THE USE OF COGNITIVE POETICS IN TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THREE SCHOOLS IN SELANGOR

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Abstract: English Literature in Malaysia is a dying discipline among students in secondary schools, and the subject is losing its appeal among the current young generation of students over the years based on recent published records. Hence, this study was designed to explore the extent to which the Cognitive Poetics (CP) approach, strictly adhering to Peter Stockwell's theories of CP could help the teachers to teach literature effectively and assist students' understanding of the literary texts. Among Stockwell's CP concepts, three concepts namely figures and grounds, prototypes and reading as well as discourse world and mental spaces were selected for the teaching module in the classrooms. The single case design via the qualitative research method was employed, involving three phases of the research process through semi-structured interviews with three teachers from different private secondary schools in the first phase, followed by three classroom observations and post-observation interviews with the teachers in the last phase of study. The results revealed the following: the understanding of the CP approach, the teachers' teaching experience and the teachers' role in the classroom were instrumental in implementing the CP approach for literature lessons. There were prospects in implementing the CP approach in future lessons by simplifying the CP concepts and by delving into content analysis to develop students' thinking skills. The study concluded that the use of the CP approach might be effective in being used as an addition to the existing approaches in teaching literature.

Keywords: cognitive poetics, English Literature, secondary schools, teachers, teaching of literature

1. Introduction

English Literature has become a component in teaching English Language in secondary schools in Malaysia since 2000. The Ministry of Education, Malaysia introduced a new curriculum for English Literature for secondary schools in 2018 and the new curriculum designed for upper-level secondary school level was fully implemented in 2020. The first batch who formed the pilot project for this new curriculum consisted of Secondary Four students who underwent an 18-month curriculum. Then, they sat for the national exam based on the new format in the following year, 2021 (Chin & Chua, 2019). There is a concern that the study of poetry and prose is on the brink of extinction in the education system due to students' disinterest in pursuing the subject. Recently, the annual reports from the Malaysian Examinations Council denoted that 95 students who enrolled in the Malaysian Higher School Certificate, a Malaysian pre-university programme sat for the "Literature in English" paper in 2012 but in a matter of ten years, the number dwindled to 65 students who opted to sit for the paper (Ong, 2024). This study would like to explore the extent to which the CP approach could help the teachers teach English Literature effectively and assist students' understanding of the literary texts.

1.1 *Methodologies of Teaching English Literature*

The teaching of English Literature has always been dominated by traditional-based teaching methods such as a one-way interaction of teachers delivering information to students. In recent times, global digital transformation has taken place, hence making these traditional methods less suitable for the current generation of learners. Research studies from Asia, Africa, Middle East and Europe reported

concerns pertaining to teaching methodologies that limited engagement as well as the need for students to have more autonomy for their learning.

Teacher-centred instruction continued to dominate classroom activities. Molthaka and Sekete (2025) whose study focused on teachers who taught secondary schools in South Africa reported that teachers mainly used read-aloud methods to rectify students' mispronunciation but this, in turn, resulted in limited engagement between students and the teachers in exploring the literary works. Teachers reported that they adopted interactive teaching strategies to motivate students who possessed insufficient background knowledge in English Literature based on a study in Saudi Arabia (Alshammari et al., 2020). They emphasized that there should be strategies that are inclusive and adaptive to the culture of the students.

Similarly, Fynn and Ndlovu (2024) shared their findings that younger students required more interactive methods to enjoy learning literature, and these methods should consider the inclusion of storytelling and acting in dramas to create effective literature lessons. Another strategy known as multimodal approach is another useful method that could improve students' learning of literature in the classroom and this method involves incorporating visual, auditory and kinetic learning strategies to encourage engagement among students (Freyn, 2017). This study reported that when teachers implemented the multimodal approach in their lessons, students' attitude towards learning poetry improved significantly. Furthermore, students preferred a face-to-face method of instruction as they wanted personal interaction and attention from their teachers in understanding English Literature lessons (Gasmi, 2025).

Language proficiency and lack of motivation demonstrated by learners are among the barriers that affect the success of teaching literature in the classroom. Sapalo-Agno (2024) disclosed findings from national secondary schools in the Philippines regarding common teaching methodologies in teaching English Literature. Those that were reported to be effective consisted of Cultural, Language-based and Personal Growth models. The issue of low language proficiency among students was also featured in a study by Işıklı, & Tarakçıoğlu (2017) which highlighted the struggles experienced by secondary school students in Turkey in terms of complex vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. The language barriers hampered literature appreciation, hence the researchers suggested for tailored instructional strategies for teachers to teach their students who were struggling in English Literature lessons.

Other than the student-centred strategies mentioned, other methodologies such as reflective practice and professional development were recorded by researchers as current pedagogies in the English Literature classroom. Panhwar (2025) observed that the Living Educational Theory Research which involved the implementation of Think-Pair-Share method contributed to increased communication between learners and teachers. The researcher held the view that this strategy which promoted cooperation enhanced self-esteem and critical thinking in learning English Literature among university students in Pakistan. Meanwhile in Indonesia, Kuswardani et al. (2022) shared that the language-style approach was beneficial in teaching English Literature to university students and this approach constituted vocabulary discussion, a review of sentence structure and coherence and the activity of identifying rhetoric and figurative language ensued in the latter part of the discussion. They reported that this approach assisted students to interpret poetry effectively.

Thus, we undertook an examination whether the CP approach could be useful in helping the students and teachers solve the current issues in the classrooms. The outcomes of this paper could impart knowledge on another teaching approach in the teaching of English Literature as an addition to the existing approaches that educators are using in classrooms.

1.2 *Thinking Skills in Learning English Literature*

English Literature subject emphasises on thinking skills such as critical and creative thinking and its perceived difficulties to understand the contents demand more exploration. Malaysian students in primary and secondary schools were found to need higher order thinking skills and problem-solving skills (Hamzah & Yusoff, 2021). This finding also supported a report in the latest Programme for

International Student Assessment (PISA) scores that showed a significant decline from 431 in 2018 to 404 in 2022 despite the implementation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the national education curriculum (Azahar & Cheng, 2024; Ismail, 2024). The existing problem is that thinking skills were not taught in classrooms where the activities of the teaching and learning of English Literature took place (Sidhu & Chan, 2010). Past research highlighted that students were regularly spoon-fed with information to answer exam papers and there was not much space for creative thinking and analysis of the literary texts (Mustakim, Mustapha & Lebar, 2012). All in all, few studies were conducted on the role of teaching English Literature to encourage thinking skills among secondary school students in Malaysia other than studies conducted by Rahman and Manaf (2017) as well as Singh et al. (2020). Furthermore, there is no study conducted on using the CP approach in the teaching of English Literature. Thus, by specifically using cognitive poetics as a way of teaching English Literature, this study explores whether this approach could be useful in helping the students and teachers solve the current issues in the classrooms.

1.3 *Cognitive Poetics (CP) Approach*

Stockwell (2002) defined cognitive poetics as an inter-disciplinary field that involves a natural process of reading. This reading process creates an interaction between the reader and the literary text. The science of reading consists of two main areas, namely, on how the reader wishes to think about his or her interaction of the text and how the reader could reflect on the literary text and understand the content of the literary text. In the science of reading, the readers are engaged with particular or detailed reading that requires the reader to adopt a certain method in approaching the text. According to Stockwell (2019), this opened the discussion for context, which is an important concept in the field of cognitive poetics. Contexts usually contain social and personal circumstances which allow different meanings to be generated from different readings. In his book, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, he testified that this field could reach out globally and bridge various interpretations held by different individuals as well as different groups, communities and cultures to achieve a common understanding for all. The objective of cognitive poetics is to establish a new form of reading and understanding literature. In this paper, we would like to share our findings on using three concepts founded in CP and these concepts are figures and grounds, prototypes and reading as well as discourse World and Mental Spaces, as depicted in Figure 1.

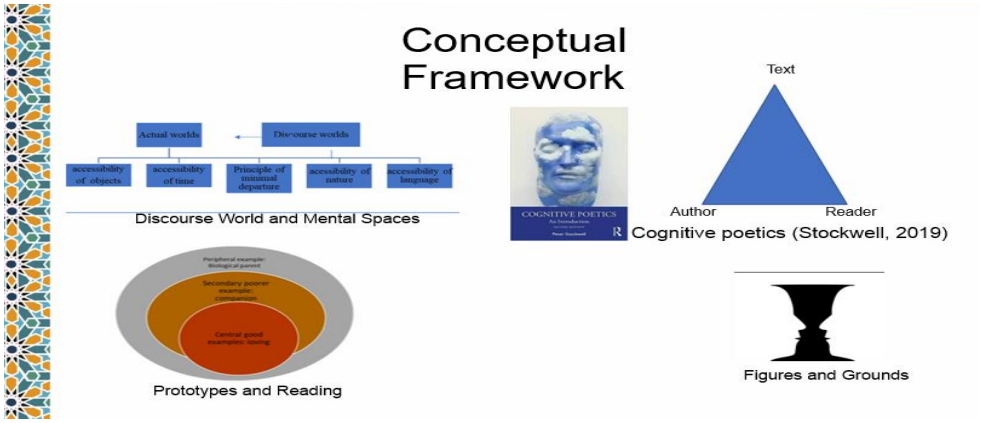


Figure 1: Visual representation of the CP approach

The first concept indicated as figures and ground, gives access to writers to grant special focus on selected devices such as repetitions and rhymes by projecting them in the foreground while fading the remaining elements into the background. This strategy serves to defamiliarize the process of reading literary works. The second concept, known as prototype, requires students or readers of English Literature to segregate words into three different categories which marks its usage in the range of the common to the least common. The strength of this concept lies in encouraging the readers to decipher the words based on their attributes, whether central or peripheral. Consequently, readers could decide which genre the literary works belong to. The final concept presented in this section is discourse worlds

and mental spaces. This concept supports the reader's engagement with the text by providing a systematic approach to study the text. This concept guides readers to explore different worlds from the one that they dwell in and compare the two worlds constantly by looking into certain traits which show similar characteristics or dissimilarities. Identifying similarities or anomalies of characters, history, time- plots or spaces will assist the weaving of two worlds in the reader's mind during the reading process. Cognitive poetics creates an analytical and logical system that allows a student to apply his or her cognitive ability and enables him or her to project a sense of understanding based on experience and prior observation of life events. This approach encourages a natural way of engaging with literary works by using psychology.

2. Methodology

We carried out this study in three stages; the semi-structured interview that we conducted before the class observation, the class observation and the semi-structured interview that we carried out after the class observation. In exploring the findings of the semi-structured interviews and class observation in depth, we also referred to the field notes gathered from reflections during class observations as well as document analysis based on the documents received from the informants in extracting valuable information for this study.

The data collection process focused on three private secondary schools located in the Klang Valley with the participation of three informants. The three teachers who took part in the study, specifically two female teachers and one male teacher, taught English Language and English Literature in their respective schools. In this study, all the informants taught at schools in the Klang Valley. Two of the informants were female teachers whereas one informant was male. Additionally, their age fell in the range between early thirties and late forties. They possessed teaching experience of six to ten years. All of them obtained their degrees from public and semi-private universities in Malaysia and one possessed a master's in education from a state-owned university. One of them, a former head of department, was a PhD holder in the field of English and French Literature.

During the data collection process, we employed research instruments namely semi-structured interviews with teachers, classroom observations, field notes as well as document analysis. We recorded the three teachers' responses verbatim during interviews and after each class observation, we penned our reflections as field notes. We obtained documents such as students' in-class exercises, lesson plans and materials from informants after each class observation to be used for document analysis.

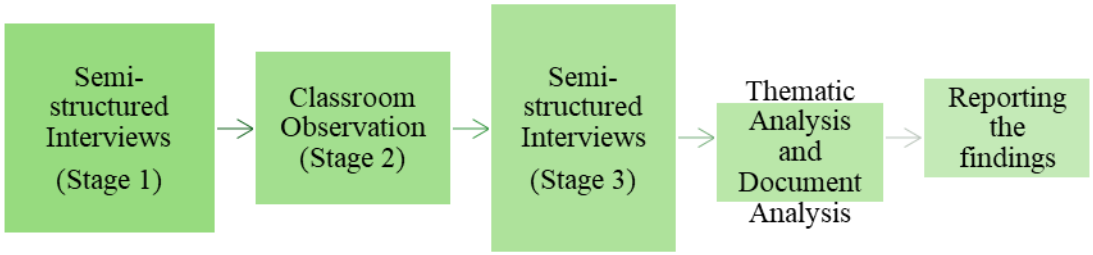


Figure 2: Data Triangulation

2.1 *Thematic Analysis*

We carried out the analysis process in this study based on Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. This approach features a six-phase guide which is a step-by-step reference for qualitative researchers to perform a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryne, 2022). We found identifying themes to be a reflective activity that required deep insights and careful considerations to be exercised by any researcher. A theme is constituted as a piece of information that holds significance about the data that is obtained in the quest of answering research questions. The theme is also identified as recurring throughout the data set and reappears through conversations with different participants or subjects of the study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Consequently, we found that

Braun and Clark's thematic analysis is a useful guide for data analysis in this study. The steps of the analysis conducted are portrayed in Figure 3 below:

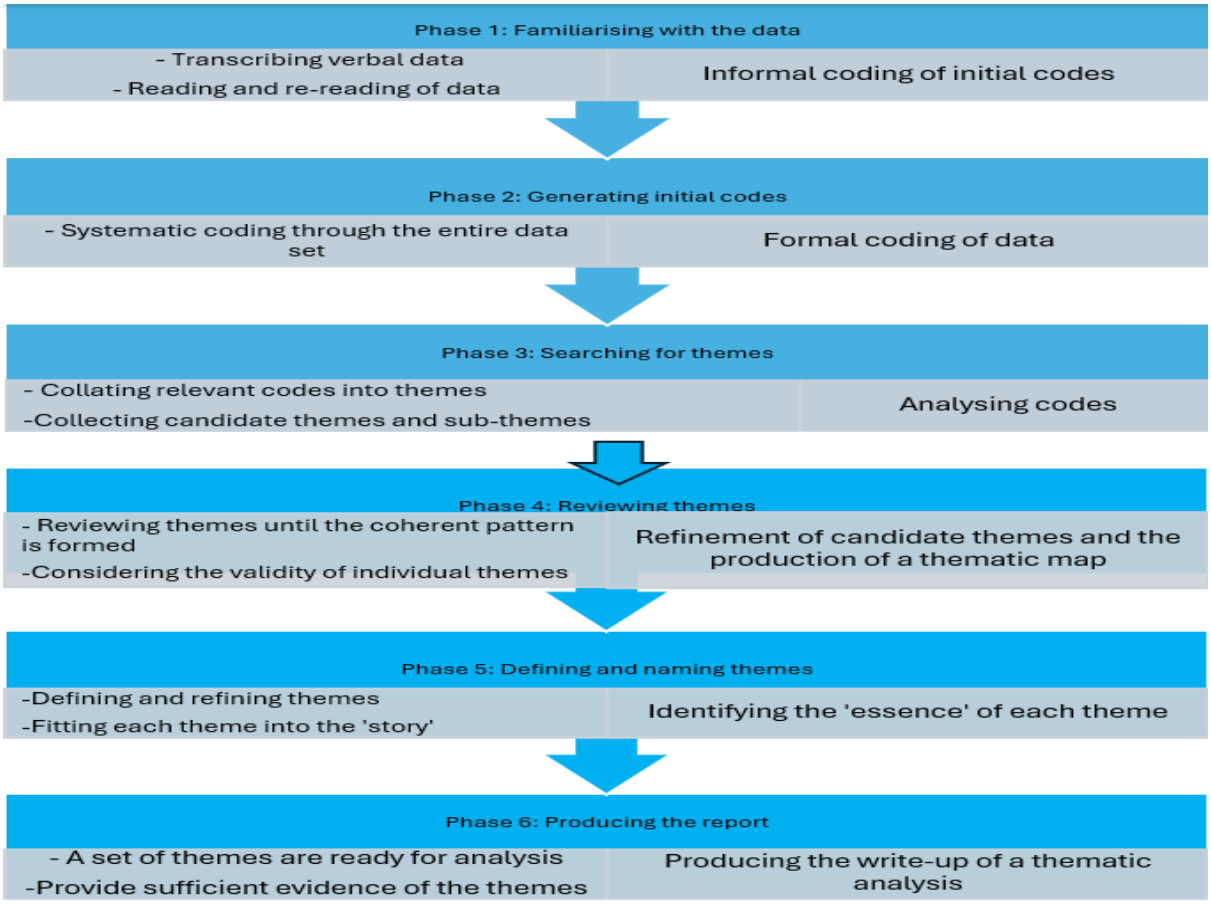


Figure 3: Six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006)

3. Findings and Discussion

This section highlights the analysis and discussion of the findings from the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews, class observations of informants' actual teaching activities in the English Literature classrooms and document analysis. In summary, the results of the study featured the following:

3.1 *Teaching English Literature by using Figures and Ground*

In teaching the first concept termed as figures and grounds which originated from Gestalt psychology, the feedback from the observations and teachers showed that this concept was the easiest of the three and students were able to use the concept to identify the foreground as the characters in the poem and the background as the setting of the poem. The students managed to deliver numerous answers by identifying the main characters as the foreground and explaining the mood of the setting as the background. Their interpretations are reflected in Figure 4.

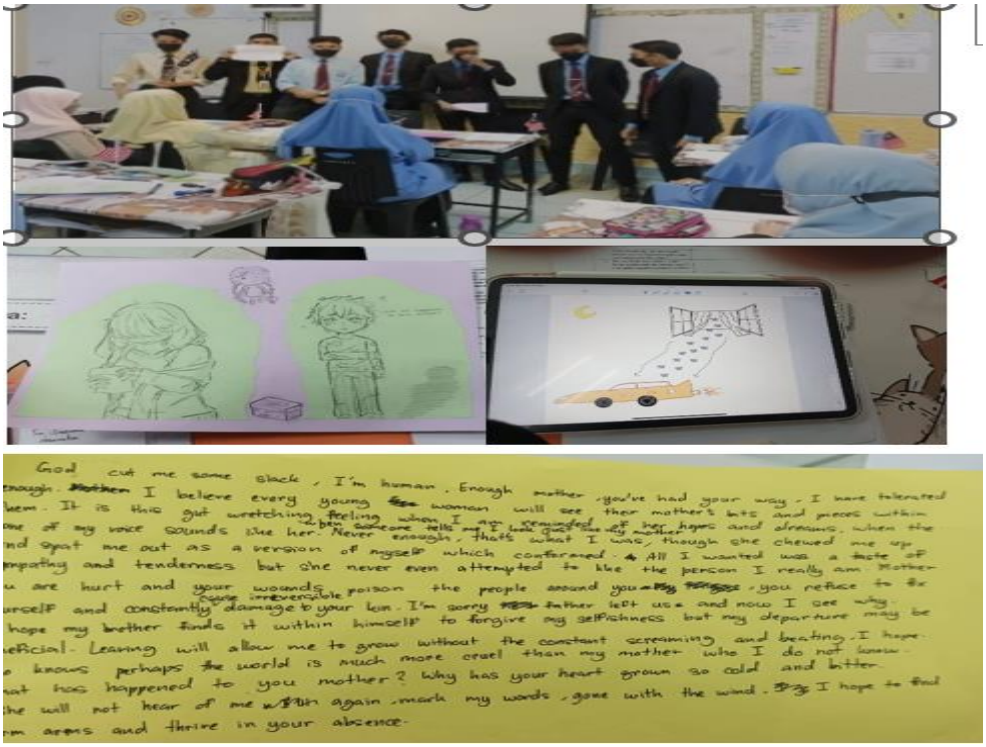
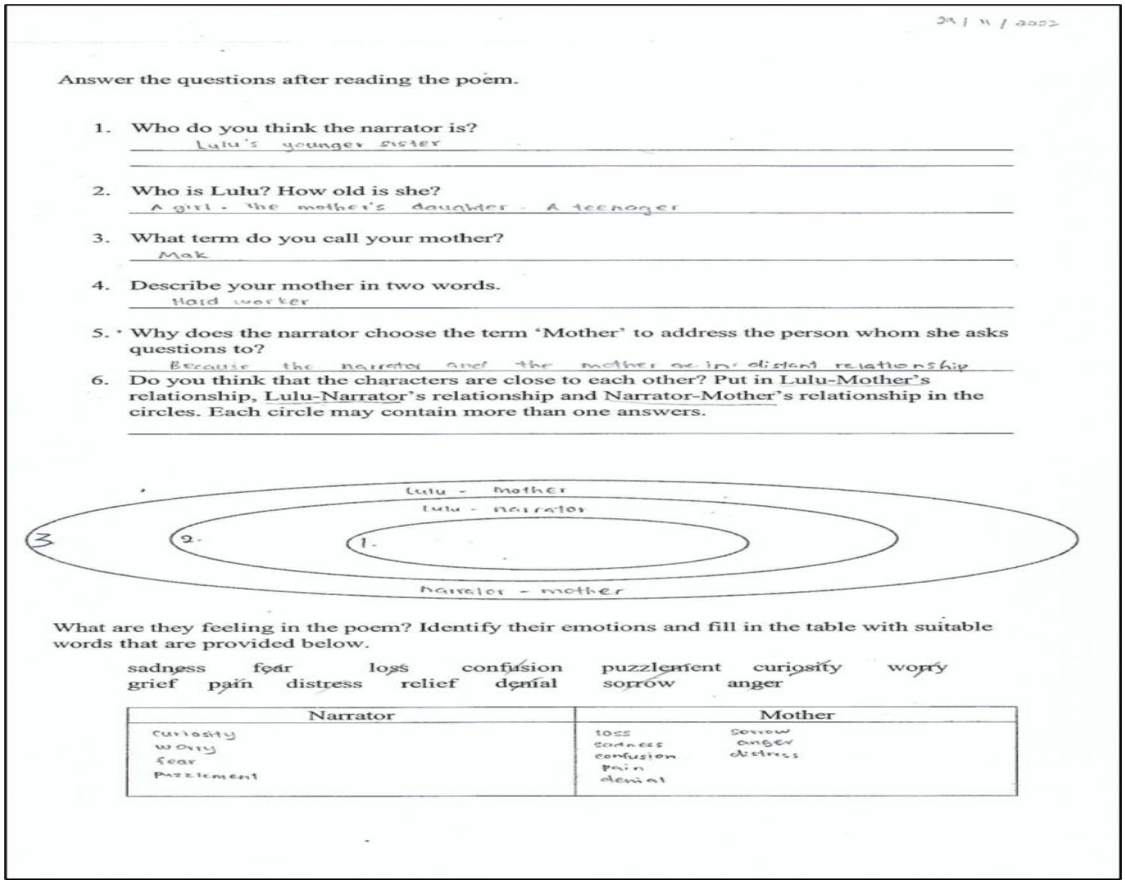


Figure 4: Students' presentation and work by using Figures and Grounds

These results in the study corresponded with the finding in the literature review that for this figure-ground theory, the character would emerge as the focal point in the narrative whereas the setting will fade into the background to represent less perceptible elements. This division of thoughts is a natural process because the human brain has limited capacity to filter all the perceptual information it receives (Callejas et al., 2021; Yang & Tao, 2024).

3.2 *Teaching English Literature by using Prototypes and Reading*

The second concept of the CP approach, prototypes and reading, was aimed at the use of language to identify common vocabulary, less common vocabulary and rare vocabulary. In the poem, teachers asked the students to identify the dimensions of relationship between the narrator and her mother, the narrator's sister-mother and narrator and her sister based on the proximity of their relationships. Based on the feedback by the teachers, the class observation and class activities, some students succeeded in coming up with the vocabulary to assess the varying levels of relationships to describe a mother with the description of 'loving'- a common connotation for a mother; 'companion'- less common vocabulary and 'biological parent'-rare vocabulary to describe a mother. During the class observations, most students even related their own experiences of their relationships with their mothers in the task of interpreting the poem. They answered questions verbally and answered an exercise given by the teacher. A sample of a student's exercise based on their interpretation of the poem can be seen in Figure 5.



Answer the questions after reading the poem.

1. Who do you think the narrator is?
   Lulu's younger sister
2. Who is Lulu? How old is she?
   A girl - the mother's daughter - A teenager
3. What term do you call your mother?
   Mak
4. Describe your mother in two words.
   Hard worker
5. Why does the narrator choose the term 'Mother' to address the person whom she asks questions to?
   Because the narrator and the mother are in distant relationship
6. Do you think that the characters are close to each other? Put in Lulu-Mother's relationship, Lulu-Narrator's relationship and Narrator-Mother's relationship in the circles. Each circle may contain more than one answers.

What are they feeling in the poem? Identify their emotions and fill in the table with suitable words that are provided below.

sadness fear loss confusion puzzlement curiosity worry
grief pain distress relief denial sorrow anger

Narrator	Mother
curiosity worry fear puzzlement	loss sadness confusion pain denial sorrow anger distress

Figure 5: A sample of a student's CP exercise by using Prototypes and Reading

The data results were found consistent with the findings by AlNasiry (2020) that the CP approach allowed students to identify expressions and emotions in a systematic and principled manner and categorized them based on layers of meaning by using different vocabulary of the language.

3.3 *Teaching English Literature by using Discourse World and Mental Spaces*

Teachers shared that the concept of discourse world and mental spaces was the most difficult concept to teach as it necessitated a longer time for students to understand the concept and engage their imagination in full capacity. This concept entailed the students to connect the imaginative features of the literary work to students' reality of life as well as establishing the truth of their perceived notions. According to a class observation conducted, one of the female teachers probed her students with questions that made them reflect whether the characters discussed were logical or illogical based on the character's actions. In completing the assignments and engaging in discussions during the classes observed, students managed to link the probabilities of the portrayed situation happening in their lives. The students also produced possible solutions to counter the social problems featured in the literary work if the event ever occurred in their lives. The results of this study mirrored those of previous studies that examined the concept of discourse world and mental spaces and they affirmed that this concept recognises humans to be endowed with knowledge, motivations, aspirations and experiences, thus humans engaged in all these resources to negotiate a communicative encounter by using language (Whiteley, 2010).

In summary, the teachers believed that the CP approach could be taught to students by introducing them to the concepts indirectly. The CP approach could also help the teachers plan lessons by using easy and simplified language. One teacher proposed abandoning the CP approach and teaching English Literature altogether in secondary schools since the concepts and the subject were too complicated for young students' level of understanding. All in all, according to the teachers, the CP approach could be

categorized as a student-centred approach that required a lot of mental efforts on the students to interpret a single literary work and this approach might be more suitable for tertiary education.

4. Conclusion

The study provides several research implications for using the CP approach in the teaching of English Literature across selected private secondary schools in Selangor. In terms of research contribution, this study was the first of its kind to offer a scholarly perspective on employing the CP approach in literature pedagogy in Malaysia. This study placed special emphasis on developing thinking skills alongside literary skills in interpreting literary works among young learners of English Literature. In addition, the notion of focusing on teachers in using the CP approach in relation to the teaching approaches employed to teach English Literature may offer much insight on the reasons behind the decreasing interest in the subject among secondary school students.

Another observation was that most of the past studies on CP covered reading literary works and literary analysis of pure literature. In contrast, this study introduced CP as a teaching strategy instead of as a tool to analyse works of English Literature and forwarded the potential of CP to encourage thinking skills among students in schools. This approach could contribute as an additional approach to the present teaching approaches in English Literature classes and this area could be further explored for future research.

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