'In Other Words': The Synonym Method (TSM)© in GCSE English Language Studies

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Abstract

Writing relevant analytical paragraphs is crucial for GCSE English Language students. However, for students in the Further Education (FE) context of this research, confidence is often diminished by prior examination failures. This study introduces The Synonym Method (TSM)© – a teaching strategy I, the researcher, created and developed to improve this. The researcher teaches English in a West Yorkshire FE college. With recourse to qualitative methodology, the researcher recorded and transcribed interviews to explore the efficacy of the method, focusing on how it enables previously unsuccessful students to rethink English studies. The researcher's findings indicate that TSM improves confidence and performance in his students and colleagues' students. The researcher recommends further research into the applicability and efficacy of TSM in other educational contexts. As its title suggests, the study seeks the introduction of TSM for teachers and students to satisfy the criteria of GCSE English examination boards.

Key Words

Analysis; Paragraphs; GCSE; English Language; Synonyms; Connotations.

Introduction

Arising from my unease with ways of teaching GCSE English, this research proposes that success with this qualification requires the ability to write relevant, analytical paragraphs. I will argue against misconceptions about teaching GCSE English, introducing instead TSM; it is a logical set of writing frameworks I originally devised when I was a GCSE English student at school to help me generate these paragraphs and, ultimately, examination responses. Meticulous work on the structures of paragraphs has rectified the vague, dissatisfying strategies encountered thus far in my career. This paper introduces these structures and their application for providing a reliable basis for confident and relevant paragraphs. TSM originated by helping students whose numerous failures and re-attempts at GCSE English left them disheartened; I felt equally dissatisfied by the previous strategies they had used. To exemplify its processes, TSM will be outlined in relation to the limitations of one such established teaching strategy: namely, the Point/Evidence/Explain (PEE) approach to paragraph structure. TSM emerged from seeking precise, reliable connections between authors' writing and the analysis of that writing.

Research Context

I teach GCSE English Language in a West Yorkshire FE college. GCSE English Language is offered as a re-sit. The strategies presented in this study have developed partly as an adaptation to the political and demographic context in which I teach. Since August 2015, re-sits have been required of every 16 to 18-year-old student yet to pass (prior grades D/3). Despite suggestions to abrogate this policy, funding guidance for 2017/18 remains unchanged. The Education and Skills Funding

Agency (ESFA) states: '*Full-time students starting their study programme who have a grade three or D GCSE, or equivalent qualification in maths and/or English, must be enrolled on a GCSE, rather than an approved stepping stone qualification*' (ESFA, 2017: p. 26). The increase in student numbers requires teaching GCSE English to previously unsuccessful, disillusioned students. Consequently, the likelihood of lower pass rates increases.

My research is a response to examination criteria requiring interpretation of textual evidence (usually quotations) and addresses the necessity of writing relevant, well-structured analytical paragraphs. Students must contextualise their interpretations in relation to specific texts. In the most recent GCSE English Language examinations:

> '*…[s]ome students looked for the connotations of words without a consideration of context, e.g. claiming that the word 'black' in Rosabel's petticoat being 'coated in black, greasy mud' was associated with death, darkness or disease ... Students need to understand that their comments have to be precise and contextualised in order to achieve Level 3 or above…*'
>
> (AQA, 2017: p. 4)

An answer's relevance and exactitude is conditioned by context; there are specific characters and events under analysis, and more confident students consider how meaning arises in these contexts. For less confident students, TSM provides a guide for producing consistently relevant paragraphs and extended answers.

Additionally, examination criteria note that '*…[s]tudents who performed less well … often identified and labelled language features but failed to comment on the effect on the reader or explain a reason behind the writer's choices*' (AQA, 2017: p. 3).

TSM operates as what I call 'translation in one language' or 'English-to-English'. As Steiner notes:

> '*When we read or hear any language-statement ... we translate … The schematic model of translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a* transformational process [my emphasis]. *The barrier is the obvious fact that one language differs from the other, that an interpretative transfer … must occur so that the message 'gets through'. Exactly the same model – and this is what is rarely stressed – is operative within a single language*'.

> (Steiner, 1975: p. 28)

It will become clear how TSM encourages students' independence. Accordingly, colleagues have described TSM as metacognitive; it '*…is not only about the strategies that students use, but also about students knowing when and how to use them. When a person is metacognitive, he/she demonstrates an awareness and regulation of his/her mental processes*' (Griffith & Ruan, 2005: p. 4).

There Is No Wrong Answer

Techniques with which I previously taught paragraph structures in GCSE English were ineffective; for various colleagues, the subject had an advantage which,

conversely, I considered a misleading misconception: namely, there are no wrong answers. Invariably, my students have previously been assured that '*[y]our opinion is the one that counts. Within reason, there is no wrong answer or interpretation*' of a text (Keating, 2017). I go on to contend that this notion jeopardises the liberation it seemingly permits; without recourse to students' opinions, relevant answers in GCSE English can be adequately produced within the reliable logic of synonymy and connotation. My methods raise the question: if there are no wrong answers, how can students be consistently unsuccessful?

Methodology

Self-study is the mode of research for this paper because avoiding self-reflection would be a disservice to students; '…*[s]elf-study demands an honest and moral stance. Inherently, teaching includes an obligation to improve a learning situation for oneself and for others through inquiry*' (Samaras & Freese, 2006: p. 42). Indeed, refining TSM was motivated by a sense of duty to improve the students' experience and mine respectively.

As self-study, ensuring impartiality required preventing bias. It was important to address staff and students respectively to ascertain the efficacy of TSM. In this study's FE context, students typically prefer their vocational subjects over English studies. Other research has '…*found that students who responded negatively with regard to the importance of schooling tended to envision future lives and occupations for which they believed school knowledge was unnecessary*' (Graham et al, 2014: p. 237). Therefore, after previously negative encounters with GCSE English studies, confidence is paramount for my learners' success in a heretofore inaccessible

subject. The unquestioned assumptions about how GCSE English Language was taught left me dissatisfied; the inherited strategies with which I was trying to convey the subject matter seemed inexact and nonsensical. I developed TSM as a means to restore learners' confidence.

To encourage honest responses thereof, anonymous semi-structured interviews were the chosen mode of questioning; they were recorded and transcribed. Four students, two teachers and one manager were interviewed. Consent to be recorded and cited was verbal and written. Because of its flexibility, the interview process encouraged dialogue; it enabled me to clarify and expand upon interviewees' responses, enhancing their veracity. Although time-consuming, the data has helped verify my claims. Semi-structured interviews enabled questioning without entirely dictating the parameters of responses. For instance:

- How do you feel TSM has helped you (teacher/student)?

- What do you think are the most useful aspects of TSM?

I sought to avoid the response effect whereby '…*[e]agerness of the respondent to please the interviewer … or the tendency of the interviewer to seek out the answers that support his preconceived notions*' (Borg, 1981: p. 87) might impinge upon the neutrality of the data. Standardised questions ensured positive responses to TSM were freely given rather than coerced. To minimise the influence of paralinguistic features (tone of voice, for instance) on the responses, and to increase reliability, interviewees read the questions. Using purposive sampling necessitated objectivity. While the sample of people satisfied the needs of the study – to assess the efficacy of the TSM – I did not select successful students simply to confirm my enthusiasm.

Rather, critical responses were invited to document the experiences of staff and students whose consistent use of TSM supported the relevance of their feedback. There was also negative case sampling in which '…*the researcher deliberately seeks those people who might disconfirm the theories being advanced … thereby strengthening the theory if it survives such disconfirming cases*' (Cohen et al, 2007: p. 115). I was aware that purposive sampling might unfairly support the conclusions I wanted to reach. Therefore, I welcomed constructive discussions regarding potential limitations of my teaching strategies.

The qualitative data reflects people's interaction with TSM. Other qualitative data was gathered from emails received from managers and heads of English departments based on a conference at which I presented TSM. Although each interview lasted half an hour, the overall timescale was imprecise; I had developed TSM in classes for one academic year before I realised feedback might be relevant for a research project. Future research would rectify this by organising interviews in a set timescale to more accurately quantify the time spent practising TSM and its effects. Nevertheless, emerging themes in the data are explored. Once TSM has been demonstrated to be effective in different educational settings, '…*validity could then be greatly increased by researching a large sample of schools (space triangulation)*' (Cohen & Manion, 1994: p. 240) over an extended timescale.

The Synonym Method

The processes of this method relate to consistent structures in GCSE English examinations: the topics and content of the papers change, but *the structure remains the same.* Subsequently, two helpful consequences arise:

- The *structures* of the questions are predictable. Thus,

- the *structures* of the answers can be predicted.

Removing specific details from successful exemplar answers reveals underpinning patterns to which they adhere, and from which I distilled templates:

> In [text], [author] writes ['quotation']. This suggests [synonym method].

Subtle, repeated variations of this pattern enable students to produce coherent, analytical paragraphs lacking in their previous GCSE English studies. Everything in square brackets is a variable; with unseen exams, specific texts, authors, textual events and words are unpredictable, yet the organisation of each paragraph can nevertheless be learnt in advance. This organisational precision enables students to know *what to do* with words in quotations they analyse. Variations of the template above create simple guides from which complex analytical paragraphs can be devised.

Although initially unclear, once the [synonym method] section of the template is delineated, it reminds students that, when they select a quotation, three manoeuvres regulate their analyses:

1. Find interesting/familiar words in the quotation.

2. Think of synonyms and connotations to replace those words.

3. Use those synonyms and connotations to contextualise the original quotation.

Here is an example of the most basic application of the template and the three stages in response to a GCSE examination question:

Q: Compare how the writers convey their different perspectives on the extreme weather conditions.

In source A, the narrator describes 'a 'cheerless place'. This suggests the joylessness and misery felt by the climbers. The adjective 'cheerless' generates an atmosphere of the dread and dismay faced by the mountaineers.

Although rudimentary, this response proceeds logically. The student's vocabulary of 'joylessness', 'misery', 'dread' and 'dismay' is relevant because of its synonymous connection to the author's original word: 'cheerless'. Expanding this response will be demonstrated when the three stages of TSM are explicated later.

A useful variation of the pattern above is:

When [event happens], we see ['quotation']. This conveys a sense of [synonym method]. Moreover, [author] creates the impression of [synonym method].

When the author describes the mountain, we see 'a cheerless place'. This conveys a sense of the dread and dismay he feels in the snow. Moreover, he creates an impression of desperation and unhappiness in the blizzard.

Point. Evidence. Explain. (PEE)

The benefits of TSM for paragraph structure can be exemplified by critiquing one pre-existing strategy: PEE. The PEE technique tells students to establish a *point* or argument, provide *evidence* to support their point, and elaborate upon it with *explanation* of why the evidence proves their point. Enstone (2017) notes that,

'…[a]s an examiner, I was disheartened by the lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated by these [PEE] responses … it felt at times as though the only reason we were reading literature was to generate these meaningless "PEE paragraphs"*. Indeed, my student recalls:

> "*I hated PEE at school. It just left me feeling more confused. If I asked how to do the* **explanation***, I was just told to analyse the quote. But, if I asked how to analyse it, I was then told to evaluate it. It just never made anything clear*".
>
> (Student 1)

Likewise, another student remembers:

> "*the way it used to make me feel – like I had to guess, like I had to make something up. I never felt like I was in control of my paragraph; I was always a bit agitated by feeling that way – like, uncertain I was making sense*".
>
> (Student 2)

With PEE, students are inhibited by a lack of clarity; the imprecision with which they write is inimical to their confidence. Conversely, TSM is enabling because its operations are consistent, yet it yields varied interpretations. A student I explained the method to for the first time, remarked: "'*it is like BIDMAS[i] for English studies. I recognise how I am getting my answer. I can follow a reason for why I have come up with the interpretation that I have*" (Student 3). This student's reference to a rationale

suggests that TSM generates familiarity with texts. GCSE English examinations reward analytical paragraphs which interpret textual evidence. To '*interpret includes working with more complex material – reading for* inference [my emphasis] *and comprehension*' (AQA, 2015, p. 2). Very few answers written with the PEE format engender inference; there is a tendency to repeat the words from the quotation verbatim. TSM enables inference via the synonymous connection between the quotation and the student's interpretation.

Unlike the final 'E' in the PEE technique, TSM shows *how* to analyse and explain a quotation, making the process less abstract and elusive. TSM refines existing strategies with which I was dissatisfied, reorganising their limitations into a reliable system which simply focalises associations between words and ideas. In a FE context committed to differentiation, my system seemingly diminishes individuality and difference. Indeed, one staff interviewee objected:

> "*Sometimes I am not sure about your method. Some students just identify synonyms and connotations but don't write about how they relate to the characters and the events of the plot. There are times when students' paragraphs sound repetitive*".
>
> (Teacher 2)

Homogenising the diverse perceptions of students would undermine the very learning I seek, so these issues have been given consideration. Variations of the paragraph templates help overcome this repetition. Counter-intuitively, the more

predictable and consistent the method, the more varied and idiosyncratic the paragraphs can be. For instance:

> When [event happens], we see ['quotation']. This conveys a sense of [synonym method]. Moreover, [author] creates the impression of [synonym method].
> When the author describes the mountain, we see 'a cheerless place'. This conveys a sense of the dread and dismay felt by the climbers in the snow. Moreover, he creates an impression of their desperation and unhappiness in the blizzard.

A student with a more confident vocabulary could produce more fluency:

> When the author describes the climbers on the mountain, the 'cheerless place' conveys how frightful and demoralised they feel in the snow. Moreover, there is a sense that the climbers have become dispirited in the harsh conditions.

Initially, colleagues decried TSM's seemingly mechanical approach:

> "*At first I didn't know what to make of it because I was used to acronyms like PEE. I thought the synonym paragraphs sounded a bit robotic. But students soon started to expand their vocabularies. What I really liked about your synonym method was how it gave the students an anchor; their answers became more relevant and focused.*"

The incredulity towards my use of words like 'template', 'method', 'formula' and 'system' in English studies aptly demonstrated the very method of which they were doubtful; mathematical terminology was synonymous with rigidity and predictability. Likewise, the logic of *saying the same thing differently* initially generated dubiousness among some students; they were concerned that they would be penalised for "*sounding the same*" (Students 1, 2, 3). Graff and Birkenstein (2010) use similar ideas about templates: '…*[a]t first, many of our students complain that using templates will take away their individuality and creativity and make them all sound the same*' (p. 10). While their work centres on university students, the lower-level FE GCSE students benefit from what initially appear to be limitations. Like Graff and Birkenstein, I think templates provide firm bases on which confident, creative analytical paragraphs can be constructed.

Now, explication of the three stages of TSM will use a quotation from a GCSE English examination text which describes climbers' turmoil during storms on Mount Everest. The [synonym method] section of the template entails the following processes:

Stage One: Find Interesting/Familiar Words in the Quotation

Students remain focused on specific words and phrases.

In source A, the writer describes 'a **cheerless** place'.

A student selects the adjective 'cheerless'. The PEE method is often overlooked at this stage. Instead of rushing into "*saying whatever you want*" (Student 1) about the quotation or the author's meaning, the words selected here serve as basic elements from which the subsequent analytical paragraph is derived. Selecting a quotation removes the need to make a point; the quotation itself becomes the point.

When interviewed about TSM, one student recounts: "*I used to worry that I wouldn't know what the words in the quote meant*" (Student 2). Overcoming this problem simply requires selecting quotations with recognisable words; typically, TSM works most fluently with adjectives and adverbs. My line manager was optimistic about its efficacy: "*it's the most effective reflective practice I have ever done; single-word focus is accessible for our students*" (Manager).

Stage Two: Synonyms and Connotations Replace the Original Words

Stage Two seeks relevance. With the PEE technique, students often repeat words from the quotation in the 'explanation'. For example:

> In source A, the writer describes 'a cheerless place'. This suggests how cheerless the mountain was in the snow.

This would receive a poor mark because it demonstrates no inference. Another student said: "*Whenever I used that PEE technique, I always used to get into trouble because my explanation of the quote would just repeat the words that were in the quote*" (Student 3). TSM resolves this problem; words chosen in Stage One are replaced with synonyms and connotations. Consequently, students generate a vocabulary with which inference from the word 'cheerless' can be demonstrated:
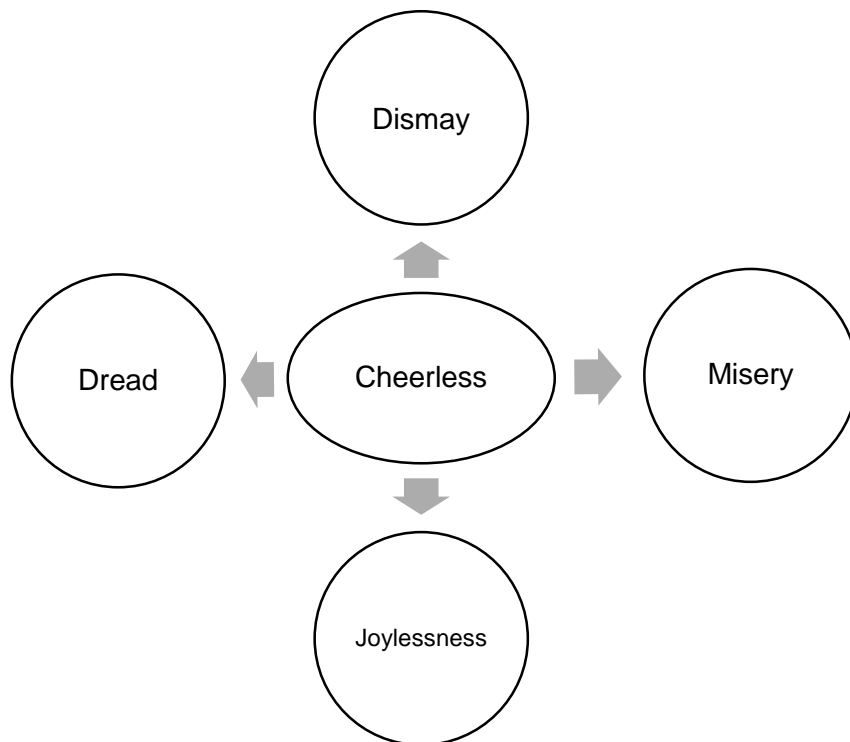
Figure 1

In source A, the narrator describes a 'cheerless' place. This suggests *joylessness* and *misery*. The adjective 'cheerless' generates an atmosphere of *dread* and *dismay*.

Likening TSM to translation makes sense because its processes correspond to notions with which "translation" is itself synonymous*: change, conversion, transformation, alteration, adaptation, metamorphosis, transfiguration* and *rendering*. Successful analyses of quotations entail a *rendering* – not of the author's meaning, but of a reasonable *alteration* of their words within the context of a text under analysis. A conversion occurs; a word with which the student is familiar can be substituted for another that is synonymous. Relevant analyses emerge when words

and phrases in the students' *interpretation* or *transformation* are sufficiently and contextually synonymous with those in the chosen quotation.

For the purposes of GCSE English, interpretation and translation are interconnected. At this stage, students have been doubtful: "*I don't think I know enough words to do this*" (Student 4). Similarly, there is concern that "*I will struggle to come up with connotations and synonyms*" (Student 4). However, for every word they know, students likely know at least one synonymous replacement. Insofar as some of its aspects elude students, English is like a foreign language.

Stage Three: Use Synonyms and Connotations to Rephrase the Original Quotation

Having selected recognisable words in Stage One, and replaced them with synonyms and connotations in Stage Two, students have equipped themselves with a vocabulary for Stage Three. Importantly, Stage Three contextualises the translation, the interpretation, and the analysis. "*In other words*", as Student 2 stated, students re-phrase the quotation, using their synonyms and connotations to describe characters and events. The paragraph now reads:

> In source A, the narrator describes a 'cheerless' place. This suggests the joylessness and misery felt by the climbers. The adjective 'cheerless' generates an atmosphere of the dread and dismay faced by the mountaineers on Everest.

With TSM, variations of the following pattern can satisfy the examination criteria of contextualising answers and analysing language features:

This use of [language feature] is effective because [statement about the language feature].

Again, a simplistic use of this might yield sentences such as:

This use of adjectives is effective because it creates a detailed impression of the action.

However, a more developed and contextualised response could read:

The adjectives create a detailed impression for the reader of the climbers' feelings in the challenging environment.

Whilst saying the same thing differently, this response specifies the action: namely, the characters' demeanour. It also identifies elements of the text without deviating from the underlying structure of the pattern. "*It's the same but different – I get it*" (Student 3). Students reiterate content in varied ways; the template simply provides a basis for their *particular* contextualisation of the *general*, unchanging properties of language features – in this case, the adjective 'cheerless'.

After following the stages of the method, the finalised paragraph reads:

In source A, the narrator describes a 'cheerless' place. This suggests the joylessness and misery felt by the climbers. The adjective 'cheerless' generates an atmosphere of the dread and dismay faced by the mountaineers. The use of adjectives creates a detailed impression of the climbers' struggles.

This analytical paragraph is relevant because its references to misery, dread and dismay are synonymous with the author's use of the adjective 'cheerless'. It is – as Stage Two outlined – a translation or transformation of the original words in the quotation. Synonymy anchors the student's interpretation to the author's words. Additionally, this paragraph is successful because it contextualises the general or [always true] effect of the language feature in relation to specific characters and events.

Conclusions

It is difficult to quantify the influence of TSM. Statistically, however, it is possible to speculate. Since I began devising and using TSM in 2014/15, my results have improved. In 2016/17, 50 of 122 students achieved grade four or above, with many just missing out with grade three. 41% might seem insignificant, but within the financial and political parameters of the college, and mindful of significantly low prior grades of students, this number matters. Departmentally, a 52% increase in GCSE English Language passes at grade four or above does not confirm – but might indicate – some influence of TSM; while I cannot yet isolate it as a factor, it is not unreasonable to suggest its contribution. Further research would seek to design controlled studies in which this data might be quantified more clearly. Subject to political changes and examination boards' grade boundaries, results fluctuate. Perhaps further study would find ways to use quantitative data.

Efficacy of TSM has been validated by colleagues' daily use. Their feedback demonstrates its beneficial effects. To develop the research, more students and staff could be interviewed. Additionally, numerous methodologies for data collection could

further verify the study's claims. At a recent conference, I presented my research to local heads of English departments. It was well-received and I was invited to demonstrate TSM to staff and pupils at their schools. Therefore, despite emerging from working in an FE college in GCSE English Language Studies, TSM codifies general interpretative processes whose applicability in other contexts will be the focus of future research.

[1] A method in mathematics for logically deriving answers from sequential operations

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