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**THE ROLE OF RHETORICAL KNOWLEDGE IN  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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# Abstract

The role of rhetorical knowledge in English language learning can be framed as a fundamental problem in the study of human communication. Communication cannot be simply explained as a process of encoding by the communicator followed by a process of decoding by the audience. Given the richness of the human language, whatever can be coded in one way can be coded in some other way (Sperber & Wilson, 1990). Rhetoric is conventionally understood as the art of using written or spoken language effectively and persuasively. Being the medium of classroom teaching and learning, language plays a significant role in communicating meaning. Rhetorical analysis enables pupils to examine ‘not only what authors communicate but also for what purposes they communicate those messages, what effects they attempt to evoke in readers, and how they accomplish those purposes and effects’ (Graff, 2010). However, when linguistic knowledge is imparted mainly through procedural and conceptual instruction, the role of rhetorical knowledge in English language learning is at risk of being interpreted narrowly as linguistic creativity, alone. Using data taken from an on-going, large-scale study of pedagogical practices in Singapore, this paper demonstrates the value of rhetorical knowledge as a powerful tool in meaning making in English language classrooms. A case-study is presented of a teacher who generates rhetorical awareness in her pupils by weaving her pupils’ current knowledge, abilities and interests with aspects of 16th century English taking into account rhetorical devices employed by Shakespeare against the historical backdrop of the Elizabethan era. Given the Ministry of Education’s focus on literacy development and not just linguistic proficiency that enables students to ‘make structural and linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture (Rubdy & Tupas, 2009), the paper concludes with recommendations for a set of pedagogical guidelines in operationalising rhetorical knowledge in English language classrooms.

## THE ROLE OF RHETORICAL KNOWLEDGE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

### 1. Introduction

At the broadest level, communication is the exchange of ideas, information, thoughts, and feelings (McCormick, 2003) and language- written or spoken is the most obvious modality of communication. Given the richness of the human language, whatever can be coded in one way can be coded in some other way (Sperber & Wilson, 1990). Brooks and Warren (1979) argue that it is through language that we discover the world and ourselves, and rhetoric is the art of using language effectively. Chaffee (2011) describes rhetoric as the art of inventing or discovering ideas, arranging them in the most persuasive way, and then expressing them in suitable language in order to have the desired effect on the audience. On this account, successful rhetoric requires both knowledge and skill. Scholars in history, literary criticism, philosophy, psychology and sociology acknowledge the power of rhetoric to help create a community's worldview, knowledge, and interpretive practices.

Tardy (2005) acknowledges that rhetorical knowledge is one essential dimension of genre knowledge. Flower and Hayes (1984, as cited in Alexander, Schallert & Hare, 1991) describe rhetorical knowledge as sense of audience, style, or register. In its classical sense, rhetorical knowledge is knowledge of how to *persuade* others of the validity, value or reasonableness of an argument or perspective that assumes some understanding of how *different audiences* will respond to speech or text. The principle modern meaning of rhetorical knowledge is knowledge of how to use language to *convey or communicate meaning* in a transparent, clear, logical and effective way.

Language as the medium of classroom teaching, plays a significant role in communicating meaning and thus, rhetorical knowledge becomes a significant tool for

meaning making in the English language classroom. Rhetorical knowledge implies communicating for *effect*- that is using language appropriate to *purpose, audience, context* and *culture*. An underlying assumption of Language Learning outlined by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore states: Language use is guided by our awareness of the purpose, audience, context and culture in which the communication takes place (MOE, 2010). Based on this belief, the English Language Syllabus (2010) aims to equip pupils to speak, write and represent in standard English that is grammatical, fluent, mutually intelligible and appropriate for different purposes, audiences, contexts and cultures.

However, translating these aims and objectives into classroom practice may not be easily attainable. This is largely because of the predominance of procedural and to some extent, conceptual instruction. English language instruction in primary and secondary schools is often about when and how to apply certain *procedures* and about the *meanings* of concepts and the *relationships* between concepts. Rittle-Johnson and Alibali (1999) highlight the causal, bidirectional and iterative relationship between conceptual and procedural knowledge which explains why procedural and conceptual knowledge are often seen hand in hand in the Singapore classroom. Thus, rhetorical knowledge runs the risk of being interpreted merely as linguistic creativity.

Given the MOE's emphasis on the value of rhetorical knowledge, it becomes imperative to explore the role of rhetorical knowledge in English language learning. Drawing on data from a large on-going study of pedagogical practices in Singapore, the paper attempts to highlight the role of rhetorical knowledge in the English language classroom with the aid a descriptive case study. A teacher draws her pupils' attention to how Shakespearean language grew from the context of the Elizabethan era. The article concludes with recommendations for a set of pedagogical guidelines to mobilise language resources in operationalising rhetorical knowledge in the English language classroom.

### *1.1 What is Rhetoric?*

Rhetoric has always been a teaching tradition, the pedagogical pursuit of good speaking and writing. Halloran (1982, as cited in Glenn & Carcasson, 2009) points out that during the 18th century, rhetoric was treated as the most important subject in the curriculum. It was not until the 20th century that the importance of rhetoric to the cultivation of citizens both began to wane in the shadow of higher education's shift in focus from the development of rhetorical expertise to that of disciplinary knowledge. Despite this shift, the foundational rhetorical theories, practices, and pedagogies developed by the ancients survived, even thrived, as they continued to guide rhetorical studies. William Riley Parker (1967, as cited in Glenn & Carcasson, 2009) describes rhetoric as the grandparent of both English and Speech (communication)... Mailloux (2006, as cited in Tombro, 2007) argues that rhetoric should be a discipline of its own as well as an "interdiscipline" (p. 199). He demonstrates that rhetoric is complex and its boundaries are constantly changing, but situates rhetoric as the connective tissue between the disciplines.

### *1.2 What is rhetorical knowledge?*

Tardy (2005) draws together some interesting research in rhetorical knowledge development and advanced academic literacy. Rhetorical knowledge is the part of genre knowledge that draws upon an understanding of epistemology, background knowledge, hidden agendas, rhetorical appeals, surprise value, and kairos (rhetorical timing), as they relate to the disciplinary community in which a given genre is situated (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bhatia, 1999). Beaufort (2004) delineates rhetorical knowledge as one knowledge domain within disciplinary writing expertise. Jolliffe and Brier (1988) outline four components of writers' knowledge in academic disciplines, corresponding roughly to the rhetorical concepts of audience, invention, arrangement, and style.

According to Walter Beale (1990, as cited in Glenn & Carcasson 2009), rhetorical education is an attempt to shape a certain kind of character capable of using language effectively to carry on the practical and moral business of a polity. Most recently, citizenship education, which is rhetorical education, often highlights the importance of “21st-century skills” such as critical thinking, innovative problem solving, deliberation, and judgment—skills, most rhetorical scholars would argue, that are part and parcel of the pedagogy of rhetoric. Rhetorical knowledge involves an individual’s understanding of the audience to whom language might be directed; the styles of verbal or written communication; the tone; or register of language that can be employed (Alexander et al., 1991) .

### *1.3 Rhetorical knowledge and the English language*

As students move through the academic ranks of education, they progress gradually from tasks of “knowledge-telling”, in which they write to prove their understanding of existing knowledge, to more complex tasks of “knowledge-transforming” in which they actively construct new knowledge. As a more complex writing task, knowledge transforming requires writers to engage in the rhetorical act of persuading readers of their work’s value, significance, and credibility (Tardy, 2005, p. 325). Tardy further argues that in order to successfully persuade readers of a work’s value and significance, therefore, academic writers need to grasp the ideologies of a community - and this is a quintessentially rhetorical task. Lefstein (2009) argues that language use is socially dependent: certain grammatical constructions or word uses are appropriate in one context but not another. For instance, a teacher who points out that certain expressions used when sitting around the dining table at home though grammatically correct, may be inappropriate in certain formal contexts, aims to generate rhetorical awareness in her pupils.

It is argued that a focus on rhetorical knowledge in the Singapore classroom would entail that pupils understand, read, view, write, speak and represent the English language with

an increased awareness of purpose, audience, context, and culture. This would mean moving away from the narrow focus of acquiring linguistic knowledge and skills merely through a rigid, and often unnecessary, adherence to structural norms and procedural aspects of the language. It would also mean an enhanced understanding of concepts and their interrelationships by a vital consideration of the context in which concepts develop.

## 2. Background

This paper presents a descriptive case study based on some preliminary data obtained from the Core 2 Research Program, an ongoing baseline study of pedagogical practices in Singapore. An overview of the Core 2 study together with a brief idea of MOE's thrust in teaching and learning English may facilitate a better understanding of the present discussion.

### *2.1 Ministry of Education*

Given Singapore's knowledge-based global economy, development of the human resource is key to the nation's sustainability and growth. English is seen as the common language that facilitates bonding among different ethnic and cultural groups, as well as the lingua franca of the Internet, of science and technology and of world trade. To equip pupils with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, the MOE recognises the need for pupils to communicate effectively in an increasingly globalised and technologically vibrant world.

For effective communication, primary and secondary school pupils need exposure to a wide range or rich spoken, audio and visual texts so that they can learn from models of spoken English and, progressively, express and represent their ideas, thoughts, perspectives, and feelings effectively. Thus, the MOE English Language Syllabus Aims (2010) strongly advances opportunities in the classroom for pupils to:

- Develop understanding of key features of spoken language and apply speaking and representing skills and strategies in using language appropriately to address purpose, audience, context and culture.



- Develop writing readiness, penmanship and spelling accuracy, and apply skills and strategies for idea generation, selection, development, organization and revision in writing and representing to address purpose, audience, context and culture in a variety of texts.

To develop pupils' knowledge of and proficiency in grammar, teachers are encouraged to show pupils how language works in a wide variety of texts so that pupils understand that the appropriate choice of grammatical items and structures contributes to effective communication for different purposes, audiences, contexts and cultures. Another important focus area is teaching vocabulary explicitly and within meaningful contexts to enable pupils to recognize and talk about the effect of vocabulary on different types of texts; and to select and use vocabulary for different purposes, audiences, contexts, and cultures.

## 2.2 Core 2 Research Program

In 2004/05, the MOE launched the "Teach Less, Learn More" (TLLM) initiative calling upon educators in Singapore to teach better, to engage students and prepare them for life, rather than to teach for tests and examinations. TLLM advocated less dependence on rote learning, repetitive tests and a 'one size fits all' type of instruction, and placed greater emphasis on experiential discovery, engaged learning, differentiated teaching, the learning of life-long skills, and the building of character through innovative and effective teaching approaches and strategies.

### 2.2.1 Objectives and key focus

To better understand the implications of the TLLM initiative, and to provide evidence-based information to policy matters on upcoming cycles of reforms, there was a need to document and examine the current Singapore teachers' instructional, pedagogical and assessment practices in their classrooms. Thus, the Core 2 Research Program was proposed in 2009 with some key objectives:

1. To establish the degree to which classroom pedagogy has changed since the introduction of the TLLM initiative in 2004/05
2. To measure, map and model pedagogical practices in Singapore; to model the impact of pedagogical practice on motivational, cognitive, meta-cognitive and “non-cognitive student outcomes
3. To systematically explore the logic of teaching in Singapore: Why do teachers teach the way they do in Singapore?

### *2.2.2 Data collection and analyses*

The sampling size included a total of 625 lessons in 14 Primary and 17 Secondary schools all over Singapore, at the Primary 5 and Secondary 3 levels both for English and Mathematics. Data collection involved the administration of survey instruments, classroom observations and the collection of teachers’ assignments and students’ work samples. Data analyses, that are currently in progress, involve exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modelling, Excel sheet coding analysis of classroom audio-video recordings, transcription work, as well as in-depth qualitative analysis of lessons of high theoretical interest using Studio Code software.

### *2.3 Present Focus*

The data presented in this paper is sourced from classroom observations of teachers’ units of curriculum work. This involved audio-video recordings of lessons by research assistants, supplemented by field notes and post-lesson interviews with teachers. Pertinent to the present discussion, is the observation of an English literature lesson at the Secondary 3 level. The approximately one hour lesson is the first in a unit of three, based on which this descriptive case study is presented.

## **3. Descriptive Case Study**

The case study is the preferred strategy when ‘how’, ‘who’, ‘why’ or ‘what’ questions are being asked (Burns, 2000) and thus, to illustrate a rhetorical knowledge focus in a classroom setting, a case study seems apt. This is because in its idiosyncratic complexity, rhetorical knowledge is about using language to communicate for *effect* with the vital purposes of understanding and seeking answers to the following questions:

- How does language grow from a given *context* and is shaped by it?
- Who is the *audience* for whom language is spoken, written, or represented?
- Why is understanding and appreciating the *purpose* of communication important?
- What aspects of *culture* need to be considered in understanding and using language?

Demonstrating an awareness of the above issues, an English teacher attempts to highlight the rhetorical devices employed by Shakespeare taking into account the historical backdrop of the Elizabethan era. She tries to weave her pupils’ current knowledge, abilities and interests with aspects of 16th century English enabling pupils to gain access to a wider area of knowledge beyond their immediate context. To illustrate the present argument, a description of the classroom setting and some excerpts of the lesson are provided in an attempt to paint a comprehensive picture of how the lesson progressed.

### 3.1 Setting

#### 3.1.1 School

The school, established in 1992, is one of the new generation schools in Singapore. Located in a quiet neighbourhood in the eastern part of the island, the school has a dedicated teaching staff to cater to 1427 pupils. The school has ten subject departments that offer courses in the Normal Academic and Express Streams. Additionally, a variety of co-curricular activities and enrichment programmes are offered. The goal of the English Department is to help the students develop their competence in English through examination-

oriented tasks and enrichment activities. The teacher in this case study is the school's Literature Coordinator.

### 3.1.2 Classroom

It is an English Literature lesson at the Secondary 3 level in the Express Stream. The lesson is being conducted in an air-conditioned computer laboratory in the third-storey of the school building. The room is dark as the curtains are drawn. There are twenty pupils in the classroom- boys and girls (almost in equal ratio) of the age group 14-15 years. The lesson commences with the teacher drawing the pupils' attention to the new seating arrangement in the classroom as is evident from the transcript below.

T	Okay. You must be wondering why the strange setup. But do you like this arrangement? (T gestures towards the U-shaped arrangement of seats)
Ss	No
T	Why?
S	Because like conference.
T	Oh like conference, which we are going to have at the end of the lesson hopefully towards the end we will, confer, I think, we will come to an agreement about certain things. Okay we are doing drama for the first time today so I thought maybe I treat you somewhat differently ah. For different treatment. So welcome! To the world of Shakespearrrre. (T rubs hands together and claps)
Ss	Yay! (Students clap)

It is clear that the pupils find the new arrangement different from the usual. The response of one student: "Because like conference" indicates that based on his/her real-life context, the student perceives that the U- shaped seating arrangement is typical of

conferences not classrooms. The seating arrangement has been planned well ahead of the lesson as is evident from the teacher's U-shaped illustration on the whiteboard.

### 3.1.3 Lesson objective

The lesson content is conveyed primarily through the teacher's PowerPoint (PPT) presentation. Typically, the teacher's exposition and a few Initiate, Respond, Evaluate (IRE) sequences revolve around a given PPT slide before she moves on to the next one. The choice of white text on a black background in all the PPT slides is noteworthy. It leads one to ask: Is the choice purposeful? Did the teacher think that white text on a black background would help her convey meaning of the Elizabethan context more effectively? Would it in any way help to generate a 'sense of history' in her pupils?

The teacher introduces pupils to: The World of Shakespeare. It is the first lesson of the unit: A Midsummer Night's Dream and the teacher aims to lessen pupils' fear of Shakespearean language before they delve deep into one of his most famous works. The teacher states her lesson objective explicitly:

T	Okay. All right. Er I'm not wearing my glasses. Okay. Now I'm not going to focus so much on the Globe Theatre but today my lesson is on the language Shakespeare used because I remember when I first asked you shall we do Shakespeare, then when we tried to look at the book that you brought, some of you said "[tea]cher I don't understand" so I thought that you had a lot of fear for language so my goal today at the end of today's lesson, your fears are lessened.
S	[Tea]cher why not completely...
T	[Mm] it all depends, it all depends, so I hope to you know to make you feel more ready to use shakes shakes Shakespeare, sorry.

The teacher wants to make her pupils' comfortable using Shakespeare's language—language, which she knows is far removed from their current knowledge and skills in the English language. She realises the importance of doing away with anxieties regarding Early Modern English and even wants her pupils to appreciate and enjoy the language of Shakespeare. On this note, the teacher emphasises a bit later in the lesson: "... because you're reading his work, if you don't make a point to really understand where the language is coming from, you're going to miss the, the excitement and, and the richness of the language". As she later explains: "... because when you're reading Shakespeare, the feeling is different".

### 3.2 Context

Demonstrating rhetorical awareness, the teacher attempts to convey the meaning that the context in which a particular language evolves is imperative for developing an aesthetic appreciation of the language. She wants to enhance her pupil's experience of Shakespeare by not merely equipping them with an understanding of the rhetorical tools employed by Shakespeare and how to use them, but enabling them to 'see' how the language came about in the first place.

#### 3.2.1 Elizabethan age

Situating Shakespeare's language in its historical context, the teacher explains at the very outset that "I'd like to share with you some background of the culture and the world he lived in, just a little bit." In this spirit the teacher presents, on the PPT slides, various pictures of the Elizabethan era: Queen Elizabeth 1; William Shakespeare; the elaborate clothing and accessories typical of the age; the kind of houses people lived in; and modes of entertainment, particularly theatre. In addition, the teacher's exposition, as evident from the transcripts below, equips pupils with knowledge of how art flourished in the Elizabethan times giving rise to prominent playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Middleton. The teacher explains:

T	<p>Okay, so I'm going to shed just some light on the Globe Theatre, little bit. Let's visit the Globe Theatre (Teacher walks over to computer at her desk). OK before we visit it, okay, now drama is very popular during that time, why? What else is there to entertain yourself- there's no TV, radio right? So people watch drama okay? Now Shakespeare appeared during this period (T. motions to the PPT slide) so did other famous playwrights, which you might not be familiar with, maybe familiar with this guy and maybe a bit of him but Shakespeare is the most familiar. OK, so during this time all the prominent playwrights came out and had their plays performed, so this period of time is where drama really flourished. OK? Now, they also derived their inspiration for their stories from things that happened around the world you know.</p>
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Highlighting the sources of inspiration for Shakespeare's work, the teacher later states "... he likes to base his plays on many kinds of people like kings, Greek and Roman figures OK or sometimes his plays he would insert these characters inside his play, so his plays are very, very interesting..." She builds the bridge with the pupils' present repertoire of experiences by highlighting the modes of entertainment available to them today but which did not exist in those days, thus making theatre a popular choice then.

### 3.2.2 *Globe Theatre*

The teacher presents an image of the Globe Theatre on the PPT slide, highlighting the circular structure and the seating arrangement. Prior to this, the teacher had asked the pupils to think about who they imagined, would have had the privilege of sitting "nearer the stage". Pupils take the cue and one of them responds "Queen". Reiterating the pupil's response, the teacher says: "the audience get to sit at many places but usually they reserve the rich, the most important very close to the stage". The teacher continues to explore the context of the

Globe Theatre to give students a fuller understanding of the language used in his plays, as is evident from the transcript below.

T	Okay. Now. You saw the Globe Theatre right. Look at the stage. Now, they don't have a lot of props.
T	So what will, how would they entertain the people like you watching? They don't have a lot of props.
S	They dance.
T	They dance. Mm, I mean the actors are acting, but how can Shakespeare entertain?
S	They use our imagination.
T	How do how does he do that? How did he make you all imagine, you think?
S	By speaking.
T	Yeah by speaking, through the language he uses. So, Shakespeare had to resort to language. To the vocabulary he's using, because they aren't many props on stage. So, he has to use, and people from far away cannot see, you know... How? They don't have binoculars at that time. So they all can hear, so they have to describe what they heard, so he has to describe what's happening on stage by using all kinds of vocabulary. So one of them is (points at the PPT slide) you know now these is are just some words, but he got to use a lot of vocabulary, and then, the details give the audience some kind of visual er... impact.

The teacher's rhetorical knowledge focus is clear as pupils are led to 'see' how Shakespeare's writing made a 'visual' appeal to the common man who did not have the privilege to be seated in close proximity to the stage. Thus, the teacher highlights how Shakespeare's language and style were entirely appropriate and topical to the day and age.



Pupils are provided with an opportunity to think about how audience, purpose and context shaped theatrical language five centuries ago.

### 3.3 Language

On the same note, the teacher goes on to point out an important aspect of Shakespeare's language: iambic pentametre, a writing style that consists of five sets of unstressed (weak) and stressed (strong) syllables. Shakespeare's rhythmic language goes along the lines of: ta-dum-ta-dum-ta-dum-ta-dum and the teacher gets pupils to practise the rhythm through an oral drill with blue ('ta') and yellow ('dum') strips. After sufficient drill and practice, the teacher asks pupils to turn to their textbook: A Midsummer Night's Dream Act 1, Scene 1, Line 1 and pupils attempt to read the opening line: Now fair Hippolyta our nuptial hour draws on apace".

The teacher then distributes handouts, which contain phrases from Romeo and Juliet and Macbeth respectively: 'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks'; 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'. The other phrases are drawn from the pupils' current range of familiar language resources such as: 'I'm hungry, is it almost time for lunch?'; 'Not yet the soup is heating on the stove'. Once students have grasped the emphasis on the second syllable in iambic pentameter, she moves on to highlighting the rhetorical basis of using this particular language device. Her shift in focus from procedural to rhetorical instruction is clear.

T	So notice ah, what effect does ah, this use of rhythm like in particular he iambic pentametre has on the meaning of the words you have read out.  What impact does it have?
S	Emotion.
T	What kind of emotion, on whom?
S	The feeling.

T	The feelings yeah. The feelings of the characters is brought out, very good. What else? What about the meanings of the words?
S	Emphasise...
T	Emphasise, yes the words and therefore the meaning is heightened. So now you know why Shakespeare writes in this way. Now the only way you can feel the rhythm is when you read it out loud. You can't see it by looking at the page. It doesn't have all those things. OK? Anyone's got any questions regarding Shakespeare's language? Are you quite, quite comfortable with the idea that he writes in this way, it's just a style of writing OK very good.

The teacher draws pupils' attention to how writing in iambic pentametre enabled Shakespeare to illustrate the emotions of the characters portrayed and thus his language produced a certain *effect*. Earlier, the teacher had pointed out that writing in rhythm was "the fashion of the time" and "it's just that Shakespeare was brilliant at doing it". The teacher attempts to explicate 'why Shakespeare writes in this way'. Shakespeare's patterned language; and distinctive rhythms and repetitions of words and phrases helped the audience to keep track of what was happening and to make sense of what they were hearing. It also served to generate mood and audience reaction.

#### 4. Discussion

The above discussion illustrates how the teacher makes meaning of Shakespeare's language through various modes of representations: linguistic, visual and spatial. An assumption underlying the English Language Syllabus (MOE, 2010) is that language is a means of making meaning and communication. By representing meaning through various modes (and their subtle interaction), the teacher communicates how the language of Shakespeare grew out of the socio-economic and cultural context of the Elizabethan society

and how it responded to the realities of the times. The teacher mobilises the resource of classroom talk along with other non-verbal representations to make meaning. Thus, the teacher is able to demonstrate adequately that “Shakespeare writes his lines with the purpose of achieving rhythm” in order ‘to enable pupils to see how the purposeful use of language shapes meaning in texts’ (MOE, 2010).

Kress (2003) speaks of semiotic resources, that is, resources of and for making meaning. If two modes - say image and writing- are available and are being used for communicating, it is most likely that each will be used for that which it does best. The teacher decides that the information of the Elizabethan theatregoer’s proximity to the stage is best conveyed in image; an apt visual representation to convey spatial meaning. The teacher uses both ‘image’: the iconic representation of the Globe Theatre and ‘writing’ that is the text on iambic pentameter presented on screen and in the students’ worksheets. The students are given to understand that Shakespeare was not writing for today’s literary audience; he was writing for the masses, many of who could not read or write. Thus, the informational ‘load’ is shared by both the modes and both are partial carriers of meaning. By transporting pupils to the Globe Theatre, the teacher gets pupils to imagine what possible resources a playwright could draw upon given the orientation of the theatre, the lack of elaborate props on stage and the limited resources of the illiterate masses.

The teacher recruits the spatial mode in her U-shaped arrangement of the classroom. Kress et al. (2005) argue that the classroom is a spatial resource that has the potential to constrain and enable different kinds of pedagogy ... and that the spatial arrangements in the classroom serve to change the relationships between teacher and students, and among students themselves. The students in this lesson can immediately sense the theatrical ambience and ‘conference’-like arrangement and the teacher sets the tone for the lesson by suggesting that pupils might expect a different ‘treatment’ in their debut lesson in English

drama. Thus, she paves the way for a more ‘open’ and democratic form of classroom interaction.

It is argued that teachers, as designers of texts, recruit modes of representation in the classroom based on their aptness of fit enabling them to communicate with *effect* to their audience that is the pupils. Teaching, as viewed through the descriptive lens of multimodality, thus involves making decisions about which modes of representation to use for particular curricular content, and how it is to be arranged and sequenced. In a sense, teaching involves the weaving together of a series of representations and commentary into a seamless whole. Rhetorical knowledge is about communicating for *effect*, and thus in a certain sense, the teacher demonstrates rhetorical awareness as she navigates meaning making through her apt modes of representations (and their interactions). Pupils in this lesson are thus, provided an opportunity to see first-hand how the teacher makes meaning of language appropriate to purpose, audience, context, and culture in the classroom.

## 5. Recommendations

The MOE emphasises literacy development and not just linguistic proficiency that enables students to ‘make structural and linguistic choices to suit purpose, audience, context and culture’ is evident (Rubdy & Tupas, 2009). Despite the strong rhetorical knowledge focus outlined by the MOE (2010), instruction in the English language classroom remains largely procedural and to some extent conceptual. It is argued that operationalising rhetorical knowledge in Singapore’s English language classroom would mean opening the doors for teachers and students to draw on a range of multi-modal representations in the classroom for meaning making as well as focusing on setting and implementing activities and tasks with a clear rhetorical knowledge focus.

### 5.1 A multi-modal classroom interaction

Learning to use representations effectively and efficiently in education fits more broadly into notions and practices relating to literacy and what it means to be literate. Kress (2003) asserts that we can no longer treat literacy (or ‘language’) as the sole, the main, let alone the major means for representation and communication. Visual, aural, and digital multimodal texts are now integral to language education, and to literacy education more generally (Luke & Dooley, 2011).

When teachers and students are provided ample opportunities to make appropriate choices of the representational modes and their aptness of fit, they obtain a first-hand lesson in communicating for *effect*. Pupils (and teachers) understand that considering the purpose, audience, context, and culture is vital for meaning making. There is research evidence suggesting that students and their teachers are not prepared to design and exploit multimodal resources adequately. Pupils in the Singapore classroom need support from teachers to be able to draw on a range of representational modes to make meaning effectively. English language teachers on their part need to think about meaning making not merely in terms of traditional modes of classroom talk and linguistic activities but in the broader notions of classroom interaction in which non-verbal modes are designed, used and even orchestrated. Kress (2003) argue that if the meaning of a message is realised, ‘spread across’, several modes, we need to know on what basis this spreading happens, what principles are at work. Teachers and pupils need to be aware of the range and impact of their choices of the modes of representation and their interactions. Thus, ‘turning a multimodal lens on the English classroom’ (Kress et al., 2005) accentuates the role of rhetorical knowledge in English language learning.

## 5.2 ‘High road transfer’ instruction

Besides a multi-modal classroom interaction, another aspect of classroom instruction i.e. activities and tasks have the potential to generate rhetorical awareness in pupils.

Bergmann and Zepernick (2007, as cited in Graff, 2010) suggest that composition courses should focus “less on teaching students how to write than on teaching students *how to learn to write*” (pp. 141-142). Pupils in the high stake assessment system in Singapore are often taught to write in a given context, say the context of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and assessed on the basis of adherence to prescribed standard procedures. Thus, a student’s creative or imaginative piece of writing that does not fit the prescribed format or the given structure often scores poorly.

Relevant to this is Graff’s (2010) argument that preparing students for ‘low road transfer’ to pass state exams involves having them practice exam-like writing in exam-like situations so that they can readily perform in those contexts. ‘High road transfer’ instruction involves enabling students to write in different contexts with state exams being only one context in which students might write. Perkins and Salomon (1992, as cited in Graff, 2010) distinguish “low road transfer” in which learners are able to apply skills in very similar circumstances from “high road transfer” in which learners abstract significant principles and apply them to new and very different situations- what Olson (2007) calls strategic knowledge. Pupils in Singapore may be equipped with ‘high road transfer skills’ to allow them freedom to explore different contexts without being tied down to a narrow focus of the examination context.

### 5.3 ‘*Knowledge-transforming tasks*’

Tardy (2005) argues that expert writers see texts rhetorically, existing within social activity, created by and for real people; rhetorical knowledge is therefore a crucial part of advanced academic literacy, which demands writing for and within a social group. The participants in Tardy’s study did not simply learn the community’s values and practices; they learned to understand writing as an explicitly rhetorical process, referring to writing as “a tool”, a way to “convince readers”, and “a story.” Tardy (2005) believes that while such a

consideration may be largely unnecessary in the ‘knowledge-telling tasks’ of many school genres, it is crucial in the ‘knowledge-transforming tasks’ of academic research.

On the other hand, given that Singapore’s global and dynamic educational system aims to equip pupils with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, it is argued that like the participants in Tardy’s (2005) study who were at the advanced academic literacy level, pupils in Singapore’s primary and secondary schools, to some extent at least, need to ‘focus not just on what content to transmit to their readers but how to transmit that content in a persuasive way’ typical of knowledge-transforming tasks.

#### *5.4 Rhetorical analysis*

Graff (2010) suggests that students need to learn how texts function, particularly texts that attempt to persuade perhaps from notions of purpose, audience, and effectiveness, adding explicit rhetorical knowledge in the course of practising this analysis. Graff asserts that teaching rhetorical analysis has the potential to help students develop the rhetorical awareness and meta-knowledge about their writing that can help them transfer their learning about writing to new contexts and tasks. Thus, rhetorical analysis involves pupils to examine ‘not only what authors communicate but also for what purposes they communicate those messages, what effects they attempt to evoke in readers, and how they accomplish those purposes and effects’.

It may be noted that while English language activities and tasks in Singapore, particularly at the secondary level, often provide scope for pupils to use language with a consideration of purpose, audience, context and culture; fewer attempts are made to illustrate the socio-economic or cultural contexts in which literary texts emanate. As Graff argues, conducting rhetorical analysis with students on newspaper articles, speeches, advertisements, and textbooks can provide them important insights about how language works in everyday life.

#### *5.5 Rhetorical grammar*

Similarly, Lefstein (2009) points out that rhetorical grammar teaching requires that grammar study be embedded in meaningful communicative contexts. The contemporary approach to rhetorical knowledge in English courses focuses on the rules of grammar which makes children aware of key grammatical principles and their effects, increases the range of linguistic resources open to them when they write, and makes them aware of the effects of different choices on the rhetorical power of their writing. Moving away from rule-based grammar, instruction in the English language classroom needs to focus on rhetorical grammar that is communicating for *effect*.

## 6. Conclusion

Teaching the tools of the English language, the concepts embedded in them together with an understanding and appreciation of the context can pave the way for a broader knowledge focus in the classroom. The case study presented serves to demonstrate why a rhetorical knowledge focus in the classroom is important and how it can be implemented through a multi-modal classroom interaction; as well as activities and tasks that focus on ‘high road transfer’ skills, ‘knowledge-transforming tasks’, rhetorical analysis and rhetorical grammar.

The significant role of rhetorical knowledge in English language learning impresses upon us the fact that we “need a quite new way of thinking about resources, their use and the users; we need a new theory of meaning and meaning-making, a new theory of semiosis” (Kress, 2003, p. 32). Operationalising rhetorical knowledge in the English language classroom means re-thinking classroom interaction and instructional activities. Thus, Kress et al. (2005) pose the important question: What resources are the students offered for their learning, and how are they positioned, physically and conceptually, in relation to this knowledge?



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