

# **The Challenges Faced By Advanced Level Teachers in Teaching of the Advanced Level Literature in English Comment and Appreciation Paper in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Selected Schools in Masvingo Urban.**

**Jabulani Moyo**

Great Zimbabwe University, Post Office Box 1235, Masvingo [Zimbabwe]

## **Abstract**

This study is an investigation into the challenges faced by Advanced Level Literature in English teachers in Zimbabwe in the teaching of the Comment and Appreciation paper. The study takes a qualitative approach to unearth the attitudes of teachers and to unravel the implications from documents studied. Content analysis, interview and observation techniques were used to gather data. The study established that instead of teaching skills for explication of the ‘unseen’ texts, the general approaches used incline more towards ‘testing’. Equally, the study revealed that most teachers are not confident to teach the paper, with the majority resorting to drills of particular genres, instead of taking a holistic approach encompassing all the three genres [poetry, drama and prose], including the recreative-response type question. The study, therefore, holds that the misconception about the difficulties of this component of the syllabus is rather unfounded. As a recommendation, the study implores institutions of higher learning to ensure that prospective or would-be-teachers of Literature in English are well grounded in the skills of explicating ‘unseens’. In the wake of the updated secondary school curriculum under the auspices of the Zimbabwe Education Blueprint (2015-2022), the Advanced Level Literature in English learning still has the Comment and Appreciation component as a compulsory, hence the need for teachers [and learners alike] to have an in-depth appreciation of how to unpack meaning from a given ‘unseen’ text.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study examines how the Comment and Appreciation Advanced Level Literature in English paper [Syllabus Code 9153/1] is taught and learnt in Zimbabwean schools. The paper is generally called the ‘unseens’ on the basis of the fact that candidates are not expected to have any background knowledge of the text or author; rather, they are called upon to interrogate the meaning imbued in the given text through an analysis of the language and style. The Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council [ZIMSEC] has made this paper compulsory for any candidate seating for the Literature in English examination. That the Comment and Appreciation paper is compulsory speaks volumes about the importance of the attendant skills that derive from study of the paper. Accordingly, this paper reflects on how this component of the Literature in English Syllabus is dealt with in Zimbabwean schools.

To enjoy Literature, one should have skills of critical appreciation so that when reading a literary text, one does not “... merely ingest words [but] tastes them” (Anstending and Hicks, 1996:5). In this regard, therefore, those who study Literature in English at Advanced Level require a guiding hand to help them develop critical skills so that they make informed judgments on given literary texts.

Burton (1974: vii) contends that “... inability to express critical reactions adequately is frustrating’ and, consequently, a student who lacks both analytic methods and self-confidence to propose his/her own personal views may resort to the adoption and regurgitation of “... ready-made critical judgments” (Widdowson, 1975:117). It is through practice in critical appreciation of texts of any genre that skills of literary interpretation are developed, thus the significance of the Advanced Level Literature in English Comment and Appreciation Paper [Syllabus Code 9153/1] which

## **BACKGROUND**

involves the critical interpretation of ‘unseen’ texts.

On account of the utility of skills of critical appreciation, “the **Comment and Appreciation Paper** has been made compulsory” by ZIMSEC as spelt out in the 2013-2015 ‘A’ Level Literature in English Syllabus [page 2]. Of note is the fact that skills of critical appreciation developed through practice in comment and appreciation of ‘unseen’ texts are brought on board during the interpretation of texts set for the four alternative papers [9153/2; 9153/3; 9153/4; 9153/5] as the text-based examination item of each set text requires candidates to first critically analyse the given text’s language and/or style before relating issues raised in the excerpt to the major concerns of the text under study. Thus, the alternative item for Section A Question 1 of the 9153/2 November 2005 session has the caption:

*Write a critical analysis of the following poem, relating its stylistic devices and concerns to at least two other poems in the section.*

Only through an in-depth understanding of the principles of critical appreciation of ‘unseen’ texts can a candidate fully address the text-based examination items of the four optional papers. In this regard, pupils need to be grounded in skills of interpreting ‘unseen’ texts.

The researcher has, however, noted that the **Comment and Appreciation Paper** is least popular among both pupils and teachers alike. Before the paper was made compulsory, most teachers opted for what they regarded as ‘easier’ papers of the syllabus, totally leaving out the then optional **Comment and Appreciation Paper**. It is against this background that this study investigates the teaching [and learning] of this paper in schools around Zimbabwe.

Rubric dictates for the **Comment and Appreciation Paper** require that candidates attempt any two questions of their choice from a total of four questions. Three questions are on critical appreciation of texts from the three genres: poetry, drama and prose. Of the three questions, one would be on comparing two texts of similar or different genres, explicating how the subject matter and thematic concerns are explored. The fourth question item can take the re-creative response mode where candidates are asked to compose a text based on the original, after which

they critique what they have composed in the manner illustrated from the excerpt of the November 2006 9153/1 below:

*Continue the text in your own words but in the style of the original, trying if*

*you can, to conclude it. Then comment on what you have written, highlighting*

*any challenges you encountered and explaining what you have learnt about*

*the style and structure of the original.*

What the researcher has noted through his interaction with teachers and pupils from schools around the country for close to two decades is that most teachers totally shun the re-creative response question item. At the same time, drama seems to be unpopular in many schools, with most candidates forced to concentrate on poetry and prose. Even on poetry and prose, most teachers just rely on readymade explications from study packs and guides such as the Prestige College series, most of which are marred by typographic errors.

Given that the updated school curriculum hinges on developing critical thinking, the **Comment and Appreciation paper** at Advanced Level in Zimbabwe is a repository for the building up of critical minds. In this respect, there ought to be paradigm shift in terms of attitudes and practice(s) of teaching and learning **Comment and Appreciation** of ‘unseen’ texts from the genres poetry, prose and drama, respectively.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical basis of comment and appreciation [also pejoratively called *practical criticism*] is the work of I.A. Richards who, in the 1920’s, carried out a study with University of Cambridge students to establish how the students explicated ‘unseen’ poems. As recorded in his book, *Practical Criticism*, Richards (1964) distributed poems [which he called protocols] to his participants. The participants were to take their own time interpreting the poems. Richards then collected and analysed the protocol responses and came up with the deduction that there are ten main problems encountered in the quest to interpret ‘unseen’ poems, namely:

- ❖ “The difficulty of making out the plain sense of poetry”;

- ❖ “Difficulties of sensuous apprehension”;
- ❖ “Difficulties connected with the place of imagery”;
- ❖ “Mnemonic irrelevance” [i.e. ‘irrelevant personal associations’];
- ❖ “Stock responses”;
- ❖ “Sentimentality”;
- ❖ “Inhibition”;
- ❖ “Doctrinal adhesions”;
- ❖ “Technical per-suppositions” [i.e. ‘pre-conceptions on conventions’];
- ❖ ‘Critical presuppositions’; [Adapted from Lodge, 1972: 115].

To Richards (1964:11), the ten problems reflected the inability to apprehend what each poem communicated as he held that “... the only goal of all critical endeavors [and] of all interpretation ... is improvement in communication.”

Richards (1964) then proposed that there are four layers of meaning embedded in a poem: **sense**; **feeling**; **tone**; **intention**.

**Sense:** *This denotes the plain or surface meaning of a poem. That is, the ability to appreciate a poem “... both as a statement and as an expression” (Richards, 1964: 13).*

**Feeling:** *This has to do with the appreciation of the sensuous aspects of a poem.*

**Tone:** *This is the speaker’s “... attitude to [the] listener” (Richards, 1964: 13). In a poem, the persona or voice in the poem is the speaker, while the reader is the listener. The implication here is that reading a poem is an active communication process. As such, it is only when the two interactants [speaker and listener] share a ‘common language’ can they understand each other. Since literary language, in general, and poetic language in particular, is an example of “... language patterned in a particular way” (Carter and Burton, 1982: 4), the reader should be able to apprehend the choice and arrangement of words in a poem in order to appreciate the inherent tone of the poetic work.*

**Intention:** *This is the speaker’s “... aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect he [she] is endeavoring to promote” (Lodge, 1972: 116-117).*

The four kinds of meaning proposed by Richards (1964) have become the blueprint or yardstick for **practical criticism**, with the acronym **SIFT** coined to represent each of the four layers of

meaning. It is therefore the purpose of this study to investigate whether teachers and pupils of Advanced Level Literature in English apply the **SIFT Method** in their appreciation of ‘unseen’ poems. The researcher does not, however, presuppose that **SIFT** is the only approach that can expedite explication of the ‘unseens’, but this has become the basis of appreciation.

According to Burton (1974: ix), “... when judging a poem, a critic works to a plan” which has the following stages:

[A]. The critic begins with a general statement of the theme of a poem as a whole. Since this implies outlining what the poem is about, it relates to the **sense** or plain meaning envisaged by Richards (1964).

[B]. The second stage is a detailed account of the meaning of the poem, and of the development of the poet’s thoughts throughout the poem. In this stage, the critic reflects on all the ‘minute’ aspects of the poem, relating all these to the development of the poem’s subject matter.

[C]. This is the section where the critic establishes the purpose of the poet in writing the poem, thus, implying the notion of **intention** from the **SIFT approach**.

[D]. In the fourth stage, the style of the poem is looked at critically, considering how ‘form’ and ‘content’ are related; that is, the effect of the form in the building up of meaning, considering how all the elements comprising the poem fuse together “... into one natural and harmonious whole. All these elements combine to communicate whatever thoughts and feelings lie behind the words” (Heese and Lawton, 1988: 21).

It would be an abstraction to look at only one element’s function separately as all elements are symbiotically related. It is against this background that Shipley (1966) holds that the meaning of a text entirely depends upon the relationship between the various components of the literary work, all of which hinge upon the fulcrum of the **content-form** relationship.

Again, once one mentions the term *style*, one necessarily alludes to the art of explicating meaning through how language is used, and to what effect the choice of language helps to illuminate what the poem communicates. However, what should be noted is that“... ”

literature [is] a kind of self-referential language; a language which talks about itself” (Eagleton, 1983: 8). In this regard, one has to appreciate the special use of language which constitutes poetic discourse and style.

Above all, once style is mentioned, the art of *stylistics* is brought to the fore. This ‘art’, according to Darbyshire (1968: 87), is a part of the Linguistic Science “... which studies and tries to account for the styles of various uses of language.” Thus, through stylistics could a critic appreciate the style of a given text.

Hirsch (1976: 50) adds that “... a difference in linguistic form compels a difference in meaning” which, by implication, means that the patterning of linguistic structures conjures different shades of meaning. Consequently, knowledge of language is needed for one to fully appreciate the nuances of meaning embedded in the words of a poem. This reflects that *Stylistic analysis* can complement *Practical Criticism* though, as Widdowson (1975: 116) contends, it cannot, in any way “... replace literary criticism [or practical criticism].”

Vogel (1994: 16-18) raises the following ideas about the process of poetry explication:

- ❖ “ ... before a teacher is able to teach a poem, he[*she*] must understand it”;
- ❖ “There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in [the] interpretation of literature, only validity”;
- ❖ “Over a period of time [one’s] insights will deepen ... self-confidence will strengthen, and [one’s] enjoyment will increase.”

In the light of the foregoing standpoints, it follows that before a teacher teaches on a given poem, he [she] should have a firm grasp of the poem in question. Equally, there is need for thorough preparation and planning on the part of the teacher. Again, since there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer in poetry interpretation, a teacher should not rigidly ‘coerce’ pupils to take his/her interpretation as the ‘correct’ response, but should accommodate every possible interpretation, provided it is validly explicated. Above all, since it takes time to develop insights and deeper perceptions on skills of critical interpretation, constant practice is called for.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used the qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis. In keeping with the dictates of the qualitative research paradigm, multiple data collection procedures were used (Nyawaranda, 2003), to ensure that the propositions made through the data interpretation process could be validated or ‘triangulated’ (Keyton, 2001). Thus, interview, observation and document analysis were the key instruments to gather data. The researcher interviewed both teachers and pupils from selected schools in Masvingo urban ; Gokwe; Mberengwa; Zvishavane; Kwekwe; Chiredzi; Tsholotsho. The researcher also observed lessons in progress at selected schools. Content analysis was used to interpret interview transcripts and contents from pupils’ exercise books and teachers’ schemes and record books. The researcher noted down key aspects or points from interviews and lesson observation, upon which emerging perspectives were noted. It is these themes or perspectives that became central referent points for the interpretation of the data gathered.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented using emerging themes, namely: *‘the paper is boring’*; *‘the paper is difficult’*; *‘the paper not taught’*; *‘no books to read’*.

### THEME 1: *‘The paper is boring’*

Interviews with the majority of pupils indicated that the paper was ‘boring’. An interview at one school summed up this notion thus:

*“Bepairirinobhowa” [“This paper is boring”]*

On further probing of the respondent, the respondent added:

*“Kotakadzidzei last year? Hapana!” [“What did we learn last year? Nothing!”]*

These responses suggested that the pupils had developed a negative attitude towards the paper, stemming from the fact that they had not been exposed much to the principles of comment and appreciation during their Lower 6<sup>th</sup> Form.

### THEME 2: *‘The paper is difficult’*

Interviews with both teachers and pupils suggested that the paper is ‘difficult’ to both teachers and pupils alike. This is corroborated by evidence from written exercises by pupils where the majority, from a sample of 50 books

purposively selected from ten schools, scored an average of 40% [10/25] on the few tasks assigned for comment and appreciation.

Teachers also shared the same sentiment with some stating that they had not been 'taught' how to 'teach' the paper during their college days. This made the researcher more curious to study the qualifications of the Advanced Level Literature in English teachers. The results of the demographic study reflected that the majority of the teachers did [do] not have a qualification that ideally places one to teach Advanced Level: Bachelor of Education Degree or Graduate Diploma in Education. That is, as part of the modules done at university in Zimbabwe [University of Zimbabwe; Midlands State University; Great Zimbabwe University], students do 'A' Level Methodology techniques. In the case of most teachers in Gokwe, the qualification was the Diploma in Education, while those in urban and peri-urban areas mostly possessed a Bachelor of Arts Degree [General or Honors]. The latter category of qualification does not equip students with 'A' Level methodological techniques.

Some teachers stated that they found poetry and drama rather unnerving while others openly said they never attempted to teach the 're-creative' response type question. This corroborated the sentiments raised by pupils that the paper was [is] challenging.

### **THEME 3: 'Paper not taught'.**

Given that the majority of teachers did not attend to all items of the syllabus, this was enough evidence to reflect that the paper was not being taught adequately. The attendant responses from interviewed pupils further suggested that there was a half-measure treatment of principles of comment and appreciation.

One respondent said the teacher was very 'knowledgeable', but he confused pupils with his verbose approach. This was later confirmed through interview of the teacher in question who remarked thus:

*"Uchitanganevafanaunotoratidza data rako rose, otherwise vanotihauketi"*

*["When you start with the kids showcase your knowledge, lest they will doubt your credibility"]*

The comment by the interviewed teacher accounted for the verbose and grandiloquent

approach adopted by a score of the observed teachers. This, according to the researcher, is a very unfortunate pedagogic flaw.

An analysis of notes given to the pupils during their Lower 6<sup>th</sup> Form indicated the following sub-headings for the majority of the schools:

- *What is Literature?;*
- *Literary terms;*
- *Poetry Analysis.*

The literary terms were mainly presented more like a catalogue without due respect to applicability to texts in the three genres [poetry/prose/ drama]. Likewise, the very few cases of written tasks assigned reflected regurgitation of devices without recourse to critical appraisal of the issues at hand. For example, some essays had content such as the following:

*The poet uses simile. There is use of metaphor as well as hyperbole.*

*This makes the poem very interesting. Also, there is use of end-rhyme.*

*Use of rhyming words imbues the poem with a musical sound...*

The foregoing excerpt does not demonstrate awareness of the critical plan by Burton (1974); neither does it bring into play the principles of SIFT envisaged by I.A. Richards (1964). In this regard, the written evidence underscores the fact that pupils did not have grounding in critical appreciation skills.

An equally interesting scenario was noted through lesson observations where most teachers betraying their anxiety and lack of confidence to handle the Comment and Appreciation paper. In one lesson the teacher merely bombarded pupils with high sounding terms, dominating the discourse. The following transpired during the lesson in question:

**TR:** *[Entered the class, the researcher following discretely behind. The teacher*

*then boomed, laughing out].*

*"Vafanahamusi serious! Staff yamakapiwamotadza?"*

*["You guys are not serious! You fail what you were given?"]*

**TR:** *[Outlined the points he expected, still oblivious of the need to*

*Introduce visitor. Some pupils became restive, glancing at the researcher surreptitiously]*

**TR:** “*You see Mr. Moyo, vafanaafahavaketi ... so ndotokwinya.*”

*[“... this group is struggling...so I’ve a lot to do.”]*

*[Teacher then tasked pupils to work on excerpts of the poem,*

*‘The Tiger’, by William Blake, but the pupils could hardly*

*decipher the meaning. This amused the teacher who then decided*

*give a model...].*

This only helped to further mystify the whole realm of comment and appreciation. Ironically, the teacher in question took himself to be a ‘guru’, shifting the blame upon the pupils whom he regarded to be intellectually ‘impoverished’. The pompous and priggish disposition of teachers who shifted blame to the pupils typified the majority of the interviewed teachers. At the same time, the approach of ‘teaching’ inclined upon the ‘depository’ or ‘banking’ concept decried by Freire (1970). According to Freire (1970), assuming that learners are empty vessels to be filled only relegates teaching to a mechanical process, the end result being the stifling of pupils’ creativity. In this respect, the researcher came to the conclusion that teachers were not teaching per se, but ‘cheating their way out’.

A cursory look into the contents of pupils’ notes and written exercise books further told the sad story that there was very little teaching being done on principles of comment and appreciation. That is, there were no guiding notes at all, besides the catalogue of devices and model ‘analyses’ transcribed [verbatim] from the Prestige College handbook. Equally tragic was the fact that the bulk of exercises assigned, written and ‘marked’ were very few, besides being scanty in detail. Here, the researcher felt that the pupils were being short changed, considering that practice makes perfect. Accordingly, the teachers were [are] not teaching the paper for skills development.

**THEME 4: ‘No books to read’.**

Both teachers and pupils stated that the teaching of comment and appreciation techniques was hampered by absence of ‘core’ texts. This left most pupils and teachers relying on the ‘not-well’ designed guides from various experimenting colleges such the Prestige College or Turn- Up series. Since comment and appreciation works with texts from poetry, prose and drama, teachers should be innovative enough to use any text at their disposal, including the set texts for the optional papers.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study indicate that comment and appreciation principles are not taught adequately in schools. Rather, what obtains is that pupils and teachers ‘flounder in mire’, not really sure of what to do. This accounts for the low passes in the subject, given that principles of comment and appreciation pervade all optional paper components of the ‘A’ Level Literature in English syllabus. The result of not teaching the paper has the effect that attitude of learners is also dampened.

That teachers blame pupils and lack of books is a flimsy excuse to cover up for their inherent deficiencies. Comment and appreciation requires practice and guidance, but this seems to lack in schools [in Zimbabwe]. In essence, teachers are not teaching, but cheating their way out, a very tragic development in terms of skills development among pupils. Another, very disturbing development is that most teachers are not ‘qualified’ to teach ‘A’ Level Literature in English.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends the following:

- Schools should use fully qualified teachers to teach ‘A’ Level Literature in English;
- Districts should devise staff development workshops co-ordinated by experienced personnel;
- Colleges of Education and universities should ensure that their graduates are fully equipped with skills to teach comment and appreciation;
- Teachers should rely on available set books for optional papers as ‘texts’ to base their teaching of comment and appreciation skills;

- Teachers should work towards an eclectic approach [blending principles of practical criticism with stylistic analysis];
- The ideal of 'found poetry' and 'found drama' could help make pupils 'love' poetry and drama.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Jabulani Moyo is a Communication Studies lecturer at the Great Zimbabwe University. He has co-published four articles and another by himself and is working towards a book on Communication and Culture. He is interested in issues related to teaching of Literature in English; Language and Gender; Language and Politics; Communication and Indigenous resource management; Communication and HIV & AIDS management; nonverbal communication [NVC]; Music and cultural communication. He is reading towards a PhD with the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

