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Isabel Piñeiro Sorondo

"Students' Awareness of Language Effects and its Promotion"

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to record a process of Teacher Action Research that took place during 2017 in the subject IGCSE Literature among 16 year old students. The problem detected was a certain difficulty in the development of their awareness of Language Effects during the production of style commentaries. An exploration on their feelings for Literature and their opinions about previous training related to the required analytical skills was carried out. Subsequently, various actions/interventions were planned and taken, based on the exploratory study, to enhance the promotion of the abovementioned awareness. Working with word associations, song translations and producing creative text-types other than commentaries proved relevant shortcuts to build an improved concept of what language effects involve. Measurement of their academic performance during diagnostic and end-of-term periods guaranteed that achievement was not hindered by the exploration and actions/interventions carried out. Side issues like students' perception of the utility of the skill, differences in gender motivation and peer pressure emerged as questions for future research.

Keywords: IGCSE literature, motivation, language effects' awareness, Teacher Action Research, essay writing, methodology.

Isabel PIÑEIRO SORONDO

Students' Awareness of Language Effects and its Promotion

0. Introduction

The motivation to begin Teacher Action Research was that students, in one of the institutions where I work, feel overwhelmed at the moment of writing an informed response on their

findings when exploring texts during Literature lessons. Though learners obtain high academic achievement, their awareness of how they perform is very different. There is a divorce between their successful results and their awareness of language effects: we have to find ways of bridging that gap.

Even if we train students to structure their thoughts following PEE (Point, Evidence, Explained) –where *Point* involves stating their idea or topic sentence, *Evidence* quoting or paraphrasing and *Explained* the analysis of figurative and language effects– it proves ineffective at times. Pupils tend to write a rewording of the question in the introduction of their essays, followed by a list of devices, likewise a cooking recipe enumerating the ingredients but without the art or know-how steps that explain the effect the language has achieved. Other students tend to retell factual/textual information other than consider the language choices the author made to shape the content.

Their awareness of language effects and its promotion is a target skill to perform successfully in IGCSE Literature (0486) and as a preparation for their future IB English Language and Literature studies. As well, our objective is to promote their enjoyment and understanding of the exploration and utility of language effects.

1. Context and participants

Stella Maris is a bilingual school in Montevideo. Students optionally sit for ICE/IGCSE in 4th year and for IB Diploma/Certificates in 6th. Their exposure to English starts in kindergarten and continues throughout their schooling. They not only study language but also content subjects. Classrooms are provided with overhead projectors and a computer with WIFI connection. In 4th year, literature lessons have a duration of 80 minutes, twice a week in groups of 15.

During the action research process, I had to work at the same pace as other peer teachers of the subject in order not to hinder students' progress, as well as measure their academic performance to ensure they retained high standards of work. They were in the second and final year of their Literature IGCSE preparation, which is a compulsory subject of the national curriculum, though the international examination is optional. Among the 26 students I worked with, there were 11 candidates to the international exam.

2. Action Research Process

The research questions I set out to answer were the following:

- What do the students at present understand by language effects and how do they show it?
- How do students feel when it comes to writing this part of their style commentaries? Why do some find it overwhelming?
- What opportunities do they have/have they had to consider language effects in the classroom?
- What can be done to enhance their awareness of language effects and improve their skill to analyse them?

The data collection methods tailored were:

- Interviews to peer subject teachers on their impressions.
- Samples of students' work: diagnostic exercises on an unseen prose text and an unseen poetic text, plus an extract-based question from a studied prose text.
- Peer teacher observation of a collective analysis on an unseen poem.
- Questionnaires to students about their feelings on the issue.

Before beginning to collect data, it was necessary to agree with peer teachers on an objective way to measure the pupils' awareness of language effects which would complement and go alongside our current way of assessing performance.

We designed correction criteria modelled on the 0486 Literature mark schemes. The criteria for language effects was amplified, discarding other aspects of analysis such as characterization. This spreadsheet complemented the habitual mark scheme, containing Cambridge Band Descriptors and the equivalent in the 1-12 national grade scheme. It became an economic way to make feedback clearer and more agile due to the fact they could visualize the skill I was trying to strengthen, read the descriptors of what was expected, compare and contrast with the strengths and weaknesses in their samples.

Band descriptor criteria to assess students' performance on language effect awareness, to be used for individual or class performance.

Please tick where pertinent.

Band 1/2

-student shows no awareness of language effects.
-

Band 3

-student expresses the need to consider language effects but does not explain accordingly.
 -student lists devices but does not exemplify or explain accordingly.
-

Band 4

- student mentions the use of language effects.
 -student presents some supporting detail about the language.
 -student presents some response to the way the writer uses language.
 -student identifies some sensorial perception.
..... and accounts for its use.
 -student identifies comparison/simile and contrast.
.....and accounts for its/their use.
 -student identifies metaphor
..... and accounts for its use.
-

Band 5

-student identifies hyperbole.

-and accounts for its use.
 -student identifies further sensorial perception.
.....and accounts for its use.
 -student identifies a special use of diction and its associations to a certain extent as a means to achieve language effects.
..... and accounts for its use.
 -student identifies the use of tone as a means to achieve language effects.
..... and accounts for its use.
-

Band 6

- student makes a developed explanation to the way the writer achieves language effects.
 - student supports with careful and relevant illustration.
 -student identifies much sensorial perception
..... and accounts for its use.
 -student identifies sentence structure/rhetorical questions and/or rhythm as a way of achieving language effects.
..... and accounts for its/their use.
 -student deepens the analysis of choice of diction.
-

Band 7

- student responds sensitively and in detail to the way the writer achieves language effects.
 - student integrates much well selected evidence and explanation on language effect achievement.
 -student identifies sound devices that affect the shaping of meaning such as assonance, alliteration, rhyme or significant repetitions.
.....and accounts for its/their use.
-

Band 8

- student responds with sustained insight and sensitivity to the way the writer achieves language effects.
 -student identifies extended metaphor/simile.
.....and accounts for its use.
-

Consent forms to parents were distributed, signed and collected. I was ready to launch the exploratory phase and collect the diagnostic data. After reflecting on the problem with a more accurate degree of certainty about my previous assumptions, I designed the interventions or actions to be taken to increase the pupils' awareness of language effects. Finally, I carried out a class survey (23 questionnaires were collected) to see which strategies had been effective and had satisfied the students most.

The other concern was to measure their initial academic performance during the diagnostic period and to compare it to the end-of-year internal test. This was to ensure it had not only not decreased but had hopefully been enhanced. The fear was that these actions could disrupt the pace of the delivery of the demanding syllabus.

During the diagnostic period peer class observation took place during the collective analysis of an unseen poem ("One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop) for the oral instance. The three written instances were the analysis of an unseen poem ("Because I Could Not Stop For Death" by Emily Dickinson) aided by a glossary, the exploration of an unseen opening of a science-fiction story ("Billennium" by J.G. Ballard) and, once having studied the story together, the analysis of an extract-based question on that story. For this phase, 68 samples from 24 students were collected and confronted with the Band Descriptor Criteria mentioned above. What I recorded in the graphs that appear in the Data Collected section part d (further down) are the occurrences/times a language effect described in a specific band was identified in a sample. During the end-of-term phase, due to restrictions on assessing time given by the demands of finishing the syllabus before the external examination took place, 23 samples from 23 students were measured. In this instance, students were given a choice between two extract-based questions (prose/poetry).

In relation to point e part 10 in the Findings section further down, my primary intuition that working in translation with their favourite lyrics would enhance their awareness of language effects, was based on the following assumptions:

- If students find it hard to understand language effects in L2 since it is not their native tongue, and do not like the works we study- perhaps one or two they do-, what is it they like? Music. A powerful shortcut could be to allow them to work with their favourite lyrics in translation, considering if their translations (L1) retained the language effects of the original (L2) successfully. And if not so, what changes had to be operated so that they did?
- The action of translation, if done with fidelity and maintaining the spirit of the original text, is as complex as that of writing.
- Sharing the previous concept with the students, so that they understood the spirit/guiding idea of the exercise, should spur their motivation to do it wholeheartedly.
- Appealing to their personal satisfaction about the meaning of the lyrics conveyed in the L1 translation, might be a way of connecting language effect exploration to what is experientially meaningful to them.

The questions I asked them to consider after they had carried out the translation were the following:

- What did you find easy/difficult in the translation?
- What language effects could you keep in your L1 version of the L2 original?

- What language effects did you have to change in you L1 version from the L2 original?
- Was the translation more literal than figurative?
- What did you do with the musical/rhythmical aspect? How far could you stick to the original?

Song translation was planned for the week previous to the end-of-year internal test. The reason was that learner motivation would be low at that time and the activity might boost their self-confidence in the final stretch.

3. Data Collected

a) Questionnaire to the students at the start of the action research process.

The target was to explore their awareness and skill at Explanation/Analysis.

I asked them to specially focus on explanation of language effects.

18 out of 24 questionnaires were collected.

2 illegible answers

6 incomplete answers

Some students answered question 3 in question 1. In such cases, the information is included in question 2 below.

1) Do you understand the concept of explanation after point/evidence?

Answered yes: 17 pupils.

Comments which expressed difficulty:

.Easy to understand. Difficult to apply.

.Difficult to put it in writing.

Other students resorted to define 'explanation' though it was not requested in question.

Following is a collection of the students' most relevant ideas.

Explanation:

- .is about meaning and connotation.
- . is the most important part of the essay.
- . is interpretation of the evidence.
- . is show off and be creative.
- . is comment on the effect.
- . is make reference to the reader.
- . is linking to themes.
- . is linking to historical contexts.

- . is suggesting alternative interpretations.
- . should be termed hypothetically, with modal verbs: ' it may/might/could...'
- . is needed to develop the point and understand it.
- . is interpretation of powerful key words.
- . is how the question supports the point.
- . reveals how the reader understands.
- . justifies the quote selected as evidence.
- . is identifying and showing descriptive words.
- . is recognizing the elements the author uses.
- . is justifying the choice of quotes.
- . is the effect of quotes on the reader.
- . is explaining theories hypothetically.
- . is why author chose those words instead of other ones.

2) Do you agree with its need regarding text exploration? Why?

Answered yes: 6 pupils.

The reasons they provided were:

- . better comprehension of point.
- . to explain the quote.
- . to improve analysis .
- . to have a more complete answer.
- . it is explanation of quotation presented before.
- . it is the explanation in your own words without repeating que quote.
- . it is explanation of how the point links with the evidence chosen.
- . if there is no explanation, you say things without justification and without explaining the connotations of those quotes.

One very sincere pupil expressed:

'I don' t get how knowing what a phrase of a random story or poems means or its effect will be positive for my future' .

3) What was the strategy about giving explanation on?

The answers provided were:

- . work on key words.
- . explain the quote hypothetically, saying what you think it means.
- .choose quotes that support the point.
- . interpret the evidence.
- . link back to the question.
- . comment on the effect on readers.

- . be creative.
- . comment on other interpretations.
- . comment on historical/ social linking.
- . explain imagery.
- . explain link to other readers.
- . choose quotations with interesting language or effect and are related to topic.
- . explain quotes connotations and then relate to other characters or other parts of the text.
- . explaining implicit meaning of the evidence, what it refers to and its effects.
- . it is not looking for the ordinary meaning.

4) Do you regularly do it?

Answered yes: 6 pupils.

Answered no: 2 pupils.

One student thinks he does it but not correctly.

Another student aims at it but, if it is not good, he does not include it.

Another student aims at it but does not achieve it.

Another student finds it difficult and sometimes forgets.

Another student tries but judges his explanations as too vague.

Two pupils sometimes lack time.

Another pupil does so incompletely, leaving out: reference to the reader/link to historical context/alternative explanations.

Another pupil expresses it is difficult.

Another pupil does it most of the times, but not perfectly.

Another does it most of the times.

Another pupil does so but with undeveloped explanation.

Another pupil usually refers back to see how the explanation relates to the question.

Another student feels he is not very accurate.

5) What future strategies could you carry out to incorporate explanation in your paragraphs to use it in essays?

- . know or find out more synonyms or words to avoid repetition.
- . understand the language of the text better so as to quote better.
- . use words such as 'might/could/may'.
- . make notes in the text altogether.
- . try to refer to the reader.
- . exploit the effects.
- . study with a friend.
- . write an essay with a friend and correct it.

- . read the poem once, then understand its meaning and then start analyzing it.
- . explore author's biography.
- . do more essay writing.
- . put more quotes and explain them in order.
- . comment on the power words and why the writer chose them.
- . make reference to the reader.
- . link to external information.
- . include different theories.
- . use more reporting verbs.
- . interpret quotes more than explain their meaning.
- . link to the historical/social context.
- . re-read the text more times.
- . re-read the analysis.
- . have a slower analysis of poems and stories.
- . have more detailed information on imagery and devices.
- . teacher must talk slower, more time for notes.
- . write an answer altogether (with teacher) to show us what is expected.
- . analyse answers belonging to other students in an anonymous way/as they do in Language classes.
- . write things on the whiteboard.

One student expressed he got messed up when it was talked about words in any order. Some students mentioned strategies they used before, such as:

- . when studying alone, comparing notes of other classmates with other teachers and pass those notes into booklet.
- . using colours only sometimes.
- . reading the texts a few times after notes are organized.
- . resorting visual memory and making concise notes.
- . projecting poems and writing notes from each of the interesting words.

Analysis of findings: approximately 30% felt confident to deal with language effect explanation, 30% did not answer this issue, and 30% felt incapable of it.

b) Questionnaire to the students at the start of the action research process

The target was to explore their feelings about Literature and their previous exposure to opportunities to explore language effects.

21 full questionnaires were collected.

1) How many years have you attended this school?

An average of 12 years.

Two pupils have been at this school 6 years.

2) How many years have you been studying English?

An average of 10/ 12 years.

3) How do you feel about Literature?

7 students hate it. More detail is shown below.

6 students like it.

1 student likes it as an academic subject. She finds differences between English and Spanish Literature questions. The rest did not state 'yes' or 'no' but responded with other comments as some of the ones listed further down.

2 prefer reading but not doing analysis.

Opinions of different students are listed below:

- . At times, teacher's rapid speaking pace makes me get lost.
- . Literature requires better writing skills than History and Business.
- . Do not hate it but do not like it due to its difficulty.
- . Dislike analysis but does like writing essays.
- . A very boring subject, but with focus and concentration, it would be easier.
- . Analysis is difficult and I am not interested in the kind of reading we do.
- . 'It can't be developed properly if you don't explore your opinions ... it can't be studied by memory... difficult to foretell your results.'
- . 'I prefer poems to stories.'
- . Hate it since First Year.
- . Likes it and prefers poems.
- . Finds the stories satisfactory but not the poems.
- . It requires effort and comprehension.
- . One student finds recreational texts very different to class texts, consequently that big gap makes comprehension in class difficult.
- . Literature helps to analyse and understand different text types, enriches language and strengthens essay writing.

Analysis of findings: 30% like Literature, 30% did not answer on this aspect and 30% hate it.

4) Have you ever thought about how a text is affected by the choice of language?
In what ways?

5 answered affirmatively and 3 negatively.

See more details on their answers below:

- . 'No because I read at a quick speed.'
- . 'Yes, the author is capable of creating certain feeling in the reader, depending on the diction and the register.'
- . 'Yes, sometimes it makes it more interesting.'
- . 'Through it, one can identify the images.'
- . Identifies metaphors when reading romantic books.
- . It changes impact on reader, makes it more lively and can create imagery.
- . Focuses on register to discriminate character relationships.
- . Cannot do so alone.
- . The choice of language allows readers to be connected to the characters.

5) Have you had opportunities to explore language effects in the classroom?

11 students answered affirmatively.

- . Yes, when analysing texts.
- Yes, in Literature, English, Spanish and Academic Writing.
- . 'When I picture myself in the story.'
- . Continuously when rewriting a letter, article or speech based on a previously read text, when connecting with the tone and the characters.

6) Can you think of a list of activities teachers have offered you to do this?

6 students answered affirmatively.

See details of their answers below:

- . watch videos.
- . work in pairs.
- . reading the text alone.
- . carry out full class analysis.
- . Comparing the situations in the stories with ordinary ones that usually happen in daily life.
- . when analysing poems.
- . 'Yes, we have hunted for devices and tried to answer what they try to describe.'
- . When analysing poems, searches for the tone of the poetic voice.
- . Analysis of unseens, new stories students must read alone, silent reading of texts with guiding questions.
- . Identification of difficult words, explaining their meaning, what they suggest and their effect.
- . Two students preferred to firstly carry out silent reading, then exploring the questions and finally asking the teacher if they were going in the right direction.

- . Specifically teacher telling the students to search for literary devices.
- . Explaining quotes.
- . Find devices used to convey certain feelings or convey something.

7) What do you think would help you to understand language effects?

- . 'Working together with the teacher. I feel more comfortable with poems.'
- . 'I prefer looking for language effects with the guiding questions. I prefer stories to poems.'
- . 'Looking for colours and trying to relate their connotations with the plot of the text.'
- . 'Studying each one of them and practice examples where we have to find them.'
- . Working in nature.
- . At home working with definitions of difficult words and their synonyms.

c) Class observation by another peer teacher.

The text used was *One Art*, a poem by Elizabeth Bishop.

Class 4.2.B: It was not possible to carry out peer teacher observation in this case so I recorded the class and assessed it myself.

The results were as follows:

In Band 4 students presented some supporting detail about the language and identified metaphor.

In Band 5 students identified a special use of diction and its associations to a certain extent as a means to achieve language effects.

In general they required much prompting and guidance to elicit their observations.

Class 4.3 B: This time peer teacher observation was possible and the following comment was submitted:

'I think most of the students who participated in this discussion were in band 4. I've noticed a clear difference between girls and boys. Girls seemed willing to participate and showed some understanding of the poem and some appreciation of the language. On the other hand, boys seemed reluctant to share their perspectives.'

d) Samples of students' work during diagnostic phase and end-of-term phase.

This analysis was carried out to make sure the academic performance remained strong.

It was relevant that the figures in bands 6, 7 and 8 improved at the end of the year.

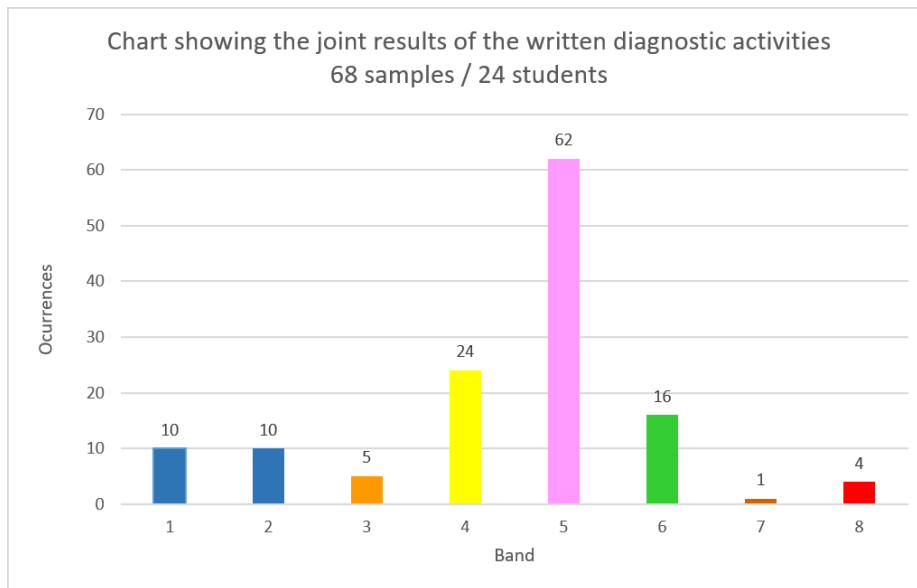


Fig. 1 Joint Results of Written Diagnostic Activities

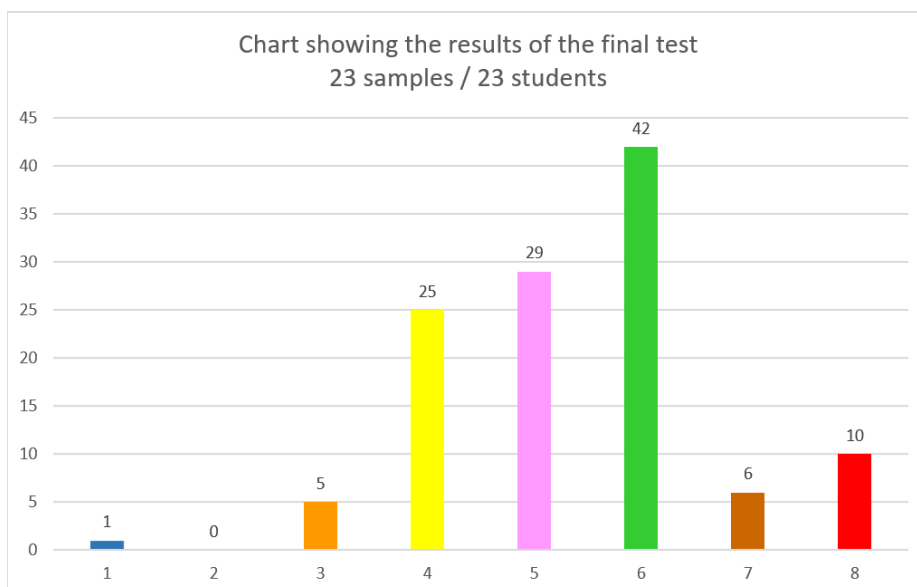


Fig. 2 Results of Final Tests

e) ACTIONS TAKEN: BASED ON EXPLORATORY STUDY, ACTIONS WERE PLANNED, AND CHANGES WERE INTRODUCED.

Intervention/ Strategies	Students that found it useful out of 23	Aspects students believed they became aware of
1. <i>Praise Song for My Mother.</i> Extracting isolated words (usually nouns/noun phrases) from the poem and expanding on the associations they awakened in	19	Working sitting in nature in an individual way to promote personal reflection and connection with natural imagery. Rhythm.

students while sitting in nature.		Diction. Structure.
<p>2. <i>Games at Twilight.</i></p> <p>Directed worksheet with textual extracts organized along a chart with brief explanations of technical aspects. Searching for other examples and in other cases providing an explanation for another extract with the same style feature.</p>	8	<p>Identifying metaphors.</p> <p>Recognizing mixed feelings within a text.</p> <p>Connecting natural imagery with the creation of a specific atmosphere.</p> <p>Paying more attention to the choice of diction.</p>
<p>3. <i>To Da-duh, in Memoriam</i></p> <p>First exposed students to images of fight, blades clashing. Considering place as character. After identifying descriptions in the text of the natural tropical forest and the sugar cane plantations, considered how to produce the same effect with a change of setting: in a desert landscape/ in a snowy landscape.</p>	17	<p>Contrasting settings/characters/age ranges.</p> <p>Identification of effect of visual imagery.</p>
<p>4. <i>Cold in the Earth (Remembrance)</i></p> <p>Teacher anticipated the themes of the poem and the learners spotted in which lines of the poem they appeared. It aided to understand the connection between nature's cycles and psychological/chronological concept of time.</p>	14	<p>Identifying natural imagery.</p> <p>Identifying oxymoron.</p> <p>Identifying religious imagery.</p> <p>Promoting active learning.</p>
<p>5. <i>Elegy for My Father's Father.</i></p> <p>First learners were given a chance to comment freely on what they could elicit from the poem and then were invited to divide the poem in parts and think of a</p>	6	<p>Identifying structure.</p> <p>Promoting critical thinking.</p>

suitable title/name for each part of the poem.		
<p>6. <i>Elegy for My Father's Father.</i></p> <p>Narrative approach: teacher first introduced Greek myth on Death, Hades, River Lethe...and narrative archetype, to then apply to images of poem as 'dark mouths', course of a river as metaphor for life: passage of time/flow of water in Grandfather's memories and how the connection between Grandfather's processes and the cycle of nature were related.</p>	6	<p>Identifying myth imagery. Identifying connotation.</p>
<p>7. <i>Anthem For Doomed Youth</i></p> <p>Exposition to aural stimuli of the weapons and religious hymns included in the poem. Then designed a Chart of Images in a normal funeral in England in 1st World War/The 'funeral' of the soldiers in the trenches.</p>	13	<p>Identifying contrast. Stimulating empathy. Facilitating language acquisition. Explaining effect of visual and aural imagery.</p>
<p>8. <i>The People Before</i></p> <p>Searching for words/phrases connected to CAVE/STONES/RIVER/LAND to understand the connection with the land and the love of it.</p>	10	Expanding vocabulary.
<p>9. <i>Song: Tears, Idle Tears</i></p> <p>Watching a YouTube version of the poem as song lyrics recreated by a singer dressed in romantic fashion and viewing romantic paintings of nature and buildings in the background.</p>	4	<p>Understanding romantic context. (Many thought it was a loss of time, perhaps because they did not share the taste for the style of the singer and felt bathos.)</p>
<p>10. Favourite song translation and consideration of</p>	22	<p>Enjoyable. Found it easy to translate</p>

<p>language effects.</p>		<p>literally, to respect word order variations, translating refrains. Some students found it difficult to follow the rhythm in the other language, find similar diction and translate idioms and metaphors. They did not transfer literally most of the times and adjusted the connotations. Found Spanish hard and artificial. Students could retain the following language effects: rhyme, tone, metaphors, repetition, direct speech, parallelisms in syntax and visual imagery. In the majority of the cases they were capable of taking into consideration the music or rhythm from the original in their translations.</p>
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4. Findings

- 1) Students built an improved concept of what language effects involve. They showed it more confidently in written cumulative assessment than in oral formative assessment due to negative peer pressure. During oral assessment in strategy/intervention 6, a difference between genders in terms of motivation was evident: girls were more sensitized but did not utter their findings till a boy validated the teacher’s allusion to myth imagery sharing the fact he remembered the story. This was a ‘breakthrough’ or a breaking of the ice for the girls to feel less intimidated and share their views. Girls who were very sensitive and capable but just did not voice their findings spontaneously until they felt validated with the male intervention. Maybe girls at this age seem more proficient for figurative analysis but feel more comfortable putting it into writing than orally due to social/peer pressure. An interesting fact was that the lower band performance belonged to boys.

- 2) They felt more confident when it came to write the style commentaries but a minority with learning difficulties still found it overwhelming under exam pressure. In these cases, as long as this project is carried out in a context where content is taught in English and with a focus on connotation, material can be adapted to design inclusive activities that empower students with writing disabilities, allowing them to design other production activities, i.e. role-playing, videos. In this project it proved a way of validating their experiences and relieving peer pressure on them.
- 3) Pupils shared multiple experiences to explore language effects in the classroom. They preferred working with word associations and song translations. They specially enjoyed reflecting in a natural environment and creating imagined scenarios where setting took the role of a character. Self-confidence increased when hunting for evidence in the texts once the themes had been anticipated by the teachers. Curiously they found it far easier to identify language effects via contrast rather than by comparison.

5. Reflections

- Students still have little awareness of their ability to identify language effects. However, they discovered the need of it.
- Peer pressure and lack of appreciation of the utility of the skill intimidates them from showing their competence.
- Motivation via texts of their interest is a shortcut to develop that awareness. If learners' experiential knowledge is taken into consideration when planning activities, learners will find those interventions more enjoyable and therefore memorable.
- Linking of the skill to future uses in their life is relevant to them.
- Given that their current academic results have improved, their enjoyment of the experience is the next challenge.
- It would be relevant for a future TAR to make an assessment of differences in gender in motivation

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Bioprofile of the author

Isabel Piñeiro Sorondo es Licenciada y Profesora en Letras, Traductora y docente en escuelas secundarias y a nivel universitario.

Contact: < familiarizzo@hotmail.com >