Testing the Test: Exploring Conceptualisations of English Literature in Post-16 Literature Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The format of post-16 literature education assessment has not varied much since formal post-16 education began in Malaysia in the late 1950s. While it still relies heavily on the writing of literature essays, conceptualisations of literature as a school subject embedded in examination papers which are constructed by different examination boards have changed in important ways. This article argues that identifying these conceptualisations through an analysis of examination papers creates an avenue to provide a different perspective in exploring the development of literature in schools. To demonstrate this, examination papers on Shakespeare and modern literature from two examination sittings administered in Malaysia, one in the year 1968 and the other in the years 2012/2013, are analysed with a focus on whether questions are writer, text or reader-centred while considering how student response, termed outcome space, is framed. This study suggests that conceptualisations of literature have shifted in two ways: the first is a shift from a balance between writer, text and reader-centred questions to a heavy inclination towards text-centred questions which is linked to another noticeable shift in student responses to literature texts that has moved from the expression of personal meaning and interpretation of the text to the demonstration of detailed textual knowledge. Such shifts demonstrate that there is a need to consider literature assessment not only as an end-product of school subject construction but as an active representation of literature that influences the teaching and learning of the subject.

Keywords: literature assessment; English literature; post-16 education; Malaysia; curriculum implementation

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a complex practice with research and debate often revolving around issues of validity and reliability, be it formative or summative, because the main concern underlying assessment is that it tests what it is meant to test (Crisp and Shaw 2011). Another area that has drawn interest recently is the emergence and seemingly increasing prevalence of a phenomenon known as 'teaching to the test' especially involving high-stakes examinations and its effect on education (Ong 2010, Tayeb, Abd Aziz, Ismail & Khan 2014).

Assessment in literature education is not free from the aforementioned concerns. Indeed, research regarding literature assessment in education is very complex as there are various elements to consider and a myriad of ways to approach different aspects of assessment. An area that has received attention of late includes analysis of item construction which is linked to the reliability of tests in representing student learning in literature. Warner (2009), for example, focuses on outcome space which is what students should produce in their examination answers. After analysing United Kingdom's (UK) Key Stage 3 literature examination on William Shakespeare's works, Warner concludes that questions are generally closed and prescriptive, often presupposing an area of right answers. Warner also notes that there is no mention of the playwright while characters in the play are often referred to as real people. Yandell (2014), on the other hand, is concerned with the gap that seems to exist between the complex and social nature of teaching and learning literature in the classroom in contrast to the rigid nature of literature examinations. Indeed, Yandell devotes a chapter in his book *The Social Construction of Meaning* to the case of Billy, a Year 9 student in the UK

(roughly 13 or 14 years old), who exhibited insightful personal responses to William Shakespeare's play *Richard II* in the classroom but received low marks in his examination. Yandell's argument is that if marks are taken as the only representation of student learning, it would mean that Billy had a deficient reading of the play while other aspects of learning such as participating in classroom discussions and expressing personal insights of the play are neglected.

At the same time, there has been illuminating research on the construction of literature knowledge which informs understanding of how literature is conceived as a school subject and academic discipline. Atherton (2005) traces the development of literature based on archived documents pertinent to the instalment and examination of English literature as an academic subject in Oxford and Cambridge universities to conclude that while there had been different approaches and conceptions of what the study of English should be at tertiary level, the discipline has increasingly revolved around literary criticism of texts. It is a trait that Marshall (2000) believes has been becoming increasingly prominent in literature as a school subject in recent years. In fact, taken together, the work of Warner and Marshall on examination questions for literature education suggests that there has been a notable shift in how literature is conceptualised. Focusing on unseen poetry from the years 1971 to 1986 in UK's O-level examination (the final assessment in compulsory education in the UK), Warner concludes that the frequency of inviting personal responses had increased during this period. However, Marshall notes that the UK's Curriculum 2000 for A-level foregrounds the achievement and demonstration of learning outcomes has resulted in "a concentration on knowledge that is apparently factual and formulaic" (p.83) with a disregard for the connections between reader, writer and text. In the same manner, analysis of English literature questions for post-16 examinations in Malaysia could also demonstrate changing conceptualisations of the subject as identified through the frame of literature assessment. English literature has been offered as a school subject since the 1950s. Assessment for the subject at post-16 level was first administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) from the late 1950s to 1981 in the Higher School Certificate (HSC), and later by the Malaysian Examination Council or locally known as *Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia* (MPM) since 1982 until the present for the *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysian* (STPM)[1] examination.

As with other school subjects and academic disciplines, decisions about literature assessment are complicated by its subject matter and the level of education involved. Indeed, "it is within assessment that our views of what should be known and understood within a subject, as well as how this might be made manifest, are most clearly revealed" (Marshall 2005, p.85). In light of that, an analysis of examination questions in literature assessment papers would, therefore, reflect what this article terms to be conceptualisations of the subject. Complementing Marshall's approach to examination questions, Shaw and Imam's (2013) analysis of examination questions focuses on the constructs contained in the questions, defining constructs as the "skills and competencies that the test is designed to elicit" (p.454). In other words, questions contain indications of what knowledge the student should have in preparation for the examination as well as implications of student's competence required to demonstrate that knowledge. Therefore, what this study is interested in is the implied knowledge about literature students are expected to present and what conceptualisations of literature are promoted through assessment especially in view of the prominence of the teaching to the test phenomenon in Malaysia. This view is strengthened by the fact that the majority of Malaysian students taking literature at post-16 level are not taught by teachers during school hours because they are registered as private candidates for the subject and undertake self-study to prepare for the examination. In short, their conceptualistions of literature are most likely, if not solely, formed by literature assessment. Thus, this article

takes a different trajectory in its interest in examination questions by focusing on what conceptualisations they contain about post-16 literature.

In brief, this study is based on the premise that if teachers and students are influenced by the subject's assessment, it would stand to suggest that their conceptualisations of literature as a school subject are directly influenced by the constructs contained in the examination questions. Should teaching and learning draw heavily on the examination, then there is all the more reason to scrutinise literature assessment because the conceptualisations contained in the questions are magnified in literature teaching and learning. As such, this study aims to link research that has been done on the development and formation of knowledge about literature as a school subject and academic discipline to work on literature assessment in post-16 literature education which has traditionally relied heavily on written essays which, as a method of assessment, has been criticised in terms of its validity and reliability in representing literature student learning (Warner 2009, Yandell 2014).

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF LITERATURE AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT

There are varied ways in which literature as a school subject can be conceptualised, each valuing a particular approach to literature based on differences in how and why a student should engage with a literature text. Based on the work by Barlow (2009) and Snapper (2007), literature conceptualisations in the post-16 examination can generally be grouped into three attitudes and these three attitudes are used to inform this study's analysis of the literature conceptualisations contained in the literature examination.

Barlow (2009), an experienced A-level English Literature teacher and Chief Examiner, writes that as a subject, literature is "defined by the body of knowledge to which it refers - English Literature, the canonical and extra-canonical texts and authors who form the object of study" (p.45) with a focus on "the way writers use words and the way readers read them or listen to them" (p.9). What Barlow foregrounds is that literature involves both writing and reading where writing is the process in which texts are produced while reading (or listening) is the process in which texts are understood. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that without the reader, the text is only "a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols" (p.12) and that it is through the reader's purpose of engagement with it that it may be deemed a literary text. In other words, a text is literary if the reader's focus is not particularly on what can be taken away from the text, which Rosenblatt terms efferent reading, but on what happens within the experience, termed aesthetic reading. Therefore, literature consists of the writer, the text and the reader. As such, this study takes the view that conceptualisations of what constitutes literary study might emphasise one particular aspect more than others. For example, if the emphasis is on the writer, the text is viewed as a product of context and skill used to communicate the writer's message. Alternatively, if the focus is on the text, the text is viewed as an object that contains a particular use of language, structure and form to be analysed. On the other hand, if the focus is on the reader, then the text is seen as an object to be interpreted.

These shifts between the writer, text and reader correspond to conceptualisations of post-16 literature education in the United Kingdom, popularly referred to as A-level. Analysing trends and movements from the mid-twentieth century that led to the development of Curriculum 2000 English literature in the UK, Snapper (2007) identifies three schools of thought, which he terms positions, that have influenced conceptualisations of post-16 literature as a school subject. They are a traditionalist canonical position, a liberal humanist position and a radical cultural materialist position. Each position promotes different conceptualisations of literature as a discipline (Barry 2009 Snapper 2007) even though these

positions are not entirely distinct and teachers' conceptualisations of literature can be a mixture of different positions (Marshall 2000, Barrot 2016).

THE TRADITIONAL CANONICAL POSITION

The traditionalist canonical approach to literature has remained prominent due to the popularity of UCLES's conceptualization of literature which was heavily influenced by F. R. Leavis (1964) and I. A. Richards (1929). The function of the HSC examination as a university entrance examination during the twentieth century (Lacey 2008) as well as its cultural heritage view associated with a Cambridge approach to literature (Leavis 1964, Marshall 2000) promoted an elitist perception of literature study. In the mid twentieth century, literature education took the form of literary criticism and was carried out through close reading of the text (Richards 1929).

An implication of this practice of literary criticism focused on the text ingrained in a traditionalist position is that students supposedly take on the role of a literary critic in evaluating rather than interpreting the literature text. However, students are more often than not required to demonstrate an appreciation of the writer's craft rather than evaluative criticism. The conflation between evaluation and appreciation came to be criticised as discriminatory practice because it contributed to the idea that some texts have more "aesthetic and moral merit" (Widdowson 1999, p.4) than others. The traditionalist position's regard for texts judged to be of high value in their ability to function as "a humanising force" (Green 2011, p.9) contributed to a narrow literature canon and an English cultural heritage conceptualisation of literature that the liberal humanist position takes issue with. Nevertheless, the appreciative study of texts lauded by critics continues to permeate literature in schools today.

THE LIBERAL HUMANIST POSITION

The 1966 Dartmouth Seminar and subsequent book published by Dixon regarding it are often associated with the liberal humanist position and the idea of personal growth (Snapper 2007). In his book, Dixon (1969) argues for a recognition of the individuality and agency of a student's use of language aided by literature which brings "new voices into the classroom. [The student] learns to use language to build his own representational world and works to make this fit reality as he experiences it" (p.13). Thus, the liberal humanist position seems to prioritise personal student enjoyment in reading literature texts and promotes the use of varied ways through which students can express their responses instead of being limited to written essays in the examination.

Goodwyn (2012) suggests that this is the most position that best matches what the teachers in UK schools believe to the purpose of teaching literature which is to evoke personal and creative authentic response as alternatives to the dry and impersonal Leavis model of literary criticism. Yet, this position is not entirely estranged from the traditional canonical position. Marshall (2000) found that teachers may hold a combination of traditionalist and liberal humanistic aims of teaching literature because "what dominates their position is the enabling power of art, both of its appreciation and its creation" (p.59) and believed that studying literature is "about personal growth, about personal fulfilment, both emotionally and in terms of life chances" (p.74). Thus, traditionalist and liberal humanist positions do share similar ideas about the moral and aesthetic role of literature in education (Barry 2009). However, I perceive a vital difference in how a reader's personal response is formed. While the traditionalist position imposes ideas and standards on personal response, the liberal humanist position values individuality, creativity and varied interpretations.

Moreover, instead of a development of sensibilities that enable students to evaluate literature texts through a heightened sense of morality (Leavis 1964), the liberal humanist position promotes empathy, tolerance and an understanding of others (Eagleton 1985) as well as an emphasis on self-expression. Another key feature Marshall identifies as a characteristic of liberal humanists is that these teachers believe in multiculturalism and the development of "personal voice" (p.91) by valuing students' own dialect and home language which form their personal identities (Yandell 2014).

THE RADICAL CULTURAL MATERIALIST POSITION

Eagleton argues for an approach to literature study that engages with context because it is "only by the political *interpretation* of experience that existence becomes fruitful" (p.104) which is an essential idea in the radical cultural materialist position. At the time when the liberal humanist position towards literature seems to have remained popular among secondary and post-16 English teachers, the radical cultural materialist approach to literature that views texts as social products of culture and context flourished in university studies (Green 2005,2006).

Although personal enjoyment which is central in the liberal humanist conceptualisation of literature is not absent in the radical cultural materialist position, it comes as a result of an analysis and exploration of the text within its context (Barlow 2009). Another difference between the two positions is that while the meaning of texts in the liberal humanist position comes from a personal interpretation of texts, meaning for the cultural materialist is derived from a critical exploration of the text through different literary theories and perspectives (Eagleton 1985).

The rise of ideas such as critical literacy, postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy as well as an emphasis on diversity and equality in education have fostered a radical cultural materialist approach to literature as a discipline which has increasingly influenced literature in schools. Those ideas point towards the need to not only question the inherent values and standards implied in the choice of one literature text over another but also in how reading, interpretation and assessment in literature are understood (Yandell 2014). This change could be manifested in the use of assessments that are student-centred where perspectives like postcolonial theory moves the focus of literature as a school subject from an emphasis on students' personal response to student empowerment which is achieved not only through challenging what they read but also in questioning their understanding of reality.

In general, scholars believe that the conceptualisation of literature as a subject has made an overall gradual shift from the traditional canonical position to the radical cultural materialist position. This shift, as demonstrated in post-16 literature syllabi, not only reflects how the academic discipline has evolved in institutions of higher learning but also how the overall aims of education have changed, particularly with the desire to appreciate, understand and engage with diverse cultures and ideas in a globalised world. However, this shift involves much more than a revision of syllabi and learning outcomes. As this article argues, the shift should be reflected in the subject's assessment in order for change in literature conceptualisations to be implemented. Compounded with the fact that there is very little, if any, research on literature as a standalone subject in Malaysia, it is essential to explore the subject's assessment as a means to understand how the subject is conceptualised in Malaysian post-16 education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

One set of post-16 literature assessment questions is taken from UCLES and MPM, specifically the 1968 HSC English examination and the 2012/2013 STPM Literature in English examination. The 1968 examination papers were chosen as it is roughly in the middle of the period during which the HSC examination was administered in Malaysia while the 2012/2013 examination year was chosen because it was the most recent complete examination sitting during the data collection period upon which this study is based. Limited by available examination papers and syllabus changes, only questions regarding Shakespeare and modern literature were considered for purposes of comparison as these two areas were consistent in the HSC and STPM examinations. Only general essay questions are analysed as they remain consistent in terms of form and structure. Thus, a combined number of 11 questions on Shakespearean texts (10 HSC questions and 1 STPM question) and 27 questions on modern literature (22 HSC questions and 5 STPM questions) are considered in this study. Although there is a great difference in the number of questions between texts, they do reflect the reality of the options available to students during the respective examination years. More importantly, considering all general essay options contained in specific papers for one particular year might better reflect the literature conceptualisations of the respective examination body.

Altogether 38 questions, which are termed 'item's in this study, were analysed using discourse analysis to identify conceptualisations about literature along with a consideration of the outcome space, understood to be what students should produce in light of the syllabus and assessment objectives as a demonstration of learning in literature. Thus, items are divided into writer, text and reader-centred questions which are then matched to learning and assessment objectives when available.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF ASSESSMENT ITEMS

This section illustrates the aspects I choose to focus on as I analyse selected examination questions from two examination sittings administered in Malaysia. Each sitting will be analysed in turn beginning with the 1968 HSC and then the 2012/2013 STPM examination. Questions in each sitting are further divided into two categories, namely Shakespeare and modern literature, to provide a focus on the demonstration of examination board conceptualisations of literature in each examination.

1968 HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE ENGLISH

The HSC English syllabus then was a very brief document with a lack of subject aims, learning outcomes and assessment objectives which are fairly recent introductions in syllabi documentation. The sections contained in the syllabus relevant to the Shakespeare and modern literature papers are contained in Table 1:

TABLE 1. Extract from the 1968 HSC English syllabus

Paper II. Shakespeare
Candidates must offer a minimum of three plays, including one tragedy and one comedy. They must answer one question from Section A and two questions from Section B.

    Section A. Questions on context and paraphrase. Short passages from each of the plays will be set, two passages from each tragedy and one from each comedy and history. Candidates will be required to paraphrase two of these, taking one passage from a tragedy and one from either a comedy or a history, and to relate them to their context with appropriate comment. Separate context questions will not be set.

Section B. General questions on the significance, subject-matter and dramatic qualities of the plays prescribed.

Paper VII. Literature since 1900.
Candidates will be required to answer four questions, including at least two from Section A, the remaining two questions to be chosen freely from Section A and/or Section B.
Section A. [*list of prescribed texts*]
Section B. General background questions on the period, based largely on the books prescribed in Section A.

(Adapted from the 1968 HSC English syllabus [UCLES, 1967])

PAPER II SHAKESPEARE

In regards to *Paper II: Shakespeare*, the instructions for Section B as listed in Table 1 specify three areas for assessment which are the significance, subject-matter and dramatic qualities of his plays. Aside from that, nothing else is provided in the syllabus regarding the subject's assessment. As noted before, only general essay questions are considered for comparison purposes due to the limits of this study. The following are the items from Section B that students could choose from in the 1968 HSC Paper II.

TABLE 2. List of selected 1968 HSC Paper II questions

Question Number	Question
2. Either (a)	'One of the Fool's functions is to exhibit to us Lear's tortured conscience.' How does Shakespeare do this?
Or (b)	How does Shakespeare manipulate the two plots in *King Lear* to give the play unity?
3. Either (a)	There is a marked contrast between Brutus and Mark Antony in political ability. How does Shakespeare exploit this in *Julius Caesar*?
Or (b)	Discuss the importance of the supernatural in *Julius Caesar*.
4. Either (a)	What are the functions of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*?
Or (b)	How far do you find it appropriate to describe *The Winter's Tale* as a comedy?
5. Either (a)	What is the importance of Bianca and her story in the comedy of *The Taming of the Shrew*?
Or (b)	Do you see any irony in *The Taming of the Shrew* as the title for Shakespeare's comedy?
6. Either (a)	'I know you all, and will a while uphold The unyoked humour of your idleness.' Prince Hal's soliloquy revealing his secret intentions deprives the play of dramatic surprise. Discuss this view of *Henry IV Part 1*.
Or (b)	Write an essay on the ways in which the office of the king is presented in *Henry IV Part I*.

(Adapted from UCLES, HSC English, November 1968, Question Paper 801/2)

Using conceptualisations of literature as categorised through a focus on the writer, text or reader, the 10 general essay items regarding Shakespeare from the 1968 examination display a fairly even emphasis on the three aspects with 3 items focused on the writer, 5 items on the text and 2 items on the reader. The numbers demonstrate that different conceptualisations about literature are represented in this paper with a slightly heavier emphasis on the text.

Items 2(a), 2(b) and 3(a) are phrased to focus on the writer, William Shakespeare, and his craft particularly through the use of the phrase "how does Shakespeare" achieve a certain effect. In these items, the focus is on how the writer's ability to successfully manipulate or exploit a particular literary element, such as characters and plot, which ultimately presents Shakespeare as an infallible writer. As such, students do not seem to have the space to question whether or not Shakespeare is effective in his craft. What students are meant to demonstrate instead is knowledge and appreciation of how Shakespeare has achieved desired effects through literary elements. In short, these items highlight the writer while the text is an illustration of the writer's abilities and students are required to appreciate the writer's

achievements. Therefore, students' responses are directed in terms of content which is what Warner (2009) notes regarding the use of 'how' that results in a limited outcome space. Thus, the implication of these writer-centred items is that literature in education is conceptualised as acquiring the knowledge and ability to identify the intricacies and subtleties in a writer's construction of a text. However, it is done not in the guise of a critic who evaluates a text but as an admirer of a writer's craft.

Items 3(b), 4(a), 5(a), 6(a) and 6(b) are questions that focus on the text. There is no mention of the writer though the text is still conceptualised as a construct that contains literary elements and themes to identify and discuss. While these items all direct students towards a particular literary element such as characterisation and dramatic surprise, there is an important distinction in terms of the outcome space of students answers which can be discerned within this category. 4(a), 5(a) and 6(b) form the first group while items 3(b) and 6(a) form the second. The first group, specifically 4(a), 5(a) and 6(b), are phrased in two ways. Items are formed either by using a question beginning with "what" ("what are the functions" and "what is the importance") or as a statement instructing students to "write an essay on the ways in which" a subject is presented in the text. It is interesting that regardless whether phrased as a statement or question, these items essentially require students to identify details of specific elements as used in the text. It is a form of response that is considerably narrower in comparison to the second group of questions that consists of items 3(b) and 6(a). While they also focus on the text, items 3(b) and 6(a) are phrased using the term "discuss" which suggests that there is room for students' responses to move beyond just identifying literary elements as they are allowed to evaluate the idea or statement contained in the item about the text. For example, the idea that a character's soliloquy reduces the dramatic surprise of the text is introduced in item 6(a) and because it is an opinion of the text, students may respond as readers with opinions of their own. Thus, taking both groups of items into consideration, it is apparent that items which focus on the text may frame students' responses differently. In short, the implication of this focus is that while the writer is not mentioned at all, the text is seen as the object of analysis and students may be required to either demonstrate detailed knowledge of the text or be able to explore their interpretation of the text in relation to introduced ideas and topics. The conceptualisation of literature education contained in these questions advocates a close-reading approach based solely on detailed knowledge of the text.

The remaining items 4(b) and 5(b) foreground the reader, or in this case, the student. Even though notions are introduced for the student to respond to in a way similar to questions that require students to discuss a particular idea, the student's answer is explicitly framed as a personal response. By directly addressing the student through the use of the pronoun "you", the question evokes a personal voice that not only seems to promote an individual response but accords it validity as well. In these questions, the reader has to take a stand in order to respond to the question based on the text which indicates that the conceptualisation of literature in education promoted here is the expression of personal opinion.

PAPER VII LITERATURE SINCE 1900

I use the items on modern literature in the 1968 English Paper VII to further illustrate and refine how questions on literature can be categorised not only through determining whether an item is writer, text or reader centred but also by considering more subtle and indirect implications of what items require students to do and how they frame student response.

TABLE 3. List of 1968 HSC English Paper VII options

Question Number	Question
1. Either (a)	'A nightmarish fable for our time.' Is this a just view of *1984*?
Or (b)	'Big Brother is watching you.' Why is the State so successful in controlling the lives of individuals in *1984*?
Or (c)	To what extent is *The Second Round* a social satire?
Or (d)	How important is it to the theme of Lenrie Peter's novel that the hero, Kawa, is a medical doctor?
2. Either (a)	'Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life.' Does this thought of Mrs Dalloway's represent Virginia Woolf's own attitude in the novel?
Or (b)	Describe, illustrate and evaluate some of the methods by which Virginia Woolf gives unity to *Mrs Dalloway*.
Or (c)	Do you regard Steinbeck's interest in 'results, not causes' as a strength or a weakness in *the Grapes of Wrath*?
Or (d)	'It is on Steinbeck's sense of place even more than upon his sense of character that the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* depends.' Discuss.
3. Either (a)	'Man is a thought adventurer.' In what ways does this description apply to Lawrence's own writings in *Selected Essays*?
Or (b)	Which section of *Selected Essays* have you most enjoyed reading? Give reasons for your choice.
4. Either (a)	Discuss the poetry of Edward Thomas with reference to: 'He saw not only with his eyes but with his understanding.'
Or (b)	Discuss the poetry of Edward Thomas with reference to: 'Love and Death are the two themes which run most obviously and most movingly through Thomas's work.'
5. Either (a)	What imaginative view of the society of his time is presented in T. S. Eliot's *Selected Poems*? Illustrate your answer with close reference to two or three poems.
Or (b)	What do you find characteristic of Eliot's use of imagery in his poems?
6. Either (a)	'I aimed to make a play with the veritable countenance of life' (Arthur Miller). How far do you think he succeeded in this aim in *Death of a Salesman*?
Or (b)	Do you see Willy Loman as the defiant hero or the victim of circumstance in *Death of a Salesman*?
7. Either (a)	'*Down Second Avenue* is notable not so much for the author's struggle towards a better life as for the humorous detachment that informs his recollections.' Where do you find this quality in the autobiography and how important is it to the book's effect?
Or (b)	How convincing is Mphalele's evocation of the African background to his life story?
8.	'In this age poets seem to have lost the power of speaking with a personal voice.' Is this so?
9.	Discuss the specifically American features of a work of American literature written in this period and which you have enjoyed.
10.	'Modern literature has replaced a preoccupation with the hero by a preoccupation with the ordinary man.' Discuss.
11.	Discuss the work of two writers of the period who in their writings have expressed a direct concern with the culture of our time.

(Adapted from UCLES, HSC English, November 1968, Question Paper 806/7)

Dividing the twenty two items for Paper VII using the same categorisation of whether items are writer, text or reader-centred reveals a heavy inclination towards reader-centred questions. In comparison to the items in Paper II where 3 out of 10 items were writer-centred, this category of questions accounts for only 3 out of the 22 items students can choose from, specifically items 3(a), 5(a) and 7(a). Text-centred items account for 6 out of the 22 options, specifically items 1(b), 2(d), 4(a), 4(b), 10 and 11, while the remaining 13 items are reader-centred.

My attempts to categorise the items for this paper by determining characteristics of writer, text and reader-centred categories suggests that categorization based on the use and lack of keywords can be misleading. For example, the mere inclusion of a writer's name does not mean that the question is writer-centred. While writers are mentioned in 13 items, only 10 are writer-centred in this category because the remaining 3 items do not limit students to

proving a writer's effectiveness as demonstrated in the previous discussion of Paper II questions. Instead, the three items in Paper VII allow students, such as in item 2(b), to "describe, illustrate and evaluate" (UCLES, 1967) the writer's work. Likewise, the inclusion of the pronoun "you" as contained in item 7(a) does not necessarily foreground a personal response to the text. Even though the reader is appealed to on a personal level, the item is phrased in a way that requires students to identify illustrations of the introduced "quality" in the text and to show that it is important for its "effect". Thus, categorising items purely by the mention or lack of keywords may not reflect the complexities involved in literature assessment which this paper argues ought to be supplemented by considering how student responses are framed.

Boundaries between the categories of writer, text and reader-centred questions are also not always distinct as items often involve an interplay of all three aspects. A good example of such a question is item 2(a). It introduces a biographical connection between Virginia Woolf's personal "attitude" and her fictional character Mrs Dalloway, thus requiring students to have knowledge of the writer's background and concerns, as well as detailed knowledge of the text in order to answer the question. At the same time, the question allows space for personal response by phrasing the application of Woolf's attitude to the text as a yes or no question which requires students to take a stand in their response. Ultimately, item 2(a) is categorised as a reader-centred question due to how the outcome space is framed as a personal response even though there is no mention of the pronoun 'you'.

In comparing Paper II and Paper VII within the same examination year, items in the former are skewed towards the text and writer while items in the latter are focused on the reader which suggests an important difference between the papers. Overall, the general conceptualisation implied by questions on Shakespearean texts in Paper II positions the reader as an admirer of the writer's work while the emphasis in Paper VII is to elicit a personal voice from the reader.

SIJIL TINGGI PELAJARAN MALAYSIA LITERATURE IN ENGLISH 2012/2013

In Malaysia, the present syllabus and assessment structure for the subject involves three modular papers that are divided according to genre. Each paper is taken at the end of a study term, which means that students obtain a full grade for the subject after one and a half years of study. This modular structure which was introduced in the year 2012, is a notable change from previous phases of post-16 English literature in Malaysia because the number of papers and texts set for study have been significantly reduced in two ways. First of all, optional papers and choice in general essay questions are no longer offered and secondly, only six texts are selected for compulsory study.

Unlike the 1968 HSC syllabus, the most current STPM syllabus document published in 2011 includes a list of learning outcomes and assessment objectives which are listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4. 2014 STPM Literature in English Learning Outcomes and Assessment Objectives

Learning Outcomes
Upon completion of the syllabus, candidates should be able to do the following in a clear, coherent and effective manner: a) Identify, describe, and explain a range of literary elements, styles, and devices; b) Analyse, interpret, and discuss themes, issues, and concerns; c) Synthesise and evaluate techniques, points of view, and ideologies.
Assessment Objectives
Candidates are required to: a) Demonstrate an understanding of texts by giving a critical and detailed response using relevant and appropriate textual evidence;

b) Show how meaning is conveyed through the use of language, structure, form, point of view, and other literary devices;
c) Compare and contrast texts in relation to language, structure, form, issues and themes
d) Demonstrate an awareness of the social, cultural, and historical backgrounds of the texts and the different approaches to their interpretation
e) Relate texts to their personal experiences and their own social, cultural, and historical backgrounds;
f) Present their argument in clear, effective, and well-organised prose.

(Adapted from MPM, 2011, p.1)

The essay questions set on texts for students who completed the STPM examination in the year 2013 are listed in the table below.

TABLE 5. List of selected 2012/2013 STPM Literature in English questions

Paper	Question Number	Question
Paper 1: Poetry and short stories	3.	With close reference to any two poems, illustrate how irony is used to comment on life and relationships.
	4.	With close reference to any two short stories in *Malaysian Short Stories*, discuss issues relating to the themes of multiculturalism.
Paper 2: Plays	3.	What effects does Viola have on Duke Orsino and Countess Olivia? Discuss with close reference to the play.
	4.	Discuss the different responses to money of the major characters in this play.
Paper 3: Novels	3.	Examine Jane Austen's use of irony in *Pride and Prejudice*.
	4.	Examine the narrative structure used by Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club*. Why is it significant?

(Adapted from STPM Literature in English November 2012 Question Paper 920/1, May 2013 Question Paper 920/2 and November 2013 Question Paper 920/3)

When divided into the aforementioned writer, text and reader-centred categories which is supplemented by a consideration of how student response are framed, these six compulsory general essay questions reveal particular conceptualisations of literature education projected by MPM. Four out of the six items are text-centred and the remaining two, specifically both items for Paper 3, are writer-centred.

The most common verbs utilised to guide student responses are "discuss" (3 items) and "examine" (2 items). The use of those terms broaden the outcome space of possible responses and, at the same time, complicate indications of what is implied to be the desired response to the questions. The Oxford English dictionary defines 'discuss' as "to write or talk about something in detail, showing the different ideas and opinions about it" while 'examine' is listed as meaning "to consider or study an idea very carefully". The use of both verbs seem to allow room for students to do more than identify and illustrate literary elements in a text as students are encouraged to take into account different perspectives of a particular notion which would likely involve processes of comparison, synthesis, and evaluation. However, the use of verbs like "discuss" may not necessarily translate into what students are required to do.

One of the effects of the use of such verbs is that the scope of some of the questions may become quite undefined which could confuse students rather than guide their responses. For example, Paper 1 item 4 instructs students to "discuss issues relating to the themes of multiculturalism". While it does not limit students to specific multicultural issues, there is also no indication of what aspect of those issues to focus on, whether it be its causes, contributing factors or effects, all of which are complex areas of discussion in themselves. What results from such phrasing is a matter of too much choice. Thus, though there is allowance for a wide scope of responses, it simultaneously presents students with an undefined range. Another item that could be perceived as problematic is the semantic

complexity of Paper 2 item 4 that requires students to "discuss the different responses to money of the major characters in this play". If 'discuss' means to show "different ideas and opinions" as defined in the Oxford dictionary, then the question could semantically be understood to show "different ideas and opinions" about "different responses to money of the major characters", thus making the item's requirements possibly overly complex. Had the question been phrased in the form of "discuss the major characters' responses to money", perhaps the scope of the item would have been more apparent. However, as it is, the semantic redundancy of the use of "discuss" and "different" in a single question widens but complicates what students are expected to include in their response. Therefore, though it is understandable that the aim for breadth is to allow students more freedom to respond to the text, questions could risk being too general and unfocused.

While both items for Paper 3 utilise the word "examine", there is again a difference in outcome space between the two items. At first glance, Paper 3 item 4 seems broader as it includes the word "why" which often connotes ideas of personal response that require reasoning. In this item, however, the addition of "Why is it significant?" actually results in a narrowing instead of broadening of outcome space as candidates are required to give reasons why the narrative structure used by Amy Tan is significant. If the 'why' question had not been included, students would have had the freedom to examine the advantages and flaws of Amy Tan's use of narrative structure. Instead, they are limited to writing about its significance.

In terms of evoking personal student response, neither the learning outcomes nor assessment objectives (AO) foreground a personal response to texts aside from AO(e) which states that students are expected to "relate texts to their personal experiences and their own social, cultural, and historical backgrounds". One may observe, however, that the application and relevance of this particular AO might be difficult for questions such as those in Paper 3 where the focus is on an author's use of a specific literary element. Likewise, Paper 2 question 3 on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* which focuses on how one character influences two other characters also presents a challenge in fulfilling the requirements of AO(e). Thus, what seems to be highlighted by MPM is that literature teaching and learning is to remain "close to the text" which seems very much in accordance to the learning outcomes listed in the syllabus such as identifying, explaining and analysing literature elements aside from AO(e).

CONCLUDING WORDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My analysis of general essay questions from two examination sittings, each from different examination boards, has provided some interesting insights into the practice of literature assessment, particularly the noticeable lack of reader-centred items in STPM literature assessment in comparison to the 1968 HSC English examination. I believe there are two distinctive shifts in literature assessment as discerned through my analysis.

First of all, it seems that conceptualisations of learning about literature could vary according to the text that is studied where, if the text is well-established and lauded, students are expected to demonstrate an appreciation of the writer's skill either through writer-centred or text-centred items. If the text is not as established in literary tradition, there is a higher possibility for assessment items to be more reader-centred. Secondly, analysis of answer scope in examinations suggests that examination board conceptualisations of student literature learning has shifted from an emphasis on personal interpretations and opinions of literature texts to a demonstration of detailed knowledge about the text. Thus, perhaps it is

not that the reader response has gradually been disregarded but rather it is the conceptualisation of reader response that has changed.

The ideas introduced in this study allude to vast possibilities for future research in literature assessment, among which is to analyse literature assessment papers from more examination sittings as well as different examination boards in order to shed light on the complex practice of literature assessment. It would certainly be interesting to learn of the differences and similarities between conceptualisations of literature in practice to gain a wider understanding of how the subject is actualised in the context of an increasingly international and global field of education. Such study is especially pertinent now when the subject's popularity in Malaysia and other countries is falling. There is a need to demystify the subject and deal with the perception of literature as being elitist, a difficult subject to study and a difficult subject to score an A grade in. Moving forwards, an important implication of this study is that it is important to avoid over-simplification of assessment items merely based upon the mention of keywords such as 'discuss' and 'examine' which may not necessarily reflect the outcome space of the item. It is for this reason that a quantitative analysis of word choice and terms for questions in literature education should be substantiated by considerations of the context in which a word is used and how it determines the answer scope because of the different elements and implied actions at play in each question that a quantitative account of the types of verbs or phrases used in questions may not reflect.

To sum up, the insights from this study can be used to inform future research and considerations about literature assessment as well as serve as a means for stakeholders and researchers to evaluate and explore existing conceptualisations of literature education currently embedded in literature teaching, learning and testing. There is much that remains to be explored not only in post-16 literature education but in literature as a school subject at all levels.

ENDNOTES

[1] *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* translates to Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education. The examination is henceforth referred to as STPM in this article.

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