

***Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level Text: Teachers' Perceptions on Overcoming Challenges of Teaching Magic Realism**

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Abstract

Magic Realism has been spreading globally over the last three decades, attracting many authors and a wide audience. Despite a mixed response from certain students and readers, a large number of such texts are used as course material, including the current G.C.E. Advanced Level (A/L) English syllabus in Sri Lanka. However, the Sri Lankan English Literature curriculum has received little attention from a pedagogical perspective in contrast to the English Language curriculum. This issue is related to the larger problem of literature pedagogy being underdeveloped worldwide. Therefore, this study explored the innovative teaching methods used by teachers against the challenges faced when teaching Magic Realism (in this case, *Life of Pi*) to A/L students. A narrative inquiry was conducted following a qualitative research approach, utilizing a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as research tools. The data were thematically analyzed using the six-phase framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2012). Accordingly, five distinct themes were identified: 'The selection of *Life of Pi* as a conscious effort', 'Teaching *Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level text', 'Challenges faced while teaching *Life of Pi*', 'Overcoming challenges', and 'Opinions on the inclusion of Magic Realism and *Life of Pi* in the A/L syllabi'. Results indicated a lack of clear guidelines on teaching and agreed-upon interpretations. To overcome the challenges, various innovative strategies such as concept maps, thematic approaches, role play, debates, discussions on WhatsApp groups, and extracting examples from mythology, fables and Biblical stories had been utilized by teachers. Findings imply that teachers require adequate guidance and training when teaching a new genre. A broader study representing teachers from different districts would provide further insights.

Keywords: Teaching Magic Realism and *Life of Pi*, challenges of teaching a new genre, innovative teaching strategies, GCE A/L English syllabus, English Literature

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Introduction

Literature, over centuries, has undergone many variations that have been accompanied by numerous styles of writing. They varied according to the then prevailing socio-political circumstances. Post-Realism, which essentially covers a range of non-realist narrative styles, including Magic Realism, has been a noteworthy tendency in fiction spreading globally over the last three decades, attracting a great number of authors and a wide audience.

Magic Realism is a genre which is a combination of Realism and Fantasy that operates on the 'natural' growth of magical elements out of a depicted reality (Faris, 2002). It unfolds a story; not a mere story but an elaborate one in which reality is blended with fantastic elements. However, there is a visible mixed response from certain students and readers towards this style. These responses vary from positive to negative; from confused to nonchalant. In spite of such responses, today, a rapid growth in fiction belonging to this genre is visible in the market. Further, a large number of such texts are used as course material in various academic programmes, including the current General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advanced Level (A/L) English syllabus in Sri Lanka.

Pedagogy of English literature: Global and local scenarios

Unlike most other subjects worldwide, the pedagogy of English Literature has always been an underdeveloped area, which is a problematic situation. In contrast to teaching English Language, there is a dearth of globally accepted methods of teaching Literature, and writing and assessing answers, which is a significant shortcoming in Literature curricula. In addition, studies have made less contribution to the development of the field of Literature pedagogy,

and as a result, there are visibly vast differences among curricula, and have led to a lack of guidance for literature teachers worldwide. As Raees Calafato (2023) points out, literary competence has been least researched, and studies explicitly on teachers' literary competence are practically non-existent, which is a notable gap in our understanding of the professional competence of language teachers concerning the use of literature as a resource.

Similarly, English Literature in the Sri Lankan curriculum has received little attention from a specifically pedagogical perspective in contrast to Language, and this issue is related to the larger problem of Literature pedagogy being underdeveloped worldwide. The A/L English Literature syllabus and assessment as opposed to the Language syllabus, has been problematic because there is little explicit guidance on what specific skills or competencies have to be acquired by students, and how these are to be evaluated and assessed by teachers and examiners. In such a context, it seemed worthwhile exploring the teaching methods followed by the relevant teachers to overcome these challenges when teaching Magic Realism, a genre that most students and teachers are unfamiliar with.

Introduction of Magic Realism to the school syllabus

The current G.C.E. A/L English syllabus in Sri Lanka, which was introduced in 2017, includes a fictional novel belonging to the genre of Magic Realism; *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (2014). The introduction of Magic Realism to the syllabus was actually a good move in keeping with global trends. Further, Magic Realism is a Post Realist genre in which storytelling is the foremost feature. In this regard, storytelling is a key method of educating the listener on world experiences while providing entertainment evidencing its significance as a pedagogical tool (Coulter et al., 2007).

However, *Life of Pi* is the only Post Realist text among a list of Realist novels in the A/L syllabus and a first of its kind, which makes it a novel experience for the teacher as well as the student. Moreover, despite this introduction being a good move, the process has been inadequately scaffolded, particularly because Realism is the more popular literary genre and is the one that most students and teachers can easily relate to.

Current study

Based on these circumstances, this study sought to investigate the innovative teaching methods used by the relevant teachers against the challenges they face when teaching Magic Realism (in this case, *Life of Pi*) to G.C.E. A/L students where Realism is the dominant literary genre. Further, this study intended to uncover answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of teachers on teaching *Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level text?
2. What are the challenges of teaching *Life of Pi* and teaching Magic Realism?
3. What teaching methods are utilized to overcome these challenges?

Review of Literature

Magic Realism

The term 'Magic Realism' was first coined in German as "Magischer Realismus" by the famous German painter Franz Roh in 1925 to refer to a particular artistic style (Widdifield, 2015). Since it was part of the movement Expressionism, this style exhibited a tendency towards referring to objects that are implausible and celestial while resorting to mundane occurrences of

everyday life (Roh, 1995). However, Roh's work soon faded in its country of origin due to political reasons but spread among certain other European lands through Surrealistic movements affecting the literary works of the latter (Widdifield, 2015). Soon, there sprung up numerous definitions and opinions on Magic Realism which were, more or less, similar. Angel Flores (1955) considered it an alteration of the mundane and the verisimilitude into the overwhelming and illusory, or even a mingling of 'realism and fantasy'. Luis Leal (1967) asserted that unlike the Realists who imitated reality, Magic Realists attempt to capture the ambiguity that lingers around it, while Zamora (1995) requested the reader to 'look beyond the parameters of the knowable' in Magic Realist texts.

In order to be more specific, it is vital to explore the difference between Magic Realism and other Post Realist genres, such as Fantasy and Surrealism, since they do have subtle differences while sharing certain common traits. Literature teachers need to be aware of these differences as well as similarities when teaching the genre to their students for better understanding and also to avoid confusion over genres. For instance, Fantasy is located in an author-created world that is fundamentally detached from our own, whereas Magic Realism exists in a recognizably real world (Widdifield, 2015). Yet, due to certain fantastic elements, such as dreams and fantasies, Fantasy shares certain similarities with Magic Realism.

On the other hand, Surrealism is a significant movement of Modernism in which 'dreamlike, irrational and sometimes supernatural elements are projected upon reality in order to distort it' (Widdifield, 2015). As a result, the line between these two genres could be a little blurred. However, Magic Realism per se has its own concerns that lay claim to certain features that keep fluctuating. Therefore, in certain instances, it becomes problematic to demarcate Magic

Realism from other Post Realist genres. This happens due to the variability of definitions, vague explanations and notions of barely discernible alterations in the historical development of Magic Realism (Guenther, 1995). As a result, the confusion that developed because of this problematic demarcation might be a challenge to teachers and students teaching and learning Magic Realist texts. In fact, over the years, critics have faced difficulties in defining the features of Magic Realism as it faintly overlays with other alike genres, such as Surrealism, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Gothic (Aishwarya & Devimeenakshi, 2023). Accordingly, the manner in which teachers face such challenges and the methods they use in overcoming them were queries that led to the emergence of this study.

Implications of promoting the use of Magic Realism as a pedagogical tool

The generations before ours were greatly influenced by storytelling due to the absence of printed and electronic media, and storytelling provided much entertainment and facilitated communication. However, over the years, factors such as the deterioration of extended family structures, disinterest, and the increased workload of parents as well as the unwillingness of schoolteachers to move beyond school syllabi have had a negative impact on the exposure of children to storytelling (Ihalagama, 2009). Despite such a situation, children still prefer to listen to a good story that would allow their imagination to run wild and will, presumably, carry this fondness for stories until they are adults (Violetta-Eirini, 2016). As such, the inclusion of a Magic Realist text – of which storytelling is a distinctive characteristic – in the English syllabus seems a step forward in generating enthusiasm among students towards their study materials. This step has been taken in including *Life of Pi* in the new G.C.E. A/L English syllabus.

There are some other plausible reasons as to why a Magic Realist text qualifies to be taught among a collection of Realist texts. The perspective of Magic Realism or how it has been utilized in a specific text may vary according to the culture and history of the country in which it is set (Jorgenson, 2007). For example, Magic Realist creations of Sri Lankan authors would invariably reflect the Jathaka Stories and folk tales which are an integral part of Sri Lankan culture. Similarly, a South American Magic Realist author would reflect the history of his culture in his works. Hence, students obtain an opportunity to view an unfamiliar depiction of Magic Realism by studying a Magic Realist author creation of another country.

Furthermore, Magic Realist texts contain numerous interesting areas to focus on when used as a pedagogical tool (Bell, 2015). For instance, such texts represent the identity of a particular group of people, times, and places, and thereby allow students studying them to develop their multicultural intelligence by mirroring the historical, cultural, hierarchical, and ideological perspectives on which they are based (Bell, 2015). As a result, students can develop empathy by becoming more meaningfully engaged in the text.

Fantasy – a sub-genre of Post Realism, as mentioned previously – too allows the reader to view the world in different ways by providing a fictional platform on which to relate to his/her own reality. It operates through metaphors opening the stories to different readings and explorations of complex social issues which are more challenging activities than merely viewing them in a realistic context. These metaphors allow young readers to locate meaningful relationships among seemingly dissimilar ideas (Flanagan, 2013).

Thus, many academic studies have proved that Magic Realist texts are as suitable as Realist texts to be utilized as pedagogical tools in a secondary school syllabus.

The current G.C.E. Advanced Level English syllabus in Sri Lanka

The current English syllabus pertaining to the G.C.E. A/L Examination was introduced in 2017. As all previous A/L English syllabi, this also consists of two components: Language and Literature. While the structure in the examination paper of the former component has remained the same over the years, the latter has been compiled using many new texts (together with a few pre-existing texts) at every change of syllabus.

Compared to past syllabi the current syllabus includes a particular novel which is different from the usual Realist novels; this is *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (2014), a text heavily influenced by Magic Realism. This is also the only Post Realist novel among four other novels: *Tess of d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, a Realistic fictional novel; *July's People* by Nadine Gordimer, and *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro which are fictional novels with a historical background; and *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, which is a fictional autobiography. Among them, both *July's People* and *The Remains of the Day* are not traditional Realist novels but push the margins of Realism. However, they still fall under the category of Realist texts due to the relatability of characters and incidents to real life. That said, *Life of Pi* is a clear deviation from Realism and is also the only truly Post Realist/Magic Realist text in the syllabus, and it is an unfamiliar genre from a teacher's perspective because the English syllabus until 2017 has always contained fiction inclined towards Realism. Further, this introduction has not exactly been a gradual process though *July's People* and *The Remains of the Day* have slightly pushed the margins of Realism. The lack of scaffolding in introducing the genre makes the

teaching process even more challenging. In spite of these barriers, certain teachers have opted to teach *Life of Pi*, and the methods they have used in teaching this text would undoubtedly be rich data for a timely study in the field of secondary school literature pedagogy.

It was also important to learn what resources are available for teachers when an unfamiliar genre is introduced to the syllabus. The only source located by this search was the Teachers' Guide (National Institute of Education, 2017) issued by the Department of English, Faculty of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences of the National Institute of Education (NIE), Sri Lanka.

The Teachers' Guide is a comprehensive booklet that clearly mentions the national goals, basic competencies and objectives that need to be achieved through the specific syllabus and the relevant texts that have been introduced in accomplishing them. It specifies the precise competency levels that need to be attained through each text. For example, according to the Teacher's Guide, *Life of Pi* must focus on 'developing a personal response to a text through critical thinking and analyzing' (National Institute of Education, 2017, p. 26), which is the sixth competency mentioned out of thirteen competencies. Under this competency, as levels of sub competency, students must be taught to 'empathize with the text, characters, emotions, and attitudes; relate ideas, emotions, and attitudes generated by the text to their personal and world knowledge; scrutinize them in relation to their own reality and understanding of the world and improve their quality of thought and feeling through reading' (National Institute of Education, 2017, p. 26).

However, what is problematic in this situation is that, along with *Life of Pi*, the poems *Among School Children* by W. B. Yeats, *The Cathedral Builders* by John Ormond, *Morning at the Window* by T. S. Eliot, and *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats and also the short story *The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are prescribed as texts for obtaining the sixth competency. Further, the detailed guidelines for the said competency are also presented for the above-mentioned texts which include the learning outcomes, development of questions that lead the students to think critically, instructions for assessment and evaluation and the possible clinical assessment tools (National Institute of Education, 2017). Evidently, in spite of *Life of Pi* being the first of its genre to be introduced to the syllabus, no specific instructions are provided to guide the teachers who teach it. Therefore, this has become quite a challenging situation for many teachers. However, in spite of these challenges, certain teachers have opted to teach *Life of Pi*. Hence, discovering how these challenges were faced and overcome by these teachers was important.

The research gap

The inclusion of a Magic Realist novel in the G.C.E. A/L English syllabus has occurred for the first time in Sri Lanka. As a result, the relevant teachers face the challenging task of introducing a relatively new literary genre to their students as well as training them to answer examination questions based on the prescribed text. However, teaching *Life of Pi* is optional, since a student must be conversant only in two out of the five prescribed novels, while no text is compulsory. Apparently, there are only a few teachers who have opted to teach *Life of Pi*. The reluctance of the other teachers suggests that there are many challenges in teaching the text.

There are numerous articles and studies carried out on teaching and understanding Magic Realism and certain Magic Realist texts. Reading for Magical Gaps: The Novice Reader's Aesthetic Response to Magical Realism (Ponzio, 2013) proposes techniques in responding to the Magic Realist elements found in *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel and *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. Practical Magic: Magical Realism and the Possibilities of Representation in Twenty-First Century Fiction and Film (Mariboho, 2016) discusses how Magic Realism has been successfully utilized in presenting the 'contemporary anxieties in popular culture' by referring to the fictional works of Tea Obreht and Haruki Murakami and also movies such as *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia*. Related to *Life of Pi*, there are studies focusing on certain Magic Realist aspects. For instance, while *Life of Pi: A Story of Suffering and Liberation from a Buddhist Interpretation* (Hsu, 2015) discusses how Magic Realism operates as a 'universal allegory' in explaining how one could be free of suffering from a Buddhist perspective, *Life of Pi: Emerging Magical Realism, Erasing World* (Septiana et al., 2015) explores how an erasure of the world through Magic Realism is utilized as a strategy in *Life of Pi*, a novel that represents Post Realist literature.

Since the inclusion of a Magic Realist text into the G.C.E A/L English Syllabus is novel and the introduction took place only a few years ago, there is a dearth of studies conducted on the experiences of teaching and learning related to it. Besides, as mentioned previously, the scarcity of teachers who opt to teach *Life of Pi* evidence that not many are willing to teach it. As a result, this study explores the challenges the relevant teachers have faced while teaching it and the methods they have used to overcome them. The findings and conclusions of this study may contribute to the development of literature pedagogy in the country and pave the way for more research studies in the field.

Methodology

Research approach

The purpose of this study was to investigate a currently existing scenario in the field of teaching at G.C.E. (A/L) and focusing on a specific text in English Literature. Narrative inquiry, which is a qualitative research approach, has been adopted in this study. A narrative inquiry typically focuses on a lived experience identifying stories situated within social, cultural, economic and institutional narratives (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Such an inquiry is conducted by analyzing qualitative data, and the current study also took the same approach. Qualitative research methods play a vital role in gathering in-depth data which facilitate a deeper understanding of a certain condition. Their focus is mostly on a hypothesis related to human experience and suitable methods that would be developed in exploring its validity (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Accordingly, since only a few teachers have selected *Life of Pi* due to various reasons such as the genre being relatively new and its difference from other prescribed Realist texts, this research attempted to perform an in-depth study on the techniques followed by these teachers in overcoming the challenges faced by them and other possible but undiscovered teaching practices that might materialize during the interviews and discussions that may help in teaching this genre, so that more teachers would be encouraged to teach the genre and more students will be motivated to learn this text.

Participants of the study

This study was conducted with the participation of purposively selected four (04) teachers who teach *Life of Pi* to their students. They are named Tilak (Teacher 1 - Male), Tania (Teacher 2 - Female), Thilan (Teacher 3 - Male) and Tracy (Teacher 4 - Female) in order to maintain their

anonymity. Among them, Tilak and Tania are employed as A/L English teachers in local schools. They also conduct private tuition classes in which they teach *Life of Pi*. Thilan lectures on English Linguistics and Literature to students in a private higher educational institute while conducting private classes for A/L students. Tracy is an Ordinary Level (O/L) and A/L English teacher in an international school; however, she too teaches the novel in the private classes she conducts for local A/L students. In addition to teaching *Life of Pi*, they all teach several other Realist novels prescribed in the A/L syllabus.

Apart from being a purposive sample, the participants are also a convenient sample since they were approached based on accessibility. For instance, all four teachers are either employed in schools or conduct private tuition classes in the Colombo District. Besides, when conducting a search for participants, it was apparent that there was a dearth of teachers who preferred teaching this novel to their students even within the suburbs of Colombo. In other districts, the numbers were quite insignificant. As a result, collection of data had to be limited to the Colombo District as well as to a small number of participants. In fact, even within the Colombo District, it was problematic to find teachers who taught *Life of Pi* during the time this study was conducted. Furthermore, this is part of a larger study on 'Teacher and Student Perceptions and Experiences regarding Teaching and Learning Magic Realist Texts in a Secondary School Context' and it included four students as well who studied *Life of Pi* for their A/L Examination which made a total of eight participants. However, the current study focuses only on the teachers' perceptions, and hence the participation of four teachers only. The dearth of teachers who opted to teach the text at the time of the study conducted compelled the researcher to rely on data available from a limited number of participants.

Collection and analysis of data

There were two main tools that were used for data collection for this study: a questionnaire administered among the participant teachers and semi-structured interviews conducted with them.

The analysis of the data was done using a thematic analysis based on the six-phase approach framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2012): 1) Familiarizing yourself with the data Phase 2) Generating initial codes 3) Searching for themes 4) Reviewing potential themes Phase 5) Defining and naming themes Phase and 6) Producing the report.

Ethical considerations

The participants in the study provided sensitive information trusting that their anonymity will be maintained. Therefore, before extracting the relevant details, they were assured that their identities will not be disclosed. It was on these premises that all data were collected for this study and the data do not contain any names or places that will reveal the participants' identities.

Results and Discussion

As mentioned before, an in-depth analysis of the data was done using a thematic analysis based on the six-phase approach framework (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and accordingly, five distinct themes were identified: 'The selection of *Life of Pi* as a conscious effort', 'Teaching *Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level text', 'Challenges faced while teaching *Life of Pi*', 'overcoming

challenges', and 'Opinions on the inclusion of Magic Realism and *Life of Pi* in the Advanced Level syllabus'.

The results and discussion of this study are presented under the three research questions while incorporating the above-mentioned themes.

What is the perception of teachers on teaching *Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level text?

The selection of Life of Pi as a conscious effort

In terms of selecting texts, Tania, Thilan, and Tracy, in their private tuition classes, had taken a liberal approach by accommodating the choice of their students' schoolteachers, they had willingly decided to teach *Life of Pi* since their tuition students were already studying it in school. Elaborating on this matter, Tania provided several reasons for her flexibility in selecting texts such as preventing students from being penalized by their schoolteachers for taking tuition and providing a wider selection of texts to the students.

"Private students, whatever they are taught in school, I cater to that. If they feel uncomfortable or some of them struggle; they are struggling with Tess [Tess of the d'Urbervilles] So, I ask them "why don't we then do July's People, whichever is better. Or do you want to do Life of Pi?" I've asked them that. Then they say, "okay fine, we'll do July's People". So, I take them through that and overview and then they get into it."

– Tania

On the other hand, Tilak was adamant about teaching only his two choices at school as well as in his private classes and was quite verbal about it.

"I always say, "You can do this with me and then you can have a selection. Whatever

you feel like, you can select when you're answering questions." – Tilak

Accordingly, Tilak had been somewhat rigid in his selection by opting out three of the five prescribed novels and leaving not much of a choice for his students. Therefore, *Life of Pi* had to be learnt by his students whether they preferred to study it or not.

Teaching Life of Pi as an Advanced Level text

Since teaching a Magic Realist text was a novel experience, it was imperative to discover how the teacher participants introduced it to their respective students. Accordingly, they were requested to explain how they had addressed this task.

Tilak gave no reason as to why he did not attempt to explain that *Life of Pi* was a Magic Realist text. His responses suggest that he was unaware of the differences between Magic Realism and Realism and therefore saw no need to provide a nuanced introduction to the genre.

"I have introduced that word saying this story goes into this genre. Other than that, nothing. Briefly, if a question is to be attempted, I would have given them some brief points on Magic Realism and a few characteristics. Actually, I have never told this is different from the other novels, but once they grapple with that, they know it is different." – Tilak

Perhaps this happened due to the lack of proper guidance provided by the NIE in terms of introducing this genre in the resource material.

Thilan too had consciously underplayed the introduction of Magic Realism based on his students' confusion over Fantasy and Magic Realism. So, when he introduced *Life of Pi*, he had only highlighted its 'twisted plots' and 'thickness' as a novel, as the main differences between the texts.

"I prepared them because I told them this is actually a very thick novel and also it has lot of twisted plots in it, so you better be careful with it, kind of a thing." – Thilan

On the other hand, Tania had introduced the genre to her students with its relevant characteristics. She had discussed it broadly and referred to it when she came across any features related to the genre while teaching the novel. She had also used examples of Fantasy fiction, such as *Peter Pan*, to highlight the differences between Fantasy and Magic Realism better. Tracy too had provided a breakdown of the genre at the beginning of the course so they could refer to the generic features while progressing with the novel.

"I get them to make a note of it. I get them to write it down. They have a note book with them..... I always start up with it because I feel, like, while going on, if I come across Magic Realism, I break the flow, and then I go on to this note and come back. They lose the plot line. So, what I do is I introduce every single thing at the onset. So, when it is Magic Realism and the whole argument and this whole conflict and all the, Pi's interest in spirituality and God, I start up with the thematic concerns and then the literary techniques, the use of language, narrators; to observe, like, just look out. So, then when they read, they get, "Oh! This is what Miss was talking about". So, they take the note down." – Tracy

Accordingly, the introduction of the novel and the respective literary genre had varied according to each individual's preference and knowledge.

Opinions on the inclusion of Magic Realism and Life of Pi in the Advanced Level syllabus

Despite being faced with many challenges, the participants have been bold enough to continue with it instead of abandoning the book like many others have done with no proper guidance from the relevant authorities on how to teach it or on how it will be assessed. As Tania states,

“Magic Realism is a theme mentioned in the Teachers’ Guide but not clearly or explicitly defined.” – Tania

It could be argued that this is why the introduction of Magic Realism to their students had varied among the respondent teachers. Yet, she insisted,

“...since a child is exposed to fantasy and magic from his/her childhood, the authorities must include it as a main theme in the guidelines and make it more explicit.” – Tania

However, Thilan confessed that unless his students insisted on studying it, he would not consider teaching *Life of Pi* in the near future evidencing his reluctance to continue teaching it to his future batches of students.

“I wouldn’t (teach it). I would recommend some other text to them. Because, I personally feel they can’t relate to the depth of the novel. Because ... and the other thing is since it has multiple interpretations, you do not know what they are expecting from you.” – Thilan

What are the challenges of teaching *Life of Pi* and teaching Magic Realism?

Challenges faced while teaching Life of Pi

It was imperative to find out how much these teachers had relied on common teaching resources to teach a novel written in a 'different' literary style, since all students would eventually face a common and highly competitive public examination. Accordingly, they were asked to comment on the Teachers' Guide (National Institute of Education, 2017) issued by the NIE, related to the new A/L English syllabus.

Among the four teachers, only Thilan was completely in favour of the Teachers' Guide, and he found it quite comprehensive and helpful.

"Yes, definitely it has. It has been helpful. It has specifically given what you have to cover and what you need to teach." - Thilan

The rest of the participants had very few positive comments about its contribution to their teaching. For instance, Tilak complained that he never received a copy of the Teachers' Guide; nor had he attempted to obtain one as he considered its content quite generic and provided insufficient guidance.

"The content of the Teachers' Guide is very general. Some guidance is there. So, whether have it or not, doesn't matter." - Tilak

Tracy too was of a similar view. She added that unlike the assessment objectives set down in the London A/L syllabus, the competency levels stated in the Teachers' Guide issued by the NIE are often disregarded in the marking scheme. According to her, the marking scheme of the Local A/L English Syllabus keeps changing every year, and as a result, she preferred

focusing on making her students understand and appreciate the texts rather than confusing them with what is mentioned only vaguely in the Teachers' Guide.

Explicating the same idea, Tania mentioned that the Teacher's Guide does direct the teacher to a certain extent, but that in terms of discussing literary techniques, it is more up to the individual teacher.

"Even though it has competency levels, it's not like assessment objectives that you would find in a London A/L paper where they actually follow it when they are marking the paper So, I focus completely on making students understand and appreciate and may be just formulate answers, how to write answers. In that sense, I kind of prepare them for questions for the A/Ls. But other than that, I don't do anything special or follow the Teachers' Guide in anyway." – Tania

Accordingly, there seemed to be a major weakness in the Teachers' Guide in terms of directing teachers on how to teach the prescribed texts with a degree of uniformity; especially, regarding a novel like *Life of Pi* in which the literary style is different to that of other prescribed texts. It must also be noted that the guidelines of G.C.E. A/L were compared with the London A/L since that is the other A/L variant offered to Sri Lankan students.

Another possible means of receiving guidance are the seminars conducted for teachers as well as students. The few seminars held had been organized privately, mainly for students who could afford the fairly high course fee. Thilan mentioned that some of his students who had attended such a seminar had complained that the resource person had provided an entirely different interpretation of *Life of Pi* to what he and their schoolteacher had taught.

“They attended a seminar; the resource person had a different view ... coming up with another interpretation.” – Thilan

Tania stated that the NIE should organize such seminars, perhaps involving the exam setters as well. She further stressed that the course fee needs to be subsidized for A/L English teachers or employ sponsorships. These responses confirmed the readiness of teachers to attend such seminars if the opportunity is created under conditions that are economically favourable and also accessible for them.

“I think they should offer their services or the NIE; the Government should pay them, and maybe, they should probably have a forum where they teach them, ask the teachers to come and sponsor it. Whoever else wants to come, can also come and you kind of educate them on it.” – Tania

As for the perception on teaching *Life of Pi* as an A/L text, despite the above-mentioned shortcomings, the participants have been bold enough to continue with it instead of abandoning the book like many others have done, despite receiving no proper guidance from the relevant authorities on how to teach it or on how it will be assessed. As Tania states, Magic Realism is a theme mentioned in the Teachers' Guide (National Institute of Education, 2017) but not clearly or explicitly defined. Tracy found the inclusion of the Magic Realist genre quite a 'modern move' and believed that secondary school Literature students should be exposed to as many different genres as possible. She further argued that since kids read various types of magical and fantastical stories, they should not find it a problem to study such stories pedagogically as well.

“Today’s millennials, they have watched so many things; all these things on zombies and vampires, and they watch absolute rubbish but they try to make sense through that as well.” – Tracy

Tilak shared the same viewpoint; having read/watched stories/ movies such as *Harry Potter* and other magical adventure stories, he believed that the present generation would not find such ‘fantastic’ themes alien.

The respondent teachers affirmed that *Life of Pi* was not a favourite among their students. According to them, *July’s People*, *The Remains of the Day* and *Nectar in a Sieve* topped the list, all of which are largely Realist narratives. However, even *July’s People* and *The Remains of the Day* were not very popular among teachers and students when they were initially introduced, largely due to the lack of secondary reading material on the same, and due to the general belief that they were ‘difficult’. The ‘safe’ choices seemed to be the time-tested Victorian novels for which it was relatively easier to find material. As such, *Life of Pi* may not have been selected by certain teachers not because it is a Magic Realist novel but because they feared the ‘unknown’.

However, further probing led to the revelation of several other issues related to teaching/learning *Life of Pi* as a Magic Realist text. For instance, Tania insisted that there were many among her private students who had initially commenced studying *Life of Pi* in school but had later abandoned it either because they could not relate to it or because the teacher had decided to discontinue teaching it.

“They have done Life of Pi and they have said, “Miss, we are not connecting to this in school at all”. So, when that energy is there in school its somewhat brought into class as well. But I have continued with Life of Pi. But then in school, they have dropped it.”

– Tania

Thilan was of the view that his students who disliked the text initially never changed their opinion even when they were about to face the A/L Examination. Tracy mentioned that the choice of a text depended on how comfortable the teacher was with it. She further added that since most teachers lacked the imagination to relate to *Life of Pi*, they preferred more straightforward texts. This seemed a plausible reason for the small number of teachers who had attempted the novel.

“It’s like teaching Charlie and the Chocolate Factory vs teaching something like Black Beauty or Mill on the Floss or something like that. Something which is very straight forward, which doesn’t require much imagination.” – Tracy

It seemed that most teachers preferred the comfort zone of Realist novels because previous syllabi were compiled of such texts. However, texts with qualities that departed from classic Victorian novelist fiction are ‘appropriated’ and ‘normalized’ after a while in the syllabus. In other words, with time, they began to be read like normal Realist texts. The dystopian and post-modern qualities of *July’s People* and the metafictional qualities of *The Remains of the Day* were downplayed, and they came to be read like ordinary Realist novels. In the case of *Life of Pi*, if this ‘normalization’ occurs in the future, it will be particularly problematic because this is a novel that clearly departs from the Realist mode.

Based on how much her students had loved the movie of the book, Tania believed that the issue lay more with the narrative style of the story than Magic Realism per se, since she felt that students were quite open to the concepts of the latter. The narrative technique, as she says, put them off at the inception and she insisted that some sort of intervention had to be made by the teacher to hold their interest.

Another major challenge is the multiple interpretations of the novel. Towards the end of the novel, Pi provides two different endings to the Japanese officials whom he meets in Mexico: 1) Pi surviving on a lifeboat at sea for 227 days with a tiger and several other animals 2) Pi's replacement of these animals with human beings to make the story more believable. Apparently, both endings have been taken as different interpretations by various teachers. This seems quite a confusing situation for students. This was created due to the lack of uniformity in teaching a novel belonging to a literary genre which was new to the syllabus. This also points to the larger problem of how literary competencies are assessed. Assessment now appears to be based on the notion of a fairly rigid 'correct' reading, whereas assessment needs to be based on the competency of a student to interpret a text within a reasonable range of interpretations, all demonstrating creative and intellectual skills in interpretation.

What teaching methods are utilized to overcome these challenges?

Overcoming challenges

Tania had followed several methods to combat the boredom her students had felt initially when they read through the narrative on their own. For instance, before commencing teaching, she had provided them with an overview of the text comprising the setting, literary genre, and related themes.

“First, I give them a breakdown of everything and I get them to do a lot of semantic maps and through that, like I kind of introduce new concepts.” – Tania

She had also asked them to watch the movie, if possible, and research on the novel and its background. She had noticed that the students who had failed to follow her instructions had been bored in class, making no contribution to the discussions that were generated among their peers. Having recommended the movie, she was also aware of its shortcomings as opposed to the novel. Admitting that the movie has not done justice to the book, she had taken advantage of this difference and generated discussions in class by comparing the two genres.

“How would you improve the movie? What effects could you use?” And then, to test their knowledge, “what things were excluded?” Because there is quite a lot excluded.

“What parts are excluded in it?” – Tania

Another common method utilized to overcome challenges was referring to other texts with similar characteristics. For example, Tilak had extracted examples from Russian folk tales, and his own students had made references to *Harry Potter* and also to Hindu mythology. Tania had referred to the Sinhala stage drama *Sinhabahu* by Prof. Ediriweera Sarachchandra and also to Chinese myths, fables, and Biblical stories. Her students too had made some contributions with a few examples such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the paranormal movies they watch quite often, since the impression these movies have made on them had helped them relate to the text better.

Tania had made a WhatsApp group comprising herself and her students. Sometimes, she asked them to play different characters from the novel on the group, and then react to a certain incident within the parameters of that particular role.

“They have a WhatsApp group and I ask them to sort of assign characters to each other. Like, if there is a novel, even a drama, who do you think ..., because to create a bond even ...” - Tania

This had helped them to critically analyze the characters as well as certain incidents in the story. Within the WhatsApp group, she had also paved the way for discussions by occasionally posting questions for which the students had to text back their views. Further, she had made them participate in debates in the classroom on topics related to the themes of the story. Getting them to write answers for essay-type and context questions quite frequently was another method she practiced, as she believed that merely talking would only generate ideas but not improve their writing skills, which are essential for the ultimate goal of succeeding in the A/L Examination.

“Sometimes I type a question and I send it to them which they have to do or I just ask them text me back their ideas and some of them, they just text some ideas back to me on their opinions.” – Tania

Thilan had made his students draw flow charts depicting the movement of the plot which had aided them in remembering the story sequence. Along with the flow charts, he had also made them create mind maps based on the themes, motives, symbols, important incidents, and special utterances. Yet, the most helpful of all methods – according to him – had been the thematic approach, where he had made them draw a table with eight columns for separate

themes that he had coined by locating parallels between the story and the notes he had searched online; some of these themes were 'Faith, Piety vs Confidence'; 'Individual Identity vs Ego'; and 'Friendship and Mutual Understanding'. Afterwards, they had been assigned to read the book word-to-word and trace quotes relevant to each theme and fill up the table. Subsequently, they were asked to memorize these quotes on the basis that all questions would revolve around these themes. Thilan found this technique very useful and had seen noticeable progress in his students' term end examination marks.

"They were very successful because I saw a very high progress at their term test. Students who had got 30s and 40s in the first term test, after allocating thematic after rather implementing the thematic approach, they succeeded in getting marks." – Thilan

However, his stance seemed risky since all potential questions being based on certain limited themes was not something stipulated by any authority but merely assumed by himself. Moreover, the absence of Magic Realism among these themes was quite apparent despite the novel belonging to this genre.

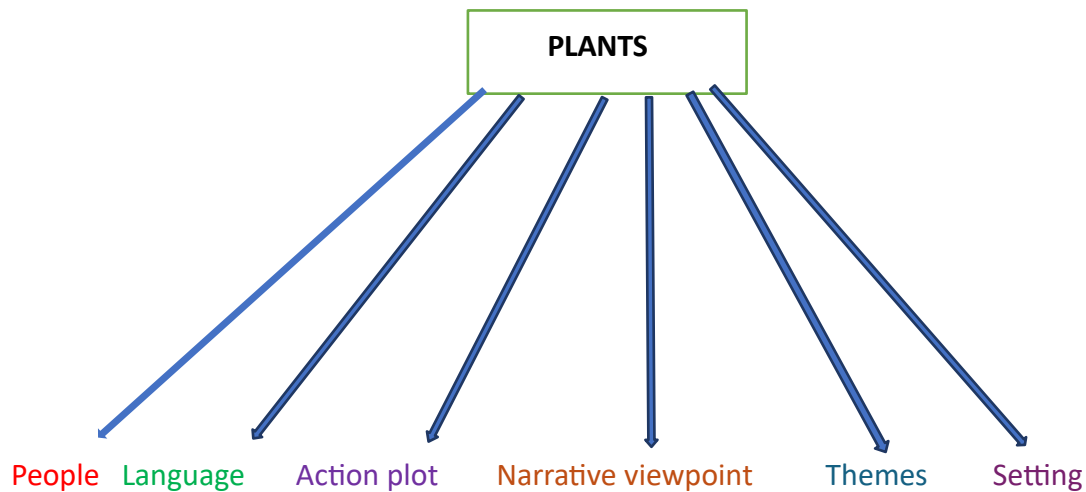
Tracy too had followed a similar method, but not one based on themes; hers was based instead on specific segments.

"I teach them PLANTS. So, I write first PLANTS. So, plants mean people; then, L is language; A is action plot; N is narrative viewpoint; T is themes; S is setting and what waters and nourishes the plants with social background. So, I introduce that to them." – Tracy

Figure 1 depicts this technique in a simplified illustration.

Figure 1

Tracy's technique of teaching the main elements of a text



Tracy had taught her students to interpret any question based on these categories. For example, if the question is about 'change', one must discuss the characters that undergo the change, and the language techniques that are used to highlight it, and the person through whose viewpoint the change is narrated; also, the themes that are highlighted, and the setting the question is based on. Furthermore, she had made them draw concept maps on drawing books, and also write down significant quotes.

On the whole, the four teachers have tried various innovative ways to overcome the challenges inherent in teaching the novel. Yet, noticeably, they had paid little attention to discovering novel ways of introducing the characteristics of Magic Realism to their students,

presumably because they have not been properly guided by the relevant authorities in viewing *Life of Pi* as a Magic Realist text.

Conclusions

The current G.C.E. Advanced Level English syllabus was introduced in 2017 and includes a Magic Realist novel, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, which was the first of its kind in the syllabus. This study attempted to explore challenges faced by teachers while teaching *Life of Pi*, and the teaching methods followed by them to overcome the challenges. The conclusions of the study are presented under the relevant research questions.

What is the perception of teachers on teaching *Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level text?

The shortage of teachers who opted to teach *Life of Pi* proved that it was the least favoured among the rest of the prescribed novels. Probing into the cause behind the reluctance to teach the novel revealed that there is a dearth of widely and collectively accepted study notes and secondary literature on the relevant subject. As a direct result of the unpopularity of the novel as an A/L text, the number of participants in the sample had to be reduced to four individuals.

One of the most significant findings was how differently the four teachers viewed the teaching of the text. There was also a noticeable difference in how each teacher approached the text; and, depending on their approach, their intention to continue teaching the book to ensuing classes of students also varied. Specific and clearer guidelines need to be developed by the relevant authorities, such as the NIE, and make them available to teachers.

What are the challenges of teaching *Life of Pi* and teaching Magic Realism?

There seems to be a lack of clear guiding principles stipulated by the relevant authorities, Furthermore, there are multiple interpretations made by various readers. The lack of an agreed-upon range of interpretations has led to confusion among teachers. The NIE is best positioned to remedy this issue. It is also important that the goal of assessment shifts from 'correct' interpretations to literary competencies where a range of acceptable interpretations can be accommodated.

The NIE could contribute to resolving the issue by revamping the Teachers' Guide by providing more specific guidelines for all texts, including notes on literary genres, themes, and literary techniques. They could also organize seminars for teachers in order to provide teacher training and insights into assessment and standardized testing, making the teaching process more fruitful and result-oriented.

What teaching methods are utilized to overcome these challenges?

The study also revealed a few interesting and unique techniques utilized by the teachers to mitigate the challenges of teaching *Life of Pi*; some of these are the use of role play, mind maps, concept maps, thematic approaches, PLANTS' (People, Language, Action Plot, Narrative Viewpoint, Themes and Setting), and debates on Magic Realist characteristics, and also discussions and role playing on WhatsApp groups. Such techniques are useful not only in overcoming challenges but also in generating enthusiasm for and enjoyment of the text among students.

Limitations

There are certain limitations that have narrowed the scope of this study. For instance, the sample of participants was restricted to four teachers from the Colombo District. However, since this study was initiated, the number of schools that offer *Life of Pi* as an A/L text has increased, thereby broadening the teacher population who are involved in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, a similar study could be conducted with a larger number of participants representing many more districts. Furthermore, having gained further experience in additional years, the participants of the current study may have newer information to contribute to a follow-up study.

Recommendations

Despite the above limitations, this study provides insights to all teachers who are currently teaching *Life of Pi* and also to those who are considering teaching it in the future, especially on how vital it is to appreciate the novel as a Magic Realist text. Moreover, the NIE must take necessary steps to direct and guide English teachers so they can achieve the expected pedagogical outcomes, thus making teaching-learning of the only Magic Realist text in the English syllabus more fruitful.

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