plus Minus Interesting or PMI towards enhancing technical students' skills in interpreting and analysing literary texts have been scarce. The objective of this study therefore was to gauge the perception of technical students on the benefits and drawbacks of applying thinking tools to facilitate better understanding of literary texts. The following research questions informed the study:

1. What are the benefits of incorporating critical thinking tools in the literature classroom?
2. How do technical learners' generally perceive the application of critical thinking tools to promote better understanding of literary

NAME OF TOOL	DESCRIPTION
<p>Other People's View (OPV)</p>	<p>This tool encourages students to consider different perceptions and opinions of other people. This thinking tool technique encourages students to analyse and evaluate the viewpoints of other people who are affected by an issue, event or incident. The thinking tool encourages the students to broaden their perception by analysing other people's viewpoint</p>
<p>Consider All Factors (CAF)</p>	<p>This tool encourages students' to analyse and evaluate all matters to be considered. Students have to consider adding to the list of factors to probe and understand an issue in detail. In listing all the factors, students will have to evaluate factors that are of more importance to less important factors.</p>
<p>Plus Minus Interesting (PMI)</p>	<p>This tool allows students to categorise and evaluate the points or issues in various categories. Values in terms of points are attached to each chosen word or phrase according to the degree of importance. Students have to evaluate the total value of each category. The category with the most value reflects the students' judgment or decision.</p>

Table 1: Description of Thinking Tools

Methods

The participants of this study were Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP) foundation level students from the engineering, information communication technology (ICT) and business information systems (BIS) programmes. All participants ranged from the ages of 17–20. They were made up of Malaysian as well as international students. Participants were all registered for the English 1 course in which literature is taught. Table 2 indicates the profile of the 10 interviewees.

The study was conducted over a period of 6 weeks. Over the first two weeks, participants were asked to read the selected literary texts i.e. *The Jade Pendant* and *Re and Creation*. They were given the task of analysing and interpreting the characters, themes, plot and moral issues present

Student	Gender	Programme
A	Female	Engineering
B	Male	Engineering
C	Female	ICT/BIS
D	Male	Engineering
E	Male	Engineering
F	Female	Engineering
G	Male	ICT/BIS
H	Male	Engineering
I	Female	Engineering
J	Female	Engineering

Table 2: Interviewee Profile.

in the text using methods they were previously exposed to in secondary or high school when embarking on analysis and interpretation of literary texts. In the third week, participants were exposed to input on the application of critical thinking tools for the analysis of the literary texts. The remaining weeks were then used for guided and hands-on

During the hands-on practice sessions, participants had the opportunity to share and bounce their ideas through pair work and group work and share the outcome of their analysis with the class at large. Appendix A highlights samples of participants' analysis and interpretation of the literary texts, *The Jade Pendant* and *Re and Creation* using the OPV, PMI and CAF thinking tools.

The qualitative methodology was the main methodology applied for the study. The researchers employed the phenomenological theoretical tradition to study the perception of the technical students on the application of thinking tools to assist them in analysing and interpreting literary texts. The phenomenological approach was chosen as the researchers wanted to focus on the manner in which the students 'perceive, describe, feel about, judge, remember, make sense and talk' (Patton, 2002, p. 104) of the use of thinking tools in analysing and interpreting literary texts. Data was gathered through interviews with participants who had 'directly experienced the phenomenon' (Patton, 2002, p. 104) as they had 'lived experience as opposed to second hand experience' (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Interviews were chosen so as to 'offer the persons being interviewed the opportunity to respond in their own words and to express their own personal perspectives' (Patton, 2002). All interviews were standardised open-ended interviews and were conducted face-to-face by the primary researcher. Criterion based purposive sampling was used to select the participants of the research. The criteria for selection were some prior exposure to learning literature, and no experience on learning literature using critical thinking approaches. The selection of participants was based on the predetermined criteria mentioned above as the researchers were interested in exploring the manner in which participants related to their level of comprehension of characters, theme, plot and moral issues without and with exposure to using thinking tools for the purpose of interpretation and analysis of literary texts.

Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants at the end of the sixth week. Appendix B contains the questions posed

permission of the participants. Each interview session lasted between 20–30 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, confidentiality, data security and anonymity measures were clarified with all participants. All names indicated in this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. The interview transcripts were later transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed. Three prominent themes emerged, namely 'developing critical thinking skills', 'fostering understanding of literary texts' and 'systematic approach to learning literature'. The findings and discussion sections will elaborate these themes further.

Findings

Two short stories were used to elicit participants' feedback on the application of thinking tools in analysing and interpreting literary texts, namely *The Jade Pendant* and *Re and Creation*. *The Jade Pendant* centres on the main character Mrs Khoo who decides to sell her family's prized possession, the jade pendant to meet the lavish wedding expenses of her daughter to avoid being embarrassed in society. Ironically, the prized heirloom is bought by her maid, Ah Soh. The story is based upon two central themes, social status and the power of wealth. *Re and Creation* on the other hand revolves around the mystical powers of King Re, an initially a cruel King whose kindness is later portrayed after he decides to sacrifice his own flesh and blood, his daughter to rescue his people from disasters and war.

Findings from the interview indicate that there were potential benefits and drawbacks to applying OPV, PMI and CAFs to analyse and interpret the short stories. The findings are based on the themes that emerged from the interview sessions with the participants.

Three main themes emerged from the interviews with the participants on the use of thinking tools to analyse and interpret the short stories. The themes include 'advances critical and analytical thinking', 'systematic approach to learning literature' and 'fostering understanding of literary texts'. Each theme is explored in the section below.

Advances Critical and Analytical Thinking

Interviews with participants revealed that thinking tools are helpful in promoting critical and analytical thinking amongst students. The benefits of using thinking tools according to Student J is that it teaches her to critically consider all aspects that have an effect on the plot of the story.

When use the Consider All Factors tool, we have to really think in a very critical way...must think out of the box...not limit our mind.

Student H as well noted that he is able to decide which fact is more important compared to the other factors when he uses the thinking tools.

I have to think properly first. I must be aware which are more important events compared to the lesser important issues in the story...many small incidents can occur...but I must focus on the important ones.

Student I stressed that with thinking tools used in learning literature, more ideas can be expressed. This is expressed in her statement upon reading the *Jade Pendant* when using the CAF thinking tool.

When I use the CAF tool in analysing the different characters or situations in the Jade Pendant, I find that I am able to add on more ideas by using this tool.

Another student J added that with the use of the thinking tools in learning literature, we can explore many possibilities and add dimensions to the major and minor characters in the story.

Actually, reading a long story is no fun...but when I use the thinking tool such as PMI, I am eager to fill in the boxes of the many characters...I learn to read and find the meaning behind the actions of the character...so...then I know the characters better...whether main guys or not so important ones...I learn more about their characters...

The next theme that emerged was the effect of thinking tools towards a more organised approach to learning literature.

Systematic Approach to Learning Literature

In addition to advancing critical and analytical thinking skills, participants revealed that thinking tools can assist them in learning literature in a systematic way.

For Student B who finds literature a rather difficult subject to understand, the incorporation of thinking tools in the analysis of the literary texts has been valuable.

I am not a person who likes to learn literature because I cannot understand the story...because I don't like to memorised But when I use the CAF, PMI and OPV, I feel literature is enjoy and easy to understand because it is step by step action.

As revealed in the excerpt above, Student B explains that the use of the PMI, CAF and OPV thinking tools has made it possible for him to enjoy the learning of the subject which he once disliked due to his inability to understand the texts. He explains that through the use of the thinking tools, he is now able to pen his thoughts of the texts down in an orderly fashion, which he believes has made him enjoy his literature learning experience.

Echoing similar sentiments of Student B who finds the use of PMI, CAF and OPV as fitting tools to create better understanding of literary texts is Student I. Student I notes the following:

The way the tools are used has some similar in the way I learn mathematics...especially the Plus, Minus, Interesting, got calculation...i like it. I didn't know can use calculation to learn literature

Student I is of the opinion that the approach used in applying the thinking tools is similar to the methodical approaches she is used to when learning technical subjects. Hence, it makes the learning of literature more interesting for her as she is able to apply techniques similar to learning technical courses when she learns literature.

The next theme, fostering understanding of literary texts is discussed in the section that follows.

Fostering Understanding of Literary Texts

Participants indicated that all thinking tools i.e. OPV, CAF and PMI were effective in promoting understanding of the short stories. All participants indicated that they could apply OPV, PMI and CAF to analyse characters in the stories read. The PMI thinking tool for instance seems to be preferred over the OPV and CAF to analyse characters and moral issues in short stories, while the CAF tool is favoured for the analysis of plot and themes.

According to Student A, she likes using the PMI to analyse characters because,

...with the PMI, my thoughts are very systematic and organised...I can see the points very clearly what are the positive points, what are the negative points and what are the interesting points...when I am trying to analyse or decide on the character that I read...

The challenge in using this technique to analyse characters nevertheless is that the students have to be focused and selective in their choice of words to be associated in specific categories. Student D explains this scenario rather aptly.

I have to be very specific in choosing the words...because I have to categorise these words...I have to decide and analyse which points are positive,...which are negative and ...also interesting... I must evaluate the points also... and place in these categories...

As revealed in the interviews with Students F and G, it has been noted that CAF is an appropriate tool to use to analyse the plot of the literary texts. In applying this tool, students are required to consider all information or factors of importance in the text before deciding on an important issue or incident which is pivotal to the plot of the story. Student F for instance mentioned the following:

...I have to look at the information, events or incidents in the story... have to consider which are the important factors... say ...about Re what power is he going to give to his daughter?...er...How much power?... Will he ever feel pity for the mankind?...I have to select...see the significance of incidents... before I analyse the plot of the story... By using CAF I get a clearer picture.

Student E notes that the CAF is an effective tool to analyse the theme of the short story as it helps him to explore the theme deeper:

I can analyse the contents of the story deeper... consider all everything first er... say if we think the theme is about "Saving Face"... we have to consider all the incidents, examples, actions by the characters... to find the theme of the story... this technique... we can see our points very easily...

According to Student C, the CAF tool is useful because,

...with CAF...er I get to ask myself... why is this event mentioned... what is the significance... there must be something deeper... something more than just this...er...so I ask myself why the author puts all these examples... what is she or he trying to show...

This tool motivates students not to be complacent with one interpretation but to consider various interpretations on the theme of the text. It encourages them to analyse and ask probing questions to interpret the events, incidents or issues that are relevant to the theme portrayed in the story.

Student G nevertheless adds that the CAF tool could pose as a challenge if the student is unable to generate many possible solutions for a situation.

...It is just like when I use it for plot analysis... have to be alert to all possible things that having connection to the theme... must keep on thinking of all possible situations... then I can understand it clearly

The three themes discussed in the sections above, shed some light on the use of thinking tools to promote students' comprehension of literature. These themes will be discussed further in the section that follows.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that technical students perceive the application of thinking tools in the literature classroom as a useful approach towards fostering analytical and interpreting skills. Feedback provided by the participants in this study suggests that thinking tools can be applied to learning and making meaning of literary elements and texts. Findings of this study indicate that the comprehension of literature, through the critical thinking perspective assists students in assuming greater autonomy in their learning. The findings of this study are in tandem with the findings of Jaffar (2004) who denotes the importance of critical thinking in shaping autonomous learners. The findings of this study further suggests that the use of critical thinking tools to promote the learning of literature has also provided students with an avenue to draw, assess and use information they derived through the application of the thinking tools in an effective manner. The findings also indicate that certain thinking tools are more beneficial in comparison to other thinking tools. While the PMI thinking tool seems to be preferred over the OPV and CAF to analyse characters and moral issues in short stories, the CAF tool is favoured for the analysis of plot and themes. The findings further suggest that the PMI is more preferred for character analysis while OPV and CAF is more suited for analysis of general and issues such as plots and themes in the short

Feedback provided by interviewees indicate that the PMI thinking tool is beneficial for analysing characters as students would be able to categorise the points that they have picked up from the text to specific categories such as plus or positive points, minus or negative points and interesting points. With the use of the PMI thinking tool, students are further motivated to analyse the story read in greater detail, as they can selectively choose specific examples, incidents, words or phrases and decide which category these points belong to. When using the PMI tool, participants are guided towards making appropriate decisions to elicit points, events or incidents from the story to benefit the characters they analyse. Such an action not only develops the students' ability in making informed decisions, as also proven by Facione (2006), but also helps students to explore the text, hence making them critical readers. Thus, it can be said that the use of critical thinking tools do provide students with the opportunity to exploit their potential towards harnessing decision making skills.

Interviewees also noted that either the CAF or PMI thinking tool could best help them understand the plot and theme of the literary texts. The CAF is a useful tool to use when one wants to exploit all possibilities of an issue. Figure 3 in Appendix A illustrates an example of using CAF to analyse the theme of 'saving face' in *The Jade Pendant*. Although the student seems to have identified 6 factors, this is not an indication that he / she has exhausted all other possible factors that could contribute to the issue of 'saving face'. The more the factors identified, the more the possibilities that surface. When applying the CAF thinking tool to analyse literary texts, students have to understand the whole spectrum of events or issues of importance in the text and be critical in selecting only the important factors that will affect the plot of the story. This tool therefore provides an opportunity for students to analyse the motives, events and issues and evaluate its importance to the plot of the story.

The findings indicate that students find the thinking tools beneficial as these tools encourage them to analyse the literary texts more critically and analytically. This is advantageous to the students as it enables them to be more receptive to the texts and appreciate the text better. Interviewees further noted that the systematic nature of the application

of thinking tools has made the learning of literature more enjoyable and interesting. With the use of the thinking tools, the students can clearly demonstrate their thoughts in an organised manner, as highlighted in Figure 1 in Appendix A. In Figure 1, the student's systematic approach towards analysing the character of Mrs. Khoo from *The Jade Pendant* is apparent through the plus, minus and interesting categories he / she has identified of the characteristics of Mrs. Khoo. The positive, negative and interesting characteristic organisation of Mrs. Khoo's character indicates his / her ability to decipher the attributes of the character in a methodical and systematic manner to arrive at the intended interpretation of the character. This step by step manner of deriving and deciphering information using the PMI thinking tool is rather akin to the manner in which students derive information for technical subjects.

Although this study was conducted to gauge the perception of tertiary learners on the use of critical thinking tools to promote the ability to analyse and interpret characters, plot, theme and moral issues in literary texts, the researchers are of the opinion that the findings of this study would not only be applicable to lecturers at tertiary institutions, but to teachers as well.

As the PMI, CAF and OPV thinking tools are relatively easy to apply, it is recommended that teachers use these tools in their literature classrooms to promote and enhance students' creative and critical thinking ability. Teachers for instance could use the PMI tool to teach their students the manner in which they can categorise and evaluate points they have come up with in order to analyse characters from the selected texts used for the teaching of literature in schools. For students to attain the intended benefits of the thinking tools to analyse and interpret the texts, the researchers would like to suggest for the texts to be read as a whole instead of in parts so they will have a clearer perspective of the text before they begin to apply the tools for analysis. The researchers would also like to suggest that activities be carried out in groups, so as to encourage team work and group based learning.

Conclusion

This study indicates the potential of applying thinking tools in learning literature. The use of thinking tools is seen as a novel way of making literature, a subject technical students often find complex, more appealing. While this study focused on the application of thinking tools in short stories, further research could probably be centred upon the usage of thinking tools on other types of genre. A comparative study could also be conducted to note differences of opinions between technical and non-technical students on the use of thinking tools foster understanding of literary texts. It is hoped that the findings and suggestions from this study provide educators with a foretaste of the potential of thinking tools in assisting their students make meaning of literature.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLES OF THE APPLICATION OF THINKING TOOLS

Plus (+)	Minus (-)	Interesting
Love her daughter so much (+7)	arrogance (-7)	come from bad ancestors (-1)
face saving person (+3)	inhumanity (-5)	love to show off (-6)
wealth (+3)	love to humiliate others (-6)	
Total Plus: +13	Total minus: -24	Total interesting: -1
Total Plus: +13 Total Minus: -25		

Conclusion: Overall Mrs Khoo is a bad character in the short stories of The Jade Pendant

Figure 1: Using the PMI tool to analyse characters in a literary text.

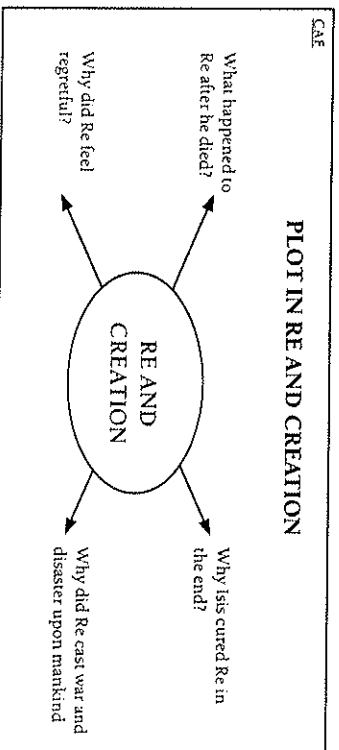
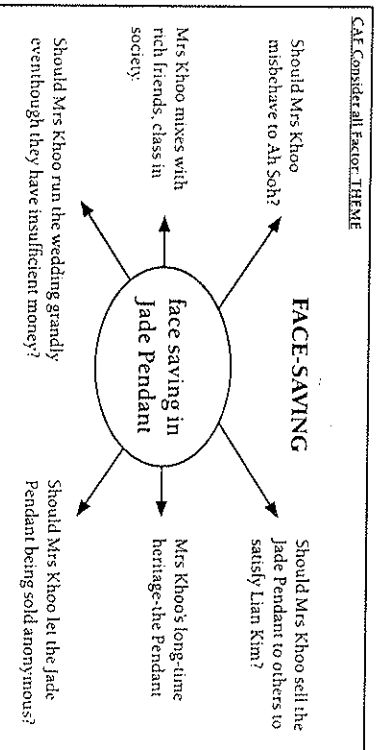


Figure 2: Using the CAF tool to analyse the plot in a literary text.



Decide whether to sell the Jade Pendant

PLUS	MINUS	INTERESTING
Can have the money that are really needed +8	Cannot fulfil the promise to the daughter -7	It would be interesting to get the money by cash +5
Can continue the process of arranging the daughter marriage celebration +6	Lost the Jade Pendant forever. (Family treasurer lost to a unknown person) -9	It would be interesting to see the mysterious person that buy the Jade Pendant +2
Did not lost the dignity that have been known to the society +8	Have to lie to the friends and relative about the Jade Pendant -7	

Decision = +8 -7 +5 +6-9+2+8 = +6
 *It would best to sell the Jade Pendant

Figure 4: Using the PMI tool to analyse moral issues in a literary text.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Warm up questions: Interviewer to get interviewee to introduce himself or herself. Interviewer to ensure that information on age, nationality and programme of study is obtained.
2. Have you learnt literature before? For how long?
3. Can you explain the types of literary genres you have been exposed to during your course of study?
4. Have you heard of or learnt to use critical thinking tools before learning about it here? Can you please describe this experience, if any?
5. After learning how to use OPV, PMI and CAF through this course, what do you think about the use of these tools for the purpose of studying literature?
6. What, in your opinion are the benefits of using thinking tools to learn literature?
7. Did you face any challenges in using the thinking tools to analyse the stories you were asked to read? Do elaborate your opinions.