# How can I Improve my Teaching Strategies for Class Twelve Students to Score Better in The Merchant of Venice?

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## Abstract

During the 2018 Mid-Term Examinations, Class Twelve students of Phuentshol-ing Higher Secondary School scored relatively lower in *The Merchant of Venice* in comparison  to short  stories. Action research, thus, was undertaken with the research question 'How can I improve my teaching strategies for Class Twelve students to score better in *The Merchant of Venice*?' thirty Class Twelve science students of Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School participated. Data was mainly gathered through students' Mid-Term Examinations marks. Questionnaires were also used to identify and analyse the preferred learning styles of students and to obtain insight into students' beliefs and attitude towards learning the play. Base-line data was collected and analysed followed by a practice of preferred learning styles suggested by students and informed by literature. After three months of the intervention process, data was once again collected and compared with the baseline data. The result showed noteworthy improvement in the students' overall score.

*Keywords*: The Merchant of Venice, examinations, preferred learning styles, teaching strategies, genres

## Introduction

Ever since the reintroduction of Shakespearean play, *The Merchant of Ven-ice*, in English Curriculum of Bhutan for classes eleven and twelve in 2017, the question the researcher has been asking was not whether the play was worth the reintroduction but how the play must be approached. O'Malley (2000) admits that although he had been teaching Shakespeare for approximately twenty years, he had never theorized what it was that he was trying to do in teaching a Shake-speare's class. Since different approaches appeal to different students, the teacher must understand and identify which student needs a simple reading of the text and which student wants acting the play out, and implement the strategies accordingly. Strategies considered as feasible and applicable by the teachers may not be stu-dents' preference, and thus, students would not be motivated to learn the play. It is from this very issue that this study came into limelight.

**Reconnaissance**

Reconnaissance in this action research cycle involved an examination of the situation of the identified problem along with the competence of the researcher and participants, and reflection of relevant literature.

**Figure 1**

*The Reconnaissance after Maxwell (2003) (Cited in Royal Education Council, 2018, p. 8)*
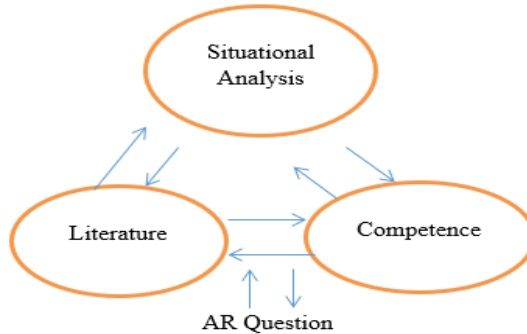


**Situational Analysis**

The participants in this study were one section of Class Twelve science students. Out of 30 students, 17 were girls and 13 were boys. Both the researcher and the students acknowledge that students perform better in short stories as compared to The Merchant of Venice. This was further validated during the 2018 Mid-Term Examinations.

**Figure 2**
*Average Scores in Two Genres*
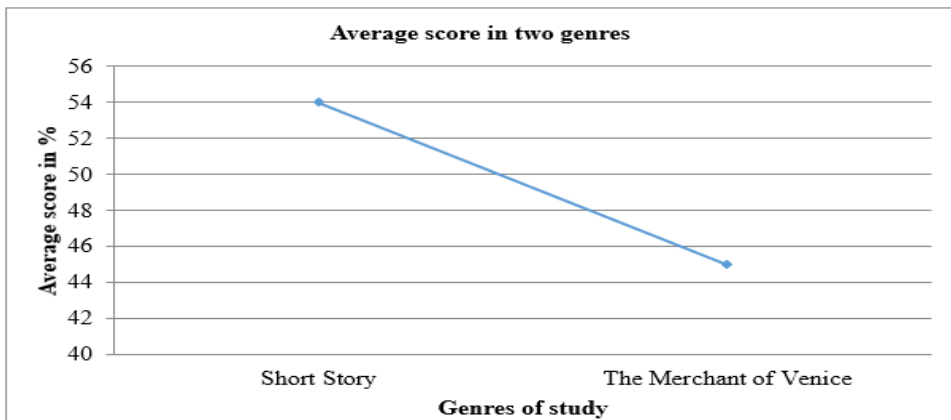
Though there is no vast difference between the marks students have scored in the two genres, the  scores (average score in %) for *The Merchant of Venice* is comparatively lower than the marks (average score in %) in short  stories. Therefore, it was quintessential to understand the preferred strategies and to adopt them accordingly. Comparison is made between *The Merchant of Venice* and short  stories as both are seen texts.

## Competence

Following an extensive four-day refresher course on *The Merchant of Venice*, the researcher has been teaching the play for classes eleven and twelve in Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School since its reintroduction in 2017. Moreover, the researcher had studied the same play when he was a student. Despite his interest and experience in teaching English, the researcher not only wanted to analyse students' preferred learning styles but also their beliefs and attitude towards learning the play.

Students know English is their main subject in order for them to move to the next grade and the play is as important as short  stories, yet the phenomenon of scoring lesser in the play continues to prevail.

## Literature Review

Flanders (1970) defines teaching behaviour as an act by the teacher which occurs during the interaction in the classroom. Classroom interaction eventually is one important factor which contributes to students' score during the tests. Students' scores during the tests is a fundamental evaluation to validate how much a student has learn. In order for students to learn meaningfully, teachers adopt varied strategies, but which strategy suits which individual student is difficult to thrash out. It is, hence, the mutual understanding of scholars for the need to understand students' preferred learning styles and to identify the teaching strategies adopted by teachers that are most likely to  enhance students' performance during their examinations.

Renz (cited in Gibson, 1942) contents that Shakespeare has written plays for stage and that the students in schools must enact them. Similarly, O'Malley (2000) shares that he emphasizes on students' collective performance through the theatrical talents of students.

In the words of Wright (2001), in his *Preparing Teachers to Put Drama in the Classroom*, the sequence of teaching strategies in the United States, proceeds from "sensory/concentration activities" to "movement/pantomime, dialogue, characterization and improvisation/story playing", with some variations though (p. 206). Dowdy & Kaplan (2011) claim that while for some teachers

drama is about theatrics or stunning performance but for some, it is about enriching learner's life by making content accessible and memorable through active, hands-on, collaborative exploration of ideas.

Madsen (2001) conducted a research to examine the strategies used by the teachers in teaching Shakespearean plays and the strategy most liked by the students in learning the plays. 80% of students liked performing in the classroom and 70% of respondents disliked reading activities. Therefore, the researcher recommends the teachers to place more emphasis on performance teaching strategy.

Similarly, Batho (2006), in his *Shakespeare in Secondary Schools*, involved 60 secondary school English teachers. In his study, reading the play around the class was a popular practice (80% of the teacher respondents). He recommends that teachers must look for imaginative ways for tackling the language difficulty with Shakespearean texts of pupils and that memorising lines from Shakespeare should be "once a common practice in English classrooms" (p. 168).

Using a qualitative research approach, employing semi-structured interviews, Sutton (2016) studied strategies used by two Shakespearean educators. The result indicated that students learned Shakespeare better in a collaborative and creative classroom environment. He commends creating an exciting and lively atmosphere while teaching Shakespeare using methods such as "group learning and dramatic techniques to engage students" (p. 64).

Rocklin (2005) stressed that for teachers to incorporate a performance dimension into their literature courses, students must analyse, cast, rehearse, and perform parts of the play, as well to observe, respond to, and learn from these performances.

In his action research, Stoneham (2013) evaluated an approach to teaching a Shakespearean play to 24 boys from Class 10. He made no attempt to read or cover the play but "lead students into the play at such a point where they might be able to make sense of the play without my telling them what it was about" (p. 2). With his open-ended approach in making students write essays on relevant topics, 19 of the 24 essays submitted were awarded an A on the English Department's marking scale.

Leah (2016) conducted interviews and observed lessons of four Secondary English teachers to understand the Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) of teachers teaching Shakespeare to second language learners in South Africa, to establish the beliefs of these teachers and to identify the ways in which these beliefs influence the practice of teachers. The socio-economic constraints of learners, the fact that most were not English home language speakers, influenced the development of teachers' PCK.

Although there are studies conducted by researchers to analyse the strategies of teaching Shakespearean plays, there is hardly any study piloted in Bhutan. This is probably because Shakespearean play was reintroduced in the English Curriculum of Bhutan in 2017. Action research, hence, is practical to examine which strategy suits individual learner so that they learn better and score high during the examinations.

## Research Problem – Action Research Question

Despite various strategies adopted by the researcher, which strategies best cater to individual student's learning can partly be known by their scores during the examinations. The Mid-Term Examinations result of 2018 indicated that students had scored lower in *The Merchant of Venice* than in short stories. The issues of interest for investigation, therefore, were:

- Students' beliefs and attitudes towards learning the play.
- Students' preferred learning styles in learning the play.

*Action Research Question*

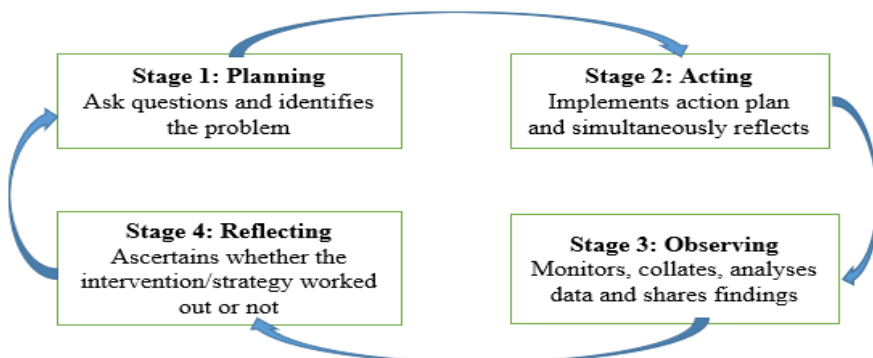With the aforementioned argument as a basis to address the issue, the following question was developed.

How can I improve my teaching strategies for Class Twelve students to score better in *The Merchant of Venice?*

## Research Plan

The theoretical framework and action research plan adopted in this research are "a cyclical and spiral four-stage process, namely planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (Royal Education Council, 2018).

## Figure 3

*Action Research Process (Royal Education Council, 2018, p.5)*



**Stage 1: Planning**
Ask questions and identifies the problem

**Stage 2: Acting**
Implements action plan and simultaneously reflects

**Stage 4: Reflecting**
Ascertains whether the intervention/strategy worked out or not

**Stage 3: Observing**
Monitors, collates, analyses data and shares findings

## Procedure

This action research was conducted with one class of science stream. The participants were provided with a questionnaire each to be filled up, and their mid-term examinations marks were compiled during the reconnaissance (refer *Pre-Intervention* section). As soon as the baseline data was collected from the participants, intervention actions were put into practice (refer *Action Intervention* section). Finally, during the post-intervention stage, the participant's individual marks were collected once again and compared with the baseline data and investigated the effects of intervention actions (refer *Post Intervention* section).

## Data Collection

A quantitative method was used in this research. Questionnaire and examination results of the individual participant were used as data collection techniques. Ethical approval was sought from the school vice-principal. Participants were provided with a questionnaire each to be filled up, if interested, at home and returned the next day. This was done anonymously to seek genuine information from the interested participants. The return rate of the questionnaire was hundred percent.

## Pre-Intervention: Baseline Data

Data was collected in two ways. Firstly, Mid-Term Examinations marks were collected (see *Situational Analysis*). Secondly, the first section of the questionnaire sought students' general beliefs and attitude towards Shakespearean play to analyse their readiness. While teacher's teaching strategy is vital, student's beliefs and attitude to the text is equally important. Language of the play is found to be the biggest challenge for all 30 respondents, yet slightly over 83 percent of the students have positive attitude to learning the play. 100 percent of respondents recommend for the reintroduction of Shakespearean text in classes nine and ten as well. The second section of the questionnaire intended to study students' preferred learning styles. It was broadly divided into four areas.

**Figure 4**

*Students' Preferred Learning Strategies*
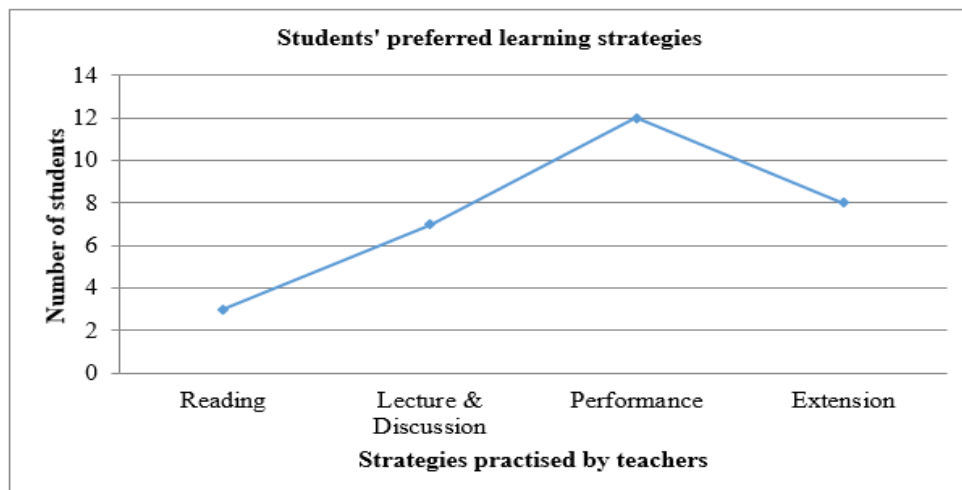


40 percent of students prefer *Performance* the most while a contrasting 10 percent like *Reading*. Within the category, 80 percent of respondents like *Acting Scenes & Declamation* while none of the respondents dislike *Watching scenes on video tapes*. On the other hand, 15 percent and a little over 3 percent of respondents dislike *Lecture*.

In the last section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to give short opinionated answers to the questions. Many students have called for power point presentation. One student has written thus:

*I prefer learning when teachers teach using power point presentations.*

Another respondent has called for performance.

*If we can act for every scene, we can understand clearly and remember during the examinations.*

One more participant has suggested the same strategy.

*If drama competitions are held between different sections, students can understand the text better and we will be able to remember it for longer duration.*

In general, students have called for interactive sessions with more focus on performances and power point presentations.

**Actions – Intervention**

After careful analysis of students' preferred learning styles collected from the questionnaire (see *Pre-Intervention: Baseline Data* section) suggested in the literature, the researcher adopted the following strategies to discuss the play for around three months, beginning from August till October (until Trial Examinations).

- Debate
- Role play
- Declamations
- Guest speakers
- Group discussion
- Games and puzzles
- Summary of scenes
- Power point presentations
- Reading some related texts
- More of competency based questions
- Skit competition among the teams within the class
- Translation of scenes into modern English in their own words
- Listening and watching scenes on audio and video tapes respectively

Prior to the lesson, students were provided with a certain portion of the play to read and discuss accordingly. Teacher cleared the doubts in power point presentation if students had any and different versions of movie on *The Merchant of Venice* were shown. Depending upon suitability, students were called for declamation wherever possible. At the end of every scene, students were asked to dramatize the scene. In order for students to be fully engaged, the researcher held drama competition in teams.

**Post Intervention**

After the intervention stage, individual student's Trial Examinations score in *The Merchant of Venice* was collected. Similarly, Mid-Term Examinations score was once again referred to compare and analyse the data.

**Figure 5**

*Students' Trial Examinations Score*



Students' Trial Examinations marks
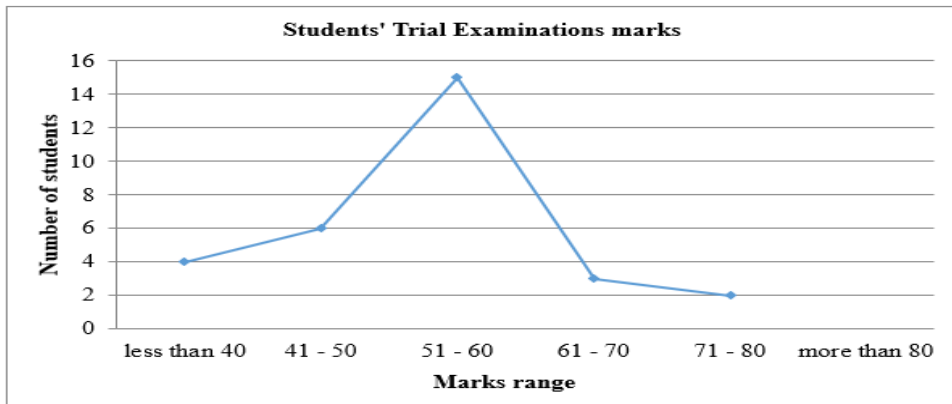
While none of the students scored more than 80% in *The Merchant of Venice*, the figure above shows that a little more than 13 percent of respondents have scored 40 or less than 40%. With 50 percent, maximum numbers of respondents are decked in the category of 51-60% aggregate marks in *The Merchant of Venice*.

## Data Analysis and Results

The following figure illustrates the comparison between the baseline average score and the post-intervention average score.
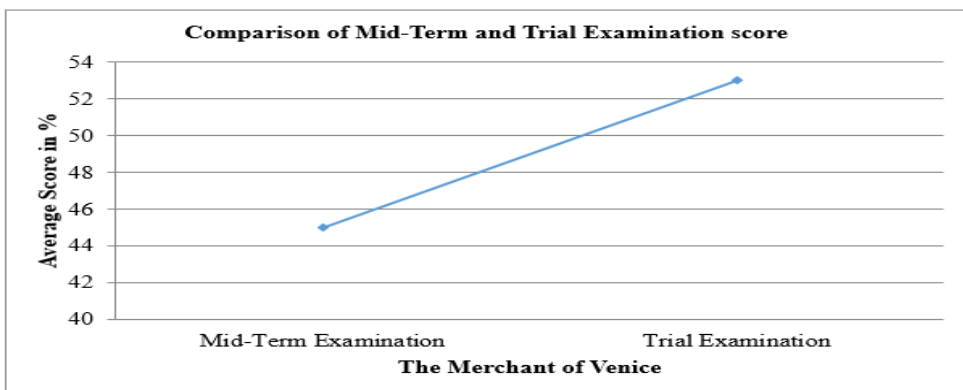
**Figure 6**

*Comparison of Mid Term and Trial Examinations Score*



Comparison of Mid-Term and Trial Examination score

Figure 6 shows the comparison between the average mean score of the baseline data and the final data regarding the average score in *The Merchant of Venice*. The graph shows an increased trend. The average score has increased from 45 to 53 after the intervention process indicating the effectiveness of the same.

## Conclusion

The author concludes that this study was carried out successfully and implemented on time most importantly, numerous strategies which were fundamental in enhancing students' performance were explored and adapted accordingly.

The following conclusions could be drawn from this action research.

1. There is a strong relationship between what students need and what teachers apply. Thus, understanding students' preferred learning styles is imperative for teachers to improve students' score.
2. It is vital for teachers to use varied strategies of teaching, depending upon individual student's needs, to enhance students' performance during their examinations.
3. Teachers must move from lecture to performance-based teaching so that the play is not perceived as an intimidating subject.
4. During the course of study, both teachers and students must actively engage to make the learning of play an exciting process.
5. Teachers must use ICT in enhancing better learning.
6. The behaviour of teachers in the classroom is decisive in enhancing students' ability to think critically, develop confidence and speaking skills, contribute towards collaborative learning and develop self-esteem (Dukpa, 2010) thereby performing better during their examinations.

## Limitations

There are some notable limitations to this study such as restricted sample size. The result would have been much authentic if the participants were selected from different schools.

The author could not take on a critical friend to authenticate the data due to time constraint. Therefore inadequate time span considered for the research can also be questioned. Since the research suggests that a lot more could be explored, the researcher intends to do further research with more participants from different schools to ascertain the preferred strategies of students to perform better during their examinations.

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