READING AND WRITING ABOUT UNSEEN LITERARY TEXTS AT A POST-16 SCHOOL IN MALTA: PRACTICES, PERCEPTIONS, FEEDBACK, AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Reading and Writing about Unseen Literary Texts at a Post-16 School in Malta: Practices, Perceptions, Feedback, and Challenges

This study explores the practices of preparing students for reading and writing about unseen literary texts at a post-16 school in Malta. The types of feedback students receive on their essays about unseen literary texts are also examined. This study discusses whether students apply their teachers’ feedback to future writing. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and classroom observation. The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, and data were analyzed according to a grounded theory methodology. The reported findings are presented according to four elements of grounded theory: Processes, Actions, Perceptions, and Challenges. The study’s main contribution is to present interconnected research on three categories: reading, writing, and feedback. Primarily, how reading and writing about unseen texts take place, how they are perceived, and the challenges students face. This leads to a consideration of teacher feedback on writing, how it is provided and perceived, feedback application and challenges in the latter. Students’ and teachers’ perceptions in shaping practices emerged as a recurring issue in all three categories. The perceptions also highlight a number of challenges pertaining to writing essays and using teacher feedback. The study concludes that the differing perceptions held by teachers might be influencing the students’ attitudes towards unseen literary texts, leading to a fear of literary criticism and writing. Hence, holding more dialogues between teachers and students on the nature of reading and writing about unseen texts is suggested. Another conclusion heightens the need for more work on feedback provision and application. Timing and the language of feedback emerged as pressing issues over which there was doubt and uncertainty. These conclusions prompt further research and training on the multifaceted nature of reading and writing about unseen texts, and feedback application.

Stephanie Xerri Agius
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# Table of Contents

**Abstract**  
2  

**Acknowledgements**  
3  

**Table of Contents**  
4  

**List of Tables and Figures**  
7  

**Abbreviations and Definitions**  
8  

**Chapter 1 – Introduction**  
9  
1.1 Introduction  
9  
1.2 Reading and Writing about Unseen Literary Texts, and Feedback Practices  
10  
1.3 The Unseen Literary Text  
12  
1.4 The Post-16 School Context and the Matriculation Certificate  
(Advanced Level English)  
14  
1.5 The MC Advanced Level English Syllabus and Examination Papers  
15  
1.6 The Language Issue at this Study’s Post-16 School: English as a subject or a discipline?  
16  
1.7 Conclusion  
22  

**Chapter 2 – Literature Review Part 1: Writing about Literature**  
23  
2.1 Introduction: A Note on the Literature Review  
23  
2.2 Preparing for Reading: Practical and Literary Criticism  
24  
2.3 Reading Approaches: Reader-response and Stylistic Analysis  
29  
2.4 Preparing for Writing  
36  
2.5 Writing Essays about Literary Texts: Methods and Approaches  
38  
2.5.1 Some Traditional Approaches and Perspectives to Writing  
41  
2.5.2 Alternative Approaches to Writing  
43  
2.6 Planning the Essay: Guidelines and Writing Stages  
46  
2.7 Learning How to Write Essays about Literary Texts  
51  
2.8 Writing Challenges  
53  
2.9 Conclusion  
56  

**Chapter 3 – Literature Review Part 2: Feedback Practices, Approaches, and Perceptions**  
55  
3.1 Introduction  
57  
3.2 Responding to Students’ Writing  
57  
3.3 Definitions of Feedback  
58  
3.4 Types of Feedback  
62  
3.5 Preparing for Feedback: Modes and Gradations  
66  
3.6 Focus of Feedback  
72  
3.7 Usability of Feedback  
74  
3.8 Feedback Dialogues, Preferences, and Perceptions  
76  
3.9 The Teacher’s Role in Students’ Perception of Feedback  
78  
3.10 Challenges of Applying Teacher Feedback to Future Work  
80  
3.11 Conclusion  
81
Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction: Investigating Students’ Writing and Teachers’ Feedback Practices at a Post-16 School in Malta
4.2 Qualitative Research and an Interpretivist Paradigm
4.3 Case Study: The Post-16 School and an Insider Perspective
4.4 Grounded Theory Method: Adaptation and Application
4.5 Applying a Grounded Theory Method: From Coding to Theoretical Sensitivity
4.6 An Explication of the GTM chosen for the Study
4.7 Formulating the Research Questions and the Objectives
4.8 Semi-Structured Interviews
  4.8.1 Constructing the Interview Questions
  4.8.2 Piloting the Interview Questions
  4.8.3 Conducting the Interviews: Procedures and Co-Construction
4.9 Classroom Observation
  4.9.1 Piloting Classroom Observations
  4.9.2 Tackling Bias and the Observer’s Paradox
  4.9.3 Observation Procedures and Analysis
4.10 Document Analysis: The MC Advanced Level English Syllabus and the Examiners’ Report
4.11 Considering and Overcoming Methodological Challenges
4.12 Ethics: Procedures and Measures
4.13 Conclusion

Chapter 5 – Findings

5.1 Introduction
5.2 Reading Unseen Texts
  5.2.1 Processes and Actions
  5.2.2 Perceptions of Reading Unseen Texts
  5.2.3 Challenges of Reading Unseen Texts
5.3 Writing about Unseen Texts
  5.3.1 Processes and Actions
  5.3.2 Perceptions of Writing about Unseen Texts
  5.3.3 Challenges of Writing about Unseen Texts
5.4 Feedback on Writing about Unseen Texts
  5.4.1 Processes and Actions
  5.4.2 Perceptions of Feedback
  5.4.3 Feedback Application and Transferability
5.5 Conclusion

Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1 Introduction
6.2 Literary Criticism as a Research Area and its Links with Feedback
6.3 Unpacking the Research Questions
  6.3.1 Research Question 1 – How are Students Prepared for Reading and Writing about Unseen Literary Texts at a Post-16 School in Malta?
  6.3.2 Research Question 2 – How are Students Provided with Feedback on Written Essays (about Unseen Literary Texts)? (When and What Type of Feedback?)
  6.3.3 Research Question 3 – How do Students Perceive Their Teachers’ Methods of Reading and Writing Preparation and How do They Make Use of such Methods (or Attempt to)?
6.3.4 Research Question 4 – How do Students Perceive Their Teacher’s Feedback Methods and How do They Apply the Feedback (or Attempt to)? .......................... 199
6.3.5 Research Question 5 – What are the Reading and Writing Challenges that Prevent Students from Applying Their Teachers’ Feedback? .......................... 202

6.4 Emergent Areas and Connections between Theory, Practice, and Applicability 207
  6.4.1 Link between Teachers’ Perceptions and Students’ Perceptions ............ 208
  6.4.2 Link between Perceptions, Writing Outcomes, and Feedback .............. 213
  6.4.3 Link between Writing Challenges and Students’ Use of Teacher Feedback .... 215
  6.4.4 Differences between Oral and Written Feedback ................................... 218

6.5 Researching Writing about Unseen Texts and Teacher Feedback through a Grounded Theory Methodology 221
6.6 Conclusion 223

Chapter 7 – Conclusion 225
  7.1 Introduction 225
  7.2 The Study’s Conclusions 227
  7.3 Implications for Further Research 229
  7.4 Implications for Training 232
  7.5 A Note on Methodology 234
    7.5.1 Researching Reading and Writing, and Teacher Feedback via a Grounded Theory Method – Insights Gained ................................................................. 234
  7.6 Limitations of the Study 234
  7.7 The Study’s Contribution to Knowledge 236
  7.8 Proposed Grounded Theory Conclusions 237
# List of Tables and Figures

## Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Principles of Good Feedback</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Gradations of Peer Feedback</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Six Categories of Feedback</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Stages in Qualitative Research</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Elements of Insider Research</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>A Comparison of the Original and Revised Research Questions</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Interviews with Teachers – Sections and Question Areas</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Interviews with Students – Sections and Question Areas</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Document Analysis Stages</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Ensuring Ethical Practice during Research</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Teachers’ Educational Background and Teaching Experience</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Information on Students</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Categories of Codes (according to Grounded Theory Elements)</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Feedback</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Comparison between Syllabus Criteria and Teachers’ Practices</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Identification of Areas and Action Points</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Areas, Challenges, and Suggestions</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Connecting Research and Training</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Stages of Research</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Coding Order</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Recursive Analytic Operations</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The Link between Perceptions and Feedback Application</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations and Definitions

MATSEC – Matriculation Secondary Education Certification
MC – Matriculation Certificate
SEC - Secondary Education Certificate Certificate/Certification (also referred to as O/Level)
GTM – grounded theory method
VLE – virtual learning environment
EFL – English as a Foreign Language
PGCE – Post-graduate Certificate in Education
I – Interviewer
T – Teacher (interviewed)
S – Student (interviewed)

Unseen literary text – a poem or prose passage that is not a syllabus set text, and that has not been read or studied prior to the examination

Literary Criticism – the component in the MC Advanced Level English syllabus that concerns the unseen literary text (preparation for writing about an unseen poem and prose passage); the writing tasks on unseen poems and prose passages are referred to as ‘practical criticism exercise’ in the syllabus

‘Appreciation’ – This term can be found in the MC Advanced Level English syllabus (in the Practical Criticism component) in connection to reading unseen poems and prose passages; further explication and understanding of this term is attempted in this study.

Perceptions – In this study, the term Perceptions refers to the impressions and beliefs that teachers and students have and might bring with them to the classroom setting, to writing about unseen texts (the students mostly), and to feedback practices.

Challenges – These can be defined as difficulties or obstacles that impede students from reading unseen texts, writing about them, and applying their teachers’ feedback.

Lessons – The observed lessons were either in the form of seminars (1 hour; between 15-20 students) or tutorials (1 hour; between 5-8 students, not more than 10).
Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study explores the methods and approaches of preparing 16-to-18-year-old students to write about an unseen literary text, an area also known as literary criticism. Teacher feedback on this type of writing is also considered. A research strand that has emerged from the interplay between reading, writing, and feedback involves the students’ perceptions. The latter are about their teachers’ methods of preparation and feedback suggestions. The exploration on feedback includes whether students utilise or apply it to future writing. The strands of reading and writing about unseen texts, feedback on writing, perceptions, are at the centre of this study.

Early on in my teaching career at post-16 schools, I became aware of the challenges students faced when armed with the task of interpreting unseen literary texts and writing critical commentaries about them. This led me to reflect on whether teacher feedback on such commentaries was being applied by students at all to their next writing task(s). Another factor that prompted me to investigate the unseen literary text was that this area seemed to present conflicting ideas within the Department of English at the school where the research was conducted. This emerged during some departmental meetings I attended. While teachers seemed to share similar views on how to structure essays and prepare students for writing about the set texts of the MC Advanced Level English syllabus, it was not as straightforward in the case of the unseen text component. At times, teachers voiced differing views as to how students ‘should’ be guided in essay writing (e.g. what they are meant to include in their interpretation of an unseen text). However, essay writing or structuring of essays, was not discussed at all. Moreover, the teachers (and also students) seemed to feel frustrated because progress in students’ writing in this area was not forthcoming. This pushed me to focus on this component of the MC Advanced Level English syllabus (even though the need to research this area was also confirmed by the methodological approach that I used, as shall be explained later on).

To this end, I aimed at locating the views held by teachers and comparing them with students’ perceptions. In so doing, this study also attempted to make connections between preparing students for writing about unseen texts and teacher feedback on students’ essays (on such such texts). By bridging feedback practices with the specific
area of writing about unseen texts, the aim was to gather whether such feedback was being carried forward in students’ future writing.

Despite my familiarity with the post-16 educational context in Malta, impartiality and objectivity were sought. Hence, a grounded theory method (GTM) was considered a conducive match for the research conducted. The research methods and paradigm led to connections between the writing about unseen literary texts and teacher feedback on essays about unseen texts. It has to be noted that the areas of writing about unseen texts, teacher feedback, and students’/teachers’ perceptions emerged more clearly through the grounded theory methodology that was adopted, and as a result of the coding and analysis processes.

In the following sections, information about the study’s school and context of this study is presented. The examination system and the Matriculation Certificate are also explained. This includes an overview of the examination papers’ layout. Furthermore, the MC Advanced Level English objectives are outlined in relation to the component of the unseen literary text. The study’s literature review is divided into two parts. The first one evaluates the processes involved in preparing for reading and writing. The second part of the review focuses on different aspects of feedback on writing, such as definitions and types of feedback. The research methods and tools used are located in Chapter 4, including an explication of the grounded theory method. The selection of students and teachers, and the data collection procedures, are also explained. The findings and the discussion follow in two consecutive chapters. The conclusion underlines the main findings, and includes recommendations for further training and research opportunities. Eventually, the knowledge gained through this research can also be shared with other professionals and schools with similar contexts.

1.2 Reading and Writing about Unseen Literary Texts, and Feedback Practices

My study investigated the reading, writing and feedback practices at a post-16 school, specifically in relation to unseen literary texts. It also explored how and whether the feedback was being applied, and reasons for which it was not being transferred to new writing. Students’ reactions to their teachers’ practices were considered in light of the argument that ‘there is still a relative dearth of published material’, particularly in the area where students ‘make sense of their tutors’ comments on written assignments’ (Walker,
Some studies indicate that students do not always know what the comments and suggestions mean or how they can be used for future writing (Chanock, 2000; Weaver, 2006). Walker (2009) recommends that more research is conducted on the type of comments that students might consider ‘usable’ (p.68). My study attempted to investigate the students’ application of feedback suggestions and their perceptions of feedback in relation to unseen literary texts. The following research questions were posed to obtain data on aspects of reading and writing preparation, and feedback application:

1. How are students prepared for reading and writing about unseen literary texts at a post-16 school in Malta?
2. How are students provided with feedback on written essays (about unseen literary texts)? (When and what type of feedback?)
3. How do students perceive their teachers’ reading and writing preparation methods, and how do they make use of such methods (or attempt to)? How are the following perceived by students: literary criticism, ‘appreciation’, and the examination?
4. How do students perceive their teachers’ feedback methods and how do they apply the feedback (or attempt to)?
5. What are the reading and writing challenges that prevent students from applying their teachers’ feedback?

The first two questions were aimed at discovering information teachers’ methods, approaches, and strategies to prepare students for writing critical commentaries on unseen literary texts; this included exploring teacher feedback such writing. The post-16 educational Maltese context is discussed further on. In questions 3 and 4, I shifted the focus onto the students and their response to their teachers’ methods, approaches, and strategies. These questions were meant to offer students a voice on perspectives, perceptions and preferences. The last question was aimed at investigating the difficulties students faced when writing about unseen texts and the obstacles to feedback application. The process of formulating the research questions and other objectives tied to them are discussed in Chapter 4. In the latter chapter, I also explain the qualitative research I chose to conduct to seek answers to the research questions, namely through semi-structured interviews and observations. Data analysis of the interviews and observations, as well as document analysis, was conducted through a grounded theory method and is presented through an interpretivist paradigm. The next section explains the component of the unseen literary text and reasons for having chosen this area.
1.3 The Unseen Literary Text

Dymoke (2012) defines the term ‘unseen’ as ‘a piece of text that has not previously been read or prepared’ (p.402). The idea of including the unseen text as a component in the MC Advanced Level English is so that students would be ‘in a position to apply his or her prior knowledge of poetry, to engage in conversation with it and arrive at an appreciation or understanding of it’ (Dymoke, 2012, p.402). Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) define the ‘unseen’ text in terms of writing under examination conditions:

The term ‘unseen poetry’ is commonly used in these examination contexts, referring to poems which pupils encounter…and are required to analyze, without having studied the text previously. Typically, required analysis would focus on content and ways in which meaning is conveyed, rather than on contextual detail. (p.148)

It does not only mean that the text type is ‘unknown’, but that the poem or prose passage would be ‘new’ to the student. The term ‘unseen text’ is also located in the OCR: ‘A Level specifications must also include a text which has not previously been named for study (an “unseen” text)’ (2014, p.3). It is ‘an unprepared passage containing thematic links to a set text previously studied’ (OCR, 2014, p.3). This is different to the MC Advanced Level English because there are no links thematically or otherwise to the set texts being studied. There is no preparation on specific topics to which texts may be linked, but this issue was raised by some respondents (students) in the study, who suggested that it would be more helpful if the texts chosen could be connected to specific themes or topics (e.g. childhood, education, conflicts, relationships). The context within which students are guided towards the unseen text is presented and discussed in Chapter 2.

The revised UK A Level Literature in 2000 attempted to balance the difficulty of interpretation and shortcomings of literary criticism by including reference to the texts’ contexts (‘historical and cultural backgrounds’ (Atherton, 2005, p.3). On the one hand, this meant making it more feasible to ‘regulate assessment of knowledge; on the other hand, however, a more factual approach to literary criticism would reduce the emphasis on ‘personal growth’ (Atherton, 2005, p.3). Providing contextual information on the texts is discussed positively by the teachers and students of my study. However, there may be reservations about interpreting the text from this angle because it might be restricting. On the contrary, there are those who favour close reading and the tradition of ‘literary criticism’ rather than pandering to the inclusion of context (Barlow, 2007). It is argued
that if teachers prefer the latter, it is because they would not have been trained in the tradition of ‘literary criticism’ and thus resist it. However, the respondents of my study felt that including context did not mean going against literary criticism traditions but would serve as a way in, for students to ground their understanding of a text. Yet, Barlow (2007) questions whether teachers are being trained to teach in the literary criticism tradition.

Despite the differences between the UK Advanced Level English and the MC Advanced Level English (Malta), the above definitions of the unseen text are similar to both contexts, because the MC Advanced Level English has been partly modelled on the UK’s Advanced Level English examination. In the MC Advanced Level English at this study’s post-16 school, the unseen texts are categorised under the area known as Literary Criticism, which involves honing students’ critical skills to interpret a poem or prose passage that is not set for study purposes. During the MC Advanced Level English examination, students would have to write about two texts that they would not have studied or prepared for (a poem and a prose passage). At the study’s post-16 school, teachers would prepare students by providing them with knowledge of literary terms, genres, and concepts of essay structure. This would take place during literary criticism lessons (also known as seminars).

Before every academic year commences, a department meeting is held to agree on the materials that are to be used by all teachers. There is usually a set text that is common to the teachers in the English department. However, every teacher has additional resources to use in class. These resources are usually in the form of a pack, which comprises a range of poems and prose passages. Both the textbook chosen by the department, as well as the individual resources, are used during one-hour literary criticism seminars held once a week. A more individually-oriented class is a one-hour tutorial, which is also held once a week. Whereas the seminar is for 15-20 students, the tutorial usually caters for seven to nine students. In relation to the literary criticism area, the tutorial tasks based on an unseen text are either guided, semi-guided, or unguided (the number of tasks is approximately six to eight tasks each year, three to four on poetry, and three to four on prose).

In relation to the above definition of the ‘unseen’ text, one reason why this area was chosen, rather than the set texts, is because students’ performance on the latter texts often depended on studying the content. Conversely, students would not have studied the texts that eventually feature specifically in the examination, although they would have
been trained to read and write about similar texts. In this case, students’ performance will
depend on other criteria, such as the skill of critical analysis. In relation to critical
analysis, the concept of ‘appreciation’, which is located in the MC Advanced Level
English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) is also discussed. Another reason for choosing the
unseen text area was its relation to feedback. The need for more research on how students
receive and react to feedback is advocated by Mutch (2003) and connected to Rust’s
(2007) paradigm shift. The latter indicates moving away from prescriptive practices and
embracing others that place students at the centre of education.

1.4 The Post-16 School Context and the Matriculation Certificate
(Advanced Level English)

The study’s school was established in 1995. The aim since then has been that of preparing
16-to18-year-old students for the Matriculation Certificate (MC). The latter is the
students’ passport to tertiary education and a variety of degree courses the latter offers.
The MC course is two years’ long, during which time students attend lectures, seminars,
and tutorials on the subjects of their choice. The subjects are chosen in accordance with
the University of Malta’s General Entry Requirements for specific courses. In all the post-
16 schools in Malta, students are to choose two subjects at Advanced Level, three at
Intermediate Level, and Systems of Knowledge, which is obligatory for all students (this
also at Intermediate Level). A variety of subjects are on offer in the school chosen for the
study, and English is offered both at Advanced and Intermediate Levels. Students who
choose English do so with the aim of following certain undergraduate courses in mind,
such as English (B.A.), Law, Psychology, Communications (for journalism), and
European Studies.

The school’s English Department organizes a number of talks and seminars each
year to encourage students to enrich their reach of literature and language. As this type of
school acts as a transition to tertiary education, students are encouraged to collaborate on
a number of projects related to areas such as drama, sport, debates, student councils, and
student exchanges (part of EU Projects). Visits to the University of Malta campus are also
organized. Similarly, lecturers and professors from different University of Malta faculties
visit the school to better inform students of course descriptions. Apart from academic
study, the school also provides students with extra-curricular activities to develop more
holistically.
The number of students registered at the school approximately ranges between 2000-2800. The latest figures indicate 2,300 students had enrolled for studies during the academic year 2015-2016. In the same year, there were ten classes of first-year year MC Advanced Level English students, and nine classes of second-year students. The approximate population was 600 students in total taking English at Advanced level. Around 250 students sat for their A level examination from this school, while the total number of examination candidates in Malta was around 700 in 2015. Therefore, the students from this school sitting for the MC Advanced Level English examination accounted for 35% of the total cohort of candidates. In comparison with other post-16 institutions, this school represents a larger cohort of students, which is one of the reasons I selected it. It was hoped that it would provide a representative sample and range of students’ abilities, backgrounds, and attitudes towards the English Advanced level.

1.5 The MC Advanced Level English Syllabus and Examination Papers

Apart from outlining the Matriculation course, it is also essential to contextualize the study in relation to the MC Advanced Level English syllabus and how it translates into the examination papers. This places the component of literary criticism within the bigger picture of the MC Advanced Level English syllabus. Students taking English at this level have to read and study the following set texts, on which they then have to write 500-word essays during the examination sessions: Shakespeare (e.g. Othello), a collection of poems (e.g. Wilfred Owen’s War Poems), two novels (e.g. Graham Greene’s The Heart of the Matter, and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale). Another two components of the syllabus (and examination) are poetry and prose unseen texts. They are called ‘unseen’ as they are not set texts, so the students do not know which texts would eventually come out in the examination (as explained earlier on). The last section of the syllabus is related to language. This comprises a language essay, a reading passage for summary purposes, and linguistics. An oral component is also included as part of the language preparation. The ten sections of the syllabus are then structured in the following way, for examination purposes:

Paper 1 (written; 3 hours): Shakespeare, poetry set text, and poetry unseen text
Paper 2 (written; 3 hours): 2 novels (set texts), prose unseen text
Paper 3 (written; 2 hours 45 minutes): language essay, summary, linguistics
Oral Examination (15 minutes; scheduled a month before the written papers)
1.6 The Language Issue at this Study’s Post-16 School: English as a Subject or a Discipline?

Maltese and English are recognised as official languages. The two languages are used in a wide variety of domains, including family, mass media, and work (Sciriha and Vassallo, 2006). Moreover, English is obligatory in schools and is taught as a second language from Kindergarten up to Form V (equivalent to UK’s Grade 11). Students finish compulsory education at the age of 16 and sit for examinations called SEC (Secondary Education Certificate). This certificate would enable them to pursue studies at post-16 level, such as at this study’s school.

The school chosen for research offers a representative sample as the students come from different types of backgrounds. What this means is that some of them come from Maltese-speaking families while others are brought up speaking English as a first language. The expectation might be that after twelve years of schooling, students would have reached a quasi-native level of proficiency. For this reason, it may be thought that students should be well-equipped to write critical commentaries on unseen literary texts after they would have been learning and writing English for twelve years. However, students only start tackling unseen literary texts at around 13-14 years of age.

This prompts an explanation of the language issue from the outset, to situate the position of English within the Maltese school context. In relation to the spoken level of the participants, most of the students who were interviewed felt they were fluent enough to answer the questions in English. Only two out of the fifteen students switched to Maltese occasionally. This is reflective of the commonplace trend of code switching that is germane to the Maltese setting, but that also indicates people’s familiarity with two languages at a quasi-native level (Camilleri, 1996). Opting for Maltese at some points in the interview, these two students felt more confident to clarify their opinions. However, they were equally fluent in their spoken level of English, so speaking in Maltese was merely a question of habit and comfort. Given that spoken English was not central to the study’s areas of writing and feedback as the writing ability were, I did not develop this thread further, particularly in view of the fact that this occurrence (of code switching) was noted only in the case of two students.

In contrast to the students, all the teachers answered and discussed questions in English. Their background was also varied, as they either held a degree in Arts or Education. All of them possessed a Master’s degree. Of the six participant teachers
interviewed, three of them were pursuing further studies at doctoral level at the time of the study. The participating teachers who received teacher training, however, had not been trained to teach post-16 specifically. The teacher education course that they had followed at the University of Malta did not focus on post-16 level of education, but on primary and secondary school levels only. Training on teaching unseen literary texts and feedback provision was not included either. This led to an examination into the approaches and perceptions teachers take with them to class, and how such methods were perceived and utilized by students. Perceptions of students’ writing ability in the area of the unseen text are presented and discussed respectively in Chapters 5 and 6.

It could be useful to discuss and clarify how English at this post-16 school and similar contexts is positioned and perceived. Atherton (2005) presents the argument that the UK reform of A Level English Literature had led to debates ‘about the defining qualities of literature’ (p.2), while shedding light on the nature of English: Is it considered a subject or a discipline? Barry (2003) refers to English as a ‘discipline’, alerting that English within the area of English Studies is ‘often felt to be unsatisfactory and misleading’ (p.7), because on English degrees it is not only the literature of England but also works written in English that are studied, very often consisting of a sample of texts from different countries. Moreover, he explains that English as a discipline is distinct from other ‘textual disciplines’ because of the ‘high-intensity reading’ that it involves, with the result that ‘it produces its own characteristic mental atmosphere’ generated by words and lines that one follows when reading (Barry, 2003, p.9).

Goodwyn (2005) underlines a tension between English and Literacy, as English teachers in the UK seem reluctant to identify themselves as teachers of literacy. Following years of research, Goodwyn (2005) states that English teachers of different generations ‘still strongly identify with personal growth’ as a model, and that they feel that the term Literacy has ‘usurped’ terms like English and Literature (p.198). By personal growth he means the ‘professional identity’ of teachers, whereas English for them goes beyond ‘any ‘basic’ model of literacy’ (p.198). In Malta, the situation is very similar, as teachers of English and Literature do not believe they are teaching literacy but view them both as subjects. Neither do they view them as disciplines, as discussed. Goodwyn (2005) explains that ‘these highly experienced teachers feel that ‘Literacy’ poses a threat to subject English as they know it because it does not appear to acknowledge the value of literature’ (p.198). The teachers Goodwyn (2005) surveyed partly felt threatened when movements towards Literacy proposed looking at ‘bits’ of text, as opposed to ‘whole’
texts that might draw a ‘whole’ reaction from readers (p.199). The seeming contradiction here is that in practical criticism (in the Maltese context), students are trained to extract such ‘bits’, but with the aim of understanding the text in depth. Apart from the similarity pointed out earlier, it is not fully possible to draw comparisons between the different contexts (UK secondary and Malta post-16 contexts) other than an attempted interpretation. However, the concern that Goodwyn (2005) alerts one to can be partly pertinent to this study: ‘this threat is perceived to be because of the spread of capital ‘L’ Literacy, as enshrined in the primary Literacy Hour. It is important to distinguish absolutely between literacy as conceptualized as an educational entitlement and social good and Literacy seen as a reductive practice and one essentially damaging to the ‘proper’ reader-text relationship’ (p.199). Goodwyn (2005) concludes that for most teachers, ‘literacy is fine, but it is the beginning not the end’ (p.199) and he understands that they respond to themselves as teachers of English.

My study’s aim was not to go into issues of terminology (that is, distinguishing between English and Literacy, or between English and Literature) or how teachers perceived themselves as teachers of English. In fact, Cadden (1986) warns of ‘a danger inherent in the terminology we use’, such as naming courses Practical Criticism. He suggests ‘appreciation’ instead because of the incidence that students might take ‘the term “criticism” too literally and adopt the role of the reviewer’ (p.7). However, in the post-16 school context of this study, this did not feature as a challenge or issue. Instead, it was the term appreciation that proved problematic as it yielded contrasting perceptions. Nonetheless, it was considered useful to provide some context for the above terminology, particularly by referring to issues outside Malta during periods or times when educational reforms or changes affected English and Literature in general, and how they were, or still are, perceived.

Atherton, Green, and Snapper (2013) suggest that English literature ‘is often perceived as the liberal subject par excellence, strongly associated with the realization of the individual through enjoyment, self-expression and self-discovery’ (p.1). Moreover, as a subject, it ‘has always had a special connection with the ideals of Romanticism…nevertheless, the image is idealized and selective’, however, ‘the reality is more complex, more problematic, more varied…’ (Atherton, Green, and Snapper, 2013, pp.1-2). English has taken shape in different ways at different levels, ranging from the promotion of ‘critical literacy’ in secondary schools, to theoretical studies at university. However, this has also led to ‘a lack of consensus’ on what its role is in any
educational framework, such that English and its practices have been criticised. Regarding the debate of English as a subject or discipline, the perception of it being a subject was reinforced even at post-16 level when UK schools started implementing the AS system which saw students taking up between 4-5 subjects in their first year at post-16 level (Barlow, 2007, p.46). The idea of breadth of study was also embraced in Malta when the sixth form system did away with 3 subjects at Advanced Level (in 1997) and required that students take up 2 subjects at Advanced Level and 4 at Intermediate Level (the subjects that have to be chosen include 1 science or mathematics, 1 humanities or business, 1 language, and any two other subjects).

At English Advanced Level, the emphasis on studied (set) literary texts often leads to less time and ‘still less opportunity for students and their teachers to engage meaningfully in literary criticism’ except as part of the syllabus. At the same time, however, students in Malta are not as as burdened as those in the UK (Barlow, 2007, p.47). The latter are assessed on ‘a minimum of eight texts’ (Barlow, 2007, p.47). In total, students in Malta have to study 4 texts (2 novels, a Shakespearean play, and a collection of poems). Yet, the students and teachers in my study did lament the need for more time in relation to honing skills in literary criticism. The tutorial system sees them rush from one essay to another and despite having one hour a week allocated to a practical criticism seminar, there is little time left to do any writing in class.

In relation to this study’s seminal area of literary criticism, Barry (2003) distinguishes between literary theory and literary criticism. The latter is the most relevant, even though the area of the MC Advanced English Level component is known as practical criticism. Literary criticism, according to Barry (2003) ‘is about the interpretation and appreciation of individual literary works’ (p.77). Moreover, a distinction is also made between two types of reading: ‘unseen close reading’ and ‘seen close reading’. Apart from the discussion of what is meant by unseen (see 1.3), this term also refers to ‘the textual practice that rules out of play the use of any external data, and limits the critic strictly to “the words on the page” (p.82). This is what students do during practical criticism of unseen texts brought into the classroom by their teacher. The critique of the close reading method is that, while it works ‘at its best for the short lyric poem’, it is more difficult to apply or adopt when reading prose (‘it can never be a sufficient tool for the novel, given the vast scale of the text in comparison with the nature of the critical method’ p.82). Yet, the practical criticism exercise does include prose, but what almost always happens is that the reading is ‘poeticize[d]’, by which it is meant that
‘exaggerated importance’ is given to ‘the novelist’s use of verbal imagery’ (p.82). As will be evident in the interviews and observed in the lessons, the following situation has been confirmed: teachers and students placed substantial emphasis on the novelist’s use of language and its effect, in the same fashion as analyzing poems.

As a component of the MC Advanced Level English syllabus, literary (or practical) criticism is problematic for students. This is partly because of ‘the process of analysis and evaluation that seems to epitomise the subject’s intangibility’ (Atherton, 2005, p.2). It was indeed pointed out by many respondents in my study that the difficulty of interpretation, which revolves around the problem of not being able to pin down what the text is about and agree on it, is a central challenge within literary criticism. This is partly because students are being led to a process of ‘making texts mean whatever one wants them to mean, seeing in them things that are not actually ‘there’ so the emphasis is ‘not knowledge, but interpretation’ (Atherton, 2005, p.2). Another distinction is made between evaluation and interpretation, despite the fact that people practice both ‘in combination’ (Barry, 2003, p.19). It is suggested that ‘writing about literature is not exclusively concerned with making judgments about literary quality, but attempting to make such judgments is a significant part of it’ (Barry, 2003, p.19). Students were also concerned about this aspect of criticism, particularly when their tutors advised them against under- or over-interpretation, which is something that the interviewed teachers also confirmed. Such a preoccupation with interpretation echoes Atherton’s (2005) argument, that ‘the discipline of English lacks an objective body of knowledge, a core of material that can be taught and tested’ (p.2).

English at Advanced Level in Malta, such as at this post-16 school, is considered a subject rather than a discipline. In the UK, however, English as an academic subject in universities has not been respected as much as other subjects, primarily because of ‘its perceived lack of academic weight and the belief that it was bound up with judgements rather than knowledge, making it difficult to assess’ (Atherton, 2005, p.3). Despite these misperceptions, English as an Advanced Level subject in Malta undergoes examination procedures as other subjects, even though it seems to be more of a discipline because it takes years and practice beyond the classroom. As far as literary criticism (for examination purposes) is concerned, interpretation is a skill that teachers are expected to teach and that students are expected to learn, so they would be formally tested on it during written examinations. This also implies refuting the idea of literary criticism as the expression of personal opinion, even though students felt that having an opinion is
important for them. The reason for refuting the reduction of criticism to expressing opinion is that pandering to the latter would ‘deny the discipline’s claim to expert knowledge’ (Atherton, 2005, p.3). The argument or question is whether English can be considered a discipline, given that other ‘disciplines of knowledge’ have been imbued with professional structures; for instance, Atherton (2005) mentions the case of natural sciences which, as a discipline, has ‘readily adopted norms of specialisation, precision and the avoidance of bias’ (p. 4). The same cannot yet be said of literary criticism within English studies, so where does that leave this area?

It seems that literary criticism is considered neither an academic subject nor a discipline. Atherton (2005) presents the detractors’ reason for this ‘strenuous resistance’: literary criticism could not be ‘an academic discipline’ because it ‘lacked rigour and was too subjective’ (p.5). Literature could not compare well to the objectivity of science. It has to be admitted that certain structures need to be in place so that when assessed in examination situations, the level of subjectivity is minimised. Marking criteria and outcomes would be written in a way that enhances objectivity and academic level. In the classroom, adopting structured approaches to reading, such as reader response theory and practical criticism, could help to overcome this perception that literary criticism lacks academic rigour. What did emerge from the above discussion in light of the study’s findings was that views of the role and position of English as a subject or as a discipline will vary, whether at post-16 or university level. There is not just one view or definition. Sometimes it will also depend on how teachers, students, academics, and assessment bodies perceive and practice English, either as a subject or as a discipline. It was not, however, the remit and scope of this study to research this aspect, or to go into detailed accounts of the institutionalisation of English as a discipline. At this point, it is sufficient to provide a conceptual framework, to attempt a discussion of the differences between ‘discipline’ and ‘subject’, so as to contextualise the practices of reading and writing about unseen texts at this study’s post-16 school. Atherton (2005) surmises that debates about the nature and definition of literary criticism will persist, revolving around the tension on whether it can be professionalised and made more academic without compromising the ‘pleasure to be gained from reading’ (p.7). Her conclusion is that literary criticism will continue to be marked by the ‘tension surrounding the relationship between amateur and professional’ (p.8). All of the above leads inexorably to the issue of ‘whether literary criticism is actually needed’; consequently, its survival in ‘its current institutional form’ could be questioned (Atherton, 2005, p.8). This ties in with a concern voiced by Barlow
(2007), that ‘the gap between English as a subject at school and English as a discipline at university has become such a chasm that there is no longer any useful sense in which A level English can be described as a preparation for degree level English Studies’ (p.45).

The uncertainties, challenges, perceptions, and contrasting views exhibited in the interviewed teachers’ and students’ responses potentially link with this dilemma, not only on the status and role of literary criticism in the MC Advanced English Level Syllabus, but also on the issues of writing and feedback practices that result from it.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the research context, the area of study, and issues that are connected to the research questions. The main concern is to understand the writing and feedback practices at the above post-16 school, as well as the students’ and teachers’ perceptions of these two areas. The focus point or issue of this study is to investigate how feedback on students’ writing (about unseen texts) is provided and whether it is being applied to future writing.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review Part 1: Writing about Literature

2.1 Introduction: A Note on the Literature Review

The journey I undertook for the literature review has been characterized by iterative processes of reading the literature, researching the areas of writing about unseen texts and feedback, and returning to the literature. Such a process was in part determined by the grounded theory method I adopted. This was particularly the case for the literature on feedback, which is discussed in the second part of the review. Hence, dividing the literature review into two sections was considered more practical and structurally manageable to tackle the areas of writing and feedback separately. Moreover, the areas of the two literature reviews are recast in Chapter 6. In this way, the research informed the literature review, rather than the latter dictating the former. Eventually the two areas of writing about unseen texts and teacher feedback on writing merge in Chapters 5 and 6. The stages in figure 2.1 give an idea of the processes from inception to finalisation.

In this chapter, the following two sections explore the concepts of Practical and Literary Criticism, and the reading approaches that are connected to and have been highlighted by this study. In 2.2, a brief overview of Practical Criticism is presented and discussed in light of Literary Criticism, the term used in the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014). An exploration of the premises of Practical Criticism and its position in educational contexts follows. Connections will be made further on with the data analysed (Chapter 6). Section 2.3 compares and contrasts the reader-response approach and stylistics that were both flagged by the study’s data. The aspects pertaining to these approaches are considered here, as well as definitions of different types of reading, namely ‘efferent’ and ‘aesthetic’. In Chapters 5 and 6, a discussion of what approaches were used by the study’s participants will be compared and contrasted to the above.
2.2 Preparing for Reading: Practical and Literary Criticism

In the MC Advanced English Level Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014), the term Practical Criticism is used in the rubric for essay writing (‘In this practical criticism exercise…’). In reality, it seems to be used interchangeably with ‘literary criticism’, which is the heading of the syllabus component. At this point it is useful to clarify by defining the latter: ‘Literary criticism has traditionally been regarded as the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary works. Criticism as an academic activity expresses the reader’s sense of what is happening in a text’ (Peck and Coyle, 2002, p.177). This seems to come close to what occurred in the lessons that were observed at the post-16 school. However, a finer distinction can be drawn between Practical Criticism and criticism. When the
criticism is more academic, which is one of the exercise’s aim, it takes this a step further to involve the analytical and overrides the impressionistic. It also ‘involves spotting the central themes of the work and then seeing how the text presents and develops these themes’ (Peck and Coyle, 2002, p.177). This is markedly different to Practical Criticism, which started as an experiment and then became a method of the close reading of texts, preferably unseen, and ideally in isolation from background or context information, as discussed below. Twentieth-century criticism saw ‘a shift from an emphasis on the author to an emphasis on the text, and then a shift from the text to the reader’ (Peck and Coyle, 2002, p.179). Even though the concept of Practical Criticism and the criticism done in educational contexts share the first premise (moving away from the author), it can be unclear whether the shift to the text or reader is occurring, and whether a reader-response method is embraced as not only as a personal reaction to a text but also one that involves a transaction between the reader and the text (see more on reader-response theory in 2.3).

The term Practical Criticism is synonymous with critic I.A. Richards (1929), who chose poems for his class and discussed them without providing students with any background information on the poets or period in which they were written. More importantly, he presented the poems anonymously, without revealing the poets’ names. He discovered that the best poets were not well-received (such as John Donne and Christina Rosetti), whereas the students had preferred the poems of less repute or lacking in capability (such as magazines poetasters). This led him to conclude that the skill of reading with a sharp understanding of what qualifies as good writing was lacking in his students, who also did not seem to manifest emotive reactions as hoped for. The skill of close analysis, which was also germane to the concept of ‘organised response’, was more important than knowing the background of the writer. Organised response occurs when the emotions unleashed by the reading of the poem would be discussed in view of the students’ own emotions, and whether they correspond.

Richards’ (1929) method highlighted the reading of the poems as not being dependent on the author’s life story or other known facts, but the focus would be primarily on the poem’s language. Following Richards’ (1929) work, a student of his (Empson, 1930) further studied this approach of reading. In his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947), Empson places an emphasis on ‘ambiguity’ as a distinctive marker of poetic language and argues the separation of texts from their context in the reading process. In relation to Empson’s (1947) concept of ambiguity, Practical Criticism was defined as a method that ‘encouraged attentive close reading of texts and, in its intellectual and
historical abstraction, a kind of democratization of literary study in the classroom, in which nearly everyone was placed on an equal footing in the face of a “blind” text’ (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 1997, p.16). Empson (1947) was also associated with New Criticism (although he was against such characterisation and labelling), a movement that appraised texts as repositories of elaborate thoughts but detached from context and historical confines.

Similar to Richards (1929) and Practical Criticism, the New Critics would not give importance to the historical backgrounds but rather approach the texts as self-contained. With ‘practical criticism’ as a base, New Criticism started to be adopted ‘as a way of coping with masses of individuals who had no ‘history’ in common’. Similar to the method of practical criticism, ‘its ahistorical, “neutral” nature – the study only of “the words on the page” – was an apparently equalizing, democratic activity appropriate to the new American experience’ (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 1997, pp.17-18). This democratic aspect meant that in the United States and the United Kingdom, Practical Criticism was to become ‘the central compulsory critical and pedagogic tool of the higher-education (and then secondary) English syllabus’ (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 1997, p.16); one problem, however, was that it ‘rapidly and damagingly became untheorized, and thus naturalized, as the fundamental critical practice’ (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 1997, p.16). Hence, the aspect of reading a text without knowledge of the author or context was still upheld, while Practical Criticism in the classroom was starting to become less theoretical, used as a tool rather than perceived as a movement.

Indeed, one form of Practical Criticism adopted in the contemporary classroom similarly sees the detachment of the text from any socio-historical processes that might have formed or informed it. The reading of a text would focus on its meaning and form rather than on broader issues, although there might be a subsequent discussion, for instance, on how a poem or prose passage throws light on the human condition. Hence, the movement of Practical Criticism is perceived less as a critical method and more as the ability to respond to a text without too much emotion or reliance on knowledge of history or context. As a teaching device, Practical Criticism concerns itself with a careful close reading of texts conducted by a teacher guiding a small group of students (Bredin, 1986, p.27). Most often under examination conditions, this exercise is meant to prove the candidates’ awareness of versification, knowledge of technical language used by poets (in poems) and writers (in prose passages), and an ability to open up the text in an attempt
to discover its qualities. In this scenario, personal emotions are advisably held in check (as some respondents in my study also expressed).

This view is not only held by this study’s participants, but is also a concern that is argued and debated by faculties of English in the UK (for example, the University of Cambridge). The latter faculty questions whether one’s reading of a text might be conditioned or different if students are aware of the context or conditions within which it was written, or whether reading the text in isolation is advisable. Analysing Richards’ (1929) position, Bredin (1986) seems to argue that, similar to spoken language, ‘any written text requires a context if it to be fully understood’, particularly in view of the fact that ‘the extra complexity of poetry makes it especially susceptible to misinterpretation and misjudgement if taken in isolation’ (p.27). He also contends and envisages that many teachers would provide their students with context, in the form of ‘a period, a chronology, a social, political, religious, and intellectual background’ (p.27). This is partly due to a recognition that reading a text, especially poetry, requires a complex transaction between the text and the reader’s ‘state of mind: a private, and transient, equilibrium of impulses in the nervous system’ (Bredin, 1986, p.31). Providing some context might help address the balance (this view was also expressed by some participants in my study). However, this means moving away from the original remit of Practical Criticism, including some affordances of providing contextual information. Consequently, one has to consider whether this might or might not impinge on the transaction between the reader and the text.

Another issue is raised in what reads as an imaginary but fascinating dialogue between the work of Richards (1929) and Bredin (1986), where the latter recognises the intention of the former, to meet ‘an isolated text’ with ‘an isolated mind’ (p. 31). It can be argued that Bredin (1986) reads Richards’ (1929) method not as a negation of the ‘public and communal character of literature’ (p.31) but as way of ascertaining it. Moreover, the aim would be ‘not to acquire a heritage of literary wisdom, but to get rid of a heritage of preconceptions and stock responses; not to acquire membership of a literary community, but to commune with poetry in the silence of the soul’ (Bredin, 1986, p.31). It also seems that Bredin (1986) is converted to Richards’ (1929) philosophy, despite initially questioning such beliefs. Bredin’s (1986) words seem to neatly tie up the point of practical criticism, but the ‘silence of the soul’ (p.31) seem to imply that poetry is something ineffable (this chimes with students’ perception of poetry in particular and practical criticism in general as difficult). This prompts a consideration of the position of
practical criticism in MC Advanced Level English examinations. Richards (1929) and Bredin (1986) seem to question whether placing practical criticism under examination conditions is advisable because it is an activity to be held *communally* rather than merely *individually*, and it requires a certain amount of thought and cognitive effort beyond the time constraints of an examination. They do not suggest removing it entirely but adopting it as a method to teach reading.

The next issue is the difference between text and poem, given that reference is made to poems as unseen texts. This is because in the MC Advanced Level English syllabus, the component of the unseen text consists of a poem and prose passage. However, it is known that Practical Criticism started with Richards conducting his study with poems only. This leads to an ontological distinction between ‘poem’ and ‘text’. It is argued that the text of a poem is but a stimulus, which in turn initiates a response. Bredin (1986) seems to agree with Richards (1929), as he presents the view that the poem can be ‘experienced in isolation from its context’, whereas the text is a ‘public object’ that might be part of a context (1986, p.33). Considering the etymological perspective, the word ‘poem’ can be defined as *something that arouses strong emotions because of its beauty*, whereas the word ‘text’ can be considered as *a subject or theme for a discussion or exposition*; hence, the debate whether context could be brought in as part of the discussion of the text. The etymological seems to be entwined with the ontological, as the concept of poetry is attributed metaphysical status akin to the nature of being, whereas text is more a more physical and tangible object. In light of ontological and etymological distinctions, the word ‘text’ will refer to poems or prose passages that are meant as a stimulus for analytical reading and critical appreciation conducted at the study’s post-16 school. Yet, it is also contended that the text within a poem seems to cause difficulties in reading and interpretation (as shall be seen via a presentation and discussion of the study’s results in Chapter 5 and 6 respectively).

Returning to the concept of literary criticism conducted in classes such as in the UK University faculty above and at the post-16 school of my study, one aim is to guide students from a more formal analytical reading to a more comprehensive and stronger critical reading. However, the issue of what ‘critical’ means is still open to debate. Does it mean to explain, interpret, and evaluate? If so, where does the students’ own sensibilities feature? In an attempt to explore the qualities of the term practical criticism, I asked the teachers and students in my study to consider what it means to them. This also included a reflection on the meanings behind the term ‘appreciation’. Both the latter and
‘practical criticism’ are found in the MC English Advanced Level Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) under the Literary Criticism component. What emerged were different views and perceptions of both. In the midst of the data analysis, another conclusion emerged in relation to notions of reader-response, as mentioned earlier. The next section presents a more in-depth discussion of this approach.

2.3 Reading Approaches: Reader-response and Stylistic Analysis

When writing about literature, there is an element of response to the text. Whether it is a reader-response method or a stylistic framework that is adopted, both approaches have their aspects and foci. My study focuses on these two particular approaches as the interviews and observations reflected some of their features and stages. This section is aimed at discussing the differences between reader-response and stylistic approaches.

One definition of reader-response is that literary criticism centres on a reader’s personal reaction to a text. It may be confused with the personal growth model of English in the UK, which was first advocated by Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and Iser (1978). This is because a determining element of the personal growth model is that it ‘calls for students to not only take in information but also asks them to process and respond to it’ (Kreidler, 2009, p.54). What is more, this model could be relevant to the unseen literary text because it ‘allows students to make meaning from literary works and seek opportunities of application and practice’ (Kreidler, 2009, p.54). However, interpreting reader-response as a personal or subjective reaction to a text could be rather limited and superficial. It involves a more critical stance that includes different types of reading and, more importantly, the attempt to hold a transaction between reader and text.

Goodwyn (2012) affirms that many consider reading literature as ‘experiential, aesthetic and affective, in that it holds or offers an ‘authentic experience for the student with some personal significance’ (p.213). For the sake of clarification, what is meant by literature refers to written works that are considered superior or of lasting artistic merit (as defined in the dictionary). Fry (1987) also clarifies this in the beginning of his book: ‘At the beginning of the century English Literature was seen as a canon of great works, with a vital (if somewhat belated) role to play in the formation of a national consciousness’ (p.1). Although Fry specified that this perception was evident a very long time ago, in a country like Malta (with its post-colonial ties) it is still the case because of the literary heritage bequeathed by the British Empire. Atherton, Green, and Snapper
(2013) argue there could be a ‘political impetus that tends to invest English literature with a range of possibilities’, such as ‘upholding academic rigour’, ‘maintaining the canon’, and ‘defending the national literary heritage’ (pp.1-2).

Similarly, a distinction is made between ‘efferent’ and ‘aesthetic’ reading. Rosenblatt (1978) questions ‘What does the reader do in these different kinds of reading?’ to which she answered that ‘the reader performs very different activities’ and stated that it is essential to differentiate between the two kinds of reading (p.23). Efferent reading is characterised by information-seeking. The reader is not focused on the way the text is written, such as its style patterns or its rhythm, but rather on understanding what is going on in the text. In efferent (from the Latin “efferre”, which means “to carry away”, p.24) or nonaesthetic reading, she suggested that it is ‘what will remain as a residue after the reading’, that is, to ‘the information to be acquired’ or ‘the actions to be carried out’ (p.23). Instead, aesthetic reading is related to the experience during the reading.

However, Rosenblatt (1978) does not mean that aesthetic reading ‘excludes or is diametrically opposed to an awareness of possible later usefulness or application’ (p.24). Yet, the need for distinguishing between different kinds of reading meant that in aesthetic reading specifically, ‘the reader’s attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text’ (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.25). Rosenblatt (1978) goes on to emphasise the ‘lived-through experience’ yielded by aesthetic reading; by perceiving it as an ‘inner-oriented focus of attention’, it could provide a respite from ‘the untenable opposition between art and life’ (p.27). Instead, during efferent reading, the reader disassociates the ‘personal and qualitative elements’ when responding to the text, by focusing on ‘what the symbols designate’ and how they yield information or concepts that are being sought (p.27).

In a way, reader-response as a method could consist of the two types of reading, moving the students from the efferent to the aesthetic, or going back and forth between them. If one starts with information-seeking, then one is emphasising what the student understands (what is going on in the text), whereas if one opts to prioritise the aesthetic reading, then the focus is on the experience. A step further would be to include a more technical type of efferent reading, which includes a consideration of stylistics (discussed later on).

Before discussing the issue of the transaction between text and reader, it could be beneficial to consider the idea of holding conversations on the type of reading students are engaged in. Such conversations can be deemed valuable because they present a
different slant through which reader-response is construed, though not necessarily at an analytical level. Cliff Hodges (2016, p.54) is drawn to the idea of having conversations with students and young people on their reading experiences. She discusses Fry’s (1985) study on children talking about books and how they see themselves as readers in particular. Fry’s (1985) study had involved children aged between 8-15 talking to him about their reading. Rather than the result of the conversation, Cliff Hodges (2016) is intrigued by the conversation itself, ‘as distinct from interview or questionnaire’ (p.54). This is because what the act of conversation reveals is the process of talking about reading. According to Fry (1985), by talking about their reading (rather than talking about the texts at this point), children may become more aware of themselves as readers. The conversation sheds light on their ‘coming to understand how they learn, how they live, how they are’ (Fry, 1985, p.107). This might indicate that reading for such young readers can be an experience that enables them to draw parallels with their lives. There is, however, a challenge to this somewhat idealised if valuable experience of reading, particularly at that age. It is contended that when reading becomes part of an assessed subject, then the mode of reading can be influenced by demands imposed by literature as *texts* for analysis purposes, namely ‘what students are asked to do when they study a text’ (Cliff Hodges, 2005, p.71). In cases where students are expected to analyse a text, it can be argued that this could be taking place at the expense of their enjoyment of reading. In this scenario, reader-response and stylistic approaches of reading become less about the reader and more about an interpretation of texts. However, the former type of response also involves a transaction between the reader and the text.

Notwithstanding the above doubts on viewing reading as a way of drawing connections with one’s life, the stage where young people talk about reading literature as a personal experience can be instrumental. It helps to understand where the students as readers are coming from, while it informs the attitude they might have towards literature as *texts* later on. When young readers grow into students of unseen literary texts (for example at Advanced Level), it could be relevant to explore the transition from reading for pleasure to reading for analysis. Goodwyn (2012) argues that a ‘tension’ lies between literary engagement and literary study, which is exacerbated by assessment demands and examination pressures. Bridging the idea of conversations on reading and a reader-response approach, Cliff Hodges (2016) suggests using reader-response not only as a theoretical approach but also as a way into what ‘we can learn what actual readers think’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.143).
At this point, it is inevitable to discuss reader-response as a theoretical rather than a personal approach to reading. A more important and defining aspect of the reader-response approach involves a transaction between the reader and the text. What is meant by transaction is that an interpretation based on understanding and thought is required or sought. The concept of a transaction suggests that reader-response is not dependent solely on responding to a text at a superficial level of whether one likes the text or not. Instead, it refers to passing of something on to the reader, aside from drawing out what is already in the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). Moreover, ‘the guidance of the text’ (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.12) influences the literary transaction, but this is also affected by the reader’s participation with the text. The ‘vitality’ of such an experience should not be lost but be based on an ‘intensely personal activity of thought and feeling’ (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.69). Nonetheless, Rosenblatt ascertains that the ‘matrix’ or base is ‘the personality and world of the individual reader’ (1978, p.69). Hence, it can be argued that a reader-response approach is informed by the transactional element as well as by the reader’s personality. This is echoed by Goodwyn (2012), who states that ‘the actual text is created in a transaction between the reader and the material text and so the actual text inevitably has some personal interpretation’ (p.213). This is connected to the idea of the poem or prose passage as a text, as something tangible to work with (as mentioned in the previous section). Despite the idea that reader-response criticism involves a transaction between reader and the text, it is still perceived as lacking a ‘more empirical base’ (Goodwyn, 2012, p.314). This could be due to the problem of validating whether the transaction takes place, and how. Specifically, whether or not the transaction between text and reader is playing itself out in the literary criticism classrooms, particularly what type of transaction it is, how or when it happens. A transaction between reader and text might be more evident when the teacher explains the text to the class, than when the students work with the text.

At the same time, reader-response as a method could be veiled as ‘literary reading’, and this has ‘a much stronger empirical base through principally, experimental research’ (Goodwyn, 2012, p.314). This does not mean that reader-response is interchangeable with literary reading. In relation to this, Goodwyn (2012) objects to the statement that ‘Pupils learn to become enthusiastic and critical readers of stories, poetry, and drama’ (p.216). The implication is that they are either enthusiastic or not. However, becoming critical can be honed by the two types of reading mentioned above (suggested by Rosenblatt, 1978). Instead, Goodwyn (2012) recommends literary reading that could
incorporate terms such as ‘engagement’, ‘immersion’ and ‘reflection’. In light of this possible confusion, my study explored whether teachers tend to have different ideas of reader-response.

Despite the critique towards personal response, studies show that it is essential for student engagement with literary texts (Collins, 2005; Miall, 2006; Goodwyn, 2012). Dymoke (2012) suggests that students ‘need to take risks in creating aesthetic responses to poetry’ (p.396). This not only connects to the earlier discussion of aesthetic reading, but it also echoes Misson and Morgan’s (2006) arguments about critical literary responses that emphasise such a reading. The aesthetic slant adds to the concept that texts are valuable to individual identity and creativity. The aesthetic is viewed as a mode of giving importance to the richness of texts and their productivity, as well as to the richness of human emotion. How students-as-readers’ responses are formed can be more complex than one thinks or sees at face value, so one implication is that there must be more reflection on the different forms of reading that take place. This also means putting the students-as-readers at the centre of reading and interpreting texts, while considering more structured ways in which engagement and transaction with the text can be evident.

The second approach to literary analysis involves stylistics. According to Carter (1982, pp.4, 6), stylistic analysis begins from linguistic knowledge, so students can use their experience of the language to interpret literary writing. Stylistics is ‘the study of style in language, especially in literary texts’ (Barry, 2003, p.153). It involves ‘tracking language use in poetry using technical terms and concepts derived from linguistics’ such as deixis (Barry, 2003, p.154). In this way, stylistics can help students hone their interpretative skills as they start from what they already know. Gower (1986, p.125) comments on Carter’s (1982) claims, remarking that literature becomes a ‘message’ that the stylistician has to work out through ‘linguistic analysis’. He does not seem to agree that literature is ‘inert’ and contends that the idea of ‘effect’ is overlooked in analysis (‘what [literature] isn’t is something you read and something which has an effect on you’), because ‘effect’ is ‘bound up with intuition and emotion and has no objective status’. The term ‘enjoyment’ appears as soon as ‘stylisticians leave off being stylisticians’ (Gower, 1986, p.125), so the implication is that analysis and enjoyment cannot co-exist. Another term that is mentioned is ‘appreciation’ (Cummings and Simmons, 1983; Gower, 1986). Stylistics enables students to appreciate literature, claiming that the analysis of a linguistic kind can lead to a better articulation of their ‘intuitions’ (Gower, 1986, p.126). However, this can seem contradictory, given that the implication above is that analysis can take
place, but not harmoniously with enjoyment. The connection with appreciation can be rather tenuous, if it is taken to involve or include enjoyment. This is why Gower (1986) seems to critiques the claim that stylistics renders students more articulate, as he states that ‘the connections made are in general hopelessly imprecise and frequently in conflict with common sense’ (p.126). Similarly, teachers in my study pointed out how students’ responses sometimes lacked logic and precise argumentation, whereas students felt that in order to analyse properly, they had to be able to appreciate the text (adding conversely that, to appreciate, they did not need to analyse the text). However, in light of this contention, it is preferable to analyse what is meant or perceived by appreciation, particularly how this term was defined, in order to ascertain whether analysis and appreciation can co-exist (whether appreciation and enjoyment are similar or in what ways they differ). I was led to this by exploring the teachers’ and students’ perception of ‘appreciation’ (presented in Chapters 5 and 6).

Following Carter (1982), Cummings and Simmons (1983), and Gower (1986), there have been other debates surrounding stylistics. According to Elliott (1990), the criticism towards interpreting literature through stylistics occurs when the latter ‘tends to focus narrowly on the word on the page as a self-contained system’ (p.192). Elliott (1990) advocates finding meaning ‘from within’, harnessing individual responses and then agreeing on a text’s interpretation ‘inter-subjectively’, as a group. This could involve students working collaboratively in class and the discussion would be ‘mediated by the teacher, who has, of course, been influenced by the academic and critical communities’ (Elliott, 1990, p.192; Fowler, 1986, pp.174-180). This approach encourages students to make ‘their own discovery of meaning, whether personally or as a group, rather than impose the meaning on them’ (Elliott, 1990, p.192). Fry suggests an interesting take on interpretation (1987): ‘When a pupil is constructing in her head various meanings for a poem, rejecting some, …she is carrying out an activity that warrants more recognition than a lot of literary theory is normally prepared to accord for her’ (p.70). This means acknowledging the different, inherent processes that might be taking place in students’ minds whilst reading a text for the first time. A similar issue is discussed in later chapters concerning the interpretation of unseen texts from the students’ perspective, and their need to find the ‘right meanings’ (Elliott, 1990, p.192). One may perceive students as being in quest for the ‘right meanings’ but what they might be involved in could go beyond that, which in itself is laudable, even though they might go ‘out of point’ in their interpretation (as some students admitted or were concerned about in the interviews).
Going out of point is a fear imbued in students due to the examination that awaits them, but Cadden (1986) urges one to place emphasis on ‘how’ the students look at and ‘approach’ poetry or prose (p.1). Despite being enrolled on an Advanced English Level course, Cadden (1986) mentions that ‘the potential to understand and enjoy poetry’ (and prose) should be ‘beyond any examination success’ (p.1). Moreover, a personal response could be encouraged even though ‘the mechanics of poetry…take over the whole process’ to the extent that ‘the whole process quickly becomes deadeningly mechanical’ (Cadden, 1986, p.2).

Despite the critique and the idea that Cadden (1986) (and others like him stated these ideas in the 1980s), stylistics is ‘very much alive and well’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.2), adopted as a method by the language, literature, and linguistic departments of many colleges and universities. Language is at the centre of stylistics as a mode of ‘textual interpretation’ because ‘the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.2).

The interpretation is arrived at through ‘the text’s functional significance as discourse’ and most often literature is ‘the preferred object in stylistics’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.2). It is argued that stylistic analysis has to be rigorous, retrievable, and replicable. The first principle refers to adopting ‘an explicit framework’ where analysis is supported by ‘structured models of language and discourse that explain how we process and understand various patterns in language’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.4). Retrievable analysis is organized through ‘explicit terms and criteria’ although Gibbs and Simpson (2004) advises that ‘precise definitions for aspects of language have proved difficult to pin down’ (p.4). The third principle, replicable analysis, does not refer to mimicking someone else’s work but that ‘the methods should be sufficiently transparent to allow other stylisticians to verify them, either by testing them on the same text or by applying them beyond that text’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.4).

Another consideration is to merge reader-response with stylistics. What this could mean is bridging different types of reading, namely the ‘efferent’ and ‘aesthetic’, with stylistic methods of analysis. It would be interesting because it would provide students with different vantage points from which to approach a text. It would guide them towards the reading they would be doing, and they would feel less confused on how to proceed to interpretation and criticism (as the students in my study claimed to feel, that is, confused about practical criticism). Interpretation, criticism and reading hardly occur in a linear
way but are interconnected (Scholes, 1985). Instead, it is argued that they occur simultaneously and would ‘need to be actively in play if readers are to realise their full potential’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.268). Considering the reading approaches (above), and accounting for the interconnectedness of interpretation, criticism, and reading, I investigated and analysed the approaches and methods used by teachers and students when reading unseen texts (Chapters 5 and 6).

2.4 Preparing for Writing
Writing is ‘a mode of social action, not simply a means of communication’ (Myhill and Locke 2007, p.2). This means that developing writers could be helped to understand and appreciate writing not only as an ‘individually-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process’ but also as a result of certain modes of ‘creating and communicating knowledge within particular communities’ (Maun and Myhill, 2005, p.15). When writing about literature, students have to consider writing conventions that pertain to their educational setting. For instance, the assignment in question (whether it is on a set text or the unseen text), the setting in which it is presented (during a seminar or a tutorial) and, ultimately, the examination. Apart from this, students would work towards contextualising literature as ‘a meaning-making activity in which the writer thinks through writing and in which the process of writing acts as a discovery mechanism’ (Myhill and Locke, 2007, p.2). Galbraith (1999) suggests that through writing, students discover their own ideas and an autonomous voice.

Research on writing has led to a concern that ‘there was no compelling model for writing, as a social process for thinking, recording, reflecting, arguing…’ (Dixon, 2010, p.10). Of concern to this study is the dearth of research in the area of writing about unseen texts. Researching models of writing is also contingent on constraints required by educational policies. For instance, in the UK one of the writing projects invited teachers to keep a ‘progressive record of achievement for each student’ (Dixon, 2010, p.11). Records would include comments and highlights for improvement rather than merely a assign a mark or grade. A preoccupation with marks or grades is connected to a concern with the examination, which has ushered in a system promoting developmental progression indicated by grades. In relation to this, it is argued that students might be ‘concerned only with their mark and not the feedback’ (Weaver, 2006, p.380).
Consequently, the teachers’ main target becomes that of preparing students adequately for examinations.

Research on examinations in the UK has indicated the examination has an effect on classroom methodology. Cliff Hodges (2009) contends that students ‘are more likely to find themselves increasingly being taught poetry with a view to being able to write about it under examination conditions’ (p.280). Dymoke (2012) suggests that a culture of where students are expected to perform constantly affects teachers’ approaches and compromises students’ engagement, by focusing on ‘the need to deal in knowledge rather than meaning making’ (p.395). This situation is not very different from the Maltese locale, particularly when educational policies in Malta are or have been based on British models. The culture behind the national examination for the MC Advanced Level English in Malta is similar to the one in the UK. The two-year MC course is centrally connected to preparing students for an examination, so the writing conducted in the class or at home targets the aims of the syllabus, which were written in connection with the examination. This also involves an area of writing such as literary criticism (the unseen literary text). The unseen literary texts constitute two sections in the MC Advanced Level English in Malta, so the weighting is significant. The area of writing about such texts is more specific and specialized, particularly when considering this study’s post-16 school context.

Preparing students for writing also calls for a reflection on the teacher’s role and position in the classroom, which shifts between that of mentor and assessor (Ziv, 1984). This is one reason why I analysed the students’ perceptions of the teachers’ role in relation to writing about unseen texts and feedback. On the one hand, it encompasses mentoring and providing students with comments. On the other, teachers often act as examiners and assessors. This is corroborated by research conducted on a sample of 2,000 scripts of British 11-to18-year-old students (Dixon, 2010). The conflicting roles have led to concerns about results and standards to be reached among educators, which are still commonly present in various educational settings (Myhill and Locke, 2007). Through this study I explored how 17 and 18-year old students perceived reading and writing about unseen texts, including writing under examination conditions.

The value of writing about unseen texts and the students’ ability to express themselves in writing are another two concerns. According to Blau (2003) ‘most English teachers will agree with the Deweyan notion that the only knowledge you truly possess is knowledge you have somehow made’ (p.151). However, in many students’ case, most of their knowledge would have been ‘previously gleaned in the classroom rather than in
contexts beyond school’ (Dymoke, 2012, p.396). Moreover, the notion of ‘what students should know’ (Maun and Myhill, 2005, p.291) informs the ‘preparation for English assessment [which] draws on a narrow range of students’ prior knowledge’ (Dymoke, 2012, p.396). Whether it is for examination purposes or to ensure that students do progress and understand the literature (Fischer, 2000), preparing for set texts constitutes a large part in the MC Advanced Level English syllabus and examination. However, it is argued that an emphasis on set texts risks ‘leaving little space for broader development of responses to texts and notions of intertextuality’ (Dymoke, 2012, p.396). This is because, according to Snapper (2006), students may have ‘encyclopaedic knowledge of their eight set texts, but many will have encountered little else’ (p.29). This may argue the case for the inclusion of unseen texts as part of reading and writing about literature, while it can help to deviate the focus from the set texts. Snapper (2006), however, advises a ‘careful reflection on what English Literature A Level is for’, because ‘many students have little sense of the critical detachment required for literary study’ (p.29). A contrasting viewpoint is that through literary texts, students may be encouraged to find various meanings, and that such texts could become a vehicle for thinking about literature and honing ‘a sense of aesthetic appreciation’ (Fischer, 2000, p.12). The concept and issue of ‘appreciation’ emerged from the data as shall be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The next section also mentions an ‘appreciation’ of literature by comparing two approaches that were central to this study and to the data that emerged.

2.5 Writing Essays about Literary Texts: Methods and Approaches

In this section I outline and discuss a number of relevant approaches to and perspectives of writing. Although they are not specific to writing about unseen texts, the core principles are intrinsic to this area and its preparation stages. The foci I present are connected with the main findings informing this research. Before considering a range of angles and areas of writing, it is useful at this point to mention the developments and attitudes towards writing as a process rather than as a product. Writing about literature is fundamentally about writing, so references are made to the writing process in the sections that follow on planning the essay and learning how to write.

Emig (1971) states that ‘writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies’ (p.122). Similarly, Britton et al. (1975) propose conception, incubation, and production; revision
is the final stage where students take responsibility for their writing. The issue with this approach is its linearity. Writing is iterative, which means that constructing and finalizing a piece may take more time and may involve more cycles of revision and rewriting than expected. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘revision’ is used in relation to the process where students take their teachers’ suggestions on board to improve their future writing.

Following Emig (1971) and Britton et al. (1975), Hayes and Flower (1980) offer a model that integrates writing and cognition. The stages are planning, translating, and reviewing. The process is non-linear but recursive and involves other processes in between, so that it is less rigid. Further on, Hillocks (1986) merges the process with the context, known as the environmental mode, which favours peer interaction and problem-solving tasks. When students engage in such processes and tasks rather than be overly concerned with the product, it may develop their awareness of writing and its the challenges. Beard (2000) praises Graves’ (1983) work on process writing, explaining how the latter had favoured a type of writing ‘with a real audience in mind, drafting and re-drafting’ (Beard, 2000, p.51). However, some reservations about process writing and Graves’ (1983) research led to a reflection of this approach’s ‘appropriateness in different contexts’ (Beard, 2000, p.51). A critique of process writing is that it might ‘erode the feeling from writing’ and so ‘texts can lack authentic expression’ (Beard, 2000, p.51). One way of resolving issues with process writing is to consider alternating with other approaches.

Another approach involves the teacher ‘present[ing] new forms, models and criteria and facilitates their use in different writing tasks’ (Beard, 2000, p.54). Known as the genre approach, this involves following a model or sample essay before writing; such examples may be provided by the teacher. This would involve a shift from writing to reading, as the students explore and study the style of the model, before writing (by imitating or approximating the style). It is suggested that teachers offer different examples of the genre, for example of the essay on an unseen literary text (Kim, 2012, p.35). The essay on the unseen text would be the ‘target genre’ that students can model when writing their own essay (Badger and White, 2000, pp.155-156). Supporters of the genre approach posit that it offers students a framework and releases them from writing challenges (Kay and Dudley-Evans, 1998, p.310; Kim, 2012, p.35). However, opposing arguments (Kim, 2012; Badger and White, 2000; Bawarshi, 2000) indicate that adopting a genre approach may prove rigid and ‘less helpful for students in discovering the texts’ true messages’.
(Kim, 2012, p.37). In this way, such an approach could be restrictive: while ‘it helps learners to identify and interpret literary texts, it interferes with the learners’ creativity’ (Bawarshi, 2000, p.343). Given the shortcomings of the process and genre approaches respectively, it is suggested that blending the two could be attempted. According to Badger and White (2000), students could be offered models and discussions of the text type. As they make progress in their writing, they would then follow the different stages of the process approach.

Owing to the fact that process writing involves students producing drafts, this approach was and is recognized as a method ‘best situated to be implemented broadly in an effort to reform writing practices’ (Graham and Sandmel, 2011, p. 396). Despite the critique, process writing is successful when time and resources are allocated to the five stages, that is, pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing (Silver and Lee, 1997). It is suggested that process writing ‘comes close to having an infrastructure for scaling up (Graham and Sandmel, 2011, p.396). However, there is no specific definition of process writing, and it has changed so much that there might be different uses and perspectives (Stotsky, 1986; Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006). For this reason, Graham and Sandmel (2001) state that ‘no claims can be made about the effectiveness of process writing in comparison to other types of writing treatments’ (p.404). However, their research does not discount the merits of process writing (Graham and Sandmel, 2011).

Writing methods that employ strategies (e.g. planning, revising, and paragraph construction) and modelling of good writing have been reviewed as effective (Hillocks, 1986; Bangert-Drowns, 1993; Goldring, Russell and Cook, 2003; Graham and Perin, 2007; Rogers and Graham, 2008; Graham and Sandmel, 2011). It is also recommended that students write together, while the teacher offers a supportive writing system. At the same time, teaching of writing can be personalized through individual attention to writing, so that students can claim more ownership of their written work. Engaging in process writing with other students or individually by receiving personalized attention also increases motivation for writing (Graham and Sandmel, 2011). These are some of the benefits of fostering process writing among students, and better quality of writing has been recorded in the work of students who were more involved in the stages of planning, drafting, and revising (Graham and Harris, 1997; Van den Bergh and Rijlaarsdam, 2006).

Process writing does not only hold rewarding benefits, despite the emphasis on thoroughness in writing. The situation is ideal when the students are involved in the above five stages. However, this is not often the case, as it has been observed that ‘students
usually produce only two drafts: the original and one revised version based on teacher feedback to the first draft’ (Silver and Lee, 1997, p.4). As a result, the process in process writing is replaced by an emphasis on the end result, particularly when writing for examination purposes. This leads to a situation where students are ‘constantly given practice in the examination format’ (Silver and Lee, 1997, p.4). Graham and Sandmel (2011) argue that process writing on its own might not be helping students to develop certain basic skills, such as sentence construction (Nagin, 2006). It is also contended that process writing does not account for explicit teaching of strategies such as planning and revising (Graham and Sandmel, 2011)). Despite these detractions, process writing is still popular, and Graham and Sandmel (2011) suggest that results of such an approach could be investigated.

The study’s data has led to consideration of approaches that range from the ‘traditional’ to ‘alternative’. The word ‘traditional’ does not imply outdated or inadequate methods in any way, but refers to some perspectives that have become common practice in the classroom. Similarly, the word ‘alternative’ does not imply the approaches are better or more innovative, but approaches that are not used as frequently in the classroom.

The traditional set of approaches and perspectives includes the use of a set textbook (consisting of passages and guidelines for writing), a theme-based approach, the connection between reading and writing (reading other essays as models for writing), and writing in stages. For alternative approaches and perspectives, shared writing, peer review and collaborative writing are considered. Following these two sections, discussions on planning the essay and learning to write about literature respectively are presented. The final section is writing challenges, an offshoot of the data collection and analysis processes.

2.5.1 Some Traditional Approaches and Perspectives to Writing

One traditional method of teaching writing about literature is using a prescribed textbook that includes guided questions for the students to model their responses on, and samples of writing to emulate the style. It is not clear how effectual this traditional formula is within school contexts as the one in this study. For this reason, I sought to discuss this method with teachers and students to reflect on its merits and demerits.

One typical approach is choosing texts according to themes (Hyland, 2002), which refer to those ‘situations or topics that are relevant to the students’ current or future
learning situation’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p. 59). In the case of (unseen) literary texts, the thematic content of the texts might be chosen by the teacher, who might help students with identification of the themes. Raimes (1983) states that ‘the longer students grapple with a subject, the more their command of the necessary vocabulary and idiom develops; the more they read on the topic, the more they learn about organizational structure and sentence structure; the more they discuss a topic, the more ideas they develop’ (p. 14). In my study, I was interested in observing how the teachers guided students when reading unseen texts.

The audience for whom students are writing is another issue to consider, if and when writing is perceived as a medium with implications in real-life communication. This is often not the case, and it might be a major dilemma, because when students write an essay based on a literary text, the audience is their teacher. So writing about literature might be perceived as artificial and examination-related. However, Raimes (1983) suggests that the audience target could be differentiated and broadened to include other students or other readers external to the classroom. The tutorial system in this study’s school offers the students the possibility to read their essay to others, but that is contingent on the teacher’s choice (this is tackled in Chapter 5).

Linking reading with writing is the next suggestion that aims at widening students’ exposure to different texts. Barrass (1982) posits that writing ties in with reading, so ‘students should be also taught how to read critically – thinking about what they read – because, reading, supported by personal observation, is the key to knowledge’ (p. 2). This involves students reading their own work to others, reading other students’ work (more on shared writing later on), and other literary texts. Balancing reading with writing is also suggested for more effectiveness of the latter (Beard, 2000). Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh (2004) suggest that apart from modelling writing on reading materials, it would also be worthwhile to attempt learning writing strategies by reading; for instance, ‘producing a text with certain features [to] facilitate the recognition of these features, say an argumentation structure’ (p. 4). Campbell (1998) also makes a case for the integration of reading into writing courses. The first reason is that reading is as demanding as writing in terms of time and level of understanding. If students have to write an essay based on something that they would have read, as is the case of the unseen literary text, encouraging them to read other similar texts could help them understand a written text and the use of language. Corden (2000) contends that making students aware of ‘literary devices’ used by authors may guide them to ‘move beyond secretarial aspects of writing
and encourage them to pay more attention to compositional features’ (p.36). Moreover, ‘readings [could] provide authentic examples of text demonstrating issues…such as usage of vocabulary, sentence structure, rhetorical modes…the writer’s audience, and purpose’ (Campbell, 1998, p.21). In turn, the readings serve as ‘model written products, practicing the types of analyses the students need to also consider regarding their own writing’ (Campbell, 1998, p. 21-22). Other reasons to use reading are to encourage discussions on the topics and to underscore the use of the language.

2.5.2 Alternative Approaches to Writing

Fischer (2000) believes that ‘offering alternative ways to write is one way of challenging students to think through why they choose a certain form, how it can support what they want to say about literature, and what they really think’ (p.11). Kirsch (1997) invites teachers to address such motivations so that using alternative forms with students has added value. In learning how to write about literature, students can be exposed to informal writing tools. Campbell (1998) and Beard (2000) suggest shared writing and peer review, whilst Topping (2009) repurposes collaborative writing into a paired exercise.

2.5.2.1 Shared Writing

The concept of shared writing does not feature often in the traditional context and therefore writing lessons may be perceived as lacking in inspiration and stimulation (Beard, 2000). Evidence of this has been also partly gathered from the three hundred hours of observation that were part of the National Literacy Strategy in British primary schools (1998). A report was issued through the discussion paper The Teaching of Writing in Primary Schools: Could do Better (HMI, 2000). Based on 1999 test results and inspection evidence, key findings were that not enough time is devoted to teaching writing, and that this skill is ‘the weakest element of the teaching and learning of literacy’ (HMI, 2000, p.3). Moreover, it was reported that shared writing did not take place in three-quarters of the lessons (HMI, 2000, p.4). Hence, Beard (2000) suggests shared writing for its ‘potential value of modelling writing’ so that the teacher can ‘channel [students’] suggestions’ (p. 54). However, he cautions that ‘the effectiveness of shared writing is difficult to assess in research studies because of its interactive and diverse nature’ (Beard, 2000, p.54). Oczkus (2007) argues in favour of shared writing because of its potential to generate students’ interest in and lessen the dullness of writing. Sharing one’s work with one’s peers can aid in the scaffolding and learning of strategies, such as
sharing word banks and making sense of ‘rubrics with clear expectations for writing assignments’ (Oczkus, 2007, p.9). In either case, a needs analysis session could be conducted to get to know what students might benefit from as part of a course programme, integrating process writing, the genre approach, and shared writing.

The link between reading and writing discussed previously could be enacted more actively when the student writer becomes a reader of other students’ work. This means that when students read their peers’ work they are not only acting as observers but they are also collaborating on writing as readers. They can know what it feels like when other readers are looking at their work, that is, they ‘experience the effect of their text on readers’ (Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh, 2004, p.6). By reading other students’ work they are immersed in learning by observing and then during the writing phase they can fully concentrate on the writing itself.

Moreover, rather than reading a model based on a textbook, students are given the chance to use more realistic texts that are closer to their own experience of writing. This is because ‘writers are placed in the reader’s role. Not to improve their writing skills, but to experience text problems’ (Campbell, 1998, p.3). Reading and comparing one’s text to other students is also an influential strategy that Campbell (1998) had experienced as a student writer, as she recalls that the ‘most successful [activity] for managing the workload of writing was working in cooperation with fellow classmates’ (p.3). In Campbell’s (1998) case, writing ceased to be an isolated activity where the essay-as-product was only shared with the teacher. In her experience, the product-oriented approach was gradually replaced by a process-oriented one so that by the time the essay was handed in, it was not the most important result but it reflected the process that went into its creation.

2.5.2.2 Peer Reviewing and Collaborative Writing
The act of writing is primarily geared at improving students’ skills of communication and expression. This could also involve sharing the writing with other writers, thus forming a community. Sautter (1991) suggests that cooperative writing and peer reviewing enable students to ‘form emotional and psychological alliances with each other that eventually lead to a community of trust and care’ (p.21). Campbell (1998) believes that peer review could be planned and integrated within the writing sessions so that students know from the very beginning of the course that they are writing for each other. This is termed as reader-based prose. It renders the writing tasks more valid, meaningful, and authentic.
Moreover, it enhances students’ autonomy and makes them aware that although the teacher does provide feedback, the students can also rely on one another. There is a connection between learner autonomy and collaboration, namely that students eventually become more independent after having learnt to work well with others (Bruner, 1966; Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1991; and Cliff Hodges, 2002). Transforming the activity of writing into a collaborative opportunity is effective when it offers students the possibility to talk about writing (Humphris, 2010). It also drives students to grow cognitively and productively (Englert, Raphael and Anderson, 1992). Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh (2004) state how collaborating and sharing one’s work with other students reinforces the goal of communication, that ‘supports the development of intentional cognition’ (p.8). Cliff Hodges (2002) contends that collaborative writing helps students not only by providing them with an outlet for ‘reflective thought through writing’ but more importantly by leading them to ‘a deepening of reflective thought about writing’ (p.9). A fair balance between peer review response and individual conferences with the teacher can be obtained with adequate time spent on both methods. As the teacher discusses the value of peer review response, students become accustomed to it.

Corden (2000) extols the benefits of collaborative learning that targets literary understanding and ‘enhances critical thinking’ (p.36). During the peer review sessions, the teacher acts as a ‘facilitator, troubleshooter, and consultant to individuals’ (Corden, 2000, p.58). It is posited that critical reading and writing can be both more successful when students are encouraged to participate actively by contributing to discussions and asking questions (Corden, 2000). Presenting one’s work to other students means having a broader audience than the teacher or tutor. When students are invited to share and communicate with other students it can help to minimise the ‘vertical’ image of teacher/student ‘dialogue’, and introduces the ‘horizontal’ view of ‘student as writer geometrically communicating with other student-writers’ (Sautter, 1991, p.24). Barrass (1982) favours this as an idea, as he believes that ‘reading an essay to other students, as a small group in a tutorial, can provide a basis for discussion’ (p.43). When commenting on other students’ work, the critical element would help them pay more attention to their own writing.

Apart from peer review, collaborative writing can be offered to students in the form of paired writing. Topping (2009) defines the latter as ‘a system for peer tutoring (or co-composition) of any sort of writing (creative or technical) in any language’ (p.141). The concept of paired writing sees students collaborate and present a final co-authored
piece of writing. Paired writing provides a support system, a way of sharing ideas and skills among writers. The stages of paired writing are similar to the ones of the writing process, namely ‘thinking, planning, intelligent questioning, self-discourse and discussion, reorganisation and restructuring’ (Topping, 2009, p.142). The six steps of the paired writing activity are: ideas generation (which includes mapping), drafting, reading, editing, choosing the best copy, and evaluating. The students in the pair encourage one another to follow the six stages adequately and with self-discipline, as it is less likely to stray from any of the steps when students are working together. The end product can be shared with another pair and ideally is exchanged at the same time to avoid shading one’s evaluative skills (Topping, 2009, pp.144-149). The students in the pair engage in self-questioning and reading one another’s work. Adopting the paired writing approach among other writing approaches also helps teachers or tutors assessing the students’ work because they would be less burdened of ‘marking or grading innumerable scripts’ (Topping, 2000, p.142). By the time the writing product is finished, it would be more polished and would need less revision.

2.6 Planning the Essay: Guidelines and Writing Stages

Preparing students to handle an academic essay or critical commentary often requires guiding them to follow conventions of the genre (Blau, 2003). This applies when ‘the reality of our classroom context’ demands ‘having students work on the formal academic literary paper’ (Blau, 2003, p.175). Three stages could be considered at an advanced level of writing (Beard, 2000). By the first stage, the ‘communicative’, students would have achieved ‘a degree of mastery over conventions’ so that ‘they realise that writing can be used to affect the reader’ (Beard, 2000, p.194). As soon as students keep the audience in mind while writing they can move on to ‘unified’ writing, the second stage. The ‘epistemic’ stage is when there is ‘improved writing and improve understanding [and includes] feedback’ (Beard, 2000, p.194).

The act of writing can be influenced by the intended message and the target audience. A two-pronged system presents the text as knowledge and the (student) writer as knowledge-teller. Engaged in the process of knowledge-telling, the student focuses on ideas and how to get them on paper. There is no drafting and revising at this point. (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). In the knowledge-transforming stage, where there is more reflection on the content through drafting and revising. Whereas the knowledge-
teller attempts to order discourse in a chronological manner, the ‘knowledge-transformer’ focuses on creating ‘a mental dialogue between content and rhetoric’ (Sharples, 1999, p.22). Kellogg (2006) has come up with an alternative stage: ‘knowledge-crafting’. This is more complex because it involves a stronger command of writing. If considered in relation to the MC Advanced Level English, to students and their writing about literary texts in Maltese school contexts, knowledge-crafting can also refer to the ability to write with the reader in mind where meaning is ‘constructed by an imagined reader as well as the author’ (Kellogg, 2006, p.7). It is advised that the last stage requires a higher level of maturity (occurring around ages 22 to 42). The students of this study were 16 to 18 years old, which is much younger than the age bracket suggested.

To better guide students towards knowledge making, teachers might provide students with models or structures. The focus would be on accuracy, cohesion, and coherence. It is still common among teachers, as is discussed also in this study (see Chapters 5 and 6), for students to be taught to follow a typical five-paragraph structure in essay writing. This approach creates two opposing reactions. On the one hand ‘most literature and writing teachers gasp at the notion of purposely teaching the five-paragraph’ essay (Fischer, 2000, p.5), which means that they resist a direct teaching of it.

On the other hand, an investigation into ‘the formal essay about literature required by state standards and preferred by many teachers’ (Fischer, 2000, p.5) indicates that it closely resembles the five-paragraph theme. In her research on poetry in UK and New Zealand secondary school classrooms, Dymoke (2012) reports how the teachers in the former schools expressed concern about guiding students (‘spoon-feeding’). Yet, it was revealed that students were ‘heavily guided on their approach to reading poetry and how to structure written answers’ (Dymoke, 2012, p.404). This was done by providing students with structured formats (acronyms such as LIPS, which stands for language, ideas, poetic devices, and structure; and PEE, short for point, evidence, and explanation). The result was that using such acronyms for essay structure could have helped students present structured responses that met assessment demands. Yet, students’ ‘overuse’ of such structures can lead to a ‘packaging of poetry, reducing its linguistic power and...the reading of a poem into a homogenized experience’ (Dymoke, 2012, p.404). Similarly, Cliff Hodges (2002) is wary of modelling writing, for it ‘can lead students to mimic rather than create’ (p.9). The act of writing might be too focused on mechanical details rather than on the students exploring writing to find a style of their own. It is suggested that the teacher could provide model structures not for students to copy but to
offer them opportunities to discuss their issues or ideas (Cliff Hodges, 2002, p.9). Instead of adhering rigidly to models, these may be used as guidelines or examples to get them started into writing. My study explored what teachers and students thought about guided essay structures, and whether they benefited from using such models.

Other suggestions include guiding students towards ‘thesis/support/conclusion format embedded in argumentation’ (Fischer, 2000, p.5). It is argued that there is more flexibility in this structure as students are encouraged ‘to take on a voice of authority’ (p.5). Barrass (1982) proposes studying ‘the techniques of successful essayists’ (p.46) at a more detailed level and advanced stage (e.g. undergraduate level). However, Heilker (1996) states that this format could ‘limit students’ development by closing rather than opening their minds’ (p.3). Hence, students might restrict themselves to thinking and constructing meaning through specific formats. Fischer (2000) argues that even when it is assumed that ‘the form of the academic essay is deceptively simple’, the work that leads to the result is less so. The ‘thinking required to successfully support such writing is tremendously sophisticated – and beyond the skill level of most students’ (p.6). However, educators might still opt for this format because the perception is that it is straightforward and not so difficult to follow. It is argued that when meaning is prescribed by form and formulaic structures, it might override expressive writing (Heilker, 1996). If students merely replicate ‘binary’ and contrived models of essay writing, then they are eventually bound to ‘perceive little purpose or value in writing about literature, other than to complete an assignment for a grade’ (Beach et al., 2006, p.102). Similarly, Cliff Hodges (2009) alerts that in criticism, students should not be too lost in ‘getting the right answers or finding the correct meaning of a poem’ at the expense of ‘articulating their interpretation and understanding of the text’ (p.282). In constructing their response to a text, students could be guided to plan their essay according to different stages.

While it is acknowledged that certain teaching methods might have become outdated, the universality of certain approaches can be reworked and adapted to the English literature classroom nonetheless. For instance, following and repurposing the four traditional stages in writing is one suggestion: thinking, planning, writing, and checking (Barrass, 1982). The task or question (or the literary criticism rubric; Appendix 1) could be considered as it usually allows students to focus on particular aspects and ‘define [the] purpose and scope’ (Barrass, 1982, p.28). A four-part analysis targeting the texts’ subject, aspect, restrictions, and instructions is also suggested (also known as SARI; Barrass, 1982, p.31). The planning stage see students order their notes and organise
paragraphing before they start writing. While planning, students could consider ‘annotating’ or ‘highlighting’ a text (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.278). Students can be encouraged to engage with developmental stages of writing in different ways. Sautter (1991) also worked with stages and adapted them. Brainstorming ideas for writing is followed by writing a first draft. Then there would be editing and re-writing. These strategies aid students to write with a stronger emphasis on areas of language such as spelling and punctuation. Sharing the writing with peers is optional but beneficial as students received peer advice prior to marking. Apart from peer feedback, revision processes are also very beneficial.

There have been developments in the research on revision which seem to refute or challenge the notion that it takes place necessarily at the end of writing. There are in fact three distinctions in revision (Myhill and Jones, 2007). Pretext occurs during the planning stage before writing commences. Revisions are known to occur during or whilst writing, also known as online. The last type is carried out after writing has concluded, known as deferred (Myhill and Jones, 2007). The above recommendations by Barrass (1982) and Sautter (1991) seem to account for the last stage but revisions are not considered or referred to in the stages of thinking, planning, and writing. There is the misconception that revision takes place only once writing is finished. Instead, the writing process could account for embedded revision within the pre-writing and writing stages, so that it is recursive rather than sequential.

The importance of revision before, during, and after composing has also been argued by Fitzgerald and Markham (1987). Humphris (2010) discusses the complexity of revision and states that it is more than error correction. It is related to changes at syntactic and semantic levels (Humphris, 2010). Humphris (2010) also suggests adopting a system of ‘writing buddies’ (p.201) for revision through collaborative writing. Revision through collaboration would offer students a slightly wider audience, with whom they can talk about revision. Humphris (2010) explains that students need to be made aware of the role of revision. It has to be conceptualised as non-linear and recursive. Humphris (2010) recommends that the quality of revision depends partly on understanding writing as a non-linear process. Humphris (2010) urges that teachers need to be alert to what students are really doing when revising, and then develop methods to help students revise more efficiently in ways that give evidence of improvement.

When it comes to modifying written work, students may resist revising their work based on teacher comments if they prefer making their own revisions. These students tend
to be the more independent-minded and creative, the ones who are willing to experiment with language, the ones who feel more confident and proficient in writing (Ferris, 1997). However, those students who, according to Hyland (1998) might be less proficient, might feel more encumbered by their mistakes and so they would depend on their teacher’s recommendations to attempt revision. It is also argued that developing writers, or what Humphris (2010) refers to as novice, tend to make changes of a superficial nature. Aspects such as spelling and punctuation are more readily revised than content-based areas. Researching the studies on revision and conducting her own research led Humphris (2010) to conclude that revision is not that easy to do for a number of factors. First of all, students have a problem detecting errors rather than repairing them. It is only when they are told where the errors lie that they can work on amending them.

Another issue is the students’ ability to self-monitor. According to Raimes (1983) ‘what students really need…is to develop the ability to read their own writing and to examine it critically, to learn how improve it, to learn how to express their meaning fluently, logically, and accurately. They need to be able to find and correct their own mistakes’ (p.149). According to a number of researchers (Zimmerman and Kitsantas, 1999; Myhill and Jones, 2007; Humphris, 2010), the ability to be accountable for one’s writing and auto-correct may be related to cognitive development. In this case, students would often lack the metalanguage to talk about revision and the writing process. This is a barrier that exposes the lack of metacognitive awareness. It is suggested that students can be taught or trained from a young age to develop ‘metalinguistic awareness (knowing terms) and a metalanguage (understanding and using the terms)…to order and express their own thoughts, to question, explore and interpret the words of others’ (Corden, 2000, p.40). The students who had worked at developing a metalanguage in his research tended to be better at describing, analyzing, and conceptualizing (Corden, 2000, p.40). On the other hand, lacking a metalanguage might explain why many writers consider the revision process as challenging.

Metacognition can be essential in writing and revising effectively (Myhill and Jones, 2007). It is connected to the ability to self-regulate and self-monitor. Self-regulation is defined as the extent to which students can claim more control over their own thinking and learning that would lead them to track their progress (Pintrich and Zusho, 2002). Learner autonomy is connected with self-regulation when students set their own targets (Nicol and Macfarlane Dick, 2006). For this purpose, feedback plays a role in enhancing cognitive and analytical skills that encourages students to self-assess, to be
more critically reflective in writing (Gould and Day, 2013). However, reflective thinking can be demanding as it ‘requires cognitive and affective activities in which students explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings’ (Van der Schaaf et al., 2013, p.229). To hone students’ reflective skills, it is suggested to involve them in activities such as ‘describing, structuring, analysing, evaluating, attributing, concluding, and planning’ (Van der Schaaf et al., 2013, p.229), which have been discussed earlier on. The idea here is to connect the stages of planning a written response with more reflective thinking so that writing becomes a reflective exercise too. Following the consideration of options for planning and writing the essay, while also debating issues in revision, the next section addresses some aspects of learning how to write about literature.

2.7 Learning How to Write Essays about Literary Texts

This study is concerned with learning to write about literature, given that both the syllabus and the MC Advanced Level English examination focus heavily on writing. The latter focus is not only prevalent in the Maltese locale. Hodgson and Harris (2010) state that there is still a high prevalence of writing at Advanced Level in the UK. What is more, that writing is connected to texts: ‘literary writing at A Level has focused on the single text, or on two texts studied comparatively’ (Hodgson and Harris, 2010, p.35). A single text is considered part of a larger ‘cultural and contextual study’ (Hodgson and Harris, 2010, p.36). The MC Advanced Level English in Malta is different because there is no comparative study, not even in the unseen text component. Otherwise, the MC Advanced Level English in Malta is modelled on the British format, as explained in Chapter 1. The ‘critical’ essay requires the student to argue and write a discursive ‘proposition’ by providing reference to the text. In the meantime, the focus in the United Kingdom shifted from a general and ‘holistic approach to the literary text’ to a more specific attention to ‘discrete ‘skills’ of interpretation and presentation’, which includes paying closer attention to ‘textual form’ (Hodgson and Harris, 2010, p.36).

As this section focuses on learning how to write, it can be suggested that the latter ‘requires cognitive and affective investments’ (Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh, 2004, p.3). Concerns are raised when there is no evidence of learning despite the teaching taking place. Back in 2001, Myhill advised there was the need to reconfigure the position of writing: ‘the time is ripe for a reconceptualization of how we teach and how students learn writing’ (p.14). The emphasis was on ‘how’ it is taught rather than ‘what’ is taught, while
drawing attention also to the issue of ‘how regularly writing is taught, in a context that devotes explicit attention to the writing itself’ (Myhill, 2001, p.14). The issue of time, or lack thereof, is an important consideration that my study explored as one of the factors that may have been inhibiting students’ progress in writing. Reference is made to this factor in a section on reading and writing challenges, and later on in feedback application (see Chapter 3). In the previous section, reference was made to the importance of metacognition and metalanguage in the area of revision.

Expectations of learning are at the core of learning how to write. These are often framed by two principles that many teachers embrace. ‘Practice makes perfect’ (Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh, 2004, p.5) implies that if students write often then they will learn how to write sufficiently well. However, this principle does not seem to account for the learning-to-write aspect which needs to precede the stage of writing practice. The second principle, ‘maximum task similarity’, sees students writing the same type of task on a regular basis (Rijlaarsdam and Van den Bergh, 2004). This does not always guarantee the quality of transfer. Despite the fact that students might imitate the style and format of a particular text, they might not always be able to adapt to other texts of a similar style but with different contexts or subject matters. This might be an issue with the task of writing essays on unseen texts, as shall be revealed in Chapter 5. To account for writing demands, Beach et al. (2006) suggest that the classroom could be more constructivist. This means that students would be given opportunities to ‘formulate answers for certain interpretations or applications of critical lenses’ (p.102). Cliff Hodges (2009) suggests that students could be encouraged to ‘engage in the interpretative process’ (p.275, 278). This could be made possible when texts chosen by the teacher and the activities set on the texts ideally ‘invite interpretation and enable pupils to remain firmly engaged with the poem’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.275, 278). For this purpose, it is advisable to ‘select readings that will work well…readings that satisfy other criteria’ (Campbell, 1998, p.22). Another suggestion is to introduce fiction as reading material before students write about unseen literary texts, so they would experiment with form. The fictional text would be chosen ‘based on how relevant the themes might be to them, given their general age and experience’ (Campbell, 1998, p.22). This reading stage of texts based on such themes would precede literary analysis which is more formal and stylised. Examples of adequate writing assignments are ‘content-based’ and ‘authentic’ tasks (Campbell, 1998, p.30). These suggestions
could foster students’ willingness to question their interpretations to literary texts and those of others.

When learning to write, Campbell (1998) advises teachers to be attentive to the different students’ needs, to ‘observe individual writers vigilantly in order to respond appropriately to their leaning processes’ (p.7). Similarly, Sautter (1991) believes that students could be mentored by encouraging them to think about topics or even choose their own, given that ‘students are proud of their work that is their own’ (Sautter, 1991, p.23). Activities that are aimed at helping students to learn and develop writing processes are ‘clustering, mapping, listing, outlining’ (Campbell, 1998, p.13). Other strategies that teachers can encourage during the writing lessons involve ‘summarising, paraphrasing, analysing an author’s approach or argument, [and] retelling something from another perspective’ (Campbell, 1998, p.13). The former set of activities are process-oriented, while the latter are product-oriented; ‘striking the balance between process and product pedagogy…[means] guiding students to interact with text’ (Campbell, 1998, p.13). The students might choose the writing processes according to the text.

Despite the above recommendations, there is the tendency to ‘teach to the exam’ which might be ‘narrowing down of pupils’ responses’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.280). This is often due to ‘time pressure’ combined with ‘the desire for pupils to achieve the highest possible grades in the examination (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.280). Hodgson and Harris (2010) claim that ‘the assessed essay [as] a monologic form of discourse’ might cause anxiety in students (p.37). A suggestion to minimise anxiety in students related to assessment is to provide them with feedback from an early stage. The feedback needs to be detailed and provide a breakdown or interpretation of academic language (Field and Kift, 2010). This highlights the connection between writing preparation and feedback provision, which my study explores further on. Moreover, determining whether anxiety affects reading and writing is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. The next section discusses writing challenges in relation to reading literary texts.

2.8 Writing Challenges

Writing is not an isolated activity and when students feel challenged by the act of writing, educators need to be aware of this and investigate the reasons. For instance, Raimes (1983) points out that a problem of communication affects writing and language learning. The elements of production (Myhill, 2001) and the complexity of writing (Kress, 1994),
make demands on students. The idea of process writing with many iterative cycles of drafting, revising, and editing, might be daunting for many students (Thompson, 2012). Moreover, the student is still developing cognitively, socially, and linguistically (Britton et al., 1975). Over time, these aspects and factors have contributed to the perception of writing as ‘a tortuous affair (Thompson, 2012, p.86).

Challenges of writing about an unseen text could be exacerbated by the fact that students are not always familiar with the context within which the texts have been written (Widdowson, 2003; Wharton, 2011). This is particularly the case when the texts are not usually written with the student in mind. There could be other reasons why students do not do so well or do not feel confident about writing. Lack of motivation and consistency in writing are two examples which concern both teachers and students. Fischer (2000) points out a distinction between the students’ readiness to participate during literature classes and their reluctance to eventually write about literature. There are also ‘differences between students’ classroom willingness to question literature, to explore its relationship to their own lives, and to make meaning out of what they read with their formal essays about literature’ (Fischer, 2000, p.5). This discrepancy needs to be addressed so that students’ willingness is not hampered. There are students who persevere despite such challenges. They do by attending classes consistently and getting the work done. However, their issue might be with ‘poor time management’ and ‘other study skills.’

As part of the process that goes into writing about literature, one has to bear in mind that students’ responses to literature through writing could be constrained by an additional two factors. According to Dixon and Brown (1984), ‘the first of these concerns social relations’ (p.223) between the writer and the reader. The student needs to be aware of the intended audience since ‘writing is…part of a broader process of interaction’ (Dixon and Brown, 1984, p.223). This is another reason to include collaborative writing: the students who write and then read each other’s work might benefit linguistically and cognitively (see 2.5.2.2).

The second constraint envisaged by Dixon and Brown (1984) is that the student might not be familiar with the format through which the content is presented. Students need to be guided to employ ‘an appropriate form for the further articulation of thoughts’ (Dixon and Brown, 1984, p.223). Bridging collaboration and appropriate format of writing, Cliff Hodges (2009) suggests that when the students share their writing by reading their text aloud, they become author and audience. This is connected to the idea that reading poetry
aloud ‘has roots in the oral tradition, and is aligned closely with music, dance and drama’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.261). When poems are read aloud, ‘its rhythms and rhymes can be appreciated differently’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.261). The process of reading aloud is valuable because the activity engages both reader and listener by creating ‘reciprocal companionship’ (Cliff Hodges, 2011, p.20). This collaborative element enables them to go beyond the text, as ‘the different contributions connect and react with one another in unpredictable ways’ (Cliff Hodges, 2002, pp.6-7). The result of hearing a text being read aloud might also ‘motivate the [students] to want to redraft’ (Cliff Hodges, 2002, p.7). These suggestions (collaboration by reading aloud) might help students avoid repeating ‘naïve models of writing’ which result in ‘an impoverishment of what the student has to offer’ (Dixon, 1984, p.225). The issue of whether students are to be presented with models has been discussed earlier, with those in favour and others against the idea of guided writing. Process writing is also conducive to help students articulate their thoughts and content in a structured manner.

Learning the basics of writing is supposedly seen to in the earlier stages of writing. However, at this study reveals, students who move on to higher education still struggle to get the basics right. Another issue is whether they are capable of writing about literature, an area that requires them to go beyond the basics. According to Blau (2003), when students’ essays ‘largely restate and sometimes misstate what we ourselves said in class’, then even educators ‘feel misplaced in [their] teaching assignment’ (p.153). When teachers do not know how to deal with students who do not succeed in fulfilling the basic writing standards, there is an anxiety about standards and how to achieve them (Myhill and Locke, 2007). Similarly, Dymoke (2012) remarked that when visiting schools in New Zealand, ‘There was a tangible air of anxiety about controlled assessments, unseen texts preparation and test results in each department visited’ (p.31).

Other issues that undermine well-intentioned pedagogic outcomes are reluctance to do the work and assignments completed half-heartedly (Sperling and Freedman, 1987; Myhill and Locke, 2007). In the latter situation, students are not interested in writing but in complying with the rules for the sake of obtaining a grade (Sperling and Freedman, 1987). Myhill and Locke (2007) underline writing as a daunting and ‘complex’ task that presents different challenges to writers or students of different ages (p.1). Time constraints and large amounts of marking papers might appear overwhelming and tiresome for the teacher too. Raimes (1983) suggests ways to handle this amount of work. For instance, one could consider using of checklists made up of criteria for essay writing,
and then responding to texts according to the criteria. Teachers could also invite students to read one another’s work and learn from one another’s writing and mistakes. However, Raimes (1983) advises that such checklists and activities need to be well-organised and monitored, such as by alerting students what they have to look out for and how to do so (p.148). Eventually, students could be trained how to become more self-critical and to learn how to self-assess.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter sought to present a number of areas pertaining to writing about literature and preparing students to read and respond to texts. It outlined certain writing challenges that have been reported in previous studies. The next chapter presents an overview of feedback practices. Definitions and types of feedback are discussed, as well as some processes of preparing for feedback. Feedback preferences and perceptions, as well as challenges to feedback application, are considered in light of the study’s research questions. Overall, the literature on feedback is rather general, which means that it does not specifically refer to or is always centrally related to writing about unseen literary texts. However, it is suggested that the aspects discussed in this chapter and the next could be applied to writing about such texts.

3.1 Introduction

The areas of discussion in relation to this chapter are: the types of feedback teachers give students on writing, students’ perception of feedback, and students’ reactions to their teachers’ comments or ‘corrections’. The sections of this chapter were recast in light of the main areas or codes that emerged from the data (see Chapter 4). The term ‘corrections’ used in the context of this research refers to the changes made by tutors on students’ writing at a language level. It is a common term used by teachers in the Maltese educational system and is defined by an exhaustive reading and rewriting of students’ work where sentence construction, word choice, spelling, and punctuation are focused on. As this study was concerned with the unseen literary text component, the feedback that was explored included reference to such ‘corrections’ carried out on students’ writing. The extent to which these ‘corrections’ were ‘usable’ as a type of feedback was also analysed. The review that follows presents an overview and discussion of different aspects of feedback.

3.2 Responding to Students’ Writing

Responding to students’ writing is central to teaching and lesson planning (Raimes, 1983; Marsh, 1992; Campbell, 1998; Beard, 2000). It has a reflective effect on tutors when devising lesson materials, and on students when preparing for future writing. It is suggested that responding to students’ writing should not happen simply at ‘the end of a teaching sequence’ because ‘the teacher’s response is to the finished product only’, which means that the teacher evaluates rather than ‘influences’ the writing (Raimes, 1983, p.139). Marsh (1992) similarly argues that when a teacher assesses a student’s writing by giving a mark, the former might feel ‘regretful and embarrassed’ upon realizing that the mark could ‘undermine the trust that was developing with the student’ (p.45). Yet, when a student hands in an assignment for assessment purposes, he or she expects the teacher to scrutinise work for mechanical errors and language use, and very few students expect the teacher to emphasise other central issues apart from those at sentence level (Campbell, 1998). The teacher needs to make students aware that responding to their writing also involves questioning the students’ purposes and aims in choosing what they have written.
Responding to content is as important as responding to language use. Beard (2000) acknowledges that while it is important to assess writing for spelling, vocabulary and sentence structure, he also suggests that such features are not to be assessed in isolation. Instead, ‘The significance of these features has to be considered in the light of what the writer is trying to achieve in writing, whom the writing is for and the genre that the writer is adopting’ (Beard, 2000, p.170). Responding to writing involves numerous stages which are often considered time-consuming by many teachers but can be handled with a small tutorial group of five to seven students. This process includes writing and re-writing three drafts, with the benefit that the writing task introduces an element of interaction between writer and reader (Raimes, 1983).

Before looking at how students react to teacher feedback, the features of such feedback are discussed. This applies particularly to the methods, tools and procedures that teachers employ. The impact of feedback on students’ writing is another consideration, one that this study discusses in relation to the students’ feedback preferences. Another facet of the teacher’s response to writing is the aim or focus of feedback. Whether the response focuses on the content or on the language will depend on certain task requirements, such as those pertaining to the unseen literary text. The next section explores the aspects of feedback, starting with definitions.

3.3 Definitions of Feedback
Giving and receiving feedback is intrinsic to writing skills development. Furthermore, the meanings and implications of feedback shape the way teachers provide it to students, as well as determine how it is received and utilized. Educational contexts regard feedback as very important in enhancing the development of skills despite the lack of precise definitions. Feedback is also connected to a motivation in learning (Dweck, 2000; Murtagh, 2014). For this reason, feedback can be thought of as a source of considerable influence on student learning and achievement (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). However, the lack of ample evidence of its washback effect on learning and writing renders it more difficult for feedback to be rated or assessed. For example, according to a student survey conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2007), most students (81%) rated a high score of satisfaction with their course. Only around half of them, however, rated feedback in terms of quality and timeliness.
In attempting a definition of feedback, one could consider its attributes. For instance, it could refer to specific information provided by tutors to their students about the performance of a task, or the aim might be geared towards enhancing future performance (Ur, 1996). Feedback may be used to locate and explain issues in writing that have emerged, or in order to point out areas for future development. The latter’s aim is for it to ‘feedforward’ (Walker, 2009; Price et al., 2011, p.880). The concept of feedforward entails ‘learning from feedback to inform future assignments’, in a way that the teacher’s suggestions and recommendations ‘can be utilised by the student to inform their efforts in future assessments’ (Orsmond et al., 2013, p.242). This notion is arguably underestimated or neglected in discussions on feedback.

Another definition of feedback focuses on ‘information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way’ (Ramaprasad, 1983, p.4). On this note, Sadler (1989) believes that ‘information about the gap between actual and reference levels is considered as feedback only when it is used to alter the gap’ (p.121). Considering what information is used to alter or close the gap also means considering the usability of feedback, as urged by Walker (2009). If Walker’s (2009) suggestion is aligned with the theories of Ramaprasad (1983) and Sadler (1989), then feedback comments are considered usable when they work to close the gaps. ‘Usable’ (Walker, 2009) comments for instance are designed to help the students reshape their writing to the desired level of task achievement.

Comments are more helpful as they explain why the students’ answer is incomplete, rather than merely by labelling what is wrong (Sadler, 1989). This is part of a constructivist perspective (tutors refer to it as constructive criticism in some cases) aimed at formative rather than summative feedback. Sadler (1989) states that engaging with formative feedback actively can help students in self-assessing and being more responsible for their development. Orsmond et al. (2013) corroborate this view by stating that ‘if students are not engaging with the feedback provided then it is less likely that improvements can be made in future’ (p.242). For students to be more engaged with the feedback, they could be guided to understand the perimeters and definitions within which it operates. According to Black and Wiliam (1998, p.2), ‘assessment’ activities conducted by teachers and their students could also include feedback; the latter would in turn serve to change or improve any teaching and learning aims. This form of assessment becomes ‘formative’ when it helps to adapt one’s teaching to meet the students’ needs. One aspect of effective formative feedback is the need to rearrange teaching and learning, ‘so a
significant aspect of any programme will be the ways in which teachers do this’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.3). My study suggests that one of the ‘ways’ is to tweak teacher talk time so that it includes more dialogues with students on their progress and success at feedback implementation.

Feedback could also involve ‘information provided after instruction that seeks to provide knowledge and skills or to develop particular attitudes’ (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.102). A suggested link is between feedback and learning, a ‘continuum’ where the two become ‘intertwined’ (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.82). For this, three steps in the form of questions are suggested: ‘how am I going?’, ‘where am I going?’, and ‘what to do next?’ (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.102). These questions lead to self-regulation as they shift the responsibility onto students, who become critics of their own work. Feedback given along a continuum may ‘serve different purposes’. This does not only include the ‘correction of errors, but is also ‘concerned with developing new ways of knowing’ (Price et al., 2011, p.880). It is suggested that formative feedback can be beneficial and lead to outcomes if students also learn to self-assess (Black and Wiliam, 1998). By being trained in self-assessment, ‘they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.7). However, investigations into feedback definitions indicate that at times, students’ sense of agency is reduced because they are merely receptacles of a prescribed system and agree with what is laid out in front of them (‘didactic teaching of prescribed content to pupils, working individually or competitively, was encouraged’, Hargreaves, 2011, p.2).

The criteria of feedback are also explored (Ivanic et al., 2000; Hyland, 2001; Mutch, 2003; Hyatt, 2005; Brown and Glover, 2006). Other proponents provide not only definitions but also ‘principles of good feedback’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Table 3.1 Principles of Good Feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p.7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good feedback:</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;</td>
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</table>
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

One proposition of good feedback is that it should be linked to performance goals, criteria and expected standards. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggest ‘conditions under which assessment supports students' learning’ (p.12). Most of these conditions are similar to Nicol’s (2010) 7, but below are the four that do not overlap. They address the regulation of time and effort more specifically. According to Gibbs and Simpson (2004, pp.12-15), the feedback conditions and activities support student learning if they:

1. Capture sufficient study time and effort (in and out of class)
2. Are spread evenly across topics and weeks
3. Lead to productive learning activity (deep rather than surface learning)
4. Communicate clear and high expectations.

‘Usable’ (Walker, 2009) feedback refers to those comments that students can understand, interpret, and adopt in future assignments. Such feedback comments would enable students to work on improve their writing by changing their self-perceptions (Walker, 2009). In the light of the principle of usability, one of the aims of this study was to investigate the type of comments that are considered useful in shaping future writing. The area of ‘usability’ is relatively untapped, as Walker (2009) observes that not enough analysis has been conducted on which comments are ‘usable’. In particular, Walker (2009) emphasizes the ‘nature’ and the ‘quality’ of feedback as two elements that have not been researched enough. MacKenzie (1974) and Cole et al. (1986) suggest working more on defining good feedback practice. Yet, according to Walker (2009), as far as published material is concerned, there are lacunae in research on the link between the comments on written assignments and students’ response to them. Similarly, there were some issues in locating research on feedback about writing (specifically on writing about unseen literary texts).

Despite the limitations, feedback is recognized as ‘a key element of the scaffolding provided by the teacher to build learner confidence and the literacy resources to participate in target communities’ (Hyland and Hyland, 2001, p.83). According to Brookhart (2010), feedback acts on cognitive and motivational levels. Cognitively, it provides students with information they could figure out where they have arrived in their
learning and where to head next. On a motivational level, most students develop or gain a sense of control over their own learning and feel more confident (Brookhart, 2010). In this way, feedback is not only an indicator of performance but a tool to boost students’ motivation and offer them a supportive classroom environment (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). It has been shown that feedback has a pronounced effect on student motivation and learning (Brown, 2001). To this end, teacher feedback can serve as a powerful tool to support students in the writing process.

Defining feedback also involves identifying students’ needs and adjusting the comments to them. Defining feedback is essential because through it both teachers and students can compare and contrast different writing pieces and trace patterns in writing. The sections that follow shall outline the types of feedback provided and the perceptions towards such feedback. The research that was conducted was partly aimed at establishing potential links between the type of feedback used by the teachers and the students’ perceptions and use of such feedback. Similar to the discussion of the literature in Chapter 2, the sections of this chapter were also partly informed by the results of the data collection and analysis, particularly the area on perceptions of feedback.

3.4 Types of Feedback

Before looking at the way students react to teacher feedback, it is necessary to analyse and discuss the types, features and stages of the two-way process of giving and receiving feedback. The type of feedback is usually contingent on format, so a differentiation emerges between written and spoken media. Feedback provided online or via a recording is an alternative medium, but the productive skills predominate in feedback provision. The type of feedback also refers to the language used, such as whether it is a comment on content or on form.

Formal feedback is provided mostly in writing (Price et al., 2011, p.881). Written feedback is ‘highly recommended’ as a ‘tried-and-true feedback strategy’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.122). By means of comments and ‘corrections’, tutors recommend changes and highlight problematic issues respectively. Once these suggestions are implemented, students would consequently work on improving upcoming pieces of writing. Permanence is another benefit as it means keeping a record of the comments (Paltridge et al., 2009; Price et al., 2011). According to Fox Tree and Clark (2013) and Honeycutt (2001), the written format can be used in email between peers. However, written feedback
is often limited and one-directional. Hence, it does not encourage communication and
dialogue, particularly when the teacher offers a verbal explanation that students do not
participate in, albeit listening to it (Price et al., 2011, p.882). It is suggested, however,
that teachers could create more opportunities for student-teacher dialogues through and
during feedback (Rust, O’Donovan, and Price, 2005). One recommendation is to consider
the rationale for good dialogue: ‘The dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be
thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that
all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas’ (Black and Wiliam,
1998, p.8). Harnessing feedback dialogues can benefit teachers, who would be able to
‘check students’ understanding’ while it would ‘give [them] opportunities to explain their
feedback, to give examples, and to explore possibilities for student improvement’ (Van
der Schaaf et al., 2013, p.228). The suggestion for more dialogue is not merely for the
student to seek improvement but also to ‘facilitate’ the teachers’ role in mentoring and
knowing that their students are thriving from their feedback.

There is the opposite argument, however, that a lack of dialogue can also present
benefits. This is the case of written feedback, which does not have to depend on
interaction and communication. In this case, ‘conversational openings and closings, [and]
politeness’ are not needed (Fox Tree and Clark, 2013, p.342). Yet, whether or not
interaction occurs, one issue that written feedback creates is a time lapse. A significant
amount of time goes by between the student submitting the work and receiving the
feedback, as the ‘writer does not know when [the] addressee will respond’ (Fox Tree and
Clark, 2013, p.343). To balance out the time lapse, spoken interaction may be considered.
Verbal feedback is also common in classes and tutorials that focus on writing.

Spoken feedback might have some benefits over the written medium. It offers
‘contemporality’ as the ‘production and comprehension take place in synchrony’. There
is also the possibility of ‘simultaneity’ which means that when ‘something is produced,
it is understood, and as understanding occurs, production is also possible’ (Fox Tree and
Clark, 2013, pp.341-342). One drawback is that it might require more time. It is stated
that ‘one-to-one conferences are extremely time-consuming and, in some teaching
situations, just not practical’ (Raimes, 1983, p.145). Other disadvantages of spoken
feedback include a lack of a ‘reviewable record of conversation’, or it might be
‘potentially less efficient because of social niceties’ (Fox Tree and Clark, 2013, p.343).
However, explaining students’ writing verbally means feedback could be more
immediate.
The time issue could be resolved by organizing ‘a conference of just a few minutes’ (Raimes, 1983, p.145). This could be included as feedback time that focuses on giving equal attention to the students. When setting group work, it is recommended that the students are organized in ‘a homogenous way’ so that there would not be ‘dominant members who may silence other members of the group’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.132). This may be related to difference in proficiency level, so grouping students according to similarity in level may offer them ‘specific content-focused feedback’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.132). Grouping students and organizing student-to-student feedback will also depend on the programme of study.

Despite the fact that written and verbal feedback may involve a top-down approach where the teacher explains and the student listens, feedback need not be ‘a unidirectional transmission of knowledge’ (Price et al., 2011, p.880). This occurs when there is more teacher-student interaction. Hence, the feedback environment may affect the type of feedback provided and received (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton, 2002). The language of feedback too has a part to play, as it might support ‘students to achieve goals to a greater extent than they would without peers or tutors’ (Merry and Orsmond, 2008, p.11). Another issue is the objective of the feedback, whether it is retroactive (looking at what has been written) or proactive (focused on what can be done to improve future writing).

There are other alternatives to written and verbal forms of feedback. Gould and Day (2013) support audio feedback despite the fact that this area is relatively ‘untapped’ (p.555). Yet, some studies (Ice et al. 2007; King, McGugan, and Bunyan, 2008; Emery and Atkinson 2009; Middleton, Nortcliffe, and Owens, 2009), suggest that audio feedback can be as informative and beneficial as spoken or written feedback. The focus on feedback in Gould and Day’s (2013) study was pragmatic because it was about students reaching the standards and requirements set by the course according to academic workloads. The premise for looking at audio feedback was a concern that students did not always carry over the feedback to future writing (Gould and Day, 2013). In an attempt to ascertain how audio feedback can be understood and utilized, Gould and Day (2013) suggest that the ‘detailed’ and ‘conversational’ style could enable students to understand more clearly how their work is being assessed (p.555). To begin with, audio feedback could include recommendations on how to improve the writing apart from signalling what the issues are. This is because audio feedback can offer more detail. For example, one minute of recorded feedback translates to around 100 words, which carry more detailed
information than the written medium (Emery and Atkinson, 2009). The level of detail also includes more than ‘mere words’ (Middleton et al., 2009). What is lost in the written format are the tone, expression, pronunciation, and emphasis (Rust, 2001). These features of intonation and emphasis within the audio feedback convey to students the importance of specific comments (Merry and Orsmond, 2008). In their study, Gould and Day (2013) reported that audio feedback had contributed to the students’ learning (92%) and had beneficial impact on their ‘final summative work’ (84%) (p.558). Students felt that the feedback was detailed and that the framework was supportive (88%). At the same time, Gould and Day (2013) pointed out that audio feedback may have had a less positive effect on some students. It might require a multi-dimensional means of communication that might not suit all students. However, Ice et al. (2007) state that students do feel it is more personalized and encourages engagement.

The feedback is tailor-made and indicates a level of support that does not come across as clearly in the written (Ice et al, 2007). This is because the audio addresses the student in real-time during marking, even though the student is not physically present at the time of marking. A step further than the spoken type of feedback, the audio format records the teacher’s reactions to the writing during the first reading. During spoken feedback, the teacher has to often go back to the written script and remember the feedback from the week before.

Another case study on an online feedback system investigated how teachers used a videoconferencing tool for feedback provision (Guichon, Bétrancourt, and Prié, 2012). The tool in question, Visu, was created as a web platform for ‘synchronous language teaching’ (Guichon et al., 2012, pp.184-185). As the outcome of a research and development project among computer scientists, language education and cognitive psychology specialists, the Visu platform was designed to host an interaction and introspection room (pp.184-185). According to Guichon et al. (2012), Visu ‘provides a dynamic timeline’ where teachers can ‘annotate by leaving simple or enriched written markers at relevant moments’. This allows them to ‘provide feedback without interrupting the flow of the conversation’ (Guichon et al., 2012, p.181). The verbal or written comments teachers offer also help to create a ‘learner friendly environment’ (Develotte, Guichon, and Vincent, 2010; Guichon et al., 2012). ‘Negative feedback’ is only provided when tutors need to alert the students of ‘a gap in their performance’ (Guichon et al., p.181). However, these issues are more pressing when the instruction is
long-distance. In the case of a school environment where the tutor can also meet with students, any negative feedback can be clarified face-to-face. The Visu case study involved upper-intermediate students learning French and it took place over seven online sessions. The teachers’ perceptions of their use of the tool during interaction and their definition of their role in the teaching situation (in relation to feedback) were recorded. Guichon et al. (2012) analysed these aspects in light of Long’s (1996) interaction hypothesis which deals with ‘understanding why conversational interaction can help develop learner language competence’ (p.182). Long’s (1996) hypothesis is linked to notions of ‘negotiation for meaning’ and ‘negative feedback’, and posits that the latter that is provided during negotiation can aid language development (p.414). Some of the above issues emerged in the questions on feedback in my study. The idea of including audio feedback to boost the spoken and written formats is also discussed (see Chapters 5 and 6).

3.5 Preparing for Feedback: Modes and Gradations

Once students have presented their written response, teachers begin preparing for feedback. It is not only what type of feedback is given that could be considered. How the feedback is given might also influence the way students use it for future writing tasks / assignments.

Before feedback is provided, students can be guided to write in four modes as explained: controlled, cued, guided and free (Dangerfield, 1991, p.193). In the first instance, students are closely monitored by having to complete exercises such as multiple choice. This is not relevant to writing essays. The second form, cued, would involve the students using language that is given to them to construct sentences (very similar to models). The third and fourth feedback categories are better suited for writing about unseen texts. The guided type of writing would entail giving students details of the content and then they would have to write according to their personal styles. In the free category, students would be given the subject of writing such as a title or text on which to base their response. They would be less restricted in how to structure their response. When writing about unseen literary texts, students are guided by means of a rubric consisting of aspects to include in their ‘critical appreciation’ of the text. However, their response is in the form of a commentary so the free form of writing is also adopted.

The type of feedback provided by tutors also involves finer gradations. This is
either in the form of full teacher correction as opposed to indication but not correction (Dangerfield, 1991, p.195). The former involves a detailed correction of all the mistakes. This is the most common strategy used, but the question is whether it is the most effective and to what extent does it encourage students to reread the highlighted mistakes. Among those who are sceptical about over-correcting pieces of writing is Truscott (1996) who doubts that giving feedback through correction is useful. He even suggests that it can be detrimental to students’ development and confidence. Yet, it is debatable whether a ‘correction-free approach’ is a better alternative. It is highly improbable that teachers would be inclined to adopt the latter method, even when giving feedback on essays about unseen literary texts. What is more, if the students expect correction to take place, then a ‘correction-free approach’ runs counter to their demands (Truscott, 1996).

Teachers and students need not restrict themselves to a ‘correction-free’ approach. Another method is to indicate the mistakes indirectly. The teacher circles or underlines the mistake without correcting overtly. Ideally, the students would ask for an explanation or be encouraged to identify the mistakes on their own. Doing the latter would help them avoid making the same mistake in future writing. For this purpose, Ferris and Roberts (2001) suggest using a correction code that would enable the students to auto-correct. Utilizing such a system over one that merely highlights the errors without a code, or not marking errors at all, can guide students towards identifying their own errors.

Another distinction is that between formal and informal feedback (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.120). The latter involves comments that the teacher provides students with during class time while the students are writing. Formal feedback, on the other hand, is provided when the writing task has been done ‘outside of class’, and the teacher collects and responds to the work in ‘written form’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.120). Both of them are considered valuable in academic writing contexts. Black and Wiliam (1998) present feedback either as directive (summative) or facilitative (formative). Whereas directive feedback entails correcting students’ essays, facilitative feedback is there to guide students to address their errors or issues in future writing. A similar system that contrasts feedback builds on previous research (Dangerfield, 1991; Silver and Lee, 1997; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). The two methods are described as direct feedback (involving ‘explicit written correction’) or indirect feedback (the errors are indicated through a code or underlining) (Srichanyachon, 2012, p.10).

The second method is similar to Black and Wiliam’s (1998) facilitative (or formative feedback), and to Dangerfield’s (1991) indication but not correction. It also
overlaps with the ‘structured feedback’ proposed by Silver and Lee (1997), and by Ferris and Roberts (2001). By adopting a correction code in the form of ‘structured’ feedback, Silver and Lee (1997), as well as Ferris and Roberts (2001) found that students did try to edit their errors and improve their writing based on the guidelines. Their research suggests that the students preferred the use of codes because the feedback is more understandable and the effort to improve is more accessible. Structured feedback boosts effective error correction when it is provided in a purposeful and guided manner. Students are trained to become discerning in editing their work before they hand it in. Another aim of this method is to encourage students to become more responsible for their learning, more independent and ultimately more self-critical whether it is before, during or after they write. Direct feedback occurs when the teacher provides more appropriate words, whereas indirect feedback identifies the error type but requires the student to make the specific change. Indirect feedback is the preferred type both for teachers and students. (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.121; Ferris, 2002).

Indirect feedback can also foster student autonomy and allow students to think ahead for future writing. Similarly, Miceli (2006) contends that indirect feedback is meaningful because it enables students to work on certain areas of writing. Srichanyachon (2012) confirms that students are better able to claim responsibility for their writing through indirect feedback, as they engage in self-revision. However, indirect feedback is effective if and when it is integrated with revision. Srichanyachon (2012) argues that indirect feedback is more ‘effective’ and ‘appropriate’ than direct feedback when it aims at addressing ‘students’ long-term writing development’ (p. 11). It is suggested that indirect feedback is most effective in the case of academic writing, as students are guided how to ‘construct new understanding about their writing for themselves’. This leads them to a process where they ‘can reflect and really try to understand what choices they have made’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.122). Similar to direct and indirect feedback are the processes of verification and elaboration. The former involves a ‘simple judgement of whether an answer is correct or not’ whereas elaboration ‘may indicate what the correct answer should be through the provision of relevant cues’ (Murtagh, 2014, p.518). It is suggested that feedback includes both when possible.

Direct feedback can prove beneficial in relation to language use and could even be the students’ preferred form of feedback. For instance, Ferris (2002) claims that students use direct feedback more regularly compared to indirect types because it entails fitting in the tutor’s recommendation into the next pieces of writing. Despite supporting
indirect feedback, Miceli (2006) speaks in favour of the direct approach when the target is to edit vocabulary and syntactic features. This makes direct feedback most appropriate for ‘untreatable’ errors, so the students would require their tutor to ‘correct’ sentence structure and word choice (Ferris, 2002). It helps if the teacher clarifies the meaning of the students’ writing when giving direct feedback. Any conflict between the teacher’s response and the student’s reaction to the response may result in students resisting revision or viewing the teacher’s feedback as ‘invalid’ or ‘incorrect’ (Srichanyachon, 2012, p.11). Meanwhile it is recommended that students are trained in ‘how to interpret feedback, how to make connections between the feedback and the characteristics of the work they produce, and how they can improve their work in the future’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.122). In situations where students manifest ‘weak English skills’, the teacher could alert the student that direct feedback would be given, and then provide students with ‘clear explanations about grammatical errors’ (Srichanyachon, 2012, p.12). For classes with students of mixed abilities, it is recommended that direct feedback is used alongside indirect feedback. This is because ‘it cannot be assumed that when students are given feedback they will know what to do with it’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.122). For this, Lalande (1982) supports the use of a correction code to encourage problem-solving skills in students. Using a correction code helps to clarify the comments received (Frodesen 2001).

Hyland (1998, 2001) identifies three feedback gradients: praise, criticism and advice. Praise can be defined as the act of giving credit to positive features of writing. This is expressed either through written or verbal feedback. Weaver (2006) argues that praise and encouragement could improve the students’ confidence, and push them to be take responsibility for their writing. Level of detail in feedback could also be helpful when coupled with one of the above. Field and Kift (2010) suggest that detailed feedback can support students who might feel stressed and anxious when writing. To support effective written feedback, positive feedback is perceived as ‘positive reinforcement’ whereas negative feedback is interpreted as ‘punishment’ (Brookhart, 2010, p.11). Hyland’s (1998, 2001) second gradient, criticism, is usually perceived negatively by students. To counteract this perception, the teachers’ language when giving criticism could be worded in such a way that it would help students become more conscious of language use (Silver and Lee, 2007). The aim is that critique is perceived as positive even though it has negative connotations. Students could be made aware that they are not being berated for making mistakes, but they are being offered constructive criticism in the form of written
comments or oral feedback. Examples of these comments will be discussed (see Chapters 5 and 6).

The third gradient, advice, refers to those comments that merge praise with criticism. Advice can still be perceived ambiguously, however, if criticism overrides praise. This can be mitigated if advice is ‘less explicitly critical’ (Silver and Lee, 2007, p.7). In their study, advice as feedback had led to revision in 80.30% of the cases. Criticism only prompted 48.8% of the participants to revise. However, only 1.51% of revision took place in praise as feedback (Silver and Lee, 2007, p.11). Advice as feedback enables the teacher to be perceived as ‘a mentor or a facilitator rather than a critic or an evaluator’ (Silver and Lee, 2007, p.16). On the other hand, using criticism as feedback made the teacher seem ‘judgemental’ and ‘harsh’ and students would ‘feel unworthy about themselves and their writing skills, and made them lose their confidence’ (Silver and Lee, 2007, p.16). However, this does not mean that criticism always has this effect on students. On the contrary, there are students who feel that being criticized motivates them to work more. As Ferris (1997) suggests, ‘teachers should not abandon constructive criticism but should place it side-by-side with comments of encouragement’ (p.49).

Ashwell (2000) states that combining critique and praise is preferable than emphasising errors only. A balanced approach can boost students’ motivation and confidence while prompting them to edit their writing before handing it in. Teachers would structure their comments as though they were ‘giving directions that the student can follow, step by step’ (Raimes, 1983, p.143). Any feedback provided would be practical, meaningful and task-related.

An alternative way of helping students to understand feedback is through peer feedback (Falchikov, 1995). During peer response, learners act ‘as a source of information and interactants for each other’ so that ‘roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor or editor’ are adopted by the students, who learn to work on ‘commenting and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.128). Students would then give one another recommendations and, before the essay is handed in to the teacher, they can edit or revise their work based on those recommendations. Similar to peer review, this approach has the added advantaged of fostering student autonomy and independence (Dangerfield, 1991). There are finer distinctions of peer feedback (adapted from Paltridge et al., 2009, pp.130-131):
Table 3.2: Gradations of Peer Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The prescriptive stance</th>
<th>The reviewer imposes their own view of how essays should be written. Inherent in this is the reviewer’s belief in what is right or wrong about academic writing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The collaborative stance</td>
<td>The reviewer attempts to view the text according to the textual aims of the author. It takes account of issues an author may have and is more likely to make suggestions in a tentative way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interpretive stance</td>
<td>The reviewer rewrites the text to reflect their own interpretation of the topic. The focus is on personal meaning and is likely to involve personal elaboration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is advisable that the students are informed about the procedures and potential shortcomings of this type of feedback. For peer feedback to work well, the classroom environment has to provide support (Burke and Pieterick, 2010, p.64). Peer feedback can be less formal and ‘less threatening’ because it is ‘dialogic in nature’ and motivates students to be more communicative about their work, as students feel more at ease with one another (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.127). However, ‘students must feel comfortable and trust one another in order to provide honest and constructive feedback’ (Burke and Pieterick, 2010, p.64). This is because peer feedback could make students more conscious of their writing, and they may also be embarrassed to share their work. Despite this, the possibility of having other readers than the tutor might make writing more realistic while considering the role of revision. This would indirectly force them to be more careful when writing the first draft but in those cases where students would not be able to identify their own mistakes, the other students might spot them and mark them for correction. While teacher feedback helps by ‘reflecting the academic writing teacher’s expertise’, peer feedback is ‘a useful addition to the writing process’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.127). The consideration of peer feedback means that it complements teacher feedback and does not intend in any way to replace it.

However, the need for training in peer feedback is recommended (Liu and Hansen, 2005). Preparation is required by mentoring students ‘in the strategies’ that are involved as ‘giving useful feedback is a skill that develops over time’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.131). Students could be given the opportunity to work in small groups, and start by giving feedback on exemplars of written work, before proceeding to provide feedback one another’s work (Blair and McGinty, 2012, pp.8-9). Leading them to peer feedback gradually and with proper preparation makes students ‘aware of the rationale for the use of peer feedback’, by providing them with ‘clear guidelines for providing constructive
feedback’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.131). For example, students can be given the same academic text to respond to and ‘by following a model or form’, they would comment on ‘certain areas such as the content and organization of the text’. This does not mean correcting ‘surface errors’ as in peer correction but ‘concentrating on ‘deeper-level issues’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, pp.131-132).

More studies in the connection between peer feedback and revision have indicated that students tend to revise their work more when peers provide them with suggestions (Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Mendonca and Johnson, 1994). However, this is conducive in those situations where students are trained to give peer feedback (Min, 2006). Moreover, revisions are successful when students expressed willingness to make them (Liu and Hansen, 2005). In terms of the above gradations of peer feedback for revision purposes, it is suggested that the collaborative stance is most helpful (Paltridge et al., 2009). Hence, there are a number of many variations on oral and written feedback, from audio feedback to creating an online portal. Peer feedback has its benefits too, such as promoting revision.

### 3.6 Focus of Feedback

When reading and responding to students’ work, teachers may discuss the focus of feedback before students write and submit their essays. Ur (1996) urges that students can benefit from knowing and being aware of the feedback, and the role it plays. The feedback system would be discussed so that teachers help students understand the role feedback plays (Srichanyachon, 2012). For instance, teachers would inform students that feedback would focus on language organization in some pieces, whilst attention to content might be given precedence in other essays. In terms of the unseen literary text, what is meant by content is one or more of the following: themes and motifs, narrative voice, characterization, literary terms and devices, rhyme and rhythm, tone and mood, setting and era. Moreover, focusing on specific areas when marking can help prevent ‘over-correction’ so ‘teachers can tell students that for a particular piece of writing they will be assessed on language form or organisation and presentation or on content’ (Venancio Faleiros, 2008, p.96). It is also suggested that content is at times more important in writing, particularly when ‘the ideas or events that [are] written about [are] significant and interesting’ (Ur, 1996, p.170). Organization and presentation follow (‘whether the ideas were arranged in a way that was easy to follow and pleasing to read’) and it is only
at the end that language issues (the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation) are considered.

It is suggested that feedback on academic writing is provided earlier on during course planning. In connection to this, Weaver (2006) investigates whether students are prepared or guided to understand and use feedback. As the prevalence of responses indicates that it is not the case, Hounsell’s (1987) and Ramsden’s (1992) views are corroborated by Weaver (2006), who states that ‘students who do do not yet share a similar understanding of academic discourse as the tutor would subsequently have difficulty in understanding and using the feedback’ (p. 380). Hence, when students understand the teacher’s comments but they do not know how to use them, the far-reaching benefits of feedback are lost. Instead, when the tutor clarifies and explains the purpose and focus of feedback, there is a better chance that students might modify their work (Wojtas, 1998). This would prompt teachers ‘to explain to their students how they will provide them with feedback’, and what type of ‘verbal and / or written responses to their work’ they will give them (Paltridge, 2009, p.120). An aspect of my research is connected to whether and when informing students of the focus of feedback beforehand can be beneficial. In view of the unseen literary text, this study also sought to investigate whether establishing a feedback focus before writing would be more beneficial to students.

One drawback of informing students beforehand is that it may influence their writing. For instance, if students know that their work will not be assessed for grammar in a particular essay, it could indirectly make them less cautious about language organization and the same holds for content. Overemphasizing an area should not occur at the expense of another. At the same time, having a specific focus could lessen the need to correct everything, which is not always the best and most effective option. Irrespective of the method used, it is recommended that teachers ‘help the writer see what to do next’ (Raimes, 1983, p.143).

Knowing the focus of feedback beforehand may yield different types of revision while writing. For instance, when students are asked to revise structure and form, such as cohesive links and grammatical accuracy, there is more concrete evidence of acting on teacher feedback (Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Leki, 1990). However, when students are advised to revise their text by improving their arguments, clarity of purpose and analytical skills, then the feedback on these areas does not feed into the assignment as directly as the language-oriented areas. The focus of feedback could be agreed on before writing
takes place, but would still need to be reinforced once the tutor reads the assignment. The focus of feedback would be discussed during the feedback session. In light of the questions ‘What kind of feedback is provided by teachers?’ and ‘What is the effect of teacher feedback on student writing?’, I investigated the methods used by teachers during tutorials and seminars.

3.7 Usability of Feedback

Usable feedback is defined as those comments, recommendations, or revisions which students can actively transfer to future writing (Walker, 2009). In relation to usability, there is a distinction between retrospective gap-altering and future gap-altering types of feedback. The former involves addressing a gap manifested in the work that had been assessed while the latter means that students can use the feedback to alter or even ‘close’ the gaps that may reoccur in upcoming written assignments (Walker, 2009). Future gap-altering could be more useful to students ‘as they look beyond the assignment…to future work’ (Walker, 2009, p.68). To address any gaps, students must receive comments that would enable them to do so. Before Walker (2009) reshaped the type of feedback into a specific system, she consulted other classification systems that define aspects of feedback usability. Among them were Brown and Glover (2006), whose system Walker (2009) ascertained to be the most adequate because it comes closest to the aims of usability. Walker (2009) argues that every comment is coded in terms of content development or skills development (see table below; adapted from Walker, 2009, pp.68-69):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.3: Six categories of feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments that relate to the substance of the answer, to the appropriateness of what the student has chosen to include, to the quality and/or accuracy of the material, to omissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills development</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments about the structure of the answer (whether text, diagram or mathematical argument), about whether the question has been properly addressed, about the student’s communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivating comments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments in the form of praise, encouragement and other designed to motivate the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>De-motivating comments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using harsh, judgmental language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comments as a resource</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A reference to a resource the student could use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The content and skills development categories can be further subdivided into three codes.
This sub-classification is known as ‘depth’ in Brown and Glover’s (2006) scheme. Each comment is coded according to whether it is indicating content or skills issues, correcting them, or providing correction alongside an explanation (Walker, 2009).

The classification system relates to four essential components of usable feedback on assignments, based on Ramaprasad’s definition of feedback (1983) mentioned earlier, and on an analysis by Black and Wiliam (1998). They are: information about the student’s knowledge of, understanding of or skill in a topic, information about the desired knowledge, understanding or skill, a comparison of the student’s knowledge, understanding or skill with the desired knowledge, understanding or skill, leading to information about some sort of a gap; and a way in which this information can be used to reduce or close the gap. (pp.47-8). The classification offered by Brown and Glover (2006) includes coding motivating comments further according to whether they are: an indication of something praiseworthy; an amplification relating to the praise; or an explanation of why the element of the work being praised is good.

Walker (2009) questions the classification of comments and how they relate to retrospective gap-altering and future gap-altering feedback. The aim is to demonstrate whether giving feedback on skills and content development with an explanation is more effective than giving comments without one. Other questions relate to the usability of feedback on skills development and on giving motivating comments (Walker, 2009, p.70). In relation to this aspect, I aimed to investigate the type of feedback that was being provided to students and whether the comments affected their future writing.

Questions that are linked to the usability of comments concern the two contrasting types of feedback mentioned earlier. On retrospective gap-altering feedback, the issue is whether the content and skills development comments with an explanation are more readily usable than those without an explanation. In relation to future gap-altering feedback (Walker, 2009), the question is whether skills development comments are more readily usable and whether motivating comments with an explanation will be more applicable than those without an explanation. My study takes these aspects in consideration when asking participants about feedback usability. Another strand of teacher feedback and usability is linked to the reliability and validity of the comments or corrections provided.

The effect of teacher written feedback on students’ writing skills can be investigated by reviewing students’ writing directly and considering students’ reaction to their teachers’ feedback (Silver and Lee, 2007). Some students are daunted by the process
And to them the teacher is merely an evaluator and assessor of their work. These students might have a lower self-esteem and may not find teacher feedback useful as they come to associate it with poor proficiency in writing (Ziv, 1984). Moreover, Barrass (1982) points out that the first thing that students look at when the work is returned to them is the mark, which is a logical reaction that indicates how close they are to expected standards. However, there might be a disconnect between feedback and usability if the students’ focus is solely placed on marks and grades. Whereas marks do ‘inform students about their individual performance’, they do not provide support or guidance because they ‘barely exhibit any of the characteristics of feedback described as beneficial’ (Harks et al., 2014, p.272). Instead, it is contended that ‘planned’ and ‘specific’ feedback ‘is more likely to influence student performance’ than marks alone, or feedback which is ‘general or haphazard’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.120). Process-oriented feedback has ‘a more positive indirect effect on students’ interest and achievement change’, when compared to grade-oriented feedback (Harks et al., 2014, p.284).

Traditionally, it has been pointed out that teachers’ feedback on students’ writing focuses on content and language mistakes. Even if this is the case, it is advised that the type of feedback ‘should be done during the process of producing drafts of academic writing, not just at the end of the process’ (Paltridge, 2009, p.121). This would lead to better revisions (Paltridge, 2009; Ferris, 2002). The next section explores students’ feedback preference and perceptions.

### 3.8 Feedback Dialogues, Preferences, and Perceptions

Feedback can lead to a dialogue on writing and an exchange of ideas between students and their teachers (Chi, 1999). Researchers are invested in harnessing the dialogue between teachers and students and the potential of feedback for writing development (Hargreaves, 2011). Such a dialogue is appreciated by students while it also reflects the teachers’ level of engagement and commitment towards students’ writing. It leads to different perceptions of teacher feedback and different outcomes of revision on the students’ behalf. Dialogue can be used to benefit student learning in a feedback-dialogue process (Blair and McGinty, 2012). However, the indications are that in general, feedback is a top-down approach between teachers and students, and leads to less dialogue. It is suggested that teachers and students try to build ‘feedback-dialogues’ or ‘collaborative discussions about feedback which enable shared understandings and subsequently
provide opportunities for further development based on the exchange’ (Blair and McGinty, 2012, p.2). Dialogue for feedback purposes has also been advocated as a preferred but not often practised technique (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Nicol, 2010). To this end, I investigated the type of feedback that students preferred and felt encouraged by, as opposed to those comments or remarks that highlighted their faults and discouraged them from writing. Negotiating support through feedback is also discussed (see Chapters 5 and 6).

According to Saito (1994) and Zhang (1995), written feedback is preferred by students to other forms of feedback, such as the spoken and student-to-student (peer). It seems that in higher education is it more likely for verbal feedback to be side-tracked in favour of written feedback. While the latter might be useful for the detail it provides, it tends to sever the potential of ‘talk’ as part of the teacher-student feedback process (Blair and McGinty, 2012). Similarly, Nicol (2010) prompts that ‘higher education is squeezing out dialogue with the result that written feedback, which is essentially a monologue, is now having to carry much of the burden of teacher–student interaction’ (p.503).

An alternative situation is that which bridges the two types of feedback. Emery and Atkinson (2009) found that students favoured audio feedback to the written medium, because the latter ‘made a lot more sense and could decipher where and what could be improved’ (p.3). In relation to the type of feedback that might result in effective changes, there seems to be a preference for clarification and grammatical corrections (Ferris, 1997). At the same time, it is contended that feedback on content and expression of ideas is as important as grammatical feedback. In this case, students are eager to receive feedback on what are defined as global issues (related to organization, purpose and content) as well as on local issues (related to grammar, sentence construction and choice of vocabulary) (Straub, 1997). In the latter’s study, students preferred comments that included detailed explanations and constructive advice, together with open-ended questions. This can be related to what Ur (1996) remarks about the importance of providing comments on content apart from those on grammatical errors.

Studies (Reed and Burton, 1985; Daiker, 1989; Straub, 1997) indicate that students prefer positive feedback and constructive criticism rather than comments that only emphasise the more problematic features of their writing. Then there are those students who prefer constructive criticism mainly but do not mind receiving positive feedback either (Radecki and Swales, 1988; Enginarlar, 1993). According to Burkland and Grimm (1984) alternating between constructive criticism and praise can be
motivating for students. However, words of praise and encouragement need to be couched in realistic terms, and must be authentic and credible (Brophy, 1981; Fitz and Driscoll, 1989). At the same time, constant negative feedback would not help to better the situation but could lead to more bad writing (Cleary, 1990). It is advisable for teachers to use reflective practices when providing feedback, whilst avoiding the use of comments such as ‘awkward’, ‘clumsy expression’, ‘neat work’, ‘good’ (Foley, 1998, p.265), as these are not beneficial in underlining the weaknesses and strengths of students’ writing. The issue of praise as feedback has been discussed earlier (see 3.4).

Despite the developments in research on feedback, it is claimed that research on student perception on feedback is not as extensive (Weaver, 2006). In view of this, a study was conducted to investigate the link between the feedback received, students’ perception of the feedback and the extent to which such feedback contributes to a student-oriented learning approach. Weaver (2006) questions whether students value feedback and whether it is as effective as hoped. The results yielded from her study demonstrate that ‘students wholeheartedly recognise the value of feedback in improving their learning, but their comments imply that feedback is not as effective as it could be’ (Weaver, 2006, p.390). Weaver (2006) also asked students to indicate their perceptions by rating the types of feedback given by tutors. In general, students were confident that they understood the comments. However, they expressed reservations on the clarity of the feedback and its connection to assessment criteria, learning outcomes, and whether the mark was justified by the comments. Differences have been reported between teachers’ and students’ perceptions as a ‘mismatch’ leading to ‘confusion’ and ‘frustration’ for both groups (Price et al., 2011, p.887). One reason is that teachers and students do not communicate or share their views on feedback. It is pointed out that ‘teachers’ perceptions of students, therefore, may not always match the students’ own perceptions’ (Cliff Hodges, 2010, p.102). Research on perceptions of feedback was one of the strands that emerged from my study (see Chapters 5 and 6).

3.9 The Teacher’s Role in Students’ Perception of Feedback

Students consider the teacher’s role and comments to be crucial to their writing development. According to Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Leki (1991), students anticipate and even ask for teachers to explain the errors. They might be discouraged or even dissatisfied if this does not occur. Students find feedback useful when it leads to effective changes and improvement in writing. However, in the local context of this study it cannot
be assumed that this is always the case. It cannot be assumed that the feedback being
provided is actually feeding into their development. While it may be and it is hoped that
feedback does feed into future work, there needs to be an investigation that yields
answers.

Studies that compare teacher beliefs and students’ perception reveal a divergence
in relation to the role and effectiveness of feedback (Li and De Luca, 2012). If the teacher
holds certain positions on feedback that the student is unaware of, or that are not aligned
with students’ views, then feedback could be less effective than intended, irrespective of
the time and effort spent on providing it (Li and De Luca, 2012, p.3). This aspect
underlines the need to know how similar or different the students’ and teachers’
perceptions on feedback are in a classroom setting. This also highlights the teacher’s role
in the feedback process.

It is argued that students’ perceptions (about their teachers’ feedback) may
impinge on feedback effectiveness when ‘teacher feedback is mediated through students’
perceptions, i.e., their personal assumptions about the content of the received feedback’
(Van der Schaaf et al., 2013, p.229). What this means is that students’ perceptions may
condition the way they ‘interpret’ their teachers’ feedback and, in turn, may shape how
they react to the feedback. Hence, ‘for feedback to be effective it is essential that students
hold positive perceptions about the written or verbal feedback received’ (Van der Shaaf
et al., 2013, p.229). For positive perceptions to be enhanced, students could be
encouraged to take the role of participants and agents in the feedback process. The
teacher’s role would be to help students to become more aware of their perspective, which
Hargreaves (2011) claims is an area in need of further research. This can be linked to the
concept of student voice, which my study aimed to explore, parallel with an investigation
into teacher feedback and how it can benefit students’ future writing.

Teacher positioning may vary according to schools and cultural practices, though
in Malta the figure of the teacher as the main provider of feedback prevails. The latter is
the case when students are accustomed to rely on the teacher from primary school up to
post-16 level of education. By the time students reach post-16 schooling, they would be
rather passive and dependent on their teacher’s guidance.

Being dependent on the teacher for feedback, however, is neither right nor wrong.
The point is to stress that such a position adopted by secondary and post-16 school
teachers in Malta has been the case for many years. However, there are efforts to shift the
balance onto creating a more student-oriented classroom, particularly in the secondary
school environment (e.g. with a new programme focusing on learning outcomes). In light of this, the tutorial sessions at the study’s post-16 school targeted this aim, by providing students with more individual attention while encouraging them to be more communicative and less dependent on the teacher.

3.10 Challenges of Applying Teacher Feedback to Future Work

Similar to reading and writing challenges, there are some issues when it comes to students’ attempts to apply teacher feedback to future work. The timing of feedback is a main point, particularly the time lapse in between handing in the work and being provided with feedback (Gould and Day, 2013). Time constraints might also impinge on the regularity of writing. Such time constraints or lapses could lead to a lack of consistency, which might be another barrier to the application of feedback. This could also be termed as not being able to remember feedback. If students do not remember the feedback long enough, then they would not be able to resolve the errors that keep cropping up in every essay. This may be related to the issue that students might not appreciate how comments on one writing assignment may help them in later pieces (Duncan, 2007). This does not mean that students do not go back to previous feedback or suggestions provided by their teachers. However, as Handley et al. (2011) question: ‘do students experience a positive outcome of being able to understand and then apply feedback to other assignments? Or does lack of apparent transferability encourage a behavioural dis-engagement, such as not bothering to collect formal, written feedback in the future?’ (p.552). My study attempted to shed light on such questions and issues by exploring students’ understanding and application of feedback.

Despite students’ efforts to revisit the feedback provided to them, they are not always successful in using it (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling, 2005; Carless, 2006). Research has revealed that there is a connection between students’ learning and their perceptions of feedback, which may be affecting the way students reflect on it and use it (Evans and Waring, 2011, p.185). One argument is whether there is a discrepancy between what teachers think students are doing when attempting to apply the feedback, and what students are really doing (Orrell, 2007). Research on feedback application has indicated that, in general, ‘students do not always understand the comments they receive’ (Walker, 2009, p.68). More specifically, Weaver’s (2006) analysis of students’ written work highlights four thematic elements of feedback that are considered ‘unhelpful’ in
improving learning: comments that are ‘too general or vague’, those that ‘lack guidance’; comments that ‘focus on the negative’, and those that are ‘unrelated to assessment criteria’ (p.379). To this end, it is suggested that teachers provide structured explanations and advice that would help students to not only understand but also to use teacher feedback (Weaver, 2006). In a comparative study analysing expectations of assessment, the importance given to students’ understanding of the assessment specifications was highlighted and reported: ‘Almost all students (96.8%) agreed that an awareness of the marking criteria would be beneficial and 83% predicted that they would consult relevant criteria when approaching an assignment’ (Surgenor, 2013, p.295).

In relation to feedback, more examples of ‘unhelpful’ comments are those that focus too specifically on a particular writing task but are not useful when students attempt to transfer them to new writing (Carless, 2006). A lack of dialogue on feedback between teachers and students may also hamper the latters’ response to feedback (Crisp, 2007). The importance of dialogue has been discussed (see 3.7). Moreover, Hattie and Timperley (2007) posit that feedback should not guide students towards ‘unspecified goals’ (p.101) even when it is assessment-oriented. Instead, the outcomes can be clarified with students. If the feedback is not being applied, it might be because it is not connected to assessment outcomes, so the goals are restricted to specific tasks rather than skills. Despite being inclined to ‘do more…’ (Hattie and Timperley 2007, p.101), students do not know what they are meant to do or how they are meant to do it.

3.11 Conclusion
This chapter aimed to examine different facets of feedback, from types and formats, to perceptions and preferences. Similar to writing challenges, the last section on challenges to feedback application was central to this study. The next chapter presents the methods and tools that I used to research the issues on writing and feedback, which are consequently discussed in these last two chapters. In an attempt to explore concerns and aspects of writing and feedback, a number of research questions were posed, researched through a grounded theory methodology, developed into findings, and discussed in consideration of the literature reviewed.
Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction: Investigating Students’ Writing and Teachers’ Feedback Practices at a Post-16 School in Malta

This study investigated writing about unseen literary texts and feedback practices at post-16 level. The overall aim was to explore how students were provided with teacher feedback on their writing (essays about unseen texts), whether they were utilising it, and whether this feedback was helping them in future work. In particular, this chapter explores and analyses the methods and approaches that were used to investigate the areas of writing and feedback. The type of research (qualitative) and paradigm (interpretivist) are explained. To this end, the study attempted to answer and discuss the following research questions:

1. How are students prepared for reading and writing about unseen literary texts at a post-16 school in Malta?
2. How are students provided with feedback on written essays (about unseen literary texts)? (When and what type of feedback?)
3. How do students perceive their teachers’ reading and writing preparation methods, and how do they make use of such methods (or attempt to)? How are the following perceived by students: literary criticism, ‘appreciation’, and the examination?
4. How do students perceive their teachers’ feedback methods and how do they apply the feedback (or attempt to)?
5. What are the reading and writing challenges that prevent students from applying their teachers’ feedback?

The section on grounded theory explains how and why I conducted research in the way I did. Prior to data collection, I include a section on the school’s context where I conducted semi-structured interviews and observations. On data collection, I discuss the creation of the interview questions, the selection of participants, the tools used, and the procedures adopted (including the pilot stage). While immersed in data analysis, I also decided to analyse documents pertaining to the unseen literary text, namely the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) and the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014). I chose that specific year’s report because it was based on the examination session that the interviewed students had sat for. Hence, the last section of data collection focuses on document analysis. The penultimate section of this chapter focuses on methodological issues that I encountered during data collection and analysis.
The last section presents procedures and measures that were taken to ensure ethical practice throughout research.

4.2 Qualitative Research and an Interpretivist Paradigm

Social science is considered subjective when it is perceived as ‘a means of dealing with the direct experience of people in specific contexts’ (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007, p.19). Within these contexts, social scientists aim to ‘understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.19). Such participants might be responsible for defining their social reality (Cohen et. al, 2007).

In this section, I explore and explain the reasons for choosing qualitative research and an interpretivist paradigm, both of which complement the aims and context of my study. First of all, qualitative research was valid for my research because of its aim to ‘make sense of a set of meanings in the observed phenomena’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.38). For this to be possible, ‘it is indispensable that the data should capture rich and complex details’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.38). Another objective of qualitative research is to widen the possibility of interpretations of human experience. It is suggested that being immersed in the detailed responses of a small group of participants can generate ‘thick’ descriptions which are both descriptive and interpretative. Cliff Hodges (2011) favours ‘thick description’ that focuses on ‘interpretive acts’ accompanied by ‘thick analysis, and thick theorizing’ (p.405). By ‘thick’ description, reference is being made to the concept that Geertz (1973, 1993) coined to mean the different complex facets certain phenomena under study. Holliday (2007) expanded this first of all by comparing ‘thin’ to ‘thick’ description. Whereas the former involves merely reporting the events or circumstances, the thick type on the other hand ‘goes deeper to analyze the cultural meaning of the act’ (Holliday, 2007, p.74). What is more, thick description can be build on data from the voices in the study (Holliday, 2007, p.134) and provides a context that reveals ‘experience as a process’ (Denzin, 1994, p.505). Holliday (2007) sustains this point by stating that social contexts offer an essential ‘means’ for thick description (p.75). Thick description is argued for because it also supports a ‘richness of perception’ which Holliday (2007) claims it generates. Using thick description can be successful both for small and larger scale research; there is a good connection between small scale research and thick description, in that the latter ‘fits in well’ with this type of research (Holliday, 2007, p.75). As this study is also small scale research, the attempt at thick description is so that such
richness of data is presented, and so that the data can be interconnected. Moreover, Cliff Hodges (2011) seems to value ‘multilayered interpretations’ which include ‘deeply embedded meanings’ of someone’s act of thinking (p.187). This is attempted by my study through the construction of narratives using a grounded theory method (see 4.4).

Meaning making occurs without the need to collect broader information based in statistics (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Drake and Heath, 2010). The aims and objectives of qualitative research discussed above are central to this study when considering the teachers’ and students’ experiences. An ‘exploratory nature’ was appropriate for this study as the research did not depend on former literature or other empirical results (Eisenhardt, 1989). This does not mean that such aspects were not duly considered. Prior cases and findings of research in similar contexts or areas (of writing and feedback) were referred to (see Chapters 2 and 3). However, it was not always possible to locate prior studies on feedback specifically in relation to unseen texts, so it was hoped that my study would shed more light on this area.

Through qualitative research I conducted an ‘examination of dynamic phenomena’ and explored ‘sequential patterns and the changes that occur’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.40). The phenomena and patterns are part of a social world that ‘can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.19). The individuals in question seem to prefer the interpretivist view to the positivist one. In the latter, the focus is on finding objective explanation for cause-effect relationships. Given that I focused on some individuals’ voices and their perspectives on issues related to writing about unseen texts and feedback, it was not possible to locate specific cause-effect relationships scientifically. Thus, an interpretive approach enabled me to focus on the individuals and their interpretations of their experience with the areas above. ‘Characterised by a concern for the individual’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.21) and considering myself as a ‘participant in the situation’ under investigation (Edge and Richards, 1998, p.336), my study sought to open the concepts and perceptions that the teachers and students held, and how they merged with or diverged from the literature on writing and feedback. Within this study’s context, one of the aims of choosing an interpretivist paradigm was ‘to understand the subjective world of human experience’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.21). At the same time, I conducted a rigorous analysis through a grounded theory method to minimize the element of subjectivity (see 4.11).

I chose a qualitative approach to obtain rich data through narratives and individual cases. An offshoot of this was ‘to retain the integrity of the phenomena being
investigated’ (Cohen et al., p. 2007, p.21). Focusing on the individual, I conducted ‘small-scale research’ by giving space to ‘human actions recreating social life’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.33). Small-scale research ‘does not involve large numbers of people, different sites, and does not require the analysis of vast quantities of data gathered from the research process’ (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, pp.14-15). Small-scale research is ‘non-statistical’, but the richness of data enabled me to ‘understand the actions and meanings’, as well as ‘interpret the specific’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.33). Moreover, my study gave importance to micro-concepts such as ‘personal constructs, negotiated meanings, [and] definitions of situations’ while making sense of and ‘investigating the taken-for-granted’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.33). My study attempted to match the criteria that define a qualitative interpretive approach.

Before data collection and during analysis, it was also crucial to distinguish actions from behaviours. The latter were located in the normative paradigm, while the interpretive approach focused on action. Action is often considered as ‘behaviour-with-meaning’ and is ‘intentional’ or ‘future oriented’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.21). In my study, examples of actions included approaches that were adopted by teachers and students to prepare for reading and writing about unseen texts, while also preparing for the examination. Examples of behaviour-with-meaning were the teachers’ provision of models for writing and usable feedback, and the students’ attempts at writing and adapting the feedback. Cohen et al. (2007) recommend that actions are ‘meaningful’ when ‘we are able to ascertain the intentions of actors to share their experiences’ (p.21). This was made possible through the interviews and observations I conducted, as seen in the following table:

**Table 4.1: Stages in Qualitative Research Used in this Study**

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interviewing teachers to discover their approaches to preparing students for writing about unseen texts, and their methods of providing students with feedback on their writing;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interviewing students to gauge their perceptions of their teachers’ methods and approaches, how they in turn prepare for writing, how they understand and utilize the feedback. Perceptions of feedback and attempts to apply feedback suggestions to future writing became central issues to this study;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Observing literary criticism seminars to discover how students are prepared for writing;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Observing tutorials to discover how teachers and students provide and receive feedback respectively;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Transcribing the interviews and the observations;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interpretive approach was linked to the methods of interviewing, observation, and document analysis. The latter involved the analysis of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) and the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014). The first two methods of data collection enabled me as a practitioner researcher to establish a dialogue with the participants in a way that allowed them to collaborate and construct meaning out of their experiences. Document analysis has yielded more information on the literary criticism component (the syllabus was analysed for criteria which students are expected to meet) and on students’ performance (the report was analysed for the writing outcomes and issues that show up in students’ critical commentaries on unseen texts). Moreover, merging the qualitative and interpretive elements with a grounded theory methodology has led to socially constructed meanings.

In view of this, certain criteria were adhered to during the research and analysis processes (Angen, 2000). These are: being attentive to the formulation of research questions, conducting inquiry respectfully and ethically, being aware of choices made as a researcher, evaluating and presenting results objectively, and considering content validity. It was also kept in mind that in qualitative research there can be multiple interpretations of and claims to knowledge presented by different participants (Angen, 2000). For this reason, any interpretations or claims made by teachers or students are consequently cross-examined through different coding stages.

4.3 Case Study: The Post-16 School and an Insider Perspective

Case studies ‘begin in a world of action and contribute to it. Their insights may be directly interpreted and put to use; for staff or individual self-development, for within-institutional feedback; for formative evaluation; and in educational policy-making’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.256). The researcher who adopts case study research attempts to ‘show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances’ (Mitchell, 1993, p. 239). Furthermore, a ‘good’ case study is defined as one that ‘enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable’
(Mitchell, 1993, p.239). In an attempt to investigate teaching and feedback practices, I drew a number of connections that shall be discussed in Chapter 6. During the data collection procedures, important and relevant issues were highlighted, and a number of participants informed me later that the interview questions had helped them to reflect on their current approaches and practices.

The school that I chose is a case study because students come from different backgrounds and are interested in different academic orientations. As Brown and Rodgers (2002) state, ‘case study research comprises an intensive study of the background, current status, and environmental interactions of a given social unit’ which often works in tandem with research on the ‘development of language competence’ (p.21) of the subjects being researched. Cohen et al. (2007) highlight the importance of context: ‘indeed one of their strengths [of case studies] is that they observe effects in real contexts’ (p.253). To identify possible factors affecting students’ response to literature and their writing, these areas were investigated by concentrating on the learning experience of a sample of students attending the school. This research sought to provide ‘an accurate picture of the participants and the situations in which the study took place’ (Brown and Rodgers, 2002, p.44). Although case studies ‘involve looking at a case or phenomenon in its real-life context’ this type of research also included other forms of data collection, namely observational research. In this way, ‘subjective and objective data’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.254) worked together to provide the richest detail possible that supports and upholds ‘quality of analysis’ (Silverman, 2005, p.22).

The research setting, the post-16 school, was the case study because there was ‘an intense and prolonged contact with, or immersion in’ the setting. Hence, the aim was for the research to be more ‘natural’ and non-intrusive (Dörnyei, 2007, p.38). Being immersed in the school’s context helped me gain ‘insider meaning’, as I could perceive the social phenomena from ‘a special place’, the insider’s perspective (Dörnyei, 2007, p.38). Insider research is defined as having an ‘a priori familiarity with some of the people’ and an ‘a priori understanding of the settings’ (Hellawell, 2006, pp.490-491). Despite outsider research offering more ‘freedom’ from being too ‘entangled’ in the interests of the subjects, insider research prompts ‘nuances in relationships’ to emerge that might have been ‘withheld’ from the outsider researcher (Hellawell, 2006, p.487). For instance, the outsider may have contact with the present and near future ‘events’, but lacks an insight into the past that the insider would have (Hellawell, 2006). The insider
perspective was preferred for my study also because an ‘individual’s behaviour can be understood by the researcher sharing their frame of reference’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.19).

Adopting an insider perspective helped me grasp the ‘individual’s interpretations of the world around them from the inside, not the outside’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.19). However, I considered that research had to be conducted objectively, and kept as ‘open’ and ‘fluid’ as possible for it to ‘respond in a flexible way to new details or openings that may emerge during the process of investigation’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.37). A drawback of familiarity with the context, however, was the risk of not being impartial or unable to observe certain aspects as an outsider would. One way of minimizing the impartiality was to discard a checklist for the observations and use the narrative style of recording instead (see 4.9). I also distanced myself by ensuring that the interview questions did not lead to expected responses. Personal assumptions were put aside by adopting a grounded theory method. Through these measures, the insider position has not influenced this openness or impeded a critical stance.

The choice of the school as a case study was based on my familiarity with the post-16 school context, given that I had been teaching at this level for ten years at the time of the study. Despite the above issues with the insider perspective, there are a number of benefits of conducting research in a familiar context. Some are the ‘relative lack of disorientation, the possibility of enhanced rapport and communication, the ability to gauge the honesty and accuracy and responses, and the likelihood that respondents will reveal more details to someone considered empathetic’ (Hockey, 1993, p.199). One such study that involved researchers being familiar to the school they studied led to an ethnographic style approach, to gather in-depth material (Lea and Stierer, 2000). The use of semi-structured interviews with staff and students, and observation of lessons, enabled them to collect the data. Despite the above challenges, it is suggested that conducting research in a familiar environment is both practical and educational (Lea and Stierer, 2000). Teacher research has proven beneficial ever since the concept was conceived by Elliott and Adelman (the Ford Teaching Project, between 1972-1975). In their project, 40 teachers at primary and secondary school level examined their own classroom practices. Although this involved action research, the link with classroom research in a familiar context is that in both scenarios, hypotheses on teaching are developed and then shared (Hopkins, 2009, p.1). Consequently, the researchers become invested in giving something back to the school that is familiar to them.
Conducting research in a familiar place is corroborated by Munn and Drever (2004), who state that teachers researching their own practice or school policy would already be familiar with the setting, as well the staff and type of students. Conversely, an outside researcher would have to familiarise himself or herself with these aspects, which would take time. Being a practitioner-researcher meant I had known the school, the subject department, teachers and type of students prior to my study. Hellawell (2006) traces the teacher-researcher role to certain ‘work organisations’, ranging from primary schools to higher education institutes. Furthermore, the ‘Training and Development Agency for Schools’ (TDA) programmes have led to an increment in ‘the number of teachers conducting research within their own organizations. This has often taken the form of ‘practitioner enquiry’ (Hellawell, 2006, p.484). However, Hellawell (2006) also advises that interviewing peers or colleagues can challenge the research’s reliability. This is because the colleagues might respond to the interview by saying what they think is best or what they believe the interviewer wants them to answer. I considered such ‘power differentials’ (Hellawell, 2006, p.483) and attempted to resolve this potential problem by discussing with interviewees that the interview was an opportunity to reflect on and share practices and experiences in the areas of writing and feedback. Since Hellawell’s (2006) contribution on insider research, more studies have been conducted. The situation of insider research has, more recently, been highlighted by Greene (2014), who points out that it has ‘increased in recent years’ (p.1). This is due to the fact that more teachers are witnessed ‘engaging in research in their own educational institutions’ (Greene, 2014, p.1). Moreover, there is a connection between insider research and doctoral programs, which makes sense, given that as part of their research projects, teachers choose their workplace or contexts with which they are more familiar. This is particularly the case of research ‘happening within the field of education’ (Greene, 2014, p.1). The fact that it is happening more often does not mean that it is still accepted without reservations and that the issues evaporate or are forgotten about. Instead, it is essential to iron out challenges that arise. Similar to Drake and Heath (2010), the following are listed by Greene (2014, pp.3-5) as pros and cons of insider research: the benefits of knowledge, interaction, and ease of access, as opposed to threats to subjectivity and objectivity, and chances of bias. Other issues that are raised concern confidentiality, power dynamics, and shifting social identities (Greene, 2014, pp.6-7). In order to counteract some issues as listed, it is suggested to focus on obtaining or achieving credibility, transferability (by thick description, as discussed earlier), dependability and confirmability (Greene, 2014, pp.7).
These are listed as tools to assist insider research, however, they draw heavily on previous seminal work by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in relation to trustworthiness (discussed in 4.11).

As mentioned by Greene (2014), persistent challenges might be reliability and validity. However, the strengths and opportunities afforded by insider research seem to outweigh the shortcomings. To further analyse the context in relation to more recent perspectives adopted for my study, I present the following table that lists the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and challenges of insider researcher (*Drake and Heath, 2010, p.31). Following the table, I discuss how I have handled certain aspects.

Table 4.2: Elements of Insider Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of organisation</td>
<td>Lose broader perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established relationships</td>
<td>Lose element of neutrality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial connections</td>
<td>Theoretical framework can be influenced by dominant discourse or ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy / potential for impact on practice/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immediate feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost-effective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manageability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting access to information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting access to people and institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manageability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal resistance to process of research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability and validity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity as a researcher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-research balance, loyalties and values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with colleagues could become</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contentious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the strengths and opportunities above have been achieved throughout my research journey and data collection processes. I have accumulated more knowledge of the school’s system, as well as built a good working relationship with the teachers and students. This means that relationships with fellow teachers did not become ‘contentious’ but added value to my ‘identity as a researcher’ (Drake and Heath, 2010, p.31). Power positions were not an issue as the teachers were always treated as equals, and not just as interviewees. Appreciating and respecting their viewpoint, moreover, enabled me to maintain a stable work-research balance, while ‘loyalties’ and ‘values’ were not put at risk (Drake and Heath, 2010, p.31). Issues of validity are discussed in later sections in this chapter.
I considered it important to question things rather than make assumptions (Munn and Drever, 2004). Mainly, I had to consider the type of practices that were present at this school, for instance, the approaches used to teach students how to write about unseen texts, and how the lessons on literary criticism were conducted (at the time of the study). Consequently, further research based on this study’s questions can be conducted in similar contexts where literary criticism lessons are held and where feedback on writing about unseen texts is provided. This is linked to the issue of transferability, which is discussed in Chapter 7. Ultimately, it makes sense that an insider perspective was chosen, given that ‘insider researchers are often attracted by grounded theory and case study’, which are both present in my study (Drake and Heath, 2010, p.36). In terms of a theoretical framework, a grounded theory method has prevented me from being ‘influenced by dominant discourse or ideology’ (one of the suggested weaknesses in the above table). The next section presents a discussion of the method and how it has been adapted and applied for my study.

4.4 Grounded Theory Method: Adaptation and Application

Grounded theory methodology and methods (GTM) can be defined as vehicles through which researchers attempt to develop theories that provide explanations on concerns of research areas and how such concerns could be resolved (Andrews and Scott, 2013). Moreover, grounded theory is described as being ‘drawn from data’, which makes it relevant and useful as it is ‘likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.12). Similarly, Charmaz (2006) explains that ‘grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves’ (p.2). It is posited that a main premise is to ground theory in social research (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). Grounded theory methods differ from those that aim to confirm or verify a theory that has already emerged elsewhere, because the theory is generated from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Hence, grounded theory is different to those methods that generate theory through logical deduction or based on ‘a priori’ assumptions (Glaser and Strauss, 1999, p.3). This is both appealing and intriguing, as different perspectives can be discovered from research.

The theory follows the research so that no prior assumptions are made (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Moreover, grounded theory as a methodology is not used to test a
hypothesis or prove a theory, but the latter is discovered in the data through an iterative process of coding, sampling, and analyzing. The process is as enlightening and essential as the theory that ensues (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The aim of grounded theory is not solely restricted to the generation of theory, but it can also be used to enable an explanation of and provide a perspective on behaviour, provide guidance on research style, and define categories or hypotheses in research (Goulding, 2002, p.43).

Choosing a grounded theory method as an approach for my study has enabled me to address the above in different ways. I sought to explain and provide a perspective on the participant teachers’ and students’ behaviours-with-meaning, in relation to preparing for writing, providing and receiving feedback (respectively). The third aspect concerns a ‘style for research’, which prompts me to explain the grounded theory method I used. The latter was appropriate to my study because it offered me ways to tackle the data in an iterative and thorough manner. Through a series of coding stages, I worked closely and in depth with the data, which means that an iterative process has enabled me to capture the processes of writing and feedback. In relation to writing and feedback, any categories or hypotheses that have emerged through an analysis are presented and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

As an interpretive researcher working with a grounded theory method, my aim was to grasp the realities of the participants and the impact of these realities (Cohen et al., 2007) on writing and feedback outcomes. If theory is formed from meanings and realities that enable the researcher to gain insight into understanding of people’s experiences, then a grounded theory approach has moved me closer to meanings, realities and insights. It is suggested that perspectives may emerge or arise from situations related to individuals, and their interpretations of the world around them. Hence, using grounded theory has prompted me as a researcher to find such interpretations. The challenge envisaged and confirmed was to consider the possibility of multi-layered meanings given the differences among participants. What I mean by multi-layered is the possibility that some responses had to be categorised or discussed under different areas or codes; at the same time, teachers and students gave different responses, which converged, diverged, or both. I also considered patterns, actions, and experiences that would lead me to similar trends and a transferable set of interconnected theoretical perspectives (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Cohen et al., 2007). For example, for every category, I coded and selected participants’ quotations that reflected aspects of the category (the categories and examples of code application are found in Table 5.3 and Appendices 35-41 respectively;
initially the examples were retrieved from the transcripts one by one and then they were added to a workbook of codes). An analysis of the interview and observation data yielded exemplification and instances, which form the ‘concepts’ and can be ‘the foundation of theory’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.2). Moreover, grounded theory that is concerned with the identification and interpretation of social phenomena, via exemplification and instances (Haig, 1995), requires occurrences to be qualified by answering questions related to what and why something happens (Douglas, 2004). As I was coding, I considered the following questions: *What is this about? What actions, strategies, or types of interaction are occurring? What are the conditions? and What are the consequences?* (similar to Glaser, 1978, p.57; and Glaser and Holton, 2004, p. 48; see further on). I connected these questions to the four elements of the grounded theory method I used, where I analysed the data in terms of Processes, Actions, Perceptions, and Challenges (see more in 4.6 and 4.7). These four elements are included in the table on the codes that emerged as well as linked to the research questions (see section 4.7 for formulation of research questions), which are represented and discussed later through the four elements (Chapter 5 and 6).

4.5 Applying a Grounded Theory Method: From Coding to Theoretical Sensitivity

There are a number of stages inherent in ‘doing’ grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999; Andrews and Scott, 2013). Choosing a ‘substantive area’ is the first step, although in my case it was not evident from the beginning, as explained earlier. This is followed by locating the participants within that a substantive area. Data collection begins after adequate piloting of the research tools has taken place. Piloting of semi-structured interviews and observations is tackled (see 4.8.2 and 4.9.1). Procedures of coding, sampling and memoing are central to grounded theory. Coding involves the ‘conceptualizing’, the ‘reducing’ the ‘elaborating’ and ‘relating’ of data in the form of categories and properties, such as variables and cases (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.12). Sampling refers to the collection of data specifically targeted at substantiating any aspects pertaining to a possible theory. At this point, one becomes more selective during analysis. Memoing often takes place throughout different stages, whether it is coding or analysing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Writing ‘theoretical’ memos can be done for instance in the form of annotations on the codes. The latter and memos are organized to merge with an emergent theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

As soon as the researcher has collected the first batch of data, open coding begins.
This involves ‘thematic grouping, comparison, interpretation, and [more] generalisation of data’ (Gould and Day, 2013, p.557) while data collection continues. Data collection co-occurs with open coding. Some of the elements of data coding are the identification of patterns, themes, as well as the stage of comparing and contrasting (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Sandelowski, 1995; Patton, 2002; Gould and Day, 2013). After open coding, the researcher engages in selective coding, theoretical sampling, and memoing. As soon as data collection is finalized, the researcher analyses, locates, discovers, and positions cases, variables and their relationships. Codes and their properties are sampled and analysed until saturation is reached, which occurs when data collection and theoretical sampling merge. During this process, it is crucial for the researcher using a grounded theory method to develop theoretical sensitivity (see 4.5). These stages were considered integral to the iterative nature of data collection, which did not happen in isolation but it meant that the above stages occurred side-by-side. This reflects the need for data and theory to ‘be constantly compared and contrasted’ so that any ‘materializing theory [can] drive ongoing data collection’ (Locke, 1996, p.240). The processes of coding can lead to changes in the data collection tools, such as adding or removing questions, and altering the wording of the questions. This also occurs during the piloting stage. In my study, it has led to a reorganization of the sections, the addition of questions that were more relevant to feedback and the removal of others that were repetitive or lacked depth. A comparison of the changes is discussed as part of the piloting stage (see 4.8).

Coding refers to the process where collected data are analysed and thematic threads are created. Open coding means that everything is coded, from single words to sentences and paragraphs. It refers to the labelling or naming of actions and events, bearing in mind these questions in the process: ‘What is this about? What is being referenced?’ (Andrews and Scott, 2013). Other similar pertinent questions to open coding are: ‘What is this data a study of?’, ‘What category does this incident indicate?’; and ‘What is actually happening in the data?’ (Glaser, 1978, p.57; Glaser and Holton, 2004, p. 48). These are fundamental questions that ‘keep the analyst theoretically sensitive and transcending when analyzing, collecting, and coding the data’ (Glaser, 1978, p.57). During open coding, I have considered these questions by reflecting on the following: the intentions behind my study in terms of the research focus, the location of events, behaviours-with-meaning, perspectives, and perceptions, all of which are relevant to answering and discussing the research questions.
Codes are incidents that become categories (Glaser and Holton, 2004) of such events, behaviours-with-meaning, perspectives, and perceptions. In this way, open coding leads to the identification of categories as they emerge from the data, which are then compared and analysed in more depth through selective coding (Glaser, 1978). Open coding process requires line-by-line labelling, until the main categories and concerns become visible (Andrews and Scott, 2013). As can be seen in Appendices 35-41, the open coding of transcripts meant that the majority of words were labelled to locate aspects or manifestations of the four elements inherent in the grounded theory method I adopted. Each element was subdivided further into specific areas. For instance, the transcripts that were coded for the element of Perceptions included: (perceptions of) literary criticism, of ‘appreciation’, of the examination, of teachers’ feedback and methods of reading unseen texts. The codes that emerged from the first set of transcripts were subsequently applied to the other transcripts. The codes emerged from the words of the participants, thus highlighting the importance of co-construction (as discussed in section 4.8.3 as part of the interview process). The codes also emerged via a painstaking process of note-making, memoing, and checking the participants’ responses against one another (until saturation was reached, as mentioned earlier). Applying certain codes to subsequent transcripts did not mean that I did not continue open coding the rest (further on I explain how many transcripts I coded). However, the codes I applied were more focused on highlighting the aspects within the four elements. This was in the attempt that the ‘emergent set of categories and their properties’ would be relevant to and could be integrated into potential theoretical conclusions (Glaser, 1978, p.56).

To this end, it is suggested that the data are coded ‘everyway possible’ (Glaser, 1978, p.56). This is, as was, a time-consuming process, but the rigour of open coding has enabled me as to ‘verify’ categories, to ‘see the direction in which to take the study’, to ‘see the categories that can handle the data’, and to harness theoretical sensitivity when ‘trying to generate codes that may work’ (Glaser and Holton, 2004, p.49). Open coding has prevented the risk of ‘impressionism’ and led instead to ‘rich, dense’ data analysis, which, according counteracts claims that qualitative analysis is inferior to quantitative (Glaser and Holton, 2004, pp.49-50). Similarly, Charmaz (2005, p.6) sustains the value of grounded theory to qualitative research by highlighting the seminal work of Glaser and Strauss’ (1967). The latter challenged the belief that qualitative research is impressionistic and unsystematic, questioned the view that such research does not involve
the rigour of quantitative methods, and suggested that qualitative data can generate theory.

Using a grounded theory method means open coding does not involve using predetermined categories but ‘allows the analyst to see the direction in which to take the study by theoretical sampling, before he [or she] becomes selective and focused on a particular problem’ (Glaser, 1978, p.56). The second stage, axial coding, is the clustering of open codes into conceptual categories. This stage is accompanied or superseded by selective coding so that the code clusters are chosen more specifically. Selective coding starts as soon as open coding becomes ‘limited’ to a set of variables, after the researcher/analyst has ‘discovered the core variable’ (Glaser and Holton, 2004, p.55). During selective coding it is important is to decide how the clusters relate to each other. Selective coding also includes constructing a set of ‘relational statements’ that can explain the occurrences among the clusters (Glaser, 2005). During selective coding I created the workbook of codes to group the students’ responses according to areas and thematic elements (see screenshots of the workbook in Appendix 27).

To generate rich data, I coded 21 transcripts (15 students’ and 6 teachers’ interviews) and on 16 observation transcripts (four teachers were observed four consecutive times). The intention of open coding and progressing to a more selective form culminated in building a codebook where the codes were organised systematically. In my study, the codes and categories that emerged during the analysis of the students’ interviews were initially organized through a colour-coded system. However, as the data grew, so did the need of a codebook, which I created by selecting sections and quotations that reflected the codes and categories. For the transcripts of the teachers’ interviews and observations, it was enough to work with a colour-coded system and selective coding respectively. In the case of the teachers’ interviews, there were fewer respondents and therefore less data than those of the students. Thus, colour-coding and grouping salient data into one document was considered sufficient. Moreover, it was only when faced with the huge amount of data from the students’ interviews that I decided to create a codebook. For the observations, I conducted open and selective coding but refrained from creating a codebook as I transferred the sections and quotations directly to a document of observation notes. In my study, I followed this coding order in the diagram, below (adapted from Glaser, 2005).
After selective coding, I conducted comparative analysis on different levels: teacher-teacher comparison, student-student comparison, teacher-student comparison, observation-observation comparison, and a comparison between the data yielded from the teacher interviews, the student interviews, and the observations. Comparative analysis means that newer codes are developed by comparison to previous codes, so drawing connections promotes more data collection (Glaser and Holton, 2004). As the coding and analysis processes led me to a copious amount of data, using a codebook to organize the data was, admittedly, the more efficient way, particularly when I had to analyse. I conducted constant comparative analysis to compare codes with previous events or instances that would have already been coded. At times, it was challenging to determine which events or codes belonged together. This led to some data being coded more than once to allow the flexibility of fitting them into different categories. This led to some codes overlapping but distinctions became clearer with systematic analysis of seminal areas that were also linked to the research questions. Whether coding was open, axial, or selective, the collective aims of coding procedures, which I considered and attempted to achieve, were to:

1. Build rather than test theory;
2. Provide [me with] analytic tools for handling masses of raw data;
3. Help [me] to consider alternative meanings of phenomena;
4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously; and
5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.13).

The coding procedures in grounded theory have provided me with processes through which I conducted analysis on pages of ‘raw’ data. In so doing I was able to put aside preconceived notions based on personal teaching experience, as I considered the meanings that emerged from the data. Open and selective coding led me not only to comparative analysis, but also to create a system (the codebook) to organize the ‘masses’ of data. Aims 2-4 have made me aware of the importance of building theory (aim 1). This was attempted by the consequent processes of identifying, developing, and connecting the codes and categories that emerged (aim 5).

Theoretical sampling goes further than selective sampling as it involves grouping the data into sets based on ‘theoretical criteria’ (Glaser and Holton, 2004, p.51). Theoretical sampling involves making decisions on ‘what data to collect next’ (Glaser, 1978, p.36), and in my study’s case on what to analyse more specifically. Such decisions for theoretical sampling were determined by ‘purpose and relevance’ (Glaser and Holton, 2004, p.51). As sampling theoretically occurs after having formed an idea or the basis of a theory, I focused on certain areas. For example, students’ use of teacher feedback, their perceptions of such feedback, and the writing challenges that impedes them from applying their teachers’ feedback. The areas were drawn from a comparative analysis of the data. One aim of theoretical sampling is not to prove or disprove hypotheses but to create comparisons among sets of information and to lead to conceptual elaboration (Glaser, 1978). Conceptual elaboration differs from logical elaboration in that the latter involves deducing theory by confirming hypotheses whereas the former involves interpreting patterns as they emerge from the data.

As discussed so far, a grounded theory method is a ‘perspective’ on theory and data, as well as an approach that provides research with a ‘rigorous’ and ‘orderly’ manner to develop theory (Glaser, 1978, p.56). Moreover, theory development and social research conducted systematically leads researchers to understand and gain theoretical sensitivity. The latter encompasses a ‘theoretical grasp of problems and processes within data’ and helps in building a theory that can subsequently prompt future research in the field (Glaser, 1978, p.56). For a researcher to achieve theoretical sensitivity two traits are essential. First of all, the researcher has to remain distant during data collection and accept ‘regression’ as part of the iterative process. Secondly, one has to develop and interpret
‘theoretical insights’ which involves an understanding of the data and its purposes (Glaser and Holton, 2004, p.43). Applying the study’s data to theoretical models was intrinsic to theoretical sensitivity. An iterative grounded theory method combining comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and conceptual elaboration is illustrated in Figure 4.2. further down.

By adopting a grounded theory approach to interpret the data in view of theoretical models of writing and feedback, I have also attempted to ‘anticipate other additional kinds of consequences, conditions and strategies’ (Glaser, 1978, p.13). The aim was to ‘expand description and meaning of incidents by placing them in greater scope’; however, at the same time, I wanted to give shape to concepts that could be ‘integrated in a theory’ (Glaser, 1978, p.13). Working with the ‘incidents’ and ‘concepts’ that emerged during analysis meant trying to align them with theoretical stages and models of writing and feedback. However, I was aware that using a grounded theory process was not without its challenges. Two examples were the risk of over-interpretation and the risk of forcing the data. To overcome this, I analysed the data according to four elements in grounded theory: Processes, Actions, Perceptions (changed from Assumptions), and Challenges (changed from Consequences). The actions were connected to the processes, both of which informed or were related to perceptions and challenges. These elements are part of axial coding which involves analyzing categories, their dimensions and relationships (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). My interpretation of the four elements was connected to the aspects of writing and feedback. The latter are discussed in relation to the findings and are presented in Chapter 6.
4.6 An Explication of the GTM chosen for the Study

Grounded theory was considered applicable to this study because the aim was not to test hypotheses or confirm *a priori* assumptions, but to categorize and discuss the theoretical aspects that emerge following the observation and interview procedures. Attempts were made to avoid preconceived ‘concepts that reflect epistemological predilections other than those emerging from interaction with the study site, its participants and subsequent data’ (Douglas, 2004, p.60). This section explains the grounded theory method and framework that I chose.

Despite the references made to both Glaser (1978, 2005) work on grounded theory, I am aware that at one point, their approaches diverged. Hence, this section discusses the chosen method for my study and the rationale behind such a choice. Initially Glaser (1978, 2005) proposed maxims for *doing* grounded theory, but later on two separate schools and respective models were formed: the Glaserian School and the
Straussian School. The Glaserian model suggests that the research question and the problem emerge exclusively from open coding, comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. The implication is that the literature review does not take place until the research focus has emerged. Conversely, the Straussian School or approach allows a preliminary literature review if only to identify the data that could be discovered through research questions. The Straussian model, however, is not opposed to having a substantive area and preliminary questions. What is important is that the researcher conducts the study without a ‘preconceived theory in mind’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.12). Another focal point of the second model is that coding techniques are used systematically. Furthermore, the Straussian school heritage promotes the grounded theory method by perceiving ‘human beings as active agents in their lives and in their worlds rather than as passive recipients of larger social forces’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.7). This is relevant to my study as the teachers and students involved were addressed in a similar way. How action is constructed by the participants in research is as essential as the process (Charmaz, 2006, p.7). For this reason, a grounded theory method is not a prescriptive package but a set of flexible principles and practices, where dynamic guidelines are proposed.

It is generally held that a grounded theory method complements other approaches such as qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006). This means that a grounded theory method is an appropriate fit for researchers who want to validate qualitative research by engaging in processes of rigorous analysis. It is also admitted that any ‘theoretical rendering’ in grounded theory ‘offers an interpretative portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.10). Unlike Glaser (2005), Charmaz (2006) does not state that data or theories are necessarily discovered but that ‘we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements with people, perspectives, and research practices’ (p.10). This is effective in qualitative research as participants are not only ‘cases’ but individuals with personal histories and experiences. Both characteristics influence how and why participants perceive concepts and situations the way they claim to. For instance, the extent to which the teachers’ experiences and backgrounds have shaped their approaches to prepare students for writing and provide them with feedback is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

In light of the two contrasting schools and models, it can be argued that my study adopted some aspects from both Glaser (2005). On the one hand, I did undertake a literature review before conducting data collection. I also formulated preliminary
questions. This method fits the Straussian model. On the other hand, two aspects of the Glaserian model are present. First of all, the substantive area emerged more strongly following the first stage of data collection (the piloting stage). Secondly, a more focused literature review was conducted following data collection and analysis. A blend of the two models was attempted with some attributes from both. As mentioned above, using the four elements for interpretive purposes was part of the coding process, a conceptual framework advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Thus, aspects of the Glaserian model and others of the Straussian one were adapted and also merged with Charmaz’s concepts for grounded theory, as explained above. For Glaser (2005), and according to Charmaz (2006), a *finished* grounded theory aims to ‘explain the studied process in new theoretical terms, explicate the properties of the theoretical categories, and demonstrate the causes and conditions under which the process emerges and varies, and delineate its consequences’ (pp.7-8). Adding Charmaz’s (2006) position on grounded theory was conducive to my study:

Grounded theory methods foster seeing your data in fresh ways and exploring your ideas about the data through early analytic writing. By adopting grounded theory methods you can direct, manage, and streamline your data collection, and moreover, construct an original analysis of your data. (p.2)

Despite setbacks and in view of the procedures and aspects discussed in this section, it can be argued that a grounded theory method has proven viable because ‘the topic of interest’, that is feedback on unseen texts, ‘has been relatively ignored in the literature or has been given only superficial attention’ (Goulding, 2002, p.55). Therefore, by adopting a blended approach to grounded theory, the procedures and theoretical aspects that emerged are consequently discussed in the light of any theories or perspectives extant in the more general literature on writing and feedback.

**4.7 Formulating the Research Questions and the Objectives**

As mentioned earlier, the overall aim of the study was to investigate the students’ perceptions of teacher feedback, to gauge whether they made use of such feedback, and uncover reasons for which they did not succeed in applying it to future writing. At the outset, the research questions focused rather generally on writing about literature. These were not as specific as the final version, but the focus was sharpened after I considered adopting grounded theory as an approach and piloting the interview questions. The
writing of the research questions occurred in stages, becoming more refined and closer to
the core of research. Initially, I had around eight research questions, some of which aimed
at devising a writing programme. This idea was replaced by a focus on the area of
feedback. Therefore, the research questions were eventually redefined to include this area.
The final questions were narrowed down to five, some of which have a follow-up question
to clarify or provide further detail.

Table 4.3: A Comparison of the Original and Revised Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original research questions</th>
<th>Revised research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How is writing about literary texts taught?</td>
<td>1. How are students prepared for reading and writing about unseen literary texts at a post-16 school in Malta?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How are students prepared to engage with and respond to literary texts?</td>
<td>2. How are students provided with feedback on written essays (about unseen literary texts)? (When and what type of feedback?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How well do students perform when writing about literary texts?</td>
<td>3. How do students perceive their teachers’ writing preparation methods and how do they make use of such methods? (or attempt to)? How do students perceive their teachers’ reading and writing preparation methods, and how do they make use of such methods (or attempt to)? How are the following perceived by students: literary criticism, ‘appreciation’, and the examination?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How are the tutorials on literary texts being conducted at present?</td>
<td>4. How do students perceive their teachers’ feedback methods and how do they apply the feedback (or attempt to)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How do the approaches and methods used in the tutorials affect the students in their response to</td>
<td>5. What are the reading and writing challenges and barriers that prevent students from applying their teachers’ feedback?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>writing about literary texts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6. What are the benefits of organizing a series of structured and continuous tutorials focusing on critical appreciation of literary texts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7. How are these tutorials to be conducted so that there is consistency, continuity and clarity in the running of such a program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8. How are these tutorials to be screened to ensure their reliability and validity?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The five revised research questions focused specifically on writing about unseen texts (preparation for writing, procedures, perceptions, and challenges) and feedback (provision, application, perceptions, and barriers to the application of feedback to future writing). When I began the analysis and moved on to a discussion of the findings, I categorized the questions into the elements pertinent to grounded theory (as explained earlier): Processes, Actions, Perceptions, and Challenges. For the substantive areas of writing and feedback, I adopted a common approach. I began with the processes, namely how students were prepared for writing and how they were provided with feedback respectively. I moved on to perceptions (instead of assumptions), that is, what students thought of teachers’ writing preparation and feedback methods. The next element was actions, which referred to the ways in which students used their teachers’ writing methods and feedback. I concluded with a consideration of consequences. This term was reworded
as ‘challenges’, and it included difficulties that students faced when they tried to apply their teachers’ feedback. Following the revision of the research questions, the interview questions were also revised.

4.8 Semi-Structured Interviews

Using qualitative interviews for research can fulfil ‘the aim to investigate the participants’
identities, experiences, beliefs and orientations’ (Talmy, 2011, p.25). When using the interview for data collection and analysis, I also aimed to include a ‘critical reflective dimension’ (Mann, 2010, p.6). The interview as a qualitative tool enabled me as a researcher to gather significant data, and to formulate an idea of the participants, including their experiences. Talmy (2011) presents and contrasts two angles from which to theorise the interview: the interview as research instrument and the research interview as social practice. The latter perspective takes into account issues of identity, such as co-construction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and students for precision in description and interpretation of meanings (Kvale, 2007). To begin with, ‘the individual interview is one of the most common task analysis data gathering tools…interviewing elicits a variety of task information from a respondent, it is especially useful for gathering unanticipated information about the topic … [it] is also used to identify issues or problems for follow-up analysis with surveys’ (Jonassen et al., 2005, p.253). I opted for semi-structured interviews rather than choose focus groups so as to learn more about each student. I wanted to ask students about their individual ideas in a discussion (Cliff Hodges, 2012, p.11). Furthermore, the interviewee can benefit from a qualitative research interview because it is very unusual for a person’s experiences and viewpoints to be of interest to someone else (Kvale, 2007). I considered that the semi-structured interviews ‘combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative data at the factor level’ (Schensul et al., 1999, p.149). This proved particularly true when students pointed out that they had not been asked questions on their learning and writing practices before. They also expressed how the interview as social practice had provided them with a voice in a more personalised way than if their views were sought through a questionnaire.

Despite benefits, a qualitative approach presents challenges. Roulston (2010) identifies questioning practices and interactional difficulties (p.77). Two different
approaches are contrasted: ‘a neo-positivist approach in which a neutral interviewer elicits participants’ descriptions that reflect ‘true’ states of affairs that are employed in realist reports, and a romantic approach in which a reflexive interviewer facilitates genuine rapport with participants to generate confessional data’ (Roulston, 2011, p.77). Despite the fact that my research seemed to approximate the second approach, I also favoured a constructionist approach that enhances data generation through reflexivity and rapport. I did this by conceptualising ‘the interview guide as a spoken survey’ through ‘the use of closed questions’ which provide ‘possible responses in questions and asking questions that include assumptions about participants’ life-worlds’ (Roulston, 2011, p.77). The aim was that the interview with teachers would offer a balance between closed questions and more open-ended responses. I conducted 21 interviews in total: six teachers (three male and three female), four of whom I observed four times (three females and one male), and 15 students (twelve females and three males). Each interview took place at the school in one of the offices (the teachers’) or in a vacant classroom (with the students). During the interviews there were no interruptions as it was ensured that the offices or classrooms were not being used at that hour by other teachers or students. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and was audio-recorded. Before analysis began each interview was transcribed.

To investigate feedback on unseen texts, I chose teachers who held literary criticism lessons (known as seminars). This amounted to ten teachers at the time of the interviews. Out of the ten, six were interviewed (three males, three females) while four (out those six) were observed (three females, one male). Two of the remaining four teachers participated in the pilot study (one male, one female), while another two could not participate because they did not feel comfortable being interviewed or observed. It is advised that asking people to volunteer for an interview is best avoided because of possible bias. Instead ‘it is better to select the people you want, and encourage them to take part, while recognizing their right to opt out’ (Drever, 2003, p.37). In view of this, I selected and asked the teachers whether they agreed to be interviewed. As soon as I had secured interviews with four teachers, I asked them whether they could be observed also, and they agreed. Then I decided to add another two teachers to conduct an interview with, but due to timetable issues it was not possible to observe them. Overall, the choice of participants was a blend of convenience sampling (the first three teachers I chose for the interviews and observations by approaching them directly due to their experience teaching criticism) and snowball sampling (the two teachers who were added for the
interviews were suggested by the other teachers after I asked who else was responsible for teaching criticism).

My choice of teachers was linked to the objective of obtaining a varied sample. The teachers’ years of teaching experience varied in range (between 5-20+ years’ experience). It was hoped that different views of and approaches to preparing students for writing and providing feedback would emerge. In the case of the students, I aimed at having a mixed sample but I wanted them to be in the same classes as those taught by the participating teachers so as to draw comparisons between the teachers’ and students’ views. The students were asked to participate rather than being chosen randomly. Consequently, they decided whether or not they wanted to be interviewed. The final number was twelve female students and three male students. Given that there were fewer male students at the school at the time of research, the ratio of male-to-female students was representative.

4.8.1 Constructing the Interview Questions

Questions that would lead to a variety of responses were directed at interviewees to yield richness of information. Interviewees were not provided with answers to choose from so that they would be able to reflect before answering. It is suggested that interviewers do not ask multiple questions but one question at a time (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006; Roulston, 2011). Key areas would emerge with reference to the participants’ ‘life-worlds’. Roulston (2011) posits ‘whether interviewers should ask questions with prior assumptions embedded in them’. This is suggested in the case of research topics that ‘rely on participants having certain experiences that they are able to describe’, in which case, ‘it is important for researchers to recruit people who can talk about those’ (Roulston, 2011, p.91). Drafting the questions for the interviews with teachers and students meant that these aspects were taken into consideration.

When the interview questions were created, one of the aims was to make them active, which means transforming them into ‘meaning-making ventures’ (Mann, 2010, p.8). The standardised survey interview constrains the amount of input and may ‘restrict the range of respondent’s interpretive action’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004, p.157). However, in more active interviews, the interviewer may contribute to interview content through co-construction: ‘there will inevitably be spontaneous and improvised elements’ (Mann, 2010, p.8). Interview talk, according to Mann (2010), is ‘inevitably a co-
construction between interviewer and interviewee’ (p.9). What is done by the researcher during such interaction will then depend on the type of aims the research is seeking to address.

However, some proponents of interview research, such as Atkinson and Silverman (1997), do not seem too comfortable with the ‘self-revealing speaking subject’ (p.322), which can be exacerbated by the interviewer’s position. The extent to which this happens however usually depends on the type of relationship between interviewer and interviewee. There might be affinity and comfort to speak openly, or there could be more detachment between interviewer and interviewee if required, although this might lead to the latter being aloof or noncommittal. When creating the interview questions, the former scenario was considered to be more conducive to yield fruitful results. Mann (2010) suggests that the interviewer possesses ‘distinctive features’ (p.10). These include being able to co-construct with the interviewee demonstrating too much empathy on the one hand or complacency on the other. It also means avoiding emotional interviewing (Silverman, 2005) and instead focusing on the ‘communicative structure of the interview’ (Briggs, 1986, pp.102-103). Sequencing is built and framed within arguments, points of view and even complaints which fit somehow together rather than exist ‘in isolation’ (Mann, 2010, p.10). Silverman (2005) offers to shift from ‘interview-as-technique’ to ‘interview-as-local-accomplishment’ (p. 104) so that it can be socially and educationally relevant.

Before I wrote the interview questions, I considered the relevant areas, such as reading and writing about unseen texts. This occurred after I had refined the research questions that would focus on the unseen text component, rather than writing about literature in general. When I got to the point of drafting the interview questions, I knew I wanted to ask about these areas, but not with predetermined answers or results in mind. The area of feedback became central to the study following the piloting stage (see 4.8.2). During this time, I was also considering grounded theory as my approach, partly because feedback (as a substantive area) had emerged during the pilot interviews. Moreover, the iterative nature of writing and feedback processes confirmed the need to read the data through the lens of grounded theory, as the latter method is also iterative (see 4.5).

When wording the questions, I ensured not to include too many technical terms, particularly for the students’ interviews. This explains why the wording of the teachers’ interview questions differed from that of the students. After a process of rewriting and refining the interview questions, I was also able to extract the key sections and question
areas. The question areas within the 17 sections (in total, nine based on the teachers’ interviews and eight based on the students’) ultimately led to codes during the data analysis. The interview questions in full are located in Appendices 4 and 5. However, in light of the above and to clarify how the interviews proceeded, I have also included two tables below representing the sections and question areas discussed during the teachers’ and students’ interviews respectively.

Table 4.4: Interviews with Teachers – Sections and Question Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Question sub-sections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Professional background</td>
<td>Training background and experience teaching unseen literary texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teaching an unseen text</td>
<td>Approaches, methods, guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Preparing students to write</td>
<td>Processes / procedures; ‘appreciation’; an understanding of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) and guiding students to write; the role of the MC Advanced Level English examination (how it affects preparing for writing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Writing difficulties (in the area of unseen texts)</td>
<td>Typical errors (examples); recurring patterns; students’ performance over the years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Students’ attitudes to writing</td>
<td>Influences, such as the examination (its effects on their attitude to writing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Purpose and focus of feedback</td>
<td>Definitions of feedback; focus of feedback (e.g. content, structure); purpose of feedback (retrospective or future-altering); informing students of the focus of feedback before writing (benefits and drawbacks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Types of feedback</td>
<td>Oral and written feedback; feedback procedures; examples of comments; students’ feedback preferences; a consideration of digital feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Remembering the feedback</td>
<td>How students use feedback or whether they remember it; examples of ‘errors’ that were resolved; revision of writing following teacher feedback; defining feedback effectiveness;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sections</td>
<td>Question sub-sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Teachers’ level of satisfaction with students’ progress and feedback application</td>
<td>Consideration of what works and when feedback is applied; challenges and barriers to feedback application; consideration of changes in practices related to feedback provision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.5: Interviews with Students – Sections and Question Areas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Question sub-sections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The student’s experience and understanding of literature</td>
<td>Reasons for choosing MC Advanced Level English; experience and methods of studying literature; reading for pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading unseen texts (teaching methods and text examples)</td>
<td>Views of teachers’ methods; experience with texts and types of texts read in class; perception of the unseen texts read during the seminars; activities done during literary criticism seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reading unseen texts (‘appreciation’ and students’ strategies)</td>
<td>Understanding of ‘appreciation’; guidelines to write an appreciation of unseen texts; students’ strategies when reading unseen texts; students’ perceptions of unseen texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The writing process (guidelines and attitudes to writing)</td>
<td>Attitudes to writing; difficulties / challenges of writing; essay planning and guidelines adopted by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Focus of feedback and feedback comments</td>
<td>Students’ views on the focus of feedback; students’ memory of the examples of feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Types of feedback</td>
<td>Oral and written feedback; considering digital feedback; preferences and perceptions of teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Understanding and remembering feedback</td>
<td>Understanding and remembering teacher feedback; revising written work based on teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Using feedback (resolving errors, challenges to application of feedback)</td>
<td>Consideration of feedback’s effect on future writing; attempts at applying teacher feedback; barriers to feedback application; considering alternative ways of receiving feedback (e.g. online)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I decided to begin the interviews by asking questions that would target the respondents’ background, such as teaching experience and professional background (in the teachers’ case), and understanding of literature (in the students’ case). The aim was to understand and form a profile of their backgrounds, so that their responses would contextualised. Interview questions may be related to the respondents’ experience and background in order to elicit their ‘attitudes’ towards a situation such as ‘student writing’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.55). Subsequent sections targeted methods of reading and teaching unseen texts (according to teachers), and methods used by teachers when reading unseen texts (according to students). It is suggested that ‘the interview questions for teachers can ask about the writing tasks’ they set in class or at home, and ‘the criteria used to assess such tasks’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.55). Similarly, I aimed to extract a number of methods that were used by the teachers, and cross-compare them with students’ preferences and views of their teachers’ methods. For this to be possible, I interviewed students who were taught by the same teachers being interviewed.

A suggestion for the student interview questions is to ‘ask about the difficulties students have with their writing tasks as well as other issues such as their language learning background and their preferred ways of learning’ (Paltridge et al., 2009, p.55). In my interviews with students, I included questions on the teachers’ methods of preparing students for reading unseen texts, as well the challenges students face when reading such texts. From reading and teaching unseen texts, I moved on to the section on preparing for writing. Similar to the questions on reading, the objective for the area of writing was to explore similarities and differences between the processes and procedures mentioned by teachers and students respectively. I included a number of questions on feedback and these, together with the questions on writing, formed the bulk of the research focus. Although I had refined some aims and objectives before constructing the questions and conducting the interviews, I did not have prior assumptions or expect any particular answers beforehand. This was possible through my use of a grounded theory method, which enabled me to formulate and field the questions without the need to confirm any presuppositions borne out of my teaching experiences. As shall be explained further on, I also ensured that the interviewing methods I used conformed with criteria and conditions, as suggested by proponents in the field.
4.8.2 Piloting the Interview Questions

Piloting the research tools is ‘essential’ because one cannot control or ‘know how the interview’ or any other instrument ‘will work in practice’ (Drever, 2003, p.56). The interviews are given ‘a trial run’ through which information is gathered. The pilot tests how the participants could interpret and react to the questions (Drever, 2003, p.56). The researcher may verify what works and what can be improved through the trial run. This might also influence and lead to a revision of the research questions. The pilot I conducted led to changes to the interview questions with teachers and students, as well as to changes in the research questions (see 4.7). Piloting also enabled me to gauge the effectiveness of the tools as well as to refine the questions. It was an insightful exercise into how interviews (and observations) can be conducted, into what can be avoided or adopted to make the interview experience a better one, both for the interviewer and interviewee. Therefore, piloting allowed me to understand the mechanics of research, in the attempt to pose better questions.

After considering the option of the location for the pilot, I decided to conduct the latter at the same school where research was going to take place. My choice was contingent on the premise that the conditions for the pilot study and the eventual research would be quasi-identical. According to Drever (2003), it is advisable to ‘choose interviewees for the pilot who are similar to the people in your study, ideally from the same ‘population’, but not the individuals you intend to interview’ (p.53). This was decided after having conducted the first pilot study at another post-16 school with four teachers. However, I decided to conduct a second pilot study at the same school of my research because at the first school, there were 25 students in a literary criticism seminar whereas the number of students in a seminar, in this study’s school, did not exceed 17. Despite this change, there was an important consequence to having conducted two pilot studies. The area of feedback emerged only after the second pilot study, during which time this area became more central to the study. Results obtained from the second pilot study via an analysis subsequently led to major changes in the questions.

This confirms one of the aims of conducting pilot interviews before data collection, which is ‘identifying core topics and exploring lines of development’ (Richards, 2011, p.101). In my study’s case, the piloting of the interview questions led to a reorganization of the topics and areas, a revision of certain interview questions, and a re-evaluation of the research questions (see 4.7). The interview questions were
reorganized into three sections for the second pilot study: teaching practices and experiences; preparing for writing and appreciation; and giving feedback. However, an analysis of the transcripts revealed that the interview questions needed to be restructured once again to include finer distinctions so as to yield more detailed content. The expansion led to nine sections, four of which centred on feedback. These were: teachers’ background; reading and ‘teaching’ unseen texts; preparing for writing about unseen texts; writing difficulties and students’ progress; students’ attitude to writing; giving feedback; types of feedback; retention and outcomes of feedback; and constraints in feedback. These fed back into the second part of the literature review. In this way, the piloting process alerted to the need for rewording and adding on more specific sections related to the substantive area of feedback.

For the second pilot study I conducted semi-structured interviews with two teachers (one female in her 30s and one male in his 40s respectively). Both of them had more than ten years’ experience. Three students were also interviewed, two females and one male. All three students were in their second year at the time (17 years old). The decision of conducting interviews with students was only taken when the second pilot was considered. In the first pilot, I had opted for a survey questionnaire but decided to replace it with student interviews and with classroom observations. The students’ interviews highlighted the value of students’ voice, whereas the observations were conducted to validate the interview data. Therefore, the aims of piloting the student interviews were:

1. To enable students’ voice to emerge;
2. To attempt a comparison between interviews and observations, and between teacher interviews and student interviews;
3. To investigate possible links between teachers’ practices and students’ perceptions of such practices;
4. To establish links between what the teachers do, and how the students respond to their teachers’ methods and feedback; and
5. To establish the effects of teachers’ feedback on students’ writing (about unseen literary texts) by interviewing the students first-hand.

A number of changes were made to the students’ interview areas. The first set of areas were: the student’s experience and understanding of literature; experience with unseen poetry during literary criticism seminars; reading unseen poetry: processes and appreciation; writing about unseen poetry: and feedback. The pilot revealed that questions had to be reorganized so that there were not too many in any one section. The latter needed to be more clearly categorized. The revised set of areas were: the student’s experience
and understanding of literature; reading unseen texts (teaching methods and text examples); reading unseen texts (‘appreciation’ and students’ strategies); the writing process (guidelines and attitudes to writing); focus of feedback and feedback comments; types of feedback; understanding and remembering feedback; using feedback (resolving errors, feedback application and barriers). The second pilot of teachers’ and students’ interviews was an opportunity to gauge whether the questions would yield valuable data, and whether the interviews would run smoothly (Pavlenko, 2007). Therefore, piloting was an important stage to determined whether unpredictable issues emerged (Pavlenko, 2007) or whether changes had to be made, as explained above.

4.8.3 Conducting the Interviews: Procedures and Co-Construction

I conducted the interviews through co-construction with the aim of locating the participants’ practices at the study’s post-16 school. Before attempting co-construction, it was important to consider that the ‘interviewer and interviewee jointly construct the interview talk’ (Mann, 2010, p.14; Sarangi, 2003). This meant ‘treating interviews as interactionally co-constructed events in which participant identity and positioning have significant analytical implications’ (Richards, 2009, p.159). Co-construction is an exercise where the interviewer does not conduct the interview rigidly but allows a more fluid exchange between the interviewer and interviewee (Mann, 2010). This enhances the research interview as social practice, which could, in turn, affect the meaning of the data. There are more opportunities for interacting with the meaning, which would be co-constructed rather dictated by the interviewer’s position (Mann, 2010).

The semi-structured format provided more flexibility so that the interviewees did not feel as though they were being interrogated (Pavlenko, 2007; Mann, 2010). The interviews ran as discussions and were smooth overall. Pavlenko (2007) states that very often content is given more importance than the interview’s form and context. However, when possible one can try to strike a balance between the two by focusing on the ‘interactional influences on the presentation of self’ (Pavlenko, 2007, p.178). Richards (2011) encourages micro-analysis. This means to promote and enhance ‘interactionally sensitive approaches’ to interview positioning (going beyond how questions and probes are constructed) (Mann, 2010, p.18). I followed the conditions that characterize interviews (Talmy, 2011, p.25), although with some adaptation. I used interviews as a
‘tool or resource for collecting information from interviewees’, and as a means to ‘give voice’ (Talmy, 2011, p. 25) to them, through co-construction.

When considering co-construction, I reflected on whether the participants were similar to the interviewer in terms of roles and experiences (Roulston et al., 2001). This was the case of teachers rather than the students. Roulston et al. (2001) define this situation as ‘cocategorical incumbency’, which can prompt a specific kind of discourse (p.16). It was important to consider the relationships between the interviewer and interviewees, what is termed here as ‘prior relationship’ (Mann, 2010, p.16). This is defined either as ‘a relationship of peer professionals’, ‘a relationship that has developed during fieldwork’, or even ‘no prior existing relationship (outside of arranging the interview)’ (Mann, 2010, p.16). Bearing this in mind, I conducted the interviews with the teachers knowing that their relationship to me was of the first type (peer professionals). In this case, there was more opportunity for co-construction and this helped to even out the initial discomfort felt by the teachers. For the sake of consistency, interviewees with whom the relationship was similar were chosen; in this case the one which Mann (2010) terms ‘a relationship of peer professionals’. This relationship, however, did not affect my identity as the interviewer. I constructed and conducted the interviews by balancing detachment and objectivity while establishing rapport. In the students’ case, the relationship was either fieldwork driven or none at all prior to the interview. Although there was less co-construction with the students, they were still given adequate space and opportunities to express themselves and feel comfortable doing so. I did this by clarifying that my role of a researcher was to give them a voice rather than merely question them.

When conducting the interviews, I made the respondents aware that the questions were being used as a guide. Roulston et al. (2001) define the interview guide as ‘spoken survey’ and is part of a constructionist approach that prompts information on the respondents’ ‘life-worlds’ and their perceptions (p. 77). Cohen et al. (2007) also refer to the questions as a guide when the interview is semi-structured (p.6). Before starting the interviews, I explained how the interview would proceed, giving the teachers and students a breakdown of the sections so that they would be led into it gradually. I tried to reassure them that they would not have to answer too many questions, but that a number of them were follow-up questions or used only when they were unsure of what to say. At the same time, I was aware that I had to ask follow-up questions consistently if I was to expect rich data. Questions were skipped only if the respondent would have already answered. Occasionally, I asked respondents to explain something further when the contribution was
considered relevant and important. As Roulston (2011) suggests using closed questions as a follow-up to previous discussions, I tried to position them to help clarify understanding or request relevant and specific information (p.85). This turned out to be instrumental because certain important statements emerged during these moments. Furthermore, throughout the interviews, I ensured that the respondents were not being guided or conditioned towards answering in a certain way. I avoided asking questions that could lead to yes/no responses with short answers (Patton, 2002; deMarrais, 2004; Brenner, 2006; Seidman, 2006). When that occurred with a couple of reticent students, I tried to balance open-ended and closed questions for possibility for extension and descriptive data.

One aspect that emerged was related to the language used during the interviews. Although this was not a main concern to the study, part of the co-construction meant giving the participants, particularly the students, a voice. This also meant ‘encouraging interviewees to code-switch if they feel that an explanation can be fuller in L1’ (Mann, 2010, p.15). This depended on whether students felt confident to provide adequate detail in English. There was code-switching at times and the L1 was used at more length in the case of two interviewees, one of whom asked whether he could use Maltese, prior to the interview, as he felt it allowed him to express himself more clearly and in detail. In the teachers’ case this was not an issue at all, as they felt it was more sensible and relevant to use English, given that they were answering questions on preparing students for writing in English and giving feedback. Ultimately every individual interview may generate his or her ‘own interactional context, where each turn is shaped by the previous turns, and roles and membership categories are invoked and evoked’ (Mann, 2010, p.17).

To return to the conditions affecting interviews (Talmy, 2011), the next few aspects are concerned with what I did after conducting the interviews, during the analysis stage. First of all, interview data is considered ‘participant ‘reports’ of objective or subjective reality, with a focus on ‘content’ and ‘the what of the interview’ (Talmy, 2011, p.28). However, Donnelly (2003) suggests adding a different focus to the interview, by moving from a ‘what’ to a ‘how’ perspective, so that ‘processes associated with the data analysis of interviews’ may be redefined (p.318). This would be conducive to the processes of data analysis.

When interpreting interviews, I located certain themes that ‘emerged’ from the data (Talmy, 2011, p. 29). The most relevant quotations are included and a thematic analysis of the codes follows in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. As I analysed the interview
data, I ensured that there was no ‘data contamination’ by following stages (according to a grounded theory method, see 4.4-4.6). ‘Content or thematic analysis’ was conducted through coding and memoing. The interview data were ‘ascribed the status of reports that reveal attitudes, [and] beliefs of self-disclosing recipients’ (Talmy, 2011, p.25). At the same time, the results are presented in the form of a ‘simple summary, or straightforward quotation[s]’; the latter are either ‘abridged or verbatim’, depending on the content or position presented (Talmy, 2011, p.25). In these cases, I had to make decisions as to what information to present and what to remove due to the amount of data. I removed information only when there not enough evidence or when the point made was not relevant. Yet, the richness of data yielded from a grounded theory-based analysis led me to consider more than a ‘simple summary’ because I wanted to give a voice to the interviewees as previously stated.

4.9 Classroom Observation

One of this study’s aims was to gather data on how students are prepared for writing (about unseen texts) and are provided with teacher feedback on such writing. Interviews were used to locate and analyse the strategies explained by teachers, and compare them with the students’ descriptions and perceptions of such strategies. Observation was used as a second method of data collection, to throw light on any ‘matches’ or ‘mismatches’ that may occur (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, pp.16-17). Observation is ‘fundamentally different from questioning because it provides direct information rather than self-report accounts’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.178). Moreover, any given tool used on its own ‘provides only one picture’, so conducting observation and gathering data through ‘field notes’ and ‘detailed records’, as shall be explained below, can add value to this research tool of direct access (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, pp.16-17). For this reason, observations can be considered a reliable source of information compared to what participants may choose to share. This is because ‘it allows researchers to see directly what people do without having to rely on what they say they do’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.185). The information collected through the observations can strengthen the data gathered through other tools (Simpson and Tuson, 2003), such as the interviews and document analysis chosen for my study.

Observational research was considered central and essential to this study as it provided me with a means of data corroboration. Observations are ‘one of the most versatile ways of gathering information’ and the collection process ‘can be organized to
give both quantitative or qualitative data’ (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.3). The former would involve a structured checklist or a system of tally marks which would then be reported in numerical or percentile chunks of information. Conversely, observations for qualitative purposes would be gathered as field notes and structured as narrative accounts, or ‘free-form narratives’, as suggested by Angrosino (2007, p.58). Even as recognizable patterns began to emerge, I continued observing through a free-form layout so as to reach ‘theoretical saturation’ (Angrosino, 2007, p.58). Later on I explain why I chose the second type of format for the observations.

Observations also enable the researcher to gain access into areas full of possibilities and challenges. The classroom setting is an example of this and according to Dörnyei (2007), it is ‘a primary research site’ because its ‘unique features’ offer ‘a strong bearing on the way we conduct research in it’ (p.176). For instance, the researcher can conduct classroom observation as part of qualitative research (such as interviews). Valid classroom research is that which leads to workable hypotheses based on a ‘rigorous process of enquiry and grounded in the data’ related to such hypotheses (Hopkins, 2009, p.44). Classroom research via observation can offer ‘direct access to social interaction’, it can provide one with ‘systematic records’ of such interactions given that the techniques vary, so the data gathered can boost data gathered via other methods (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, pp.16-17). In the classroom, theory meets practice so it was of interest to this study to gauge how the teachers’ suggestions and ideas, together with those of the students, played out during the literary criticism seminars and tutorials. Another asset of classroom observation was to determine the students’ positioning, whether they were active contributors or silent recipients of a teacher’s lesson, whether they asked questions and participated or whether they were asked to write anything during the lessons. I did not decide to watch out for these instances or find evidence of them specifically before the observations began. Initially I had considered using an observation schedule but decided against it because I wanted to remove any preconceived notions of what happens in the classroom. Instead, I used an unstructured method of observation.

The difference between structured and unstructured observation is that the former is associated with quantitative research, for instance by counting how often events take place. These events would fall under ‘a specific focus and concrete observation categories’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.179). I opted for an unstructured observation in conjunction with a grounded theory method not only because of its qualitative nature but mostly because as a researcher I had to ‘observe first what is taking place before deciding on its
significance for the research’ (Dörnyei, p.179). In the second type of observation, which I chose for my study, certain categories were coded and analysed according to the needs of the research foci and questions. The choice of schedule or no schedule requires the researcher to be ‘sensitive to contexts’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.396; Moyles, 2002). I did not use a schedule upon considering that ‘classroom life is very complex’ and after realising that it would be ‘increasingly difficult to draw a boundary line round what [I] think is important’; moreover, the schedule could ‘get too long and unmanageable’ (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.67). I wanted to represent the classrooms complexity as a wholesome event rather than as a set of fragmented events. I considered that recording, making notes of what was happening, and constructing narratives similar to an interview transcript, would enable me to capture a more complete picture from which I could extract patterns and interactions. In this way, I moved from conducting unstructured observations to structured analysis as the relevant instances began to emerge.

It is advised that classroom observation may be unstructured initially to decide the areas of interest and which issues to focus on, so that then more focused and detailed observation and analysis can take place subsequently (Simpson and Tuson, 2003). Whether it is structured or unstructured, observation is regarded as a valid research tool because it enables the researcher to collect ‘live’ data that occurs within ‘natural’ social situations, in the attempt to achieve authenticity and validity. This is because the researcher can access data directly rather through ‘second-hand accounts’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.396). There are some challenges in classroom observation, however, as is discussed later on (see 4.9.3). Observation can be numerically based if one wanted to record how often instances occur. I was more interested in a descriptive form that focused on actions, processes, and behaviours-with-meaning.

4.9.1 Piloting Classroom Observations

After deciding to add observational research to the methodology and data collection, I conducted a pilot study. The first pilot conducted at the other school involved interviews only. The need to conduct observations, however, did arise after the first pilot, especially after the area of feedback became central. As part of the second pilot, I conducted four observations, two of which were lessons known as literary criticism seminars and the other two were lessons known as tutorials. During two of them (one seminar, one tutorial) I attempted using a preliminary observation schedule while in another two, I used the
unstructured method (one seminar, one tutorial). The pilot observations shed light on the
modes and tools to be used for eventual data collection. For instance, they led me to
decide not to use an observation schedule but record the sessions as free-form narratives.

Piloting both structured and unstructured observations before conducting the
actual observations was essential to identify issues and rule out problems with the areas
or items chosen. The point of the pilot was to ensure that the method adopted for the study
would yield rich and meaningful data (Simpson and Tuson 2003, p.5). Although I opted
for unstructured observations, this decision was taken after having piloted a preliminary
observation schedule. In creating the latter tool, which is also known as a ‘scheme’ or
‘protocol’, one has to devise ‘a range of systematic categories to record events by using
tally marks’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.180). However, after piloting the time sampling and event
sampling, I realized a number of things. First of all, I realized I was not interested in the
frequency of events as much as in the detail with which an event was described and
discussed. Secondly, when I compared the pilot of a structured observation (using a
schedule) with the unstructured one (recording the lessons without a schedule to create
narrative accounts), I concluded that the latter form generated more data related to
individual teachers and their approaches. Lastly, using a structured observation tool
involved creating categories that might have been based on my experience, and this would
have contaminated the data. Instead, unstructured free-form narratives as observations
added more depth when combined with the data generated from the interviews.

Using a schedule posed not only a threat to objectivity but it also would have run
counter to the grounded theory method I aimed at for coding and analysis purposes.
However, having restricted categories can still mean observation schedules involve
complication and length (Simpson and Tuson, 2003). Yet, from a grounded theory
perspective, a structured observation schedule would have meant focusing on certain
patterns of interaction, which could have been based on prior assumptions of what was
expected to happen. Hence, I discarded the schedule to do away with such assumptions.
In this way, the pilot highlighted certain aspects and settings of classroom interaction,
while it also drew attention to ‘routine matters which can be easily taken for granted’
(Wragg, 1999, p.26). Moreover, it allowed me to focus on events ‘which [might] catch
the eye’ instead of those that are expected (Wragg, 1999, p.26). Keeping these aspects in
mind, I preferred that the data would provide ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 1993; Denzin,
4.9.2 Tackling Bias and the Observer’s Paradox

‘Observer bias’ occurs when ‘the observer records what he or she thought occurred rather than what actually took place, or because of the observer’s lack of attention to significant events’ (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.18). In order to minimize the bias, I decided not to prioritize certain events over others but to audio record the lessons and then analyse them using the grounded theory method and stages (see 4.4-4.6). Through open coding, comparative analysis, and theoretical sampling, I arrived at the salient instances which enabled me to remove any bias I may have held before observing. Conducting unstructured observations also meant that I did not record what I thought occurred. Although Dörnyei (2007) suggests structured observation because ‘this is the unique data collection method associated with classroom research’ (p.179), there are certain issues due to the ‘closed’ techniques that may be ‘restrictive’ when focusing on ‘a fraction of the ‘whole story of classroom life’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.179). Even if the structured observation is ‘reliable’ and ‘straightforward’, using a schedule would have been ‘reductive’ and could have heightened observer bias. The latter issue arises when the researcher enters the classroom with a checklist of events that are almost expected to take place. This is because structured schedules may contain ‘preconceived’ categories, and subsequently the observation instrument may not be ‘sensitive to context-specific emergent information’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.186). I did not want previous personal classroom experience to colour my observations or to influence me into expecting certain actions to take place. Instead, I wanted to capture the ‘complexity’ of the classroom without giving certain instances precedence over others.

The observer’s paradox was another issue to consider prior to data collection. According to Labov (1972), ‘the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation’ (p.209). Observations cannot happen without the knowledge or consent of those who are being observed. Yet, when people know they are being observed, they might be providing a different picture to what they normally do. This is why I decided to observe the teachers (with the same classrooms) more than once. First of all, the teachers would get accustomed to my presence, and subsequently it was hoped they would feel more comfortable to act naturally in my presence. I was aware that this was still going to be a limitation, hence the paradox, because despite these measures I had no guarantee that their way of carrying out the
lessons was the usual way. However, the students’ interviews shed light on their teachers’ ways, which proved to be very similar to the ones observed. This also stresses the importance of having interviewed the students who had also been taught by the observed teachers. Moreover, through the coding and analysis I conducted on the observation free-form narratives, it emerged that the teachers did exhibit and repeat certain mannerisms and ways of conducting the lessons, which showed that observing them more than once helped address the paradox.

**4.9.3 Observation Procedures and Analysis**

Cohen *et al.* (2007, p.397) suggest four observational settings. The first one is the *physical* setting, which is the environment and its organization. For the study I chose to observe literary criticism seminars and tutorials. The second setting is the *human* one, which involves how the people are organized. Most of the classes observed were made up of female students and some male students. Three female teachers and one male teacher were observed. The *interactional* setting focuses on the interactions that occur, and whether these are formal or informal, verbal or non-verbal, planned or unplanned. The seminars that were observed were more formal than the tutorials, but also involved informal aspects, such as discussions and collaborative writing among the students. Most of the interactions observed were verbal (teacher-led in most cases) but there were lessons during which non-verbal interactions took place, such as when the students were involved in writing (individually or in groups). The last setting was considered an important focus for this study. The *programme* setting is related to the resources used, the pedagogic styles adopted, and the way the resources connect to the curriculum, or the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014). To this end, I was interested in observing the methods and resources used by teachers to prepare students for reading unseen texts and writing about them, as well as how they provided them with feedback, and whether students responded to the feedback during the lessons.

Wragg (1999) discusses the importance of classroom setting for observational research. For instance, how many students there are, the students’ ages, and classroom organisation (whether the desks are set in rows or in a circular formation). These are ‘ecological’ factors that ‘can affect the nature of classroom interaction’ and hence that of classroom observation (Wragg, 1999, p.6). In view of this, I observed four teachers for four consecutive times. Observing teachers more than once enabled me to record data that
yielded ‘rich material for the research’ and subsequently to make ‘a convincing and vivid case for a wide range of audiences’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p.41).

The lessons that were observed were literary criticism seminars and tutorials (both are held once a week and last an hour). In the seminars I observed, there were between 10-15 students. Usually the seminar classes hold between 15-20 students, but during every lesson that was observed, around 5 students were absent on average. Every lesson (seminar) lasted 1 hour although the observed lesson time in terms of content was between 50-55 minutes. For writing practice, the classes are further subdivided into tutorials. This involves having a class of around seven to nine students who come to class with an essay almost every week. During the observed tutorials, around 2-3 students were absent on average. The lesson known as tutorial is focused on providing students with more individual attention on their writing. It has to be added that the work presented during the tutorials is assessed and accounts for 30% of the global mark students receive at the end of each year (the course is two years’ long). In this way, students accumulate a set of essays written on different components of the MC Advanced English syllabus, which count as formative assessment. The remaining 70% is based on the end-of-year written examination (summative assessment). In relation to the literary criticism area, the tutorial tasks based on unseen texts are either guided, semi-guided, or unguided. The number of tasks is approximately six to eight tasks each year: between three to four are on poetry texts, while another three to four are set on prose passages.

12 out of the 16 observed lessons were literary criticism seminars (three for each teacher). The remaining four were tutorials, one for each teacher. The literary criticism seminars were held with second-year, 17-to18-year-old students. There were around ten to fifteen students in each seminar and the classroom seating was organized to encourage pair work or group work. Most of the students at the time of observation were female. On average there were between three to five male students per class observed. The remaining four lessons that were observed were tutorials (one for every teacher). There were around four to seven students during the observed tutorials, and once again they were mainly female students. The predominance of female students is connected to the perception that English is a female-oriented subject. This situation changed following an admissions regulation set by the University of Malta, when the MC Advanced Level English became a compulsory entry requirement for the Law Course. Subsequently, more male students registered on the MC Advanced Level English course at this school. This took place a year after data collection was completed.
In order to gather rich data from the observations I audio-recorded the sessions and took notes of what was happening. However, I was not looking at any specific aspects or foci at that point in time so as not to restrict the data from emerging. When I transcribed the observations, I wrote narratives of the lesson rather than a set of ‘events’ that were ticked off against a checklist (as discussed in the previous section). The benefit of a written account is that it is ‘immediate and fresh’, and gives a ‘fuller picture of events’ (Wragg, 1999, p. 17). For a more definite account of the events that occur, a recording would ensure certain aspects to be noted and confirmed (Wragg, 1999, p.17). In this way I could analyse the lessons in terms of ‘events’. It emerged that there were not many differences between the observation of seminars and tutorials. Some examples of teaching events and patterns of interaction that took place during the observed seminars were: reading and analysis of an unseen text, predominantly led by the teacher; teacher explanations on literary techniques and essay construction; teacher-initiated questions; writing in class (observed twice); reading students’ work in class (observed once); teachers’ feedback on students’ writing. The teaching events can be referred to in Appendix 33, which have been based on the coding and analysis on the observation transcripts (see examples of coded transcripts in Appendices 34-36).

4.10 Document Analysis: The MC Advanced Level English Syllabus and the Examiners’ Report

Document analysis refers to ‘the collection, review, and analysis of various forms of text’ that serve as a source of research data’ (O’Leary, 2004, p.183). It is also known as ‘documentary analysis of existing papers available on the research area of interest’ (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, p.66). The aim of using document analysis in my study was to consolidate the data yielded during the interviews and observations in relation to one particular area (code): the challenges of writing about unseen texts (in connection with Research Question 5). I chose to analyse the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) and the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014) for a number of reasons. First of all, the chosen documents were considered suitable because of their ‘authoritative’ position. I had considered analysing students’ essays prior to this. However, due to certain logistical challenges, it was not possible at the time of data collection to include such an analysis. I did collect some samples of critical commentaries on unseen texts, if only to confirm the writing issues that were highlighted
by the teachers and students. However, the samples were based on specific and different unseen texts so it was concluded that they would not have led to systematic analysis. The students and teachers did mention that the students have to write commentaries on different unseen texts, which then leads to text-specific feedback. This aspect of literary criticism accentuates the difficulty of writing about unseen literary texts, and challenges feedback application. These concerns are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

In order to throw light on writing challenges and to compensate for the fact that systematic essay analysis did not take place, I chose to analyse the syllabus and the examiners’ report instead. More specifically, I analysed the poetry and prose sections on literary criticism in the syllabus to extract the teaching and preparation criteria on the one hand, and the writing objectives and outcomes on the other. Then, I analysed the unseen poetry and prose sections of the examiners’ report, to obtain information pertaining to writing problems that were exhibited in candidates’ essays during the May 2014 examination session. Despite the fact that the analysis of this report directly replaced the analysis of students’ essays, it was based on a larger sample of candidates’ essays. Ultimately, it did provide insights into some writing challenges that students faced when tackling unseen texts. The writing challenges that were highlighted during the interviews are presented in Chapter 5, and discussed in Chapter 6 in conjunction with the challenges highlighted by the report. I proceeded from the documents to the generation of data by following the stages in the next table (adapted from O’Leary, 2004, p.179):

**Table 4.6: Document Analysis Stages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. <strong>Plan</strong></th>
<th>The responsible authority was contacted and clarification on use of documents was sought. Then I considered the type of data that I wanted to explore. The documents were not considered ‘sensitive’ as they are public domain. This was made clearer after I conducted analysis of the interview and observation data.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Gather</strong></td>
<td>Access to the documents was straightforward as they were available online through the MATSEC portal. These can be accessed by anyone who needs information about syllabus materials and criteria, as well as teachers, parents, and students who need information on examination performance (via the report). Examiners’ reports are written and published every year (one for the May session and one for the September session).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. **Review**

This refers to the verification of the texts’ ‘authenticity’ and ‘credibility’. These issues were not problematic at all because the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) and MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014) were written by veritable authorities and published with the Ministry of Education’s approval.

4. **Interrogate**

This was done by exploring the content, focusing on key terms and issues (e.g. the term ‘appreciation’ in the syllabus, and the common errors highlighted by the report). I distinguished between ‘witting evidence’ (what the document intends to express), and ‘unwitting evidence’ (what was interpreted through finer coding).

5. **Reflect / refine**

I considered document analysis as ‘an iterative and ongoing process’ which meant that different readings and re-readings of the syllabus and report were necessary.

6. **Analyze the data**

The data in the documents were analyzed adopting a similar method as explained above in the section of grounded theory method.

As ‘pre-produced’ texts, the above syllabus and report were analysed semantically for themes and key terms by means of open coding and comparative analysis (in connection with the codes and areas that emerged from the qualitative data).

**4.11 Considering and Overcoming Methodological Challenges**

Conducting research in a post-16 school with which I am familiar led to certain challenges. As a researcher viewing the school as a case study, I was aware of the possibility of a halo effect. This happens when certain preconceptions are allowed to shade objective interpretations. Cohen *et. al* (2007) suggest that researchers should be wary of case studies for they ‘are not easily open to cross-checking, [and] hence they may be selective, biased, personal and subjective’ (p.256). In order to avoid over-interpretation of the data because of preconceptions, it is recommended that case study research should be supported by other research tools (Brown and Rogers, 2002; Cohen *et. al*, 2007). While I conducted research with this limitation in mind, I attempted to minimize the halo effect through the grounded theory method I applied. This enabled me to conduct observations without any presuppositions, and to conduct interviews without leading participants to expected responses.
Another issue I had to consider was that of validity, which ‘haunts’ qualitative research because of the doubt in subjective interpretations (Angrosino, 2007, p.59). To offset this situation, it is recommended that analytic induction is carried out on the findings and in my study, using a grounded theory method enabled ‘emergent propositions’ (Angrosino, 2007, p.59). In the case of internal validity, it has to be considered whether ‘the researchers have really observed what they set out to observe and have reported all the critical observational data, or just [provide] samples that most strongly support their hypotheses’ (Brown and Rodgers, 2002, p.44). To overcome this, I observed and interviewed without prior expectations but by coding in depth and without bias. Ensuring external validity was also accounted for, particularly in light of ‘whether the researcher can legitimately generalize from the case study participant(s) and situation to other people and situations’ (Brown and Rodgers, 2002, p.45). For instance, Lea and Stierer (2000) felt that their research was ‘not based on a representative sample from which generalizations could be drawn but rather was conceived as providing case studies’ (p.36). This allowed them ‘to explore theoretical issues and generate questions for further systematic study’ (Lea and Stierer, 2000, p.36). The need for diverse forms of data collection stems from possibilities of ‘threats to internal and external validity’ of case studies (Brown and Rodgers, 2002, p.44). Observational research is one option even though validity may be challenged due to the bias and observer’s paradox (see 4.9.2). However, this mode of data collection can elicit ‘rich descriptive language’ (Angrosino, 2007, p.60). Obtaining rich data was one of the aims behind my choice of observational research.

Apart from interviews and observations, my choice of case study research was determined by the aim to generate ‘realistic’, ‘manageable’ data that would lead to a ‘meaningful’ and ‘relevant’ discussion on writing and feedback (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, p.18). I was not, however, aiming at ‘grand generalizations’ (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, p.18; Stake, 1994). This was because the sample size was not as large as in quantitative research to make generalizations. To address this issue and to validate the significance of small-scale research, Jameson and Hillier (2003) suggest one of two alternatives, case study or action research. After considering both, I opted for a case study research combined with a grounded theory methodology. Case study is adequate for small-scale research in that it ‘allows us to apply sound results from useful, realistic, time-limited research in busy colleges with overworked staff who have little or no time for research’ (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, p.16). Yet, it has to be admitted that one ‘cannot
assume that what is discovered in one place will happen in another’ (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, p.16). Despite the fact that case study ‘provides insights into other, similar situations and cases’, an issue with this type of research is that the ‘results may not be generalisable’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.256). My study does not claim generalizability, particularly as an interpretivist paradigm does not always guarantee such results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Instead, my study aims towards applicability, consistency and transferability, which are the three tenets of trustworthiness in research inquiry. I attempted this by ‘providing sufficient descriptive data to make similarity judgements possible’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.298). My intention was to conduct detailed data analysis through which areas of concern could be extracted and discussed in consideration of the above tenets.

Furthermore, research through a grounded theory method can help address the issue of trustworthiness in a case study (Bates, 2014, p.241). The participants’ cases and their issues may present ‘the factors that may affect the outcome of enquiry’ (Jameson and Hillier, 2003, p.17). Duff (2006) agrees that the specific conditions or insights may not apply broadly to other contexts. However, examining ‘telling’ cases in qualitative research may be helpful to provide insights into a phenomenon. In light of this, Yates (2003) warns of the ‘potential over-reading’ of the individual stories’ (p.224). There are reservations with, different viewpoints on, and challenges in conducting small-scale, case study research. These challenges could have hampered outcomes, had it not been for a consideration of data analysis through grounded theory, as explained previously. Instead, case study research through grounded theory helped address specific issues of a group of people in detail. The present study aimed to counteract the above limitations by focusing on an extensive reading of the transcribed interviews and observation sessions through an iterative process of data analysis. Adopting grounded theory was conducive to a smaller sample size to mitigate the risk of building narrow theories from the individual cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). An intensive reading of the data (Dörnyei, 2007, p.42), which was eventually rich and detailed, helped me work towards aspects of a possible theory. This has helped me to ensure that the reading of the data did not lack methodological rigour, despite the possibility that the aspects of a theory were transferable rather than generalizable.

This does not mean, however, that adopting a grounded theory method did not come without challenges. The iterative process meant going back and forth between data collection and data analysis, and maintaining a consistent pace was not always easy due
to the fact that I was conducting research part-time and working full-time. To overcome this challenge and ensure that research was not fragmented, I recorded my observations in journals through memoing. Moreover, I made adequate time for data analysis to coincide with data collection, although there were restrictions. Another challenge that presented itself when using grounded theory was handling the level of detail. While obtaining rich data was a positive outcome, it was overwhelming at times to organize the amount of data I had collected. I overcame this challenge by mapping and diagramming a lot of the findings. Another issue in relation to this was that some of the responses seemed to fit in more than one code. The selective stage of coding allowed me to tackle this issue by sifting through the codes more specifically. A cross-comparison among the codes (axial coding) made it possible for me to demarcate more clearly among the pieces of data. This led me to make comparisons and contrasts, as well as to draw connections between the central areas (see Chapter 6). Using grounded theory for coding and analysis purposes proved useful and fundamental in rooting out predetermined ideas I could have brought with me as a teacher, particularly in view of the fact that I was conducting research in a familiar context. Despite the methodological challenges, using a GTM has provided me with depth in the data and insights into data analysis. It has also led to connections and conclusions that can be transferable to similar contexts, thereby prompting further research.

4.12 Ethics: Procedures and Measures

Ethical practices are the cornerstone of research. Without such practices, fairness and consideration of stakeholders or participants would not be ensured. Prior to commencement of research and data collection, I went through a process of applying for permission from different entities, namely the University of Leicester, and the school in which I wanted to conduct research. I also asked for informed consent from the teachers to be interviewed and observed, and for the students to be interviewed (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007). For this they had to fill in and sign a consent form. I agreed to discuss the findings with the participants, and I made myself available throughout the research and after to inform them of the eventual results. The following table presents and explains the measures taken to ensure ethical practices throughout the study.
Table 4.7: Ensuring Ethical Practice during Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations for ethical procedures</th>
<th>Measures taken in my study to ensure ethical practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Confidentiality of data and participants</td>
<td>To ensure confidentiality, I decided not to issue the name of the school and to use pseudonyms for the participants. I also decided to withhold certain data that would reveal the identity of the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Permissions to be obtained from all appropriate parties to do the research</td>
<td>I obtained permission from the University of Leicester following the procedures to apply for permission to conduct research. This meant submitting the research tools (the interview ‘guides’), the research questions, and any relevant documents (such as consent forms) to the Ethics Committee. When permission was given by the University of Leicester, I proceeded to ask permission from the participants and the school wherein research took place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Access to be gained to participants and research settings in negotiated ways</td>
<td>I gained access to participants and the research settings (e.g. for classroom observation) through informed consent and negotiation of terms for me to interview teachers and students, and to observe lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Professional attitudes to be upheld by all researcher participants throughout</td>
<td>I maintained a professional attitude throughout research by addressing the participants respectfully, by allowing them to choose the time of the interviews and observations, and by being flexible when interviews had to be rescheduled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Moral issues to be observed in carrying out data collection</td>
<td>During data collection, I observed moral issues by asking appropriate and pertinent questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Making sure that participants give informed consent to the process of research</td>
<td>As explained in points 2 and 3, I obtained informed consent from the participants (see the consent forms in Appendices 2 and 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ensuring that the views of participants are respected and valued, and they are appropriately acknowledged</td>
<td>I ensured that the views of participants were respected and valued at all times during the coding and analysis processes, during the reporting of the findings, and the ensuing discussion. I also maintain that I have not misrepresented the participants’ views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Making sure [that the] research project intends to result in benefits</td>
<td>The aim of the findings and the discussion (see Chapters 5 and 6) is to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to appropriate parties, such as the learners in the school or in the classroom | present insights into the teaching of writing (about unseen texts) and feedback provision in ways that could be beneficial for the teachers, students, and for future classroom practices.

| 9. Sensitivity to the concept of ‘owning the data’ | This means that the research findings and discussion will be made available to the participants, so that they will be informed of the outcomes. |
| 10. Making sure that participants have a ‘voice’ in contributing their ideas to the way in which the research is handled | This was considered when conducting the interviews through co-construction, with the aim of giving a ‘voice’ to participants, particularly to the students. |
| 11. Making sure that we are treating participants as equals in a democratic process | As discussed earlier, I maintained respect towards the participants at all times by making it clear to them that they are equals, so my position as a researcher would not be perceived as one of superiority. |
| 12. Making sure that we are respecting equal opportunities guidelines in recognising gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religious and cultural differences and embracing diversity and equality; | Equal opportunities guidelines have been considered and are respected in this research, although there were no issues in relation to this aspect. |
| 13. Make sure that the language we use in disseminating research and written communications is inclusive and as clear as possible; | I have made it a point that the language used to report the findings and present the discussion does not obscure or hide essential data, nor does it misrepresent what participants have offered. Clarity and truth in reporting are valuable to this research. |
| 14. Make sure we thank all parties and acknowledge them appropriately in the final report. | All parties will be notified and thanked accordingly following the finalization of this thesis. |

The above recommendations were adapted from Jameson and Hillier (2003, pp.80-81). Ethical guidelines in compliance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were also sought and upheld throughout the research period.

### 4.13 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the methodological approach, the conceptual paradigm, and the data collection tools used for this study. The methods and tools used for data collection drew upon a grounded theory method. One of the points to reiterate here is that the
interviews and observations were conducted without assumptions or expectations *a priori*. The semi-structured interviews were used to extract and categorize codes through different processes. The coding process in general enabled the location of central threads. The students’ responses were categorized in a codebook whereas the teachers’ responses were colour-coded. In the case of the observations, a checklist of criteria was not used. Instead, notes were taken while the sessions were recorded and later transcribed, so that more detailed data would be captured. Subsequently, descriptive accounts of the lessons were written. The same coding procedures were used as those for the interviews. The grounded theory method proved to be instrumental, instructive, and insightful as it has paved the way for rigorous coding procedures. The next chapter presents the findings of the teachers’ and students’ interviews, and of the classroom observations.
Chapter 5 – Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that emerged following the coding and analysis processes in relation to the research questions. Chapter 6 follows with a discussion of the research questions. This chapter is organized according to the three main categories similar to those presented in Chapters 2 and 3: Reading, Writing, and Feedback. For every category, the data were structured according to the four elements of the grounded theory method: Processes, Actions, Perceptions, and Challenges. The categories and elements were based on three data sources: interviews with 6 teachers (45 minutes each), interviews with 15 students (45 minutes each), and 16 lesson observations (1 hour each). The results of these data collection sources were analysed with the aim to compare and contrast what the teachers and students said with what was observed during the lessons. The information on the teachers and students was tabulated as follows:

Table 5.1: Teachers’ Educational Background and Teaching Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Educational/Academic Background</th>
<th>Number of Years Teaching English at Advanced Level</th>
<th>Teachers Interviewed</th>
<th>Teachers Observed (4 times)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte (T1)</td>
<td>BA; MA (Literature); reading for a PhD (Literature)</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily (T2)</td>
<td>BA; MA (Literature); EFL Qualifications; reading for a PhD (Literature)</td>
<td>Over 15 years</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher (T3)</td>
<td>BA; MA (Literature)</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine (T4)</td>
<td>BA; MA (Literature)</td>
<td>Around 32 years</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey (T5)</td>
<td>BA; MA (Linguistics); EFL Qualifications</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2: Information on Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Reasons for Choosing English at Advanced Level</th>
<th>Reading Preferences / Reading Poetry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophie (S1)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She liked reading; felt confident in English; got good grades in English in secondary school</td>
<td>She did not seek poetry but read it when she came across it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica (S2)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She aspired to become a novelist; got a satisfactory grade in English (Ordinary Level examination)</td>
<td>Did not read poetry as she associated it with school and studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil (S3)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>He aspired to pursue Law studies; liked English as a subject</td>
<td>He did not seek poetry but read it if he came across it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie (S4)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She felt she did well in English and literature in secondary school</td>
<td>She was not a ‘fan’ of poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantelle (S5)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>The teacher in secondary school influenced and encouraged her to choose English; she also enjoyed English lessons</td>
<td>She did not read poetry for pleasure but only when set as a task in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya (S6)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She was interested in pursuing a Law career; she also liked literature depending on the teacher</td>
<td>She did not read poetry for pleasure as she was concerned about not understanding it; she preferred autobiographies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Reason for choosing English</td>
<td>Reading Preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan (S7)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>He liked the teachers’ methods that showed him how to like the subject</td>
<td>He preferred fiction but not keen on reading poetry (only for the unseen task)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra (S8)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She liked the English language</td>
<td>She preferred romantic novels but did not find time to read poetry (although she would have liked to be able to read it for pleasure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison (S9)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Initially, she did not like English but changed her attitude after attending private lessons; she was interested in the Law course</td>
<td>She stated that she did not like poetry and so did not read it for pleasure; she preferred texts that were more logically written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexia (S10)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>She felt comfortable with the idea of studying English</td>
<td>She preferred reading romantic novels; she felt she did not understand poetry so did not read it alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martina (S11)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She felt that it would be a good choice to study English as it would enable her to teach it as a summer job</td>
<td>She preferred reading novels to poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanelle (S12)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She aspired to become a speech therapist; she liked English</td>
<td>She preferred reading romantic novels but did not read poetry out of a concern of understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm (S13)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>He chose English out of his love for the language but was not sure what career he wanted to pursue; he also liked writing</td>
<td>He liked the idea of reading poetry for pleasure but felt there was not enough time to do so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha (S14)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>She chose English because she was interested in reading</td>
<td>She preferred prose to poetry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nicole (S15)  
Appendix 27  
Female  
18  
She liked writing and wanted to continue studying English  
She read poetry for pleasure but was concerned that she did not always know where to look for or buy good poetry books

Note on the table above: it presents context information about the students who participated in the study. The data are presented in the past simple in the last two columns because they are based on information provided by students at the time of the interviews. Focusing on the reasons for choosing English at Advanced Level and on reading preferences enabled me to ground the students’ responses vis-à-vis their perceptions of writing about unseen literary texts. For example, it was noted that only 2 students read poetry for pleasure (Nicole (Appendix27,S15 and Malcolm (Appendix25,S13). Incidentally, both of them said they also liked writing. The other students did not read poetry because they were worried that they would not be able to understand it. This could be connected to the impression teachers had of their students, namely that they did not read enough. However, students did not say they did not read anything at all. Instead, they tended to prefer novels to poetry, and a few of them preferred romantic fiction.

Comparing the reading preferences to the reasons for choosing English at Advanced Level, the most notable connection was that between aspirations to study Law and preferring non-fiction. Both Maya (Appendix18,S6) and Alison (Appendix21,S9) preferred texts that were either autobiographical or logically written. This suggests that they did not believe that poetry follows logic or is connected to knowledge (as autobiographies might be, according to Maya, Appendix18,S6). It also highlights the different attitudes among students towards the unseen texts. In turn, it might be interesting to ascertain whether such insights might help teachers to understand their students better. It may also make teachers more aware of reasons why students are reluctant to read poetry. The above table is also an example of how I coded the data by applying the codes: reasons for choosing English at Advanced Level; reading preferences; and reasons for not reading poetry for pleasure. The codes and the interview transcripts (Volume 2) were pegged according to Processes, Actions, Perceptions, and Challenges; the table hereunder is an example:
### Table 5.3: Categories and Codes (according to Grounded Theory Elements)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grounded Theory Elements</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Perceptions</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading (unseen texts)</td>
<td>Preparing to read unseen texts</td>
<td>Reading an unseen text aloud or silently</td>
<td>(of) Literary criticism: difficult and confusing</td>
<td>Unseen texts were considered difficult when compared to studied literary texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading methods and approaches (e.g. reader-response vs. stylistic analysis)</td>
<td>Students read the unseen text on their own</td>
<td>Literary criticism as inaccessible due to language barriers</td>
<td>Students’ fear of not understanding or misinterpreting the text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ methods and approaches of reading unseen texts</td>
<td>Annotating unseen texts</td>
<td>Literary criticism as problematic</td>
<td>Reading the unseen text – the unseen text as unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiating between prose and poetry</td>
<td>Working on unseen poems / working on unseen prose passages</td>
<td>Perceiving a difference between unseen poems and prose passages</td>
<td>Poetry was considered more difficult to understand and interpret than prose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s explanation and analysis of the unseen text</td>
<td>Analysing the text (students work on their own or with other students)</td>
<td>‘Appreciation’ as analysis</td>
<td>Contrasting views of ‘appreciation’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ choice of texts</td>
<td>Students’ reading preferences</td>
<td>‘Appreciation’ as enjoyment of literature</td>
<td>Students did not always know what was expected of them (when writing a ‘critical appreciation’)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers advised students against expressing</td>
<td>Students’ views on expressing</td>
<td>‘Appreciation’ as voicing one’s views</td>
<td>Students were confused whether they were allowed to include their views</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers chose texts that are relatable to students</td>
<td>Reading texts that were related to life experiences</td>
<td>‘Appreciation’ as relating the text to life experiences</td>
<td>Difficulty of making literary criticism <em>relatable</em> (to life experiences)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s explanation and analysis targeted at understanding a text</td>
<td>Students’ approaches targeted at understanding a text</td>
<td>‘Appreciation’ as <em>the way one understands the text / recognising the value of the text</em></td>
<td>Challenge of different possible interpretations of a text and not knowing which one is correct</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Writing about unseen texts** | Preparing students for writing on unseen texts | Writing in class (or a home task) | Writing as difficult – more practice required | Writing as a challenge – anxiety over the wrong interpretation |

| Writing processes (e.g. planning, editing, revising) | Students talked about their writing process (including revision) | There was not enough time to revise the same essay | Language issues (e.g. vocabulary, syntax) cropped up repeatedly in different essays |

| Teachers’ and students’ methods and approaches of writing about unseen texts | Paragraph writing; essay writing; writing an introduction/conclusion | Writing a response to the unseen text could be confusing despite the suggestions on structuring paragraphs | Essay structure issues (e.g. paragraphing and paraphrasing skills) take time to resolve |

<p>| Identification of 2 opposing essay structures (the chronological approach vs. the aspect-based approach) | Students adopted either a chronological or an aspect-based approach to writing | Contrasting views on essay structures (the chronological approach vs. the aspect-based approach) | Doubts on whether a chronological approach should be used to structure essay |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparing for the written examination</th>
<th>Teachers’ use of sample/model essays</th>
<th>The examination affected the methods of reading and writing preparation</th>
<th>Students felt they did not know what to expect in the examination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ methods to prepare for the examination</td>
<td>Working on the unseen texts with the examination in mind</td>
<td>The examination was a source of tension but also a motivator</td>
<td>Students did not know whether their interpretation would match the examiners’ one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to the examination during lessons</td>
<td>Awareness and reference to the effect of the examination on appreciation and writing</td>
<td>The examination affects ‘appreciation’</td>
<td>Uncertainty on how to merge ‘appreciation’ and analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing about unseen texts during the examination was considered challenging because of time restrictions</td>
<td>Time constraints (not having enough time to write at length)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Feedback on writing about unseen texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Providing students with feedback – steps, foci, and procedures</th>
<th>Feedback as guidance (giving students suggestions)</th>
<th>Useful feedback = detailed feedback and when comments are specific</th>
<th>Overemphasis or concern with marks instead of feedback (comments)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ explanations of feedback types and comments</td>
<td>Feedback as task-specific (based on a specific unseen text)</td>
<td>Less useful feedback = vague or generic comments</td>
<td>Issues with not understanding teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing students with oral feedback</td>
<td>Oral feedback was used when advising students on what to do to improve</td>
<td>Oral feedback used as a tool to supplement written feedback / considered more personal</td>
<td>Oral feedback was not considered as permanent as written feedback (not as easily remembered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing students with written feedback</td>
<td>Written feedback was used when correcting errors or to provide detailed comments (when oral feedback was not enough)</td>
<td>Written feedback perceived as / used interchangeably with corrections</td>
<td>Students did not always refer back to teachers’ written feedback despite its more permanent nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of advising application; how students apply teacher feedback (or attempt to)</td>
<td>(Students’) feedback application attempts (e.g. rereading the essay and comments, working on the problem areas)</td>
<td>Feedback application was considered important but was not always possible</td>
<td>Feedback application was not always possible or easy due to time gap between one criticism essay and another; Time constraints affected the possibility to rewrite an essay based on teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process of wording the feedback</td>
<td>Lack of action – lack of feedback application connected to the language of feedback</td>
<td>Language of feedback was perceived as unclear at times</td>
<td>Understanding the language of feedback, not only what to do but mostly how to do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is provided some time after the students write and hand in the essay</td>
<td>Teachers marked the essays and then provide oral feedback one week later</td>
<td>Gap between oral and written feedback was perceived as affecting feedback and application</td>
<td>Timing of feedback (lapse of time between teachers’ reading the essay / giving written feedback and providing students with oral feedback)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing digital feedback</td>
<td>Digital feedback suggestions (e.g. a digital</td>
<td>Face-to-face preferred over digital feedback; usefulness of</td>
<td>Rolling out a new system that includes digital feedback can take</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 Reading Unseen Texts

The first section presents the processes and actions of preparing students to read unseen literary texts. These included the choice of unseen texts, reading methods (such as using a reader-response approach or conducting stylistic analysis), annotating texts, teacher explanation and text analysis, and differentiating between poetry and prose. The techniques and approaches that were mentioned and used by the students and teachers resulted in common findings at times, while views differed on certain practices. The same was reported for the observations. Whereas some techniques and approaches were confirmed during the lessons, not all were evident, and some were emphasized more than others. Following processes and actions, the findings underlined different perceptions gathered from students and teachers on literary criticism and the concept of ‘appreciation’. To conclude this first category, challenges of reading unseen texts, tackling literary criticism, and understanding ‘appreciation’ are outlined.

5.2.1 Processes and Actions – from Choosing Unseen Texts to Reading Approaches

During the interviews, most teachers and students spoke of how unseen texts were chosen for the classroom. This included using a pack, bringing in photocopied poems and prose passages, or making use of a prescribed book (as used by all teachers in the Department). For instance, Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.13) explained that she tried choosing reading material with which students could identify (poetry that is on life). Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.52), however, explained that neither the subject matter nor the level of complexity influenced her choice of text. She ensured that her personal method did not influence her, otherwise you end up giving them what is most adapted to your method. From the students’ perspective, Martina (Appendix23,S11) referred to a difference in the use of materials. Whereas her first-year teacher used a textbook and sample essays, the second-year teacher mostly used texts taken from past papers. At this point, it could be relevant to point out that the processes of choosing and reading unseen texts for the classroom seemed to be affected by the examination factor, hence the use of past papers. For example, Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.55-56) said she chose to tackle the poems and prose texts of the past papers because she felt the examination determines how [she]
prepare[s] students to write (ln.64). However, despite being aware of the type of texts chosen for the examination papers, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.48) pointed out that *all sorts of texts* (could) *come out*. Consequently, her choice of texts for the seminars reflected a wide spectrum, *from the Victorian period*, to those *which are more recent*.

During the lessons, it was observed that teachers chose texts either from the textbook that was being used at the time, or from a booklet, or a photocopied poem. A comparison between the teachers’ and students’ views, and the observations, indicated that although teachers tried to choose texts that would appeal to students, the latter felt that this was not often the case. For instance, Maya (Appendix18,S6, ln.19) mentioned that the poems chosen by her teacher *tend(ed) to be about death and the dark side of life*, which did not always appeal to her. Additionally, Malcolm (Appendix25,S13) felt he could relate to those texts that were chosen according to themes. Students (e.g. Appendices 20 and 22) confirmed that the teachers were responsible for choice of text. This could highlight the differences between teachers’ and students’ views. Students suggested that they could be offered the opportunity of choosing the texts.

When students talked about reading actions, a common thread that emerged was the distinction between working on a text alone or together, as a class. Students such as Maya (Appendix18,S6) and Kyra (Appendix20,S8) said their teacher asked them to read the text and work on it alone, but at other times they were encouraged to participate in a class discussion or listen to their teacher’s explanation. All three processes and actions were observed during the lessons, although it was noted that the teachers’ explanations and analysis dominated the lessons (see observation transcripts, Appendices 28-31). During the lessons, the teachers encouraged a response from students, and it was noted how they asked direct questions to specific students. Overall, this was an effective method, despite the fact that students answered briefly or hesitated. However, some students, such as Sophie (Appendix13,S1), preferred analyzing the text on her own initially, to have time to read the texts before taking part in a whole-class discussion. This could be a reason why they hesitated when answering teachers’ questions. Yet, other students, such as Martina (Appendix23,S11), seemed to prefer working on the texts with other students, or with the teacher.

Students described how the analysis was conducted and by whom, explaining how they were trained to analyze. Most students said they were allocated between 10-15 minutes to read and annotate the text. However, Nicole (Appendix27,S15,ln.56) explained the process where they read the text together to understand it (so that the teacher
would see what we can grasp from it). Before annotation, they also discussed a lot of literary terms. During the observations, it was noted that teachers often reminded students of the importance of literary terms, and gave them some examples how to identify and explain them (e.g. Appendices 30 and 31). Similarly, according to Ellie (Appendix16,S4,ln.62-63), their classes were advised to look for literary devices, to pick the theme from different words. During the first year, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.52) said he introduced students to the idea of the poem and starts by making them find out the theme. However, in contrast to what Nicole (Appendix27,S15,ln.56) said on literary terms, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.52-53) explained he initially avoided references to techniques but focused on the meaning or the topic/theme. Then, at a more advanced stage in their course, he would work with students on certain basic techniques, such as imagery and diction. Rather than a contradiction, it tallies with the students’ response, given that the students interviewed were in their second year, which is when Christopher said he would emphasise literary terms.

The teacher read the text aloud before or after the students would have read it on their own (according to Malcolm,Appendix25,S13). Chantelle (Appendix17,S5) remarked that her first-year teacher read out the text first and then held a whole-class analysis, while her second-year teacher asked them to read and analyze it on their own. This chimed with what Christopher (Appendix9,T3,l.46) claimed to believe, that the ideal is to work very much on theory in the first year and on practice in the second year. This notion might be stemming from the assumption, which was then verified by asking the students, that many of them have no idea at all (Appendix9,T3,ln.50) because only some students would have been exposed to basic criticism (Ln.49) in their secondary school years. A possible implication here is that students needed to be guided more in the first year, while second year students were considered to be more independent. During analysis of the unseen text, which would take up to 30 minutes (of a one-hour lesson), the teacher would lead the discussion. Jeanelle’s (Appendix24,S12) class found themselves working on a text on their own, during which time the teacher guided them on thematic concerns. The trend was that students worked on their own interpretation following two readings. Some examples of actions taken, and mentioned by students, were: underlining unknown words, and carrying out a line-by-line analysis.

The teachers spoke of similar methods to prepare students for reading and analysing unseen texts. For example, Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) said she assigned 15 minutes (of a one-hour lesson) to silent reading, and asked them to read the text a number
of times before attempting analysis. Other teachers spoke of the need to make adequate
time for reading the text. Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.31) explained that she gave students
around 5 minutes for some general considerations. Instead, during the one-hour tutorials
(made up of between 5-8 students), Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.52-54) said he asked
students to read the text for about eight minutes, prompting them with questions such as
‘What do you think this is about? He explained that the first reading’s objective was to
get a sense of the text. During the observed lessons, it was noted that, despite the claim
that students were given time to read the text, the 30-minute analysis was mostly teacher-
led. This was observed when the teacher reckoned that the text was difficult or the
students required closer guidance on it. This was confirmed during the interview with
Emily (Appendix8T2,ln.35), who said that she spent a substantial part of the lesson
analyzing texts she considered to be rather difficult: I go over it with them practically line
by line (for prose, it would be paragraph by paragraph).

When asked about reading approaches, teachers spoke of reader-response and
stylistic analysis, or blending both. Most of them referred to reader-response as though it
meant building a personal response. For example, Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.70-72)
defined her understanding of reader-response and stylistics as follows: when you’re
telling them to engage with the poem, it looks to me like the reader approach, because
you’re reading and enjoying it; whereas the stylistic approach is the deeper kind. She
tried to involve students with the poem on a personal level, after which she guided them
towards analysis of the words (stylistics). Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.42-43) said that
reader-response was a base on which stylistic analysis, which comes later, is built. Yet,
she gave examples of questions she poses: I tell them ‘What do you think is going on
here?’ Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.62) said that when reading unseen texts with students,
he preferred the reader-response method, eliciting students’ reactions (‘Did you like it?’).
Although he seemed aware that his questions were subjective, he considered the reader-
response approach more important because unless we get them to relate to what they’re
reading, then it’s very difficult for them to identify significant features (Appendix11,T5,ln.68). Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.113-114) similarly expressed
how he tried to promote reader-response while attempting to train students in stylistics:
you cannot have the reader’s response without knowing the techniques and the style. The
emphasis placed on stylistic analysis was also noted when George (Appendix12,T6,ln.70-71)
explained that because of the nature of the exam we have to have a stylistic approach.
Despite the examination, weaving reader-response with stylistic analysis was considered
ideal: to understand where the students come from and try to see this intertextuality between who they are and the texts we present to them – so the reader-response is very important for me (George, Appendix12,T6,ln.68-69).

The above interpretations of reader-response seem to be connected to enjoyment and personal experiences. Moreover, it was interpreted as a less academic approach. Reader-response seemed to promote reading, whereas stylistics was an area students needed training in. Given that teachers worked with reader-response approach first and then moved students onto stylistic analysis indicated that they considered the latter to be more technical and academic. During the observed lessons, teachers involved students in a stylistic analysis most of the time, so for them reader-response meant prompting students to react to questions that would help establish topic or theme. Further discussion of the reader-response approach and stylistic analysis is presented in Chapter 6.

5.2.2 Perceptions of Reading Unseen Texts – Literary Criticism and ‘Appreciation’

Differences in reading approaches and methods led to a consideration of perceptions of literary criticism and the concept of ‘appreciation’. Teachers and students had similar perceptions on these areas, possibly because they passed on such views to their students. This highlighted the central but hidden role that perceptions may have played when moulding the students’ attitudes towards the unseen text, whether it was a component in the syllabus or the act of reading. One example was that literary criticism was connected to analysis, whereas ‘appreciation’ was likened to enjoyment. However, individual respondents’ definitions added more depth.

The main finding of this element (Perceptions) was that literary criticism was perceived by most students, and some teachers, as a difficult and confusing exercise. The descriptor difficult was also used by teachers during the observations which could have signalled that teachers too were aware of the demanding nature of criticism within the syllabus (e.g. it appears 3 times in Appendix 30 and 5 times in Appendix 31). However, what teachers might have been less aware of was that by using the word difficult, students had started to express a fear of reading (and writing) about unseen texts. Language barriers and lack of background information on the texts added to students’ confusion. By background information, what respondents meant was the lack of context and unawareness of cultural norms present in certain texts. For instance, Martina (Appendix23,S11,ln.187-188) spoke of a poem that had confused her (they put this person in a coffin for three days and in Malta that is not the custom so I got confused – she was
referring to the custom of the wake). More generally, Martha (Appendix26,S14,ln.21) defined difficult texts as *those that do not deal with themes we can relate to*. Two students felt *lost* when poems *first give you the impression they’re written about something* (Sophie (Appendix13,S1,ln.128) but the meanings are completely different from one’s interpretation (Chantelle (Appendix17,S5)). This led them to surmise that critical appreciation was more difficult than other components of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECh, 2014).

Conversely, students said they preferred texts they believed to be more relatable to their life (e.g. via themes). For instance, Alison (Appendix21,S9) mentioned how her teacher had used examples from life experiences which helped her better understand the text (similar to what Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) said about her choice of texts, as mentioned in 5.2.1). Sophie (Appendix13,S1) preferred texts or poems that had relatable themes, such as childhood. She also felt she responded well to texts that are described in detail. Similarly, Alexia (Appendix22,S10) seemed to perceive literary criticism as practical when students could relate to the texts’ topics. In terms of the language, age-appropriate and more modern texts were considered less challenging (Jessica (Appendix14,S2)).

From the teachers’ viewpoint, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.72) spoke of *literary criticism as an in-depth study of the text under analysis*, as she referred to the manner by which a writer achieves the effects in the text. Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.75,78) referred to an element of detective work, to have an informed opinion of the poem by trying to find the evidence for it. Christopher and George (Appendix12,T6) both spoke of practical criticism as a *two-year process* of reading and writing, by which they meant it takes time and practice for students to hone analytical skills.

In relation to level of difficulty, five students compared prose to poetry. For instance, Martha (Appendix26,S14,ln.19) considered prose to be easier *because it is taken from a short story*, as opposed to her perception of poetry as abstract and elusive. Despite the fact that students did not like reading poetry for fear of misunderstanding, they retained it was more self-contained when compared to prose. Contrastingly, prose was more confusing because the passage is *taken out of a novel, so you do not get the whole idea* (Alexia (Appendix22,S10,ln.70-71)). Although Jessica (Appendix14,S2,ln.67) stated her preference for reading prose for pleasure, she perceived this genre as more difficult for literary criticism than poetry when *the characters are not exactly pinpointed* or if passages *contain twists*. Jonathan (Appendix19,S7) thought that the poems’ *shorter
length would ease reading, but preferred prose because the longer length enabled him to formulate a better argument (Ln.148) (for essay writing).

The above analysis also considered ‘appreciation’. The latter word is located in the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014): ‘the enjoyment and appreciation, in a disciplined and critical way, of literary and non-literary texts’ (p. 2). In the literary criticism section of the syllabus, it is stated that in the examination papers, two unseen passages would be set for ‘critical commentary: a poetry passage in Paper I Section C, and a prose passage in Paper II Section B. The guidelines to teachers and students perusing the syllabus also include this note: ‘In each case, examiners will be looking for appreciation as much as critique, as at this level what is looked for as much as anything is ability in the recognition and savouring of literary effect and of striking and stylish use of language’ (MATSECb, 2014, p. 5). The key words were italicized as part of document analysis and are discussed also in Chapter 6.

During the interviews, I asked teachers and students to reflect on ‘appreciation’ and different perceptions emerged. While it was equated with analysis, it was also felt that it involved an element of enjoyment. This led to clashing views on the concept. Three students, spoke of analysis (Appendices 16,18, and 19). Jonathan (Appendix19,S7) stated that to appreciate one has to analyse, while Ellie (Appendix16,S4,ln.144-145) equalled analyzing a poem to giving importance to it. Similarly, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.102-103) underlined that the word has always meant analysis; echoing this view was Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.148-149), who stated that appreciation is analysis. Yet, he expanded on it to include criticism, critique, and analysis (Appendix9,T3,ln.147). This connects with what Maya (Appendix18,S6,ln.33) pointed out, that ‘appreciation’ was more than analysis, because it revealed that there doesn’t have to be (only one) correct interpretation. However, she felt that although students were primarily guided towards analysis, she did not think they been led directly towards an appreciation.

That students viewed ‘appreciation’ as quasi-synonymous with analysis was not surprising when considering how their teachers perceived this concept. For instance, Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.113) felt that there should be an analytical focus, particularly on words [that] form patterns of meaning, and specifically because examiners would want a kind of disciplined attempt on the part of students (Appendix11,T5,ln.107). Charlotte’s (Appendix7,T1,ln.16-19) definition was quite detailed and seemed to capture certain aspects:
The term appreciation is our ability as readers to respond to language as text, to appreciate the imagery, to go beyond context. It comes with attention, by being sensitive to the characteristics of a poem and how it exploits the resources of language as well as literary devices.

The underlined words represent her viewpoint, the idea that ‘appreciation’ is connected to being attentive and being sensitive to a number of features within the text. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.102-103) seemed more hesitant in defining it exactly. Instead, he opined that it’s a very vague word and so posed further questions (‘How are you going to appreciate a text?’, or ‘How are you going to dissect it into parts?’). It seemed that for other students, the line between ‘appreciation’ and analysis was blurred. For instance, Martha (Appendix26,S14) acknowledged that in secondary school she did connect appreciation and analysis. Malcolm (Appendix25,S13), on the other hand, distinguished between the two. He seemed to perceive appreciation as more personal than objective, and defined it as recognizing the value of something (Appendix25S13,ln.141).

Contrastingly, other students spoke of appreciation as shaping one’s understanding and interpretation of texts. Kyra (Appendix20,S8,ln.88) defined appreciation as the way you understand the text, while Martina (Appendix23,S11,ln.123-124) spoke of reading between the lines as a way of understanding the message behind the poem. However, teachers felt that students were often not able to read between the lines (this was mentioned as part of the reading challenges; see 5.2.3). Another insightful comment made by Sophie (Appendix13,S1,ln.157) was that in order to appreciate an unseen text you just have to really relate to that piece of text. Students felt that whereas a text could be appreciated without analyzing it, the reverse was different. To analyze a text, one had to appreciate it first (Nicole (S15), while Neil (Appendix15,S3, ln.227) spoke of understanding what the writer is trying to convey. The findings revealed a possible discrepancy between students’ perspectives and teachers’ perceptions of their students.

Some students felt that appreciation meant voicing one’s opinion on texts and enjoying literature. For instance, Alexia (Appendix22,S10,ln.98-99) merged appreciation with expressing your opinion on what you think the poem is about. Appreciation is more than knowing the theory; one has to enjoy literature so it is easier to wrap your head around it and understand it (Nicole,Appendix27,S15,ln.92). Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.137) stated that appreciation involves enjoyment, I would expect the students to enjoy what they’re doing, particularly when she discussed the same poem with
different groups and discovered aspects she would not have noticed earlier (Appendix10,T4,ln.141). However, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.81) clarified that ‘appreciation’ definitely does not mean whether I like it or not.

During observations, it was noted that the word ‘appreciation’ was not mentioned as teachers guided students predominantly towards analysis. During coding, it emerged that the word ‘appreciation’ only came up once (Appendix 28). During the teacher interviews, ‘appreciation’ was discussed in more detail. Charlotte (Appendix7,T3,ln.19-20) stated that she did not use the term directly in class but guided them to appreciate, by showing them tools to approach poetry in a certain way. Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.160) said she did not mention it too often, as she felt it was inherent in the practical aspect of reading texts.

In contrast with analysis, students mentioned that they had been encouraged to nurture an interest in literature. However, despite their attempt at enjoying literature, they felt that such joy was often lost as a result of studying. This irony emerged when considering the concept of ‘appreciation’ whilst preparing for an examination. For instance, Sophie (Appendix13,S1,ln.165-166) pointed out that despite the examination they [the teachers] are expecting us to be very understanding of the poem, that in our free time we read poetry. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.220-221) seemed to echo students’ views on the importance of inculcating a love of literature (you want students to love literature). However, students felt that studying literature affected this so-called love for it. Martina (Appendix23,S11,ln.136) stated that we do not really appreciate literature because one got used to studying since secondary school. Similarly, Sophie (Appendix13,S1,ln.172) felt that we only analyze, I think I never learnt to appreciate, not even in secondary school. Jeanelle’s (Appendix24,S12,ln.180) understanding of appreciation was different, that one has to dig deeper into the poem. Alison’s (Appendix21,S9,ln.168-169) response extended appreciation to include a grasp of life experiences, world-views, and the authors’ message: It’s not just a poem to criticize for an exam, it’s to better understand life and experiences.

The different interpretations of the term ‘critical appreciation’ also highlighted the issues of how it could be ‘taught’, if at all. Emily (Appendix8,T2) and Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5) explained they guided students towards appreciation by focusing on the technical aspects, such as what the writer uses in to order to achieve a given number of effects (Appendix8,T2,ln.86), and differentiating between imagery, symbolism, and motifs (Appendix11,T5). George (Appendix12,T6,ln.112-113) asked introspective
questions (e.g. ‘What do you think the passage is about?’), while Christopher (Appendix9,T3) felt that the rationale for ‘appreciation’ and criticism should go beyond assessment. Reading literary texts could aid the process of critical thinking (Appendix9,T3,ln.160), which he considered was important... for people who are going to be journalists, lecturers, psychologists (ln.161). However, when guiding students towards appreciation, he also encouraged them to find out what the author was trying to communicate and how he managed to do it, what techniques he uses (Appendix9,T3,ln.151-152). Differences in teachers’ approaches might have explained why students seemed confused in their perceptions and understanding of this concept.

5.2.3 Challenges of Reading Unseen Texts

The interviews and observations highlighted challenges related to sections, one on reading unseen texts and the other on writing (see 5.3.3). The patterns were cross-examined against the teachers’ responses. The latter’s views on challenges seemed to match the students’. Issues that emerged were language difficulties, lack of context knowledge, the fear of misinterpretation, time constraints, and difficulty in grasping the texts’ meanings.

Students felt the texts were difficult to read particularly when they did not consider them to be relatable (to life experiences). In connection to this issue, students mentioned the problem of not knowing about the author's background. This lack of knowledge made them believe that they would be unable to understand the poem’s or prose passage’s setting properly. This might be one of the underlying reasons why unseen texts were considered difficult when compared to studied literary texts. Students were worried that they would not understand the unseen text that would be set eventually in the examination, because the unseen texts were unknown. The fact that the text was completely new emphasised the students’ preoccupation with not knowing what is coming out in the examination, and in turn made them anxious. Reading challenges were often affected by students’ perceptions of poetry. The latter was considered more difficult to understand and interpret than prose passages. As mentioned in the previous section, contrasting views of ‘appreciation’ might have confused students who did not always know what was expected of them, when writing a ‘critical appreciation’. Students were concerned about there being different possible interpretations of a text.

Furthermore, unseen texts were considered difficult when the diction was ambiguous or complex, and if themes were culturally unfamiliar to students (as
mentioned by Martina (Appendix23,S11). Despite their teachers’ assistance, identifying literary devices was not straightforward and those texts that were non-linear in sequence, particularly prose, proved challenging. When students spoke of the fear of misinterpreting the text, especially poetry, they stated it was a fear of getting it wrong, or being on the wrong track (Appendix16,S4,ln.80). The use of the word ‘wrong’ as opposed to ‘correct’ highlighted students’ belief there are standard or correct interpretations within the texts, so deviating from them would not be advisable. This was also connected to their belief that examiners would have agreed on a particular interpretation so reading becomes a form of guesswork, trying to approximate the examiners’ interpretation.

Teachers also expressed concerns that students often over-interpreted or read something that was not in the text. For instance, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.185-186) spoke of the problem that students sometimes go completely astray in simple things. According to Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.149-150), misinterpretation occurred when students invent[ed] things which [were] not in the text. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.145-146) similarly commented that students were not able to back up their arguments from the texts because of over-interpretation or misinterpretation. Teachers might have been unwittingly warning students against going astray, that is, that they either ended up reading too much into the text, or not grasping the style of the text at all (Appendix9,T3,ln.192-193: sometimes they assume too much or sometimes they don’t read between the lines). Students, such as Malcolm (Appendix25,S13) indicated an awareness of this issue.

That students and teachers emphasised the problems of misinterpretation during the interviews could be one reason why students feared literary criticism. It seemed that what teachers believed in was being passed on to students. However, teachers did encourage students to take risks. They expressed openness towards students’ own interpretations, as long as they were adequately substantiated. At the same time, the pressure of having to validate their responses might be stressful to students. In addition, time constraints exacerbated students’ stress levels when reading unseen texts. Such constraints meant not having enough time in the examination to read the text adequately, annotate it, analyse and interpret it, and finally, write a 500-word response.
5.3 Writing about Unseen Texts

This section focuses on the processes, actions, perceptions, and challenges of writing about unseen texts. Of note, the processes that were used to prepare students for writing were: planning and structuring an essay, as well as writing specific parts of an essay (e.g. introduction and conclusion). As part of the planning stages, students referred to teachers’ use of sample or model essays. Actions were related to the writing strategies teachers advised students to use, and the pitfalls to avoid. These were contrasted with students’ approaches, and whether they adopted their teachers’ suggestions.

Perceptions of writing about unseen texts centred predominantly on lack of confidence. The examination also influenced students’ writing. Writing challenges ranged from difficulty with structuring the essay to language errors. Once again, there was a preoccupation with interpretation and expressing oneself in a way that would be congruent with the examiners’ viewpoint. Indications pointed towards differences between preparation and outcomes. Despite the effort put in by teachers to guide students towards planning and structuring essays, the challenges and problem areas that were highlighted meant that something was missing between planning and execution. It was for this reason that the third category, feedback on writing about unseen texts, was considered in an attempt to understand the issues and their possible causes.

5.3.1 Processes and Actions – Preparing for Writing, Planning and Writing Approaches

To prepare for writing, students and teachers mentioned the use of sample or model essays provided by their teachers. Malcolm (Appendix25,S13) and Martina (Appendix23,S11) mentioned that their teachers provided them with sample essays, which highlighted aspects such as diction or theme. Similarly, Emily (Appendix8,T2) said she provided students with templates, which included subject matter, the persona/narrator, the themes, diction, and imagery. The students would complete the boxes on these aspects via quotations. Jeanelle (Appendix24,S12) felt that through the sample essays she learnt how to quote from a text because they contained examples of such quotations. Katherine (Appendix10,T4) also explained that she used model essays because the students were preparing for examinations. Her templates would include components of the essay. Instead of model or sample essays, Alexia’s (Appendix22,S10) teacher offered her class the opportunity of writing essays in class, helping them while writing. During the
observations, it was noted that teachers referred to or did make use of templates (Emily (Appendix8,T2) brought in a jumbled-up essay for students to reorder). However, this did not happen often during the lessons observed.

The planning stage was discussed by most respondents. Neil (Appendix15,S3) mentioned a ‘practice class’ where students worked unaided on a plan before writing. However, collaborative writing was encouraged: *we write it with him (the teacher), he writes all the things but gets the ideas from us* (Appendix15,S3,ln.214). Alexia (Appendix22,S10) and Sophie (Appendix13,S1,ln.188) spoke of working on a plan, though the former preferred noting important aspects of the text whilst the latter felt that planning requires time. Jessica (Appendix14,S2) gave weight to text annotation so as to locate the important literary devices. Ellie (Appendix16,S4,ln.175-176) mentioned self-questioning techniques she used before writing (e.g. “*why did he write that certain word?*”). This was similar to Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.48) who advised students to ponder questions such as *What do you think you have to write about and focus on?*.

During the planning stage, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.137) encouraged students to *underline phrases that are particularly punchy or effective*. Teachers also emphasised the planning stage during the observed lessons. However, given that the analysis was mostly teacher-led, there was scant evidence of how students planned their essays. When writing took place (e.g. a group activity during one of Christopher’s (Appendix9,T3) sessions), there was some evidence that students were involved in planning but mostly started writing after text annotations.

Five students explained the process of essay writing. Kyra (Appendix20,S8,ln.126) spoke of *building the main themes* and including quotations of imagery. Jonathan (Appendix19,S7) explained he tried to analyze according to the theme and contrasts. Jeanelle (Appendix24,S12) moved from theme and stylistic features (e.g. imagery) to more specific aspects of analysis, such as versification. Moreover, she tried exploring the connection between the narrator and the reader, for which her teacher had praised her. Martina (Appendix23,S11) began with a general overview and focused on thematic concerns, before expanding on stylistic features. Similarly, Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.76) advised students to *move from something generic towards a number of paragraphs that are more specific*. Moreover, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.67) spoke of imagery and diction, which he stressed were *not just ornaments* but tools with a *purpose*, an *arsenal of weapons* to use when writing.
Moving from planning to writing, five students spoke of writing the introduction and conclusion to an essay. Ellie (Appendix16,S4), Sophie (Appendix13,S1), and Alexia (Appendix22,S10) mentioned the idea of writing two introductions rather than one, as the second allowed more detail and a better link to the three subsequent paragraphs that constitute a body. Chantelle (Appendix17,S5,ln.102) felt it took her some time to find the introduction. In relation to this, it emerged that students were also advised to include a paraphrase and similarly, Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5) recommended a paraphrase in the introduction. In this way, students would show what they knew about the text’s subject matter. The students’ familiarity with the idea of a paraphrase reflected their dependence on it as an entry point into essay writing. For instance, Neil (Appendix15,S3,ln.49) mentioned writing a paraphrase of the text’s subject matter, as did Chantelle (Appendix17,S5), who said that the paraphrase usually gave her the push she needed. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.56) referred to a specific focus in the introduction as a tension in the text. He also explained that he advised students to find the main theme (Appendix12,T6,ln.55). He said that students generally felt comfortable locating the themes (mentioned also by Christopher (Appendix9,T3), Alison (Appendix21,S9), and Chantelle (Appendix17,S5) earlier). It was interesting to note that the verb find was used by both teachers and students. There seemed to be the perception that an unseen text laid out clues for students to locate and their success in writing would depend on discovery of such clues (e.g. finding devices, the themes, and other aspects).

Paragraph writing was mentioned by teachers as well. Emily (Appendix8,T2) stated that if students succeed in writing points that are properly articulated (In.69-70), then they can be very easily assembled to form a paragraph (In.70). Christopher (Appendix9,T3) also spoke of paragraph writing in relation to specific areas, such as imagery and diction. He assigned essays for homework, while in class students wrote only parts of an essay, due to time restrictions. This was also observed during two of Christopher’s (Appendix9,T3) lessons. Students worked in groups and were asked to write one part of the essay, such as the introduction, a paragraph on imagery, tone, and diction, as well as a conclusion. After they had written their respective paragraphs, he read their work aloud, occasionally giving feedback. This was punctuated by praise or critique in those areas which were well-written or required clarification respectively. Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.27-28) organized reading so that it led to paragraph writing: I ask questions according to the organization of the essay... and I ask them almost as an
essay preparing for writing. She also offered students regular opportunities for writing, whether this included a plan or a draft.

It seemed that students knew what they had to do and what to look for, both before and during writing. However, the issues that emerged as writing challenges seemed to contradict the students’ strategies. On writing essays in class, students mentioned that the teacher decided when writing took place. Sophie (Appendix13,S1) hinted it could be (more) beneficial if students were given the opportunity to suggest when they felt prepared enough to write. These issues might throw light on a potential discrepancy between knowing what to do and how to do it, namely how to translate the above strategies into writing effectively.

This might also have been affected by two contrasting writing approaches in essay structure, as discussed by students and teachers alike. On the one hand, teachers and students mentioned the chronological approach. For them this meant writing one paragraph for every stanza of a poem, or per paragraph of a prose passage. By following the text’s sequence, students felt their essay would be more adequately structured. Alison (Appendix21,S9) and Chantelle (Appendix17,S5) mentioned the chronological approach when structuring essays, despite the fact that Chantelle’s second-year teacher advised against this approach. This stemmed from the fact that different essay types had been explained to Chantelle’s class. These were the same as those found in the MC Advanced Level English Examiners' Report (MATSEC, 2009). The latter report stated that the essays that were written according to the text’s chronology lacked adequate structure. For instance, Maya (Appendix18,S6,ln.44-45) spoke of being advised against the chronological approach for the risk of breaking up the poem in stanzas. Similarly, Malcolm (Appendix25,S13,ln.225) realized it was not very effective or efficient because you keep repeating the same thing. Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.44-45) seemed to prefer to move (students) away from the chronological approach, by asking them to write individual paragraphs on areas of the rubric. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.175-176) also advised against this approach because you don’t have that overall picture that a thematic approach offers you. The latter approach was defined as writing according to suggested areas in the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) such as imagery, diction, and theme. Similarly, Jonathan (Appendix19,S7) and Martha’s (Appendix26,S14) teachers advised the thematic approach to writing essays. It appeared that other students avoided using the chronological approach in their essays because they had been told it is not right (Kyra (Appendix20,S8,ln.153). Alexia (Appendix22,S10)
pointed out that the thematic approach was preferable. Despite this, students still followed the chronological approach, because they thought it is something natural to adopt (Appendix7,T1,ln.57). Maya (Appendix18,S6,ln.40-41) was aware of the approach’s pitfalls, but seemed to prefer it when the poem was difficult, because it helped her organize her layout better.

As I tried to understand where the chronological approach originated from, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.152-153) offered a possible reason behind it. She seemed to believe it had been ingrained in students from secondary school (they would have been trained when doing their 'O' level when studying poetry texts for example... they are taught to do a stanza-by-stanza analysis). According to her, and based on students’ and her experience, the students would have received training to write chronologically-structured essays on the studied set poems at SEC Ordinary Level English Literature. Subsequently, they transferred this method to essays on unseen texts at MC Advanced Level English.

In agreement with Charlotte (Appendix7,T1), George (Appendix12,T6), and Emily (Appendix8,T2), Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.97) said he discouraged students from using the chronological approach, but did not write it off completely. This was the case when students’ language use was accurate, and if their response included salient literary aspects of critical appreciation (Appendix11,T5,ln.98-99). Similarly, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.131,139) was aware that other lecturers preferred guiding students to write according to techniques, but he felt that the thematic approach may sound rather cold. Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.88) explained why she was not against it. She said that there were certain poems that are amenable to the chronological approach. This echoed the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (2014, 5 years after the 2009 report) in which it had been stated that the unseen poem chosen for that year was considered conducive to a chronological approach. Indeed, Katherine (Appendix10,T4,) spoke with the examination in mind, explaining at the apprentice stage, such an essay structure enabled students who are not exactly avid readers and deep interpreters to focus on specific parts of the text (Appendix10T4,ln.96). She commented that they should do well if the chronological approach is established for them (T4,ln.155). By this she meant that it could be recognised as an approach rather than penalising students for using it.

Apart from being advised against the chronological approach, there were other pitfalls to avoid. These included: not giving one’s opinion; not narrating but analysing the text; not commenting on every line but focusing on the important points to save time; and not commenting on tone and setting in the beginning of the essay but towards the end
for more cohesive writing. Some students expressed personal views on certain aspects. For instance, Jonathan (Appendix19,S7) and Alison (Appendix21,S9) believed expressing one’s opinion could be merged into analysis, with adequate evidence that came from the text. Ellie (Appendix16,S4,Ln.244) felt she had to avoid narrating the text because the examiner would know what is was about, and believed that narrating would result in less marks. During the observed lessons, it was noted that teachers mentioned over-narrating and warned students against it. Differing views on essay structure could have impacted students’ perception of what was acceptable or not, as well as the practices and strategies they adopted in essay writing. It could also be connected to their confusion and lack of confidence in what was expected of them, for instance at examination level.

5.3.2 Perceptions of Writing about Unseen Texts

This section presents teachers’ and students’ perceptions of writing about unseen texts. I was interested to find out how perceptions might have shaped not only teachers’ practices, but also students’ confidence in writing about unseen texts. Students’ and teachers’ perceptions of writing about unseen texts in relation to the examination are also discussed here. This is because the examination might have been an influential factor in shaping such perceptions.

First of all, some teachers seemed to prefer preparing for writing about poetry in the first year and prose in the second year. Yet, they seemed to believe students found it more difficult than prose. Christopher (Appendix9,T3,Ln.82-83) explained that poetry by its nature is concise and tends to be more cryptic; prose might be more straightforward, as it is an extract from a novel or short story, so he seemed to believe it tends to be explicit (Appendix9,T3,Ln.85-86). This was confirmed by some students, who were under the impression that prose would be easier because of length or involved a plot and characters. Despite such perceptions of poetry and prose, the latter was mostly done in the second year. This was possibly because of the idea that students would be more familiar with poetry criticism than prose, given that they would have done more work on poetry as part of the ‘O’ Level Literature course. During the first year, George (Appendix12,T6) said he preferred providing students with ideas on how to write an essay and then do more practice in the second year. However, students emphasized the need to write more regularly during literary criticism seminars.

In fact, students recognised the importance of writing practice and felt they needed more of it during both years. In particular, six students suggested that writing had to take
place more often that it did. Jonathan (Appendix19,S7) stated that they wrote something during every seminar, whereas Martha (Appendix26,S14), Nicole (Appendix27,S15), and Jessica (Appendix14,S2) felt they had been given more opportunities for writing practice in the first year. Martha (Appendix26,S14) said writing in class took place on alternate weeks, while Nicole (Appendix27,S15,ln.128) stated that we were constantly writing. Jessica (Appendix14,S2,ln.103) mentioned that they often conducted text analysis in the second year, but felt that writing was more important. On writing in class, Ellie (Appendix16,S4) stated that sharing their writing gave students a voice in the lesson.

Despite opportunities for writing and a willingness to write, students’ lack of confidence in writing about unseen texts emerged. That students seemed to perceive writing about unseen texts as difficult could be linked with teachers’ beliefs that practical criticism is a complex area. It could be argued that teachers’ attitudes towards the unseen text might have rubbed off on students, fuelling more anxiety and fear of this syllabus component.

Following a couple of interviews, I decided to ask students to rate their level of confidence and explain why (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest). The aim was to discover their concerns about literary criticism, and frame the writing challenges. I wanted them to come up with descriptors. The average rating for confidence level was 6.5/10, and the reason for this was that an unseen text was ‘unknown’ to them, which meant they would have prepared or studied for it before the examination. 5 students (Maya, Jonathan, Kyra, Alexia, and Jeanelle; Appendices 19,18,20, 22, and 24 respectively) placed their confidence in writing at an average 6, overall feeling more prepared to write about the set texts. Six students perceived writing about unseen texts as less daunting, but with some reservations. Martha (Appendix26,S14,ln.34) stated I don’t mind writing about unseen texts, but admitted not feeling 100% confident. Martina (Appendix23,S11) felt more confident when writing about unseen texts than other students (7/10), on account of there being no studying involved. Nicole (Appendix27,S15) and Neil (Appendix15,S3,ln.90) stated that they felt quite confident (7.5), because of the subjective element. Jessica (Appendix14,S2) remarked that she had performed better than on set text essays. Hence, the students’ level of confidence was low when they were concerned about interpretation but higher when they perceived writing about unseen texts to be an act of creative expression, which they felt constrained them less than when writing about the set texts.
Teachers and students were asked to reflect on the effect of the MC Advanced Level English examination on writing about unseen texts. An issue that emerged among students’ responses was anxiety because students did not know how essays would be marked by examiners (i.e. what criteria or parameters would be used for marking). Similarly, teachers spoke of how preparing for the examination could have impacted the students’ writing performance in the unseen text component (in the written examination papers). For instance, George (Appendix12,T6,ln.43-44) mentioned there are certain parameters you have to abide with (e.g. reference was made to tone, imagery, and figures of speech) in the examination. Christopher (Appendix9,T3) seemed to believe it was more important to talk about the structure of the poem (T3,ln.98). Such examples highlight the differing viewpoints held by the teachers, which could have explained that confusion among the students, who did not seem to know what was expected of them.

Most students spoke of being afraid of the prospect of having to write about an unseen poem and prose passage under examination conditions. Students spoke of being apprehensive and hesitant (Appendix25,S13,l.012), or anxious about understanding and writing about the text in one hour (Appendices 15,S3; 24,S12; and 26,S14). The issue of subjectivity seemed to worry students because they believed the marking of essays could vary from one examiner to another (Appendices 13,S1 and 20,S8). This highlights the gap between teachers’ perception of what was expected of students (in the critical component for the examination), and what the examiners expected of them. Preparing for (examination) writing, students were also concerned that they had to demonstrate their ability, and therefore preferred working individually (Appendices, 19,S7 and 21,S9). The use of tests was not opposed because this mode of assessment help gauge one’s ability to analyze unseen texts (Appendices 15,S3 and 21,S9). This echoed Christopher’s (Appendix9,T3,ln.167) view, that writing about unseen texts really shows their method. Nonetheless, writing about unseen texts was perceived as a challenge from the teachers’ viewpoint. Students could not compensate for their writing and interpretation skills by studying the texts (Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.72-73), given that they haven’t seen the text before, not like the other parts of literature that they study (Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.164-165). Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) explained that preparing for the examination had influenced students’ attitudes to unseen texts: The exam is ultimately their goal. 60% of students I must say are exam oriented; they cannot enjoy or relish literature (ln.63-64). Emily (Appendix8,T2) also mentioned that the examination format influenced the way students study.
Ultimately, teachers felt the examination impacted them too, their techniques and the way they approach it (Emily, Appendix8, T2). For instance, George (Appendix12, T6, ln.124-125) suggested that he would have allow[ed] the students to come out with things more at their own pace if it were not for the examination. Others echoed this view, as teachers want students to reach that level examiners are looking for (Appendix10, T5, ln.137-138). Overall, however, it was perceived that students seemed to fare poorer in the unseen texts as opposed to the studied texts. This was also corroborated by the Examiners’ Report (2014). Reasons for students not performing as well as expected are discussed in the next and last section on the writing category.

5.3.3 Challenges of Writing about Unseen Texts

The difficulties encountered by students when writing about unseen texts, as reported by the respondents and observed during the lessons, were similar to the reading challenges (in section 5.2.3). Students spoke of their anxiety over the text’s subject matter, of not knowing what the themes were and how to develop them. They said they could not write well if they did not understand the text and they panicked when they did not know what to write about. Echoed by teachers, it was noted that students sometimes misinterpret the metaphorical as literary (Charlotte, Appendix7, T1, ln.26), so they were afraid that what they write might be wrong (Katherine, Appendix10, T4, ln.114-116).

The role of the teacher might have impinged on how students shaped their interpretation. It was suggested that the teacher should [not] always come in like a Deus Ex Machina, to say this is right or this is wrong (Emily, Appendix8, T2, ln.216-219). Instead, she meant the teacher is a mentor who helps students overcome their difficulties. During the observed lessons, teachers used an encouraging tone, but were also noted advising students of certain problem areas to avoid, such as narrating rather than commenting on the text. Students also gave importance to contact hours offered by their tutors to discuss writing difficulties (e.g. Martha, Appendix26, S14; and Jessica, Appendix14, S2). Jeffrey (Appendix11, T5, ln.198) believed that students’ writing improved with the teacher’s guidance: once you tell them what they have to look for, they would become more responsive to writing. However, one problem was that students often did not know how to improve their writing despite knowing what to do.

The examination seemed to be influencing the way teachers and students perceived writing and its challenges. In relation to interpretation, Charlotte (Appendix7, T1) drew a link between reading and writing, by suggesting that the inability
to read led to or impacted the inability to write. Christopher (Appendix9,T3) also mentioned that writing was often a consequence of reading. This seemed to explain why students might have considered essay writing daunting, while their resistance to criticism and writing could have been due to a lack of confidence to speak in class (Katherine,Appendix10,T4). Providing practice to speak and write was considered important. However, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.169-173) explained that success in writing (for the examination) depended on three factors: the student’s ability, the chosen text, and the examiner’s role. Essentially, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.116-117) was concerned that time and word constraints affected students as they have to write around 500 words in 1 hour. Students thought writing under examination conditions was stressful, as they were worried about missing out details, lacking depth and using expression that examiners would deem inappropriate.

With reference to the areas of self-expression and style, teachers and students highlighted structural problems. Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) seemed concerned with such issues that affected other aspects of essay construction, such as the writing of an introduction. Despite the fact that students seemed to have been trained to write an introduction and conclusion to the essay, teachers reported that they still could not do this with ease. Teachers also expressed concerns about structural and technical accuracy at word and sentential level (Appendices 9,T3; 11,T5; and 12,T6). These problem areas were also mentioned by the teachers during the lessons. When I asked teachers whether they thought these writing issues could be addressed, it was noted that organizational and structure-related errors could be resolved short-term, whereas language-based errors, content, and interpretation issues required more time. They seemed concerned that students ended up not mentioning certain content-related ideas, which consequently led to condemning themselves to a earning lower mark (Appendix8,T2,ln.138-139).

Students spoke of vocabulary and syntax issues. These were categorised either as the type of vocabulary students were expected to use when writing about unseen texts, or the advice to refrain from using words that were over-the-top or out of context (Appendix25,S13,ln.332). Students felt they did not know how to use linking words adequately, or were told that their range of vocabulary was limited (e.g. the language that reflects critical thinking). In relation to syntax, students mentioned not knowing what verbs or tenses to use when writing about unseen texts. Moreover, students spoke of being advised against writing long sentences, or that they had to write clearer topic sentences.
When analysing unseen texts, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.86-87) mentioned that he advised students to reflect on questions such as: ‘What is being said? How is it being said? and Why is it being said in that way?’ (quotation has been rephrased). He underlined the last question because he felt that students floundered when writing about effect (T3,ln.90). Students admitted not knowing how to explain ‘effect’ in writing. Similarly, George (Appendix12,T6,ln.131) seemed concerned that students were unable to grasp different levels of meaning because they did not go beyond the literal meanings of words (Appendix12,T6,ln.135-136).

At a more specific level of analysis, it was noted that students were able to identify figures of speech (Appendix7T1,ln.34) but did not go beyond identification. Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.35) was concerned that their essays read like an inventory. Similarly, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.178-179) explained that students stopped at identification, either because they [didn’t] find a reason for it, or because they were not able to explain why. He pinned this down to students’ difficulty with creativity and imagination (Appendix9,T3,ln.184). Jeffrey (Appendix 11,T5,ln.159) stated that students faltered because of their rather simplistic attempt at coming to grips with the stylistic and literary features. However, students’ reasons for and concerns of not being able to go beyond identification indicated that their teachers’ perceptions of them were slightly critical. For students, it was less a question of lacking creativity and imagination than being afraid of not giving the right interpretation.

On resolving challenges, students spoke of improving their writing skills rather than resolving them. A common thread was that certain ‘problem areas’ seemed easier to work out, such as essay layout and sentence structure. For example, some students stated it was easier to work on sentence structure and improve language-based errors, such as tenses (Chantelle (Appendix17,S5), Alison (Appendix21,S9) and Ellie (Appendix16,S4). Conceptual issues, such as developing ideas and interpretation, were more difficult to resolve. More work was also recommended on developing themes (as mentioned by Martha (Appendix26,S14). Attempts at resolving writing challenges were also corroborated by teachers, who felt that problems of interpretation were the most complex to resolve short-term, whereas structural errors were sorted out with practice and attention.

Teachers gave different reasons for lack of improvement, but principal among these was a view that students were on the receiving end of teacher input (Appendix10,T4,ln.191-192), thus leading to students being at a loss with texts
Despite the critique of spoon-feeding, teachers were caught up in such a system where the students had not been taught how to think for themselves (Appendix10,T4). The issue was intrinsic to the teaching-learning connection, namely whether the students learnt what the teachers were meant to be teaching. Part of this problem could be that the teachers were the ones who predominantly provided the input and students’ contributions were less lengthy and detailed in comparison (as noted in the observed lessons). Unwittingly, Katherine (Appendix10,T4) and the other teachers were eventually reinforced the same practices which they decried. The silence and reticence that was observed in students, as indicated by their blank faces at certain points, may also have highlighted their struggle with this component of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014).

In an attempt to counteract the issue that lessons were heavy on teacher talk, the four teachers who were observed did try involving students to increase the response rate, as well as to boost participation in class. When the teachers read and interpreted a text together with the students, the former built on the interpretation by asking questions. These were either leading questions that required a simple answer, but also resulted in flowing sustained discussions during the seminars. A more specific example was observed during one of Christopher’s (Appendices 9,T3 and 30) lessons, who showed students how to draw conclusions by using the text’s language and quoting from the text. Overall, students’ participation rate increased during collaborative writing and during teacher-led discussions.

The students responded to their teachers’ questions about the texts by providing personal reactions or more technical responses, such as references to literary terms. There were moments of student-initiated responses (Appendices 35-37). Whereas the length of students’ response was brief (one-word answers or short phrases) when prompted by the teachers, they tended to be longer when self-initiated (in the form of questions or statements). When asked directly by the teachers, the students’ tone was hesitant. They answered with a raised intonation, uncertain of the correctness of their response. The teachers responded to the students’ contributions by repeating what they said to the class, and confirmed whether it was ‘correct’ or not. In this case, the teachers extended the students’ response by explaining in more detail. When the teachers did not think the student had provided the response they were hoping for, they provided the ‘correct’ interpretation by rephrasing and explanation (Appendices 35-37). It could be noted that this technique of addressing students’ responses occurred in every session of the four
observed. During explanation and extension, it was observed that teachers also repeated and paraphrased to consolidate learning (Appendices 35-37).

Students’ lack of responses and their difficulty in contributing to a discussion on the texts during the lessons can be connected to challenges they eventually faced when writing. When students faltered at teachers’ questions, it was not merely a question of being shy to speak. Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.203-204) spoke of students’ lack of confidence in relation to higher order skills: *sometimes they make the mistake of thinking that in writing a critical appreciation they need to have some higher order intelligence.*

Some teachers suggested how one can guide students. Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.113) said she advised them to *dig deep into every word.* She also differentiated between errors of content/interpretation and language use, stating that the former *depend[ed] on the poem,* whereas the latter *depend[ed] on the student* (Appendix10,T4,ln.119-120). Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.204-206) was very alert to his students’ issues, as he explained how he helped them overcome this mental block: *‘Look, start from the little bit that you can understand ok what is this about/ can you write a sentence about this?’* From the students’ end, Kyra (Appendix20,S8) mentioned that she had been provided with guidelines on how to structure her essay. Additionally, she and Alexia (Appendix22,S10) stated that being more self-reflexive of one’s writing helped to notice errors, as did focusing attention on extending one’s vocabulary range. Other tools mentioned by the students to address writing errors were: referring to the notes or web resources (Appendix21); maintaining a personal dictionary system on a mobile phone (Appendix13); and referring to critical essay samples provided by the teachers (Appendices 23,24). Students’ attempts to improve their writing not only indicated their awareness of the writing challenges but led to insights of methods and approaches used.

However, some students found it difficult to explain ideas in writing or seemed to believe that more writing opportunities were required (Appendices 23,27). Contrastingly, it seemed that teachers often thought their students were lazy and sloppy in their work, or not often being bothered with their teachers’ advice (*they lack the intellectual energy,* Appendix9,T3,ln.388, or lack *personal motivation,* Appendix12,T6,ln.320). However, how students described and approached writing seemed to indicate that they were motivated, despite feeling discouraged and anxious at times. This could be a very relevant point in connection to the differences between teachers and students, once again influenced by perceptions. The next and final category of feedback attempts to bring together the processes of reading and writing.
5.4 Feedback on Writing about Unseen Texts

In this section, the findings related to the actions, processes, perceptions, and challenges pertaining to feedback are revealed and analysed. Similar to the categories of reading and writing, the data gathered from the interviews and observations were analysed. Aspects such as feedback definitions, different types of feedback, perceptions of feedback (such as gauging its effectiveness), and difficulties of applying teachers’ feedback to future writing, are discussed. Teachers and students had similar views on the role of feedback, but there were differing perceptions, which highlighted the multifaceted nature of feedback. One pressing concern revolved around the challenge to pinpoint exactly how the feedback was being applied, and whether it led to any progress in future writing. The students’ concern with marks over feedback and the lack of time to apply feedback by revising their essays seemed to be undermining feedback provision. However, teachers had valuable contributions on possible ways of measuring effectiveness. Students gauged what good feedback meant for them yet were concerned about applying their teachers’ feedback. Other seminal points that were raised centred around the timing of feedback, the discrepancy between spoken and written feedback, and the language of feedback.

5.4.1 Processes and Actions – Definitions, Forms of Feedback, and Feedback Provision

It was important to start with an understanding of what teachers and students think feedback is, specifically its role and significance to their respective teaching and learning processes. Some definitions of feedback were provided by the teachers. It was described as an intervention in writing, but primarily as a way of helping and guiding students’ development of ideas (Charlotte, Appendix7, T1, ln.78). However, it was claimed that feedback should not merely be an intervention in writing but also an opportunity for students to develop their voice (Christopher, Appendix9, T3), to let them show their flair in writing (Emily, Appendix8, T2, ln.287). Feedback was also considered a constructive response that was contingent on the time within which it was provided (Emily, Appendix8, T2, ln.208). Moreover, it was used as a way of guiding students as the teacher could work with what he or she comes across (George, Appendix12, T6). Another way of understanding feedback was by means of asking them questions, telling [students] to consider their own thinking (Katherine, Appendix10, T4, ln.198). Yet this seemed to cause discomfort to some students: they feel like you’re persecuting them (Katherine, Appendix10, T4, ln.200).
This led to consider teachers’ feedback practices form the students’ viewpoint. For the latter, feedback was a form of knowing and understanding what their weaknesses were, whilst being provided with guidelines on how to improve their writing. Feedback was described in terms of comments or marks received, which suggested that students were concerned with grades (see 5.4.3). The comments provided on essays about unseen texts were task-specific when related to content but broader when concerned with structural errors. Teachers also mentioned this issue when explaining the type of feedback provided.

It was suggested by teachers and students that the practice of feedback should be characterized by encouragement and advice, rather than by being prescriptive (Christopher, Appendix9, T3). Some students stated that they were receptive to feedback when the tone was not too critical or did not discourage them from trying again (e.g. Neil, Appendix15, S3). This was echoed by Emily (Appendix8, T2), who advised that with oral feedback you have to be diplomatic (ln.313)...You have to try not to cause embarrassment (ln.315-316). By monitoring students’ work closely, it was suggested that building on students’ skills rather than pointing at flaws was preferable (Christopher, Appendix9, T3). This could be done via peer feedback (Emily, Appendix8, T2, ln.212-213), so that students could provide their viewpoint instead of always relying on the teacher’s interpretation. There was a tone of caution in providing feedback and ensuring one is addressing students’ individual needs (George, Appendix12, T6, ln.222-223): Can this student take a certain amount of constructive criticism? Therefore feedback was meant to guide rather than telling them ‘Listen, you’re wrong here, or this is not the way it’s done’ (George, Appendix12, T6, ln.225). Although Jeffrey (Appendix11, T5) also seemed to believe that feedback was essential to build students’ writing skills, in many cases he felt it was inevitable that marking or ‘correction’ would be necessary.

The idea of providing students with a focus of feedback before writing elicited contrasting responses. Some students felt that knowing the focus of feedback before writing would enable them to target certain areas. However, others felt distracted because they would emphasise certain aspects of writing at the expense of others. For instance, Sophie (Appendix13, S1, ln.283-284) would take the focus area and just try to make it more detailed. Neil (Appendix15, S3) spoke of knowing how to tackle the essay when provided with a writing focus. However, Kyra (Appendix20, S8, ln.198) felt that knowing
the focus beforehand would be rather stressful, as she would make sure that I’ve included everything.

Similarly, some teachers seemed to believe it was helpful and essential to guide students before writing, whereas others did not want students to focus on certain aspects at the expense of others. For example, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.280-281) said that before writing she always [made] it clear what spheres of their essays [her] feedback [would] be focusing on. This was corroborated when I observed lessons conducted by Emily (T2; Appendices 30 and 36), who hinted what students should focus on before setting a writing task. Similarly, Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5) provided students with a focus of feedback during tutorials. If it were a literary criticism seminar, he said he devoted a session to a particular focus (e.g. whether they were able to identify the meter when analyzing a particular poem). George (Appendix12,T6,ln.248-249) stated that he prepared students for criticism essays, that what they are getting from me is to improve writing for the future, and to try to avoid certain errors (Appendix12,T6,ln.250-251). Contrastingly, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.281-283) did not inform students of the feedback focus before writing, because he believed that students would have had the background for that during the criticism seminar. The only advice he gave before writing was to remind students to contextualize their quotations. However, he considered it helpful if students could implement the feedback in future writing: what you say about what they write is going to influence, I hope (Appendix9,T3,ln.276).

Teachers also explained their feedback processes, while students described how they received their teachers’ feedback. Overall, the procedures mentioned by students matched those explained by the teachers, which were then corroborated during the tutorials that were observed. For instance, students said that they were asked to read their essay aloud while the teachers provided verbal comments. Another method was that teachers provided verbal feedback on the essay during the lesson (e.g. Maya,Appendix18,S6). From the students’ description of their teachers’ procedures, it emerged that teachers provided detailed written feedback and that oral feedback occurred either whilst students were reading their essays aloud or after the teachers would have read the essays (to reinforce the written comments). This was confirmed during the observations as the teachers asked the students to read their essays aloud and provided them with feedback during the reading.

The students’ contributions on feedback practices revealed their preferences and perceptions. These included a comparison of oral and written feedback, as well as praise.
and critique of feedback (that is, what they believed was helpful or not – see 5.4.2). From the teachers’ viewpoint, similar procedures were adopted. Jeffrey’s (Appendix11,T5) feedback involved giving students preliminary oral feedback before and adding written comments whilst rereading the work at home. His written feedback consisted of clear indications of what they’re doing wrong in terms of expression and language (Appendix11,T5,ln.220-221), whereas oral explanations focused on the content and how they approached the text. Christopher (Appendix9,T3) and Katherine (Appendix10,T4) adopted a similar approach. Moreover, Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.201-202) said she attempted merging oral with written feedback, prompting students through questions such as ‘Do you think that’s the right interpretation?’.

Some examples of comments teachers gave to students were mentioned. For example, Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.323-325) said that hers ideally targeted future writing. In relation to criticism, she advised them to make sure your discussion of imagery is contained in a single paragraph and it’s not scattered all over in your essay. She stated that she usually wrote more than three [comments] generally. Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) explained how she provided them with feedback on all areas of writing, whether it [was] content, or grammar, or spelling. In her comments, she said she differentiated between the content (what has been written) and the style (how an essay has been written) of writing (Appendix7,T1,ln.99). George (Appendix12,T6,ln.254) stated that he gave specific guidelines (e.g. ‘this essay is too content-focused’). His concern was that they constantly narrate what the passage is about and they don’t go into the technical aspect (Appendix12,T6,ln.255). George (Appendix12,T6) continued that his feedback was tailored to individual students, but like Charlotte (Appendix7,T1), his more generic comments [were] aimed at the whole class (Appendix12,T6,ln.242). Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.301-303) differentiated between two types of comments: if it’s a small mistake which applies to a particular person I emphasize it lightly, but if it’s something that is important overall then I take more time. As a result, he often found himself repeating his feedback.

When students were asked to give examples of comments, a number of them could not remember precisely. This could have meant that students did not feel the feedback had affected them fully, which could also have explained why they repeated the same mistakes over a number of essays. However, on reflection, some students tried to remember. For instance, Malcolm (Appendix25,S13,ln.282) said he had been advised not to read too much into a text. Other comments were focused on sentence structure and
expression, as Alison (Appendix21,S9) mentioned. Similarly, Chantelle (Appendix17,S5,ln.214) was told to write more flowing sentences. Linking paragraphs and explaining effect were two aspects of writing that Jessica (Appendix14,S2) was told she needed to work on more.

Oral and written feedback were contrasted. Emily (Appendix8,T2,ln.298) explained that she provided students with more written than oral feedback, as the former afforded more detail. Yet she seemed to believe that her students were more responsive to oral feedback as it was associated with encouragement: one tries to always keep it friendly so the attitude is not punitive. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.267) said he combined oral and written feedback, adopting the former during the tutorial and the latter during the ‘correction’ stage. He stated that students benefit a lot from the oral component because they could have a dialogue on the essay. Written feedback was advantageous because, according to him, it was possible to refer back to the essay, so it could link with oral feedback (George,Appendix12,T6). Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5) similarly tried to establish links between both types of feedback. For instance, he provided oral feedback that targeted their upcoming assignment, spending around five minutes giving individual feedback to students. Instead, written feedback was mostly the ‘corrections’ he would have carried out during office hours or at home (i.e. outside tutorial time). Oral and written forms of feedback were equally important to Katherine (Appendix10,T4). However, when considering oral feedback she said, I have to confess something – maybe with the oral I do a lot of talking (Appendix10,T4,ln.285-286). She expressed her personal preference for the written, because the oral medium is not permanent. Conversely, with written feedback she could add questions (e.g. ‘Do you think you’re interpreting it well her?’ ‘Don’t you think you’ve missed something here?’ (Appendix10,T4,ln.204-206). Overall, all six teachers noted that while the two types of feedback did not only occur simultaneously, they supplemented each other, as oral feedback sustained and reinforced the written. Students’ feedback preferences were usually divided: whereas oral feedback was considered more effective when students remembered the comments, written feedback was considered more reliable for its permanent nature. The following section discusses students’ views and perceptions in more detail.
5.4.2 Perceptions of Feedback

I asked students and teachers to discuss and explain their feedback preferences. Such perceptions revolved around the differences between oral and written feedback, and the potential effectiveness of feedback (whether it can be measured). I asked teachers specifically how they perceived feedback effectiveness and whether it could be measured. In the students’ case, perceptions of feedback were based on the differences between oral and written feedback. Teachers also revealed their preferences for these forms of feedback.

Teachers’ responses on feedback effectiveness differed. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.288) stated that one cannot precisely pinpoint how effective feedback could be. Yet, Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) suggested that it was possible to notice improvement, but advised that students needed clear guidelines. Katherine (Appendix10,T4) stated that the improvement was mostly visible by the end of the second year rather than during the first year because students would have had more practice. Emily (Appendix8,T2) reflected that one needed ample time to measure feedback effectiveness for the teacher would have had a more formative influence on the students’ work (it would take a period of a good five months … it could be measured but over an extended period, not over 4 weeks (Appendix8,T2,ln.374-275). Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.121-122) similarly offered that measuring effectiveness depended on a rigorous process, which would involve following students over a span of 2 years (Appendix7,T1,ln.122-123), whilst trialling different feedback approaches (from the chronological approach to other ways (Appendix7,T1,ln.123), and comparing the results of these approaches. Whereas Charlotte (Appendix7,T1) and Emily (Appendix8,T2) suggested that feedback effectiveness could be measured through research and systematic approaches in place, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.345-346) seemed to believe that it could be a very subjective thing; it depends very much on the mood of the individual student on the particular aptitude.

Students compared oral to written feedback, with some expressing preference of the former over the latter. For instance, verbal explanations (Maya,Appendix18,S6) and focusing on gaps in writing (Chantelle,Appendix17,S5) were considered more helpful. However, more long-term effects of verbal feedback depended on whether the student was paying attention (Neil,Appendix15,S3). This echoed one teachers’ point. Christopher (Appendix9,T3) felt that the benefits of oral feedback can be exploited only if students were receptive enough. Students preferred oral over written feedback when teachers
provided lengthy verbal explanations (e.g. when the teacher explained the students’ strengths and weaknesses, Appendices 25 and Appendix 27). Moreover, students preferred oral feedback when the teacher read their essays during the tutorial and provided immediate reactions (Appendices 14 and 24). Hearing the teacher’s critique of her essays in front of others motivated students to be more careful when writing the next essay (Appendix23,S11). Two students preferred oral feedback because of its one-to-one format and because the teacher could explain written comments that might have not been easily understood (Appendices 13 and 21). Another reason for which oral feedback was considered beneficial was that it helped establish a better rapport and dialogue with the teacher when discussing difficulties (Appendix20,S8). From the teachers’ perspective, Jeffrey (Appendix11,T5,ln.274) believed that oral feedback [was] far more effective, because it could be used to build bridges with students. Oral feedback was felt to have had more immediate impact than writing: sometimes it's more useful and effective, instead of generalizing you can explain it (Charlotte (Appendix7,T1,ln.107).

Students mentioned the advantages of written feedback. The most straightforward response was that it was more permanent, and could be used as a self-study tool, which students could refer to before writing subsequent essays (Appendices 13,16,17,24, and 27). Written feedback was helpful to remember suggestions, in cases where the oral feedback could not be recalled (Appendices 21 and 26), when students did not pay attention to what the teacher said or when they forgot the advice (Appendices 18,20, and 25). Similarly, Christopher (Appendix9,T3) seemed to believe students preferred written feedback when they were not particularly attentive to the suggestions provided verbally.

Students felt they could combine the oral and the written by being more responsible for the feedback given to them. Specifically, Alexia (Appendix22,S10) felt that feedback was not only something that teachers provided but could be owned by students who received it. She suggested noting down the teachers’ spoken feedback and rewriting the written comments in a language that was more understandable, relevant and usable to students. This chimed with what Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.296) recalled, how she had asked students to make notes of her feedback, to make oral feedback more usable and permanent through writing.

Whether it was provided in an oral or written format, students stated that they responded well to feedback that was constant and consistent (Appendices 16 and 27). They seemed to believe feedback was effective when it was specific, focused, and sustained (Appendices 13,15,22, and 26). Feedback that led to dialogue and that was
based on interaction was also considered useful (Appendix 15, S3). Individual attention was preferred over feedback that had been provided to the whole class (Appendices 22 and 23), though students felt that the latter feedback also taught them about one another’s writing. Consequently, it was considered that marks on their own were not as effective as when accompanied by comments (by students: Appendices 15, 17, and 21). At times, obtaining a low mark was demotivating (Appendix 17, S5), but in other cases it had encouraged the student to ask for an explanation (Appendix 15, S3). Guidelines and clear information of what was expected of students were considered useful (Appendices 16, 17, and 26). This was either in the form of detailed comments or as oral feedback (Appendices 14, 21-23). Two students felt that their self-evaluation and reflecting on feedback by writing down the suggestions would be beneficial (Appendices 22 and 27). The table below summarizes the students’ perceptions of effective feedback, as well as their critique:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of effective feedback</th>
<th>Critique of Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Feedback that guided students in what they were expected to do</td>
<td>i. Feedback was not considered as useful or effective when it was too technical, vague, authoritative or tended to be subjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Feedback that gave them the confidence to write the next essay</td>
<td>ii. Feedback that occurred in isolation without being related to targets was not considered helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Feedback that targeted specific foci</td>
<td>iii. Students preferred feedback comments not to be written only at the end of the essay because they felt such comments were disconnected from the rest of the writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Feedback that was timely and consistent, and</td>
<td>iv. Students pointed out that there was an imbalance between teachers who provided too much feedback and those whose feedback was considered not enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. Feedback that led to a dialogue between the teacher and student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers and students were asked to consider whether oral and written feedback could somehow be merged through an online format. Many students held positive perceptions of online feedback. Digital feedback via a podcast or email was considered efficient and easy to use, and possibly effective (Appendices 20, 23, and 27). However, it was suggested
that digital feedback could consolidate rather than replace written and oral feedback. Another suggestion would involve the teacher audio-recording the oral feedback for students so that it would be more permanently stored (Appendix18,S6). In terms of more immediate benefits, digital feedback would enable students to visualize the comments provided (Appendix16,S4).

Two students described alternative feedback systems that were being implemented in other post-16 schools. Alison (Appendix21,S9) explained how students received feedback on assignments before being given the mark, including an email with suggestions on how to improve their work. Following a signed printout of the comments, confirming their approval, the mark would be awarded on the completion of subsequent assignments. Malcolm (Appendix25,S13) spoke of his experience with digital feedback as part of the TEFL course he had completed. Students were given feedback and a mark on assignments. However, when he compared this system to the one in this study’s school, he remarked that the tutorial was more useful. Writing an assignment without the backing of a tutor meant not being able to discuss and justify one’s work verbally, both before and after writing.

Other students expressed a preference for the one-on-one support offered by the tutorial system. Whereas some students felt that the system already in place was satisfactory (e.g. Appendices 14,S2 and 24,S12), it was suggested that an online feedback system could complement the tutorials (Appendix17,S5). Despite the reservations that some might be resistant to changes in the system, it was recommended that the system could develop over a period of time (Appendix15,S3). Teachers also spoke favourably about introducing a third format of feedback even though the need [had] never really arisen (Emily,Appendix8,T2,ln.305). Using digital feedback could cater for students’ different forms of intelligence and understanding (George,Appendix12,T6), it could make feedback process more engaging by interesting students who are into technology (Jeffrey,Appendix11,T5), and it could be a tool that encourages students to communicate more (Katherine (Appendix10,T4) suggested videoconferencing).

When challenges to feedback application were considered (as discussed in 5.4.3), it emerged that the issue lay not with the format of feedback. For example, Katherine (Appendix10,T4,ln.302) seemed concerned with time constraints: the thing is sometimes I am a bit impatient to wait for [the students’] answer...in reality, I’m blaming the time limit. More pressingly, respondents felt that the timing between feedback provision and
application could be reduced and the language with which it is presented could be clearer and more focus-oriented.

When comparing different forms of feedback, it can be noted that students’ and teachers’ views converged at some point. However, some concerns emerged that throw light on the need to harness the potential of both oral and written feedback. For instance, teachers sometimes lamented that students were not attentive or responsive enough to feedback, and although students admitted this occurred, they had their own concerns and insightful suggestions, such as constructing the feedback together with the teacher rather than being passive recipients. Yet, teachers did not seem aware of students’ views of and their difficulties with feedback. There were differences in perceptions of oral and written feedback, and in how students perceived feedback, as highlighted in Table 5.4. Students’ suggestions and concerns can be instrumental in opening more dialogues on feedback and its impact.

5.4.3 Feedback Application and Transferability – Challenges and Recommendations
Students and teachers were asked to consider whether feedback was being applied to future writing and, if so, how. Students’ responses indicated their awareness of feedback application and their reflection on how they could effectively integrate feedback recommendations in their writing. Similarly, teachers shared their views and perceptions on how students could apply their suggestions. Before moving on to recommendations, however, it was seminal to uncover the challenges to feedback application. Difficulties with applying teacher feedback emerged. First of all, students felt they could not remember the feedback. In connection with this issue was the concern of not being able to understand the teachers’ language of feedback. Students also revealed their shortcomings in writing skills and how these impeded the them from acting on their teachers’ feedback. The teachers suggested their own reasons or factors why they seemed to believe that students did not fully apply and transferred the feedback to future writing.

Feedback that was not recalled was not being applied (Appendix26,S14, and Appendix20,S8). This was linked to the idea that it was more difficult to remember and apply oral than written feedback (Appendix20,S8). In other cases, not applying feedback was due to miscommunication and not being able to understand the teacher’s language (Appendix21,S9; Appendix26,S14; and Appendix24,S12). Jeanelle (Appendix24,S12) stated that she was not always aware of her shortcomings in writing, whereas Jessica (Appendix14,S2) explained that she could not apply the feedback if the unseen text’s
meaning was ambiguous. Sophie (Appendix13,S1) and Alexia (Appendix22,S10) remarked that because the unseen texts were different from one task to another, the feedback suggestions might not have been relevant.

Some students spoke of personal writing challenges. For instance, Ellie (Appendix16,S4) felt she could not express herself clearly. Chantelle (Appendix17,S5,Ln.390) said that there were times when she reverted to the old ways, despite being aware of her writing weaknesses. Moreover, receiving the same mark discouraged her from considering feedback important. Similarly, Neil (Appendix15,S3) stated that obtaining a low mark held him back from applying the feedback. Both Chantelle (Appendix17,S5) and Neil (Appendix15,S3) seemed aware that making the same mistakes affected and discouraged them but they still tried to amend their errors. On another note, Alexia (Appendix22,S10) stated that deadlines and time constraints had got in the way of applying specific feedback.

From the teachers’ end, it was remarked that factors such as the lack of consistency in students’ work (Appendix7,T1,Ln.128) and the time period (between students’ handing in the essay and their receiving feedback) often impacted feedback application and potential effectiveness. Similarly, Katherine (Appendix10,T4) commented that time constraints thwarted students’ efforts at feedback application so revising essays occurred infrequently. However, students said they did try to revise their essays but could not do so often because of the workload and time restrictions. Emily’s (Appendix8,T2) concern was related to the issue of students not remembering the feedback. She considered this was evident when you have to give them the same feedback over and over again (T2,Ln.342-343). She was under the impression that certain students sometimes ignore[d] (her) advice or instructions (T2,Ln.259). However, from the above concerns mentioned by students, it emerged that they did try to implement their teachers’ feedback, even though they were held back because of the challenges that were mentioned. Similarly, George (Appendix12,T6,Ln.316) thought that students did not seem to have the love of the subject, so they wrote merely out of obligation (e.g. when they had to write a tutorial essay), or because of assessment purposes and examination preparation. Moreover, he was concerned that writing about unseen texts was too difficult or challenging (George,Appendix12,T6). He also seemed to believe that some students did not have the level of maturity to appreciate certain things at their age, nor did they consider criticism useful beyond the examination or assessment.
Comparing the students’ views with those expressed by the teachers led to differing perceptions. Teachers seemed to believe that students lacked the energy, motivation, and drive to improve by following their feedback. However, students attempted to apply the teachers’ feedback but were impeded from doing so for different reasons to those that were mentioned by the teachers. What could be considered noteworthy here was the issue of language, as students felt they could not always understand how they had to apply the comments or suggestions. This leads to the suggestion of holding clearer dialogues between teachers and students about the nature, format, language, and purposes of feedback. Despite the differences, students and teachers seemed to agree that oral and written feedback had distinct advantages and drawbacks, and there was also congruence between some respondents when it was suggested that the two formats are merged (i.e. that students write down the oral feedback).

Reflecting on challenges led to suggestions on improving feedback application. Almost all students mentioned referring to previous essays when they could not remember the teacher’s comments (Chantelle, Appendix 17, S5), or before writing a new criticism essay (Martha, Appendix 26, S14). Another two students spoke of the need to reread specific instructions (Kyra, Appendix 20, S8 and Sophie, Appendix 13, S1). Students hoped that teacher feedback on previous work would prevent them from repeating mistakes (Jeanelle, Appendix 24, S12, Alexia, Appendix 22, S10, and Alison, Appendix 21, S9). Trying to remember feedback was attempted. For example, Malcolm (Appendix 25, S13) tried recalling feedback on areas he was not very good at, while Alexia (Appendix 22, S10) did so when it highlighted her strengths in writing. The above references to rereading their teachers’ comments underlined the role of written feedback.

However, verbal explanations were considered practical, particularly when students personalized them (Martina, Appendix 23, S11 and Alexia, Appendix 22, S10, spoke of making notes of teachers’ spoken feedback, as mentioned earlier). Students considered feedback to be relevant when the teacher provided students with alternatives, rather than just give them a mark. For example, Martina (Appendix 23, S11, ln.347) suggested that the teacher could advise which words to use, or provide examples of academic language, instead of merely writing improve your vocabulary. Similarly, Jessica (Appendix 14, S2) and Neil (Appendix 15, S3) commented on the language of feedback, specifically to use more straightforward language.
Students’ application of teacher feedback was also discussed during the teachers’ interviews. There was evidence of feedback application when students followed the guidelines, for example how to write an introduction (Charlotte, Appendix 7, T1, ln.129-130). George (Appendix 12, T6, ln.289) reflected that he did see the improvement but that it took place over a number of sessions (e.g. after the third attempt). Furthermore, Emily (Appendix 8, T2, ln.351-352) commended those students who did sufficiently retain it; those who [were] committed to doing well in the exam, yes, they [did] retain feedback. Echoing George’s (Appendix 12, T6) thoughts, she suggested that this implementation was evident in students’ essays after two or three essays. Despite the summative approach, she explained that the marks (would) give you a good indication students’ improvement (Appendix 8, T2, ln.380-382). Christopher (Appendix 9, T3, ln.356) stated that students’ improvement depends on the students’ eagerness [and] on their curiosity. Another issue was understanding effect in an unseen text. George (Appendix 12, T6, ln.95) felt that this prevented students from connect[ing] with the text, because they [did not] understand what [was] being brought across.

Despite these issues, one of the most evident improvements following feedback was in essay structuring, even though it was gradual rather than immediate. It was felt that students needed time to progress from focusing on what the passage was about to how it was constructed or developed: they are able to use the text more to back their arguments, they put their arguments first rather than simply quoting from the text (George, Appendix 12, T6, ln.301-303). Jeffrey (Appendix 11, T5) could not guarantee whether his students read and understood his comments, or applied the feedback recommendations. However, he did register attention and effort on their behalf. For instance, he seemed to believe that students’ questions of clarification (e.g. ‘Can you please explain?’) were a direct indication of them reading the feedback (T5, ln.279-208). Similar to George (Appendix 12, T6) and Jeffrey (Appendix 11, T5), Katherine (Appendix 10, T4) spoke of feedback application as not being easily identifiable or clearly indicating improvement, because it would require a longer time-span. Given that the teachers change from first to second year, it would be more difficult to track students’ progress. Charlotte (Appendix 7, T1) similarly stated that it was not always possible to guarantee whether the feedback led to improvement, but could be effective if students adapt the feedback adequately when they revised their work.

The idea of revising the essay was discussed with mixed views. Students and teachers felt that time constraints often did not enable the former to revise the same essay.
However, both groups acknowledged the benefits of going over the teachers’ feedback by rewriting the essay. Emily (Appendix8,T2) seemed to believe that offering students an opportunity to revise their essays could lead to a better mark and achievement. George (Appendix12,T6,ln.312) also mentioned that when he offers students the opportunity to revise or rewrite the essay, feedback implementation was more immediate. Katherine (Appendix10,T4) offered students the chance to rewrite the essay mainly to help them sort out the language errors. She registered improvement when she compared the two versions of the same essay. However, she also noted that syntactical errors and interpretation skills needed more time and practice.

Students also spoke of revising their essay. Some students felt it difficult to go beyond the feedback, particularly to resolve the issue of interpretation. Four students (Appendix18, S6; 24,S12; 25,S13; and 26,S14) suggested being offered more support in writing about unseen texts. It was suggested that any confusion over the texts’ subject matter could be settled if they were provided with a one-liner on it. Despite recognising revision as beneficial, sometimes it was considered pointless because the next essay on an unseen text would be on a completely different text. Others, however, seemed to believe that revising errors would help hone their writing skills on a broader level, such as learning how to analyse in more depth and removing any grammatical errors. Not all students said they did revise their essays but some stated they did so often without being asked by the teacher (e.g. Appendix13,S1). This indicated a level of autonomy and self-critique among these students, running counter to the impression that teachers might have had, that they need to guide students every step of the way.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of the interviews and observations. The themes that emerged on reading, writing, and feedback revolved around the elements (actions, processes, perceptions, and challenges). There were similarities in the teachers’ and students’ actions and processes of reading and writing, but differences were also highlighted, such as the students’ preference for the chronological approach in writing, and the suggestion for more writing practice. Teachers’ perceptions on the area of unseen texts as ‘difficult’ could have impinged on how students considered this syllabus component. Students’ anxiety and fear of the ‘unknown’ were noted considerably (due to the nature of the unseen text). Challenges of reading and writing were connected to
understanding the texts’ interpretation. On feedback, one concern was feedback application and transferability from one writing task to another. Overall, students’ voice emerged as an important aspect of this research, particularly when suggesting that feedback could be co-constructed with their teachers. These findings will be further discussed in relation to the research questions and the literature in the next chapter.
Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The discourses of writing and feedback are intricately related when teachers provide the latter and students attempt to utilize it to hone their writing skills. Researchers have reported that teachers and students do believe in the importance of teacher feedback in the writing process (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 2002). I explored the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of reading and writing about unseen texts, as well as attempts to use teacher feedback. By gathering data on the teachers’ practices and students’ views, a connection between preparing for writing and feedback provision was analysed.

This chapter discusses the research questions and examines the central issues that emerged. For each question, I connected and compared the categories and elements of grounded theory, which are Processes, Actions, Perceptions (changed from Assumptions), and Challenges (changed from Consequences). Following the reporting and analysis of the findings, this chapter seeks to interpret them against the literature and research on writing and feedback. Training implications and avenues for further research in the area of feedback on writing (about the unseen text) are also presented.

6.2 Literary Criticism as a Research Area and its Links with Feedback

The area of unseen literary criticism appeared to be a bone of contention in the Department of English at the school where I conducted research. This emerged during some meetings I attended. In the case of the set texts of the syllabus, there seemed to be a common agreement on how to structure essays and prepare students for writing (e.g. following a structure for a discursive essay or providing certain agreed-on interpretations for set texts, such as the set poems or for the set novels). However, when discussing the unseen text component, there seemed to be discrepancies in how students were guided in essay writing (e.g. what they were meant to include in their interpretation of an unseen text). This study explored possible connections between preparing for writing and giving feedback on the essays about unseen texts.

One common conclusion reported among students was that they considered writing about unseen texts to be more difficult than writing about the set texts; however, some students also felt they enjoyed criticism more when they were encouraged to share
their perspectives on the texts. This resonates with the claim made that on the one hand, ‘in many respects criticism is more challenging than reading and interpretation’; at the same time ‘the process of criticism itself can give pleasure, and the ways of achieving it need not be dry or purely academic’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.283). Similarly, Dymoke (2012) contends that the format of the unseen text leads to it being ‘perceived as “more difficult”’ (p.30). Together with the analysis and presentation of the findings on the above, feedback was evaluated in relation to the unseen component.

6.3 Unpacking the Research Questions

The following section analyses and discusses the research questions in relation to the previous chapter’s findings, and in view of the literature on writing and feedback. Cross-references are also made with the MC Advanced English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014), and the MC Advanced Level English Examiners' Report (MATSECa, 2014). I analysed the syllabus’ assessment criteria against the comments presented by the examiners in the 2014 report on candidates’ performance. The research questions focus on the four elements of grounded theory (as mentioned above). Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 focus on Processes and Teachers’ Actions, while sections 6.3.3 and 6.3.4 are related to Perceptions and Students’ Actions. Section 6.3.5 tackles the Consequences (which are here discussed as Challenges). Following the research questions is a reflection on the emergent connections.

6.3.1 Research Question 1 – How are Students Prepared for Reading and Writing about Unseen Literary Texts at a Post-16 School in Malta? (Processes and Teachers’ Actions)

The discussion for this question is based on the analyses conducted on interview and observation transcripts. The teachers who were interviewed utilized different methods to prepare students for reading unseen texts and writing commentaries about them. However, there were similarities despite the individual styles and perspectives. For instance, the reader-response approach and stylistic analysis were blended. The students also corroborated this convergence and the lesson observations confirmed it, although some issues emerged. One particular discrepancy was that some students were encouraged to form their own response to the texts when reading the unseen text, yet they were dissuaded from expressing personal opinions when writing the essay about the text.
However, these students felt that giving their opinion was essential to a better understanding of the poem or prose passage, and to increase their enjoyment and appreciation of the text (more on this in relation to perceptions, in 6.3.3). However, it is suggested that if students do have an interpretation of a particular text, they could attempt ‘justifying it in broader terms than just their own idiosyncratic opinion’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.282).

The methods of preparation for writing were determined by the type of text selected for seminars, the time allocated for reading, and the amount of writing done in class. For instance, some teachers chose to set individual work, whereas others were observed setting group work. During a number of observations, the whole class was involved in discussing the text. Another example was the choice of reading the text silently by the students as opposed to the teacher reading it aloud. Timing was related to the latter issue, whether teachers either allocated time to students for individual reading or whether they read the text together. In the interviews, teachers felt that the restricted amount of time given to students in class to work on a text individually helped to prepare them to handle the one-hour time window they would have in the examination, despite the pressure they felt this caused. In general, there seemed to be a convergence between students’ and teachers’ views on reading unseen texts, which corroborates Xerri’s (2013a) view: in the Maltese context, ‘the teaching of poetry at A-level has for many decades been heavily influenced by the traditional close reading of a text’ (p.206). Reading of texts considered ‘difficult’ was often conducted by the teachers so the students were mainly passive.

The texts’ level of difficulty also affected the class dynamics, particularly whether students were asked to work individually or in groups. The students would work in groups if the teacher and even the students felt that the text was more complex. Although in general the students preferred collaborating on such texts, they also admitted that it was necessary for them to be able to work individually. They felt that they would be more equipped to handle the text on their own in the MC Advanced Level English examination. This echoes the reflection that ‘the ever-increasing pressure to assess students’ writing through formal tests inevitably privileges individual work over collaborative endeavour’ (Cliff Hodges, 2002, p.9). However, if it is not possible to do away with tests, then it is suggested that the aims have to be clearly connected to learning outcomes, and that subsequent feedback is linked to progress: ‘Tests and homework exercises can be an invaluable guide to learning, but the exercises must be clear and relevant to learning aims.'
The feedback on them should give each pupil guidance on how to improve, and each must be given opportunity and help to work at the improvement’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.8).

Following the above, it was the teachers who decided which approach to use in class, and this varied according to the text discussed in class. Hence, if the teachers felt that the text was more challenging to interpret and that the students might not be familiar with the language, then they set group work at first before a class discussion. The students did not mind that the teacher took the lead in making these decisions, and sometimes expected it. This is also corroborated by Xerri’s (2013, 2013a, 2015) studies on and references to teachers’ practices, attitudes and beliefs in relation to teaching poetry. Students also preferred the teachers to read the text aloud for them, as it was considered a measure against the risk of misunderstanding the text. It is suggested that ‘students who might otherwise feel threatened by the difficulties of reading instead feel protected by the fact that the teacher takes responsibility for reading aloud’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.94). By taking more responsibility the teacher provides support but in no way detracts from the students’ responsibilities. These ‘lie elsewhere, in actively reading with their ears, imagining the narrative and developing an individual interpretation’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.94). This echoes and supports the idea of ‘reading with the ear’ (p.219) which has been suggested by Alexander (2008), who urges a reconsideration of the listening skill within English as a subject.

This above type of reading can be applied to literary texts such as poetry. Yet, this is often sidelined in exchange for silent reading. What has happened, according to Alexander (2008), is that ‘the modern habit of reading rapidly and silently has done damage to our capacity to read with the ear’ (p.220). To mitigate this, Cliff Hodges (2016) suggests the practice of reading aloud. She argues that this mode of reading ‘is inclusive because it offers the potential for all listeners to be fully involved in their learning’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.94). However, the purpose of ‘reading with the ear’ is not only in the name of involvement and inclusivity in learning, and neither does it only mean or involve reading a text aloud. It is also understood, as indicated by Alexander’s (2008) study, as hearing the words in one’s head, discovering the text’s features (such as tone and pace), and reading thoroughly (p.226; based on students’ responses in Alexander’s study with GCSE and A-level students in the UK). This is mostly with reference to poetry; however, Alexander (2008) suggests that ‘reading with the ear’ is also ‘valuable’ for prose (p.228). The students who were interviewed mentioned reading aloud as opposed to being asked
to read silently. Incidentally, they remarked that when the teacher read aloud they felt they were in a better position to form a clearer interpretation of the text and be more in control over their understanding. However, as stated by both teachers and students, and observed during the lessons, students were often asked to read the text on their own, silently (with their eyes). While this was preferred by students who wanted to have time with the text before they were asked for a response on it, it may be undermining potential benefits gained from hearing the text being read out loud (Alexander, 2008). Often the teacher read the text after the students had read it silently on their own. There were, however, cases when the teacher started by reading out the text before giving students time to work on it on their own. This matches what students said about preferring the teacher to read the text first because it guides their interpretation later.

Other reasons behind the preference for the teacher’s guidance were students’ lack of confidence in text interpretation and ‘fear’ of the ‘unknown’ factor. Naylor and Wood (2012) argue that the teacher is bestowed the role of ‘unlocking’ the texts’ meaning. Similarly, this is echoed by the positioning of the teacher as ‘gatekeeper’, someone who is or wants to be in full control of what is read, discussed, interpreted, and written in the classroom (Xerri, 2013). However, it is claimed that ‘the reader is free to enter the text from any direction; there is no correct route’ (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 1997, p.157). This questions the students’ view that places the teacher as the owner of an unseen text’s interpretation and meaning. It also challenges the students’ notion that reading entails presenting an interpretation that matches the teacher’s.

Questions on reader approaches revealed the difference between how teachers understood or adopted reader-response, and what it really signifies. This is important because what teachers might have perceived could have been passed on to their students through the methods they adopted. Appleman (2009) advises what reader-response is not, in relation to the position of the reader vis-à-vis the text. Although it seems obvious that it would involve a reaction from the reader, it is not to be confused with mere personal expression. The literature shows that reader-response is not having a personal opinion, but rather involves a transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978; Appleman, 2009). The idea that reader-response was interpreted as personal opinion indicates that teachers and students may have been unaware of what reader-response as an approach essentially means and entails. Consequently, they might have been missing out on its benefits, while being under the impression that they were endorsing it as an approach.
If viewed merely as a personal opinion to the text, then it is not surprising that there are doubts about the academic rigour of reader-response as an approach that could be as valued and respected as stylistics. One reason why reader-response might not be perceived as positively is because of the shift to the individual (as mentioned in relation to Fish (1980), and as discussed in connection with twentieth-century criticism in Chapter 2). This is not inherently wrong but it could potentially suffer if it ‘risks being romanticised’ (Appleman, 2009, p.30). Using texts to reflect on one’s life ‘can be a fruitful way to make meaning’ (Appleman, 2009, p.30), but this is a limited position. It ‘might trivialise the importance of the difference that exists between the students’ world and the world of the text’ (Appleman, 2009, p.30). Despite it being helpful for students to draw parallels from texts with their lives, it is not enough.

Echoing Rosenblatt’s (1978) concept, it is argued that this issue can be counteracted by establishing a transactional element between reader and text, so that ‘the text [becomes] an equal partner’ (Appleman, 2009, p.31). Goodwyn’s (2012) definition of reader-response also places it as a ‘transaction between the reader and the text’ (p.213). Cliff Hodges (2012) defines such reading as a ‘transaction’ when it ‘involves the reader in activities such as marshalling knowledge, interpreting the text, reasoning and reaching an understanding’ (p.12). Part of this process may result in a ‘personal interpretation’ of the text (Goodwyn, 2012, p.213) so it almost begs the question why reader-response is different to personal opinion. According to teachers and students, reader-response was approved of more than personal opinion, because it was more closely connected to literary criticism and seemed to be perceived as more formal than stating one’s opinion. Although it was argued by students and teachers that reader-response and personal opinion should not be viewed differently, they were often referred to interchangeably.

Appleman (2009), however, does not downplay the positive influences of reader-response because ‘it has made the enterprise of literature teaching more relevant, immediate, and important’ (p.29). The value of the reader is preferably not lost in the frustrating melee of fact-finding, which is not the remit or purpose of the literary criticism exercise. What the shift to the reader could involve is a consideration of changes in the classroom, ‘from a text-centred to a reader-centred pedagogy’, from ‘the traditional teacher-in-the-front formation to intimate and misshapen circles of students’ (Appleman, 2009, p.29). The latter is interesting in so far as the role of the teacher is considered pivotal by students at the study’s post-16 school, reflecting a culture of dependence on the teacher as the person who possesses the key to pre-established interpretations.
Teachers in my study claimed to embrace reader-response as an approach but their conception of it was not being fully exploited as discussed above. Moreover, in the observations and from the students’ viewpoint, it seemed that teachers still occupied the central position in the classroom. Despite the fact that they were often observed eliciting and encouraging responses in students, the ‘teacher-in-the-front formation’ dominated. This was also marked by the fact that there was more teacher-talk (see Appendices 28-31). That the teacher was at the centre is not necessarily wrong or without its merits, despite being critiqued. Students felt they needed someone to guide them, often out of the fear of the unknown element of unseen texts (the italicised words are from students’ transcripts). Some expected it and felt comforted by the teacher who could confirm their interpretations. Students’ response was drawn out by the teacher, often with hesitation on behalf of the students. This was marked by silence and pauses (which was understandable given that students needed time to think their responses through). Some students merely waited for the teacher to answer.

When some teachers discussed what reader-response meant to them, they explained what they did to encourage it among students. One teacher said he asked students questions for them to consider what they feel the text means to them. However, this is the kind of reader-response that Appleman (2009) advises against, and questions a zealous focus on the reader, because ‘how can literature foster a knowledge of others when we focus so relentlessly on ourselves and our own experiences?’ (p.31). Once again, this prompts doubts about attributing too much focus on the reader, and it seems therefore that the text is and should still be central, or part of a transaction. There were attempts during the lessons at enacting reader-response by encouraging students to frame their opinions in critical rather than personal terms. The idea would be that the reader contributes something to the text, as students suggested in the interviews. The extent to which the reader finds and contributes elements, however, could be unique to different readers (Peck and Coyle, 2002, p.208). This led to another issue. The possibility of there being different interpretations to a text worried students. They felt it was a good thing that they could have their own interpretation and attempt to justify it. However, they were concerned whether their interpretation would be in line with the one that MC Advanced English examiners might have agreed before writing takes place (see 6.3.5 in relation to Challenges).

Writing in class was also mentioned during the interviews and observed in some sessions. Teachers offered students the opportunity to practice paragraph writing alone or
collaboratively. One particular teacher (Christopher, Appendix9,T3) involved students in collaborative writing and, when read aloud, he commented on their interpretations. This echoes Rosenblatt’s (1978) views on interpretation and the positive attributes of working on a text as a collective group: ‘Learning what others have made of a text can greatly increase such insight into one’s relationship with it’ (p.146). This connects with what Cliff Hodges (2002) states about collaborative writing and reading the work aloud, namely that the contributions ‘connect and react with one another in unpredictable ways’ (p.7). It was pointed out that students are asked to read out their work in front of their peers during the tutorials, which some students felt embarrassed by but others saw it as an opportunity to share one’s voice and to understand the mistakes they made. This is similar to Cliff Hodges’ (2002) statement that hearing a text being read aloud might ‘motivate the writers to want to redirect’, (p.7). One particular student (Ellie, Appendix16,S4) felt that sharing an interpretation with others was an opportunity to express ourselves better and help others to improve. However, students (in this study’s interviews) pointed out that it would be helpful if teachers asked them when they wanted to write.

However, some students pointed out that the time spent on writing was not enough, in view of the fact that they did not know what text was going to be selected for the MC Advanced Level English examination. They felt the need to write about as many texts as they could. To help with this issue, teachers provided sample essays to students, who felt partly prepared to adopt certain essay structures irrespective of the texts. Students seemed to believe the sample essays and structures were useful in their training. The sample usually allowed students to gauge how an essay is expected to be written. Overall, it seemed that students in my study corroborated the view that sample essays are useful in guiding them how to write and structure their responses to the unseen texts (Kim, 2012, p.37). However, providing students with ‘models of good literary essays’ is not always advisable (Fischer, 2000, p.4) because it may be a stilted method of guiding them towards a specific interpretation of the text. This is also echoed by Xerri (2013a) who argues that reading poetry has to allow more flexibility of interpretation (see 6.3.2). Using the genre approach could thus hamper the students’ creative attempts at dealing with content (Badger and White, 2000, p.157). Moreover, there is hardly any room for ‘hypothetical thinking’ (Penrose and Geisler, 1994, p.516), and a ‘failure to be tentative’ (McCormick, 1999, p.203). In relation to these arguments, tackling essay structure and the organisation of a commentary on unseen texts were reported by students and teachers as writing
challenges. Specifically, they felt they did not know how to adapt a sample essay structure to different unseen texts. Such an issue revolves back to the need for more time for writing to be done in class rather than merely reading sample essays. More reading and writing challenges are discussed in connection to the last research question (see 6.3.5).

Preparation for essay writing (and tackling essay organization) was explained by teachers who suggested two methods. The first one was to follow the texts’ chronology (hence, what is referred to in the English department as the ‘chronological’ approach or the stanza-by-stanza essay). For the second approach, teachers advised students to write paragraphs on different aspects such as theme, diction, and imagery (referred to as the aspect-based or the ‘thematic’ approach). The aspects are based on the rubric and guidelines proposed by the syllabus, and used by the paper setters in the examination questions. Teachers discussed both approaches with reservations. While some advocated the chronological, others rejected it and opted for the aspect-based approach. Those who preferred the first did not however reject the second. It seems that the students interviewed were confused by the different essay structures to adopt, often not knowing what is the preferred one or expected of them in the examination. If students spent the first year with a teacher who suggested the ‘chronological’ approach, and the second year with one who preferred the ‘thematic’ one, by the end of the course students would have had two options. However, they did not necessarily know which structure was more appropriate or in line with assessment criteria. Hartley and Chestworth (2000) noted that students might experience difficulty with understanding and adopting the different approaches presented by different tutors. Different approaches may explain why students were uncertain about essay structure.

The responses to this research question throw light on connections between preparing for writing and writing outcomes, which can be viewed in the syllabus as assessment criteria. Although my study did not confirm whether the preparation stages were leading to or yielding expected outcomes, the observed teachers’ practices included a number of strategies and actions that indicated level of detail and attention to the syllabus criteria. After close examination of the lesson observations, I conducted a cross-comparison with the criteria of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014). In the table below the teachers’ strategies and actions have been pegged against the syllabus requirements.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syllabus assessment criteria</th>
<th>Teachers’ practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidates are expected to:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teachers prepared students to:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) write lucidly, fluently and accurately</td>
<td>(a) write cohesively by providing them with sample essays and by emphasizing essay organization in preparing for writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) use appropriate vocabulary and style</td>
<td>(b) pay attention to matters of word choice and style by analyzing a text in detail and alerting them to pay attention to word use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) respond with understanding to texts of different types and periods</td>
<td>(c) respond to texts of different types and periods by choosing a range of texts of different authors and eras (though most of them belonged to the Anglo-Saxon tradition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) understand the ways in which writers’ choices of language, form, structure and rhetoric help to express meaning, outlook, attitude and tone</td>
<td>(d) understand the texts’ language, form, and structure by emphasizing these elements during the lessons and in essay writing (preparation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) produce informed, independent and critical opinions and judgements</td>
<td>(e) write essays with an eye to critical analysis and interpretation by advising them to respond to the text but not to include personal opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) show awareness of the differences between poetry and literary prose</td>
<td>(f) distinguish between poetry and prose by explaining the features of both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) write about both in a manner that indicates familiarity with the tools of critical analysis particularly in the identification and commentary of rhetorical devices and the use of critical terms and idiom</td>
<td>(g) write about unseen poems or prose passages by emphasizing the different tools of critical analysis and rhetorical devices (mentioning them regularly and eliciting them from students during lessons); and by advising students against merely identifying the devices in a list-like manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) analyse texts in terms of aspects of theme, form, imagery, rhetoric, style and tone (though students will not be expected to write about all of these in one essay); to show an ability to identify and appreciate poetic devices</td>
<td>(h) write about unseen poems and prose passages by mentioning different aspects as in the syllabus (as mentioned in this table to the left) and organizing the essay according to the aspects (though some teachers and students expressed preference for the ‘chronological’ approach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) exercise some interpretative skill in their commentary on the poem or prose passage</td>
<td>(i) interpret the texts appropriately and demonstrate their writing skills by examining texts in detail, eliciting responses and interpretations from students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite the above efforts, however, students and teachers alike expressed concern with and frustration over the area of writing about unseen texts, and it seemed that the outcomes were not as positive as expected. Similarly, the commentary of the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014) highlighted issues with candidates’ writing that matched the respondents’ concerns on writing. In order to understand the reasons behind such issues, I also investigated the role of feedback in students’ writing development, which is tackled in the next section and research question.

6.3.2 Research Question 2 – How are Students Provided with Feedback on Written Essays (about Unseen Literary Texts)? (When and What Type of Feedback?) (Processes and Teachers’ Actions)

Although initially I explored feedback as one aspect of the writing process, the research propelled it as a substantive area. In my study, teachers and students explained how they tried to use teacher feedback to attempt bridging preparing for writing and writing outcomes. The feedback provided by the teachers was present in different writing stages. First, students were provided with guidance before writing (i.e. reminding students of previous feedback so as not repeat certain errors) and always given feedback after writing. This was often superseded by or blended with correction and marking. Feedback was either provided verbally or in a written format, in class or outside the class (written down on the essay). During the tutorial, feedback was provided to students individually or as a class.

Black and Wiliam (1998) describe the functions of feedback as directive or facilitative. Directive or summative feedback refers to what needs to be revised or changed, which means that the comments are specifically targeted to guide students towards a ‘correct’ answer. In the case of literary criticism, the idea of correctness is not relevant except when marking the students’ writing for spelling and grammar. When it comes to interpretation, it is less likely that directive feedback helps because a text might present more than one correct interpretation. Similarly, Xerri (2013a) contends that reading poetry should lead and encourage students to ‘engage’ in more than one possible meaning. Collingborn (1989) states that reading poetry can allow for ‘a multiplicity of meanings, of incomplete and constantly revised interpretations’ (p.10). This view is supported by Xerri (2013a), who argues that reading poetry has to make way for that type of practice. However, Xerri (2013a) is aware, as he points out in his study, that this ‘view
of reading has apparently not yet fully taken root in the post-16 teaching of English’ (p.206). This could ultimately affect the provision of feedback on writing about unseen texts.

For the critical commentary on unseen texts, facilitative and formative feedback is more conducive, because it focuses on actions and skills rather than correctness. It refers to feedback as guidance on what to do and what to achieve in future writing. Black and Wiliam (1998) suggest that ‘formative assessment helps the (so-called) low attainers more than the rest’ (p.3). However, it is argued that there is ‘poverty of practice’ in what formative feedback really looks like (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.4). Reasons for this are threefold: effective learning, negative impact, and the managerial role of assessments (p.4). The first issue concerns an inconsistency between teachers’ attempts to ‘develop [students’] understanding’ and an encouragement of ‘superficial learning’ (through tests) (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.4). A lack of discussion among teachers about their methods puts effective learning into question. In light of this, it could be said that a similar situation in my study’s school context has been flagged: teachers do not discuss their methods among themselves in relation to unseen literary texts. Negative impact has been connected to grading and marking that are emphasized at the expense of ‘useful advice’ (feedback) (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.4). At times there is a comparison of students (this has also emerged when teachers talk about the type of students they teach). Such a comparison leads to ‘competition’ rather than ‘personal improvement’; some students also spoke of their performance in comparison to others’. A culture of grading engenders a culture of ‘ability’ or lack of it: ‘assessment feedback teaches pupils with low attainments that they lack ‘ability’ so they are de-motivated’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.4). A similar sentiment has been registered among students in my study. This underlines a potentially worrying issue: students were perceived by their teachers as being disinterested and inconsistent in their efforts, but in reality it was because they themselves seemed to believe that they were unable to succeed in writing adequately about unseen texts. The last issue is the managerial role of assessments. In relation to the tutorial system of the school’s study, it seemed that students were writing essays for the ‘collection of marks to fill up records’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.4). Consequently, the feedback became part of teachers’ ‘managerial functions’ of assigning grades. Instead, it is suggested that feedback could be an ‘analysis of pupils’ work to discern learning needs’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.4). This could be done by not only keeping a record of the feedback, but also checking the feedback given by the previous teacher. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue
that the latter does not happen, and in my study teachers did not refer to the practice of checking what the previous teacher had suggested. It has to be reminded here that the students forming part of the study were in their second year and, while they compared their first and second year teachers, the latter did not seem to consult the first year teachers’ feedback, which could be part of the formative assessment process.

According to Black and Wiliam (1998), ‘formative assessment can be a powerful weapon here if it is communicated in the right way’ (p.6). Examples of this emerged in the interviews, where some teachers said they suggested students could try to reflect on some issues (e.g. ‘what do you mean by this?’ – a question referring to the students’ writing style; or ‘what do you think the author meant here?’ – a question referring to the interpretation). It is contended that ‘Pupils can accept and work with such messages, provided that they are not clouded by overtones about ability, competition and comparison with others’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.6). Similarly, Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) three questions ‘how am I going?’, ‘where am I going?’, and ‘what to do next?’ (p.102) could enable students to reflect on their work. The teachers’ questions and those advised by Hattie and Timperley (2007) are generic and can be used as guidance irrespective of the unseen text.

In relation to giving and receiving feedback, the questions that were posed to teachers and students during the interviews explored how the feedback processes shaped students’ writing. Interpreting the research in light of Black and Wiliam’s (1998) descriptors, it emerged that teachers used both directive and facilitative feedback. During selective and comparative analysis of the transcripts (interviews and observations), I categorised how and when the teachers provided feedback. Teachers provided directive feedback on writing as a corrective measure most of the time, focusing on grammatical and language-based errors. They also included some comments on content and interpretation. However, it seemed that facilitative feedback focused on the content, ideas, and organization; this was provided during the tutorials as oral feedback. Some of the feedback was provided when the students took the essays to class, but it was predominantly given the week after, following the teacher’s reading of their essays outside class time. During the observations of tutorials, it was noted that teachers provided verbal explanation of their corrections, which were written down. It is advisable that explanation rather than merely correction is provided (Ramprasad, 1983) for feedback to be usable. This is also linked to the idea that teachers’ explanations feed into
and ‘feedforward’ to future writing (Walker, 2009; Price et al., 2011), while correction mostly feeds back into what has been written.

Research into the type of feedback provided by teachers to their students also led to a reflection on feedback usability and perceptions of effectiveness. To understand the type and timing of feedback that could lead to usability, I asked whether it can be defined and measured. The result was that there were challenges in doing so. Differences in feedback practices might affect the applications of feedback, and hence its potential for effectiveness. Handley et al. (2011) argue that the drive to focus on effectiveness has led to methodological issues such as the type of tasks set (often created with correct answers in mind). Another issue is the ‘atomistic examination of which variables cause which changes’ (Handley et al., 2011 p.546). This stems from an isolated evaluation of variables. To mitigate this, an interaction between variables could promote ‘conditions for learning’ (Handley et al., 2011, p.545). Through axial and comparative analysis, I attempted to draw connections between the areas and certain variables.

To explore perceptions of effectiveness I asked participants to define how they thought effectiveness could be measured. The term ‘effective’ can be defined as something that influences learning, and leads to ‘an improvement in students’ performance’ (Handley et al., 2011 p.545). Handley et al. (2011) believe that it is preferable to focus on engagement rather than effectiveness, but for this study’s purposes I argue that it was important to define perceptions of effectiveness before considering engagement, which is in itself an entirely different facet of research. Though the concepts of effectiveness and engagement are mentioned and the former is partially discussed, it was not this study’s main aim. There was also the lack of possibility at this stage to conduct research into measuring either of them (see 7.7). However, this study throws light on the potential of and need for research into feedback effectiveness and students’ engagement with teacher feedback.

For the purpose of this study, I linked the type of feedback with perception of effectiveness on a conceptual level. The questions on feedback have led to an analyses of issues, discrepancies, and connections revealed by the data. Discrepancies between feedback received and student application of it are discussed (see 6.4.2 and 6.4.3). Four variables that might impinge on effectiveness are: the load of feedback ‘correction’ and comments (which links to the amount of information), the type of feedback (which is either through directive or facilitative), the timing, and the media (this refers to the format, whether it is oral, written or online) (Handley et al., 2011, p.544). My study identified
similar variables. First of all, there were many feedback comments and their objectives were not always clear. This is related to the fact that the foci of feedback are not always specific. Another issue concerning both teachers and students was that the written feedback was given back to students after two weeks (from the moment of writing); this connects to timing. The type of feedback was discussed above and the format is tackled in more depth in later sections (oral and written feedback; see 6.4.4).

Students considered that facing an essay full of comments and error correction was daunting. In a study on tutor feedback, Court (2014) expressed concern with the quantity-over-quality debate, suggesting that conciseness of feedback could prove more helpful than copious amounts. Feedback could take shape as ‘detailed, explanatory comments’ but a contradiction is pointed out that this often leads to ‘sheer quantity…largely viewed as unhelpful’ (Court, 2014, p.331).

When the feedback was given emerged as important as the amount, type, and format of feedback. Timeliness and clarity of feedback are two suggested feedback conditions that promote a productive learning environment (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). However, very often the teachers and students in my study felt that there were time delays between oral and written feedback. This is discussed in more detail (see 6.4.4). At this point, a reminder of a definition of time delay, or time lapse, could be useful. This refers to the amount of time between writing the essay, discussing it in class, the essay being marked by the teacher at home or in the office, and the essay being returned with comments in the following session (so by the time the student receives the feedback, around two weeks would have passed). Parkin et al. (2012) also emphasize the importance of feedback timeliness. For instance, ‘close proximity’ between writing and feedback would make the latter ‘more meaningful’ (Parkin et al., 2012, p.966). Students suggest that ‘feedback online’ would shorten the time delay (Parkin et al., 2012, p.966). Conversely, if feedback is not provided in time its relevance may be threatened.

Buckley (2012) concurs that written feedback may be less effectual if it is not provided instantly. In my study, it was suggested that the time delay impacted students’ application of feedback, as this was not being carried over to the next unseen text essay. The challenge was compounded because the next unseen task was usually weeks away, and it was a new text. The students perceived that the feedback’s relevance was diminished as they would either have forgotten it due to the time lapse or because they knew that a new text would be set, so they believed that the feedback cannot be transferred. Yet some tried to refer back to their essays and teacher’s comments before
writing a new essay, by focusing on the comments that were applicable irrespective of the text. This delay issue is highlighted and described by Parkin et al. (2012, p.966) as a hindrance to learning and to use of feedback for future tasks. The time that goes by between written feedback and receiving verbal feedback is also a concern for Fox Tree and Clark (2013). A time lapse between oral and written feedback questions whether such feedback and its value is being lost or wasted.

The data were subsequently examined for suggestions made by teachers and students on how the above discrepancies could be bridged. For instance, it was felt that feedback could be provided more promptly so that students would have the opportunity to act on it, possibly through rewriting sections of the essay during the lesson time. Doing so is admittedly more time-consuming and often improbable to follow up as students have to proceed to the next task, which is unrelated to the one before it. Students also suggested that they could try to write down the oral feedback provided by their teacher, and personalize it (in a language that they can better understand and apply). Moreover, there is some potential, as expressed by the respondents, to utilize an online medium to bridge oral and written feedback together. Issues pertaining to discrepancies and feedback application are discussed in 6.3.5. The above areas and issues are also discussed in 6.4, particularly in light of students’ perceptions and use of feedback, together with their perceptions of literary criticism and writing.

6.3.3 Research Question 3 – How do Students Perceive Their Teachers’ Methods of Reading and Writing Preparation and How do They Make Use of such Methods (or Attempt to)? (Perceptions of Reading and Writing, and Students’ Actions)

Overall, the students spoke positively of their teachers’ approaches and practices, with some preferring certain methods to others. It was partly expected that students’ responses would be aligned with their teachers’, particularly as the teachers had taught the same students who were interviewed. It is a limitation of the study that the students would try to please the researcher by speaking favourably about the education received and the institution in which this happened. However, they were also rather open about what may be improved. For instance, they suggested being given more time to work on the texts in class, and being offered more opportunities to write, particularly in light of examination preparation. Another issue was the choice of texts, which was usually based on the teacher’s preferences. The fact that students did not always consider the texts appealing
resonated with their perceptions of literary criticism. In Chapter 5, it was suggested that students could choose their own texts. Similarly, the OCR suggests that the selection of texts to be used in class could ‘include candidates’ own choice of texts, reflecting their own interests and enthusiasm’ (2014, p.3). Atherton, Green, and Snapper (2013) discuss how the ‘democratization of education during the twentieth century’, as well as ‘a growing awareness of the problems posed by a fixed literary canon’ have led to changes in 16-19 English literature. The aims of the latter course are to achieve the following:

- [to] recognize the value of students’ active engagement with discovering meaning in literary texts, and with extended personal and critical response in discussion and writing; and
- [to choose or] focus on texts [that are] considered relatively accessible and interesting in one way or another to students from a range of social and cultural background, both from the literary canon (such as Shakespeare, the Romantics and the Victorians) and in modern and contemporary literature (p.3)

In the Maltese post-16 context, one could considered such objectives when choosing texts, whether they are as set texts or even more particularly as unseen texts. In connection to the latter type of texts, two issues were raised. First of all, whether such a selection impinged on how students perceived literary criticism, and consequently whether these perceptions affected the writing outcome and quality of their essays. Students knew that at the end of the course the outcome and quality would be assessed via the MC Advanced Level English examination, but they were also aware that if they did not like the text they would be less likely to do well when writing about it. Secondly, linked with this was the students’ belief that expressing a personal opinion was an essential part of their response. In the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014), there is no specific reference to personal opinion, but students are advised to produce ‘informed’ and ‘critical opinions’ (p.2,5). Students were advised in class against writing what they personally thought of the unseen text (e.g. whether they like the text or not). In criticism, it is argued that the text is central but the role of the reader is equally important, particularly how a reader receives, perceives, and understands literature. According to Iser (1978), in reader-response, the text affects the response; it is replete with signs that the reader draws upon. Fish (1980), however, differed in this view, placing the reader at the centre, as the text’s real producer.

According to students, teachers helped them hone their personal sensitivity towards unseen texts. However, the technical reading approach could not be avoided due to examination purposes. The more technical approach was in line with the MC Advanced
Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) criteria. An analysis of the syllabus document led to a reflection of students’ perceptions in view of assessment criteria/expectations. During the interviews, students showed awareness that their personal response had to be more technical, such as when writing about literary effect. The following words and phrases shed light on the contrast between the personal and the technical approaches: “savouring of literary effect”, “sensitiveness”, and “appreciation” on the one hand, alongside “critical opinions”, “judgements”, and “critique” on the other hand (MATSECb, 2014, p.2,5). This highlighted a possible contention between students’ perceptions (and preferences when writing about the unseen text), and examination demands (and the task requirements).

An examination of appreciation as a concept and how it was perceived by teachers and students followed. While there was a convergence between teachers’ and students’ views, the definitions of appreciation were almost contradictory. On the one hand, appreciation was defined as enjoyment of literature. On the other hand, it was described as a critical exercise, as it was equated with analysis. Despite an awareness that ‘a critical appreciation’ ultimately required an analysis of the text in essay form, both teachers and students felt that the reading exercise did not have to undermine the element of enjoyment. This was not always possible, particularly when teachers and students spoke of the burden of examination preparation and how it affected appreciation. Yet, efforts did not go unnoticed, as teachers promoted the idea of appreciation and reading poetry as enjoyable, despite the examination-oriented requirements of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014). Notwithstanding, there was not really an indication that students were influenced by this enthusiasm.

This is similar to the point raised by Cliff Hodges (2016), who states that the teachers’ ‘enthusiasm for poetry [was] not [always] enough on its own to ensure that pupils will similarly appreciate it’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.260); instead, it would be advised that such enthusiasm is ‘reflected upon and tempered for the classroom’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.260). Moreover, appreciation is and should not only be confined to the requisites of a syllabus. After all, there is a distinction between writing a critical appreciation, as one teacher pointed out, and developing an appreciation for literary texts. The latter can be connected to the reading experience in general, which can be heightened by the idea of ‘reading with the ear’ (Alexander, 2008, p.219). She goes on to state that listening to literary texts being read out loud ‘results in the appreciation of literature’ (p.221). In my study, the term ‘appreciation’ has been discussed mostly as a juxtaposition...
between analysis and enjoyment. Yet, no connection was drawn between the benefits of reading aloud and appreciation. This is an enlightening discovery that could add to the reading experience and aid students to appreciate the language by hearing it being read aloud, as Cliff Hodges (2016) also suggests. What this means is that teachers and students could consider ‘reading with the ear’ as a method of stimulating or enhancing appreciation.

The idea of enjoying the reading experience was affected when students spoke of their ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety’ of the unseen text component. A closer reading of students’ responses revealed that according to them, to be able to analyse an unseen text one had to be able to appreciate it first. However, one could appreciate without the need to analyse. In relation to this situation, Cliff Hodges (2009) points out that ‘even the youngest readers not only read for pleasure but also respond to texts as interpreters and critics’ (p.268). The complexity of the reading-interpretation-criticism cycle should not however, exclude the elements of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘appreciation’. Instead, it is argued that the ‘effort involved in interpretation and criticism’ is not embraced by students ‘unless they continue to experience the pleasures of reading’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.268). Hence, if the interviewed students did not appreciate the texts, it could have been because they enjoyed them less than was hoped for. This could also have affected their critical analysis of the text. In relation to feedback application, it could also have explained why there were less attempts on students’ behalf to apply it to future writing.

The teachers’ perceptions of appreciation seemed to converge with the assessment criteria. The MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) assessment criteria suggest that appreciation and critique go together via phrases such as “tools of critical analysis”. The connection here was that the teachers’ perceptions were informed by the MC Advanced Level English examination and syllabus demands, and consequently helped shape students’ perceptions. The students’ perceptions about the literary criticism task may have also been ingrained as early as secondary school. In my interviews, students and teachers suggested that the students’ attitudes towards literary criticism had been influenced by secondary school teachers. The secondary school teachers seemed to have unwittingly passed on their perception to students who in turn either had a positive or a negative predisposition towards literary criticism. If it were negative, the likelihood that students approached literary criticism anxiously and with dread increased. This state of mind would be reflected in their writing, which led to a
cycle of anxiety being created and perpetuated. The link between perceptions and writing outcomes is discussed in the next section.

1.3.4 Research Question 4 – How do Students Perceive Their Teacher’s Feedback Methods and How do They Apply the Feedback (or Attempt to)? (Perceptions of Feedback and Students’ Actions)

This section focuses on the students’ perceptions of teacher feedback and their attempts to utilize it. Any problems or challenges of writing and feedback applicability that emerged are discussed in the last section.

Students’ perceptions of feedback were mainly positive but this was contingent on the type of feedback received, namely on the teachers’ suggestions that could have potentially promised improvement. Therefore, how feedback was perceived was related to the type of feedback, to its format, and when it was provided. Then, how feedback was perceived was translated into the students’ willingness to apply it. For instance, if students seemed to believe that the feedback given was useful, constructive, and specific, then there was more motivation to apply the feedback. This concurs with Weaver’s (2006) study on students’ reactions to feedback. Similar to the students in my study, Weaver’s (2006) students categorised feedback that was ‘unhelpful’ or too vague when it did not provide guidance, or when it focused on the negative aspects of their writing. My students and Weaver’s (2006) did value the feedback, but the latter students suggested the comments ‘could be more useful’ (p.379). Written feedback was preferred when it enabled them to be more actively involved in implementing ideas (similar to Black and Wiliam’s (1998) formative feedback, to Srichanyachon’s (2012) indirect feedback, and to structured feedback (Lee, 1997; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). Such suggestions would focus on how to fulfil the task requirements specifically and concretely (Cowie, 2005). Indirect feedback is often perceived as more forward looking and is preferred by teachers and students, as concurred by Miceli (2006) and Paltridge et al. (2009). Although written feedback is highly recommended (Paltridge et al., 2009), it could be limited in its reach because it does not offer as many possibilities for dialogue as verbal feedback does (Price et al., 2011).

Gamlem and Smith (2013) also researched students’ perceptions of feedback and distinguish between positive and negative. Students defined the former type as that which ‘gives approval of performance, achievement or effort and specifies what can be done to improve the work’ (Gamlem and Smith, 2013, p.159). Contrarily, negative feedback is
telling students that ‘they could have done a better job even when they believe they have done their best’ (Gamlem and Smith, 2013, p.159). Similar to these types of research, my study also extracted the type of feedback comments that students considered useful or problematic, particularly in their attempt to utilize the feedback (see section 5.4.3). The difference between attempting and successfully applying the feedback has also been noted. This means that the impact of feedback is a potential area for further research, because despite students’ aptitude to utilize the feedback, the latter is not being transferred or applied as hoped for.

Teachers’ feedback and grading systems also had a role to play in shaping students’ perception of feedback (and writing). For instance, if students received the same low marks (as they mentioned) and the feedback accompanying the latter was too critical rather than supportive, students perceived writing about the unseen text as a fretful exercise. Subsequently, they were concerned they would not perform well, particularly when they would give up hope of applying the feedback. Moreover, when the feedback did not correspond to the mark, for instance, when students received encouraging feedback but obtained a low mark nonetheless, then students would not apply the feedback as their focus was lost on the low mark (this resulted in a mismatch between low marks and positive comments). This gave rise to a negative feedback loop which means the same marks and comments were replicated. Weaver (2006) claims that when the mark and feedback are ‘not matched’, the indication is that the comments are ‘not linked to assessment criteria’ (p.389). Moreover, vague suggestions of what a “good” essay is (Weaver, 2006, p.389) instead of criteria could lead students to depend on the mark. Similarly, Wojtas (1998) claimed that students are more concerned with their mark than the feedback. The focus may be misplaced, as Harks et al. (2014) argue. Positive feedback on the other hand encouraged students to work and write more.

A discrepancy between feedback and grades (also known as ‘corrections’ or marking) was also highlighted. When the mark was lower than expected, students were not as motivated by the feedback to attempt revision. Handley et al. (2011) compare students who are only concerned with marks and grades with those who reflect on ‘situational cues and underlying meanings’ (Salomon and Globerson, 1987, p.625). Looking at grades is interpreted as an emotional reaction. Instead, by considering the written feedback in the form of cues, students develop ‘alternative strategies’ (Salomon and Goberson, 1987, p.625) that enable them to ‘deepen understanding and achieve learning goals’ (Handley et al., 2011, p.552). A suggestion made by students and teachers
was to focus less on the marks and more on the feedback. However, students felt more motivated when they saw an improvement in their grades. Similarly, it has been suggested that students feel more confident in preparing for writing when they knew what criteria that teachers use when marking (Surgenor, 2013, p.295). Connecting marking criteria with feedback, studies have suggested that feedback could be more effective when it is provided separately from the mark (Parkin et al., 2012). The latter study presents this as an ‘adaptive release of grades’, which is ‘a process by which feedback given to students for them to reflect upon prior to them receiving their grade’ (Parkin et al., 2012, p.968). Weaver (2006) argues that this action may affect ‘the helpfulness of feedback’ (p.389). A student in my study also spoke of a system in another post-16 school where the grade is provided only after the student would have done the necessary revisions (in this system the grade and feedback are both provided online).

Perceptions of feedback may have affected students’ attempted to apply teacher feedback. When students seemed to perceive feedback as text-specific, they believed it fed back into what they had done (or not done as well as expected) but that it did not feed into their next literary criticism task, which would be weeks away. Consequently, there was less effort on their behalf to apply the feedback to the next writing task and, unless they referred back to their essay or unless the essay had detailed comments, they would forget the feedback. This is similar to what Weaver (2006) posits, namely that specific comments on an essay were not perceived as applicable, ‘as if the student had presented a draft that could be resubmitted, although it was a final piece of work’ (p.388). This last point echoes the situation of the students in my study and the context wherein it was conducted (students receive feedback on a first draft which is not being applied to that draft because they write a new essay for the following week). Weaver’s (2006) recommendation is that for feedback to be ‘helpful’ it ‘must contain general advice that can be used for future work’ (p.388). This is related to the language with which feedback is conveyed, as it affected students’ perception towards it. For instance, Weaver (2006) suggests balancing positive and negative comments instead of focusing on the negative (p.388). Thus, feedback could be phrased and presented in ways that may be more applicable and usable for the next criticism task. In relation to this point, an area that could hold training potential is in the language of feedback used by the teachers, to ensure that they are being provided with guidance on how the feedback may be written or presented. As it stands, it does not seem that discussions are held on the language of
feedback and how feedback should be presented or written, as it is up to the teachers’ discretion and preferences.

In relation to perceptions on feedback application, it seemed that teachers in my study were aware of their students’ attitudes towards literary criticism but not as aware that these could be undermining students’ confidence levels and leading to poorer performances. This could mean that, apart from providing them with the usual feedback, teachers could also address students’ perceptions. Hence, the feedback would include accounting for students’ perceptions of literary criticism. Teachers would discuss what students think of literary criticism and writing; this can be one of the areas with potential for training. The teachers and students would then work on the perceptions that might be affecting the latter’s writing outcomes. In my study, students’ perceptions often reflected their teachers’ attitudes. It could be worthwhile if teachers were to reflect on their own perceptions of writing and literary criticism, and how these shape students’ perceptions and actions in the utilization of feedback. The link between perceptions and feedback applicability is discussed in the next section.

6.3.5 Research Question 5 – What are the Reading and Writing Challenges that Prevent Students from Applying Their Teachers’ Feedback? (Reading and Writing Challenges)

The reading and writing challenges were presented in Chapter 5. These were related to content, interpretation and analysis on the one hand, and to language problem areas, such as sentence and essay structure on the other hand. Teachers and students were concerned with problem areas that were often language-based, but also with abstract ‘errors’, such as interpretation. These could be connected to one’s teacher’s comment (T1,ln.37): the inability to write is reflected in an inability to read. Along similar lines, it was suggested that challenges inherent in reading poetry could be due to the structure of a poem: while ‘Poetry language may be simple and easy to read…the syntax, structure, imagery and allusion which some poets employ often require different kinds of reading’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.261).

The teachers’ foci and observations on writing (challenges) were very similar to those in the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report on candidates’ performance on the unseen poem ‘Geography Lesson’ by Brian Patten (MATSECa, 2014). As I analysed this report (the same year that the interviewed students sat for the examination),
I noticed a convergence between my participants’ concerns and those of the examiners. Here are the criteria examiners gave importance to in the May 2014 session:

1. Interpretation
2. Use of English
3. Text organization and the implications of the rubric
4. Critical skills and other aspects of writing

On the first point, examiners noted that misinterpretation and over-interpretation were not ‘significant’ concerns but they explained that ‘the relative simplicity of the poem’ might have helped. Despite this, the examiners stated that ‘a small number of candidates failed to produce a valid interpretation of the poem’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.6). In view of my study, the emphasis teachers and students placed on interpretation was justified and seemed to echo the examiners’ concerns about interpretation. The latter was listed as the first criterion that was being ‘assessed’. The question is, how was interpretation assessed in the first place, and according to what aspects? The fact that more questions came out of this issue is because there seemed to be no clear explanation of what was meant by ‘valid interpretation’. By extension, the examiners’ viewpoint is not clear at this point but could be examined further. However, it can be suggested that, until then, students could be coached on working towards ‘valid’ interpretations by using a reader-response approach which is based on the concept of a ‘transaction’ between reader and text (as discussed at other points in relation to reader-response theory in Chapter 2). For this to take place, though, it must be clear in the teachers’ minds what reader-response really means and entails, not what they perceive it to be.

On the use of English, examiners highlighted issues with ‘cohesion and coherence of thought manifested both in sentence structure mistakes and, more widely, in loose paragraphs or inappropriate transitions’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.7). Language-based issues, such as sentence construction and grammar mistakes, were also mentioned by my study’s participants. Essay structure was noted in the examiners’ report as text organization.

Faull (2007) researched the issues surrounding the writing of English literature essays at post-16 level under examination or timed conditions. Compared with a focus on content in such essays, Faull’s (2007) initial concerns were of a structural nature: ‘the cohesion of writing’ in particular ‘linking paragraphs and introducing a piece of writing which “flows” was thought to be a challenge for students (Faull, 2007, p.167). The latter spoke of their difficulties or ‘weakest areas’ (Faull, 2007, p.167), which were writing introductions and conclusions. This was similar to what the participants in my study said
about structuring the essays on the unseen literary text. However, after analyzing students’ essays, Faull (2007) discovered that despite students’ misgivings of not being able to write certain areas of the essay adequately, only 20% and 10% wrote ‘weak’ introductions and conclusions respectively.

In relation to the unseen literary text, the essay format can be connected to the different approaches advised by teachers. Some of the teachers directed students towards a ‘chronological’ approach while others preferred an ‘aspect-based’ one (mentioned earlier). Ultimately, the examiners’ report revealed that ‘no particular essay structure [was] preferable in this section of the examination’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.7). Instead, ‘successful’ essays were defined in terms of ‘a wide variety of approaches’. This meant that both ‘line-by-line readings of the poem’ and ‘structured approaches’ manifesting ‘separate aspects of the poem’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.7) were accepted. Additionally, the examiners stated that the poem of that year (‘Geography Lesson’) ‘was particularly amenable’ to what may be describe as a chronological response’. This shows that examiners were aware of this approach. It also explains why certain teachers and students were in favour of this approach, while others were wary of it, when the examiners expressed reservations due to ‘the risk of replacing commentary and appreciation with an excessive emphasis on simply paraphrasing the poem’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.7).

A question was raised on whether the type of essay approach would be dependent on the type of poem, such as: how are students meant to know which poems are conducive to a ‘chronological’ approach, rather than the ‘aspect-based’ one? This could be part of training implications. In the case of the above poem, examiners pointed out that the essay could have been written following the poem’s chronology because there was a shift in the middle of the text, but whether other poems with a contrast or shift leads to this sort of organization is debatable. In light of the different approaches, the examiners felt that students often misrepresented the ‘chronological’ in their essays when they ‘approached the poem word by word’ resulting in ‘the poem [being] barely discussed as a whole’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.7). When the candidates presented the essay this way, the examiners’ perception of this approach matched some of the teachers’ and students’ preference for it. Particularly, the teachers felt that this approach helped those students who had not yet mastered critical writing skills, so it provided them with a structured format.

The last criterion of the examiners’ report was the manifestation of critical skills (and other aspects of writing). It was remarked that there is the ‘need to show a general
improvement’ in how students make ‘close reference and (use) quotations from the text (MATSECa, 2014, p.8). The examiners lamented the fact that ‘the ability to close read’ as a skill ‘is becoming rare in candidates’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.8). Similar to what some teachers remarked in my study, the report highlighted lack of depth and a ‘superficial’ level of analysis. It was advised that candidates were not to be ‘instructed to appreciate poetry in terms of quest for hidden meanings’ (a couple of teachers mentioned it is not a treasure hunt, though one teacher had said that some ‘detective’ work is required to look for clues). Instead, the reading of poetry would have to be more focused on ‘sensitivity for language and poetic thought’ (MATSECa, 2014, p.8). The examiners’ critique corroborated certain challenges that were located in the data. The teachers’ interviews and the lesson observations threw light on writing challenges that were very similar to those mentioned by different students. It was felt that the above issues related to writing essays on unseen texts have persisted throughout the years. It was also mentioned that students’ lack of familiarity with literary texts in general had contributed to the ‘superficial’ analysis.

In my study, students were aware of their weaknesses and stated they understood feedback that was detailed and specific. Detailed feedback includes comments on how the student can readdress task action plans or structural errors (Mason and Bruning, 2001). Perrenoud (1998) stresses that students’ awareness of the role of feedback is already an important step ‘because it affects their cognition’ (p.86). Cognition can be related to understanding, so when students are unable to apply the feedback, it is essential to analyse why it happens. Lack of feedback application does not mean that students do not give it importance. Some students in my study explained that they did not always understand the feedback comments, as they perceived them and the language of feedback as vague or too critical.

The challenges that teachers and students mentioned in connection with feedback and writing are similar to those mentioned in the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014). It potentially indicates that feedback was not as effective as expected, which also led to issues with writing outcomes. According to some students in the interviews, they did not always succeed in addressing certain errors. Consequently, they felt that such errors were carried over in subsequent essays. Moreover, despite teachers’ consistent feedback, as noted in the observations and some interviews, students’ essays still manifested repeated errors. These were lack of proper essay organization, or a superficial reading and interpretation of the poem. This alerted
them to a lack of continuity between feedback provision and writing outcomes. Furthermore, there was a lack of evidence as to how, where, and when feedback was applied.

It could be suggested that feedback may not be enough to achieve learning outcomes (Hounsell, 1995; Fritz et al., 2000; Weaver, 2006). One suggestion to handle this is to provide students with instruction on the role of feedback, particularly if they ‘need advice on understanding and using feedback before they can engage with it’ (Weaver 2006, p.379). This argument attempts to address the link between the teachers’ provision and students’ application of feedback. While students in my study expressed concern about and frustration over not being able to apply the feedback, they did value it. However, it may be the case that they require more guidance to understand it. Weaver (2006) claims that half of the students in her research had received no guidance on how to understand and use feedback. This is a potential area for training and further research (e.g. in-house training for teachers on how to prepare students to engage with feedback).

The language used by teachers when responding to writing also affects how students receive the feedback. For instance, using generic statements such as ‘good report’ or ‘fails to answer the question’ are considered ‘unhelpful’, and explains why students may not be responding to feedback (Weaver p.381). The language of feedback is a seminal area that can be also further researched. It sheds light on how to prepare students to receive feedback and the strategies to adopt when attempting to utilize it, particularly in relation to examination preparation.

When coding and analysing the data, I noticed that the word examination was mentioned considerably. It eventually emerged as an underlying but salient code in relation to the processes of preparing for writing and giving feedback. It also played a role in shaping the perceptions and challenges of writing. Upon considering its role, I decided to analyse the MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014) to consolidate the position of the examination in my research. Despite the term examination not being included specifically in my research questions, I realised that it was a common factor among the areas discussed. More specifically, I could not but mention that an examination culture abounds and is interlocked with the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014). The tutorial system in the study’s post-16 school covered such a syllabus, where students were trained to write a certain amount of essays covering all areas of the syllabus. These demands meant that teachers and students could not afford the time to reflect on and revise the essays. Moreover, the assigned essays
students wrote over two years were not connected systematically to one another (because they are set on different components of the syllabus). These variables eventually impacted the students’ utilization of feedback and writing outcomes. It is in light of these concerns that I decided to discuss the examination’s position vis-à-vis writing preparation, feedback strategies, and writing challenges. Perceptions of the examination were also considered.

In the study, the examination’s impact was evident when teachers prepared students for writing (e.g. they mentioned time constraints as a restriction). It also affected students’ approach towards writing. They were afraid of the unseen text on the one hand, but the examination drove and motivated them to attempt analysis despite their fear of the unknown on the other hand. Despite the fact that the unseen text is part of the examination, preparing for writing and giving feedback should not be solely constrained to assessment, according to teachers and students. Instead, they felt that the writing and feedback processes should be more broadly focused on developing students’ skills and their abilities to apply the (writing) outcomes and (feedback) strategies to other areas. The next section discusses the different connections that have been drawn in this study as well as the differences or disparities that emerged (and how to potentially address them).

6.4 Emergent Areas and Connections between Theory, Practice, and Applicability

One of the premises of this chapter is to present connections between pre- and post-writing processes, between the feedback and the writing processes, as well as the outcomes or challenges that emerged. After selective coding of the data, I conducted comparative analysis so as to draw such connections. For example, one link was that between the perceptions and challenges of writing. Another central connection was that between the writing preparation process and feedback application. While analysing the findings I also attempted to connect teachers’ preparation techniques with students’ perceptions and writing outcomes. Particularly, those techniques (or approaches) that shaped the students’ perceptions, and in turn affected their writing. In view of this, discrepancies highlighted by this study are also discussed, while it is argued that there needs to be more research into the effects of preparation and feedback on students’ writing.
Before proceeding, I felt it was necessary to explain how I arrived at the connections. It was not a matter of ‘choosing’, but these connections became apparent during a close reading of the findings. I have to add that I did not intentionally seek out these areas or force these connections from any internal assumptions or personal experiences. Instead, they have manifested themselves through ongoing processes of reflection and conceptualisation. I focused on the connections presented because they were borne out of analytical processes. As I worked with the raw data, some key concepts began to emerge. These were writing preparation (based on teachers’ approaches and perceptions), students’ perceptions of these approaches, the type of feedback provided and how the students perceived it, the writing outcomes (as expected by teachers and examination demands, and as perceived by students), the writing challenges, and the feedback application challenges. Initially these were discussed separately and presented in Chapter 5 in specific sections. For this chapter, however, I linked the specific ‘codes’ or sections so as to better understand what possible discrepancies there might have been. Through this process I realised that there were potential ideas in the writing preparation and feedback processes that may be addressed through future research projects and training implications.

6.4.1 Link between Teachers’ Perceptions and Students’ Perceptions: Literary Criticism and ‘Appreciation’

The first connection was that between teachers’ perceptions and how these affected students’. In my study, perceptions of literary criticism as a component of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014), of the concept of ‘appreciation’, of writing about unseen texts, and the examination, were all instrumental in leading to conclusions on this element. For instance, of teachers perceived literary criticism as ‘difficult’ and used this word with students, then the latter were being made aware of and were consequently more concerned with this area than the set texts. This was potentially leading to a ‘fear’ and anxiety amongst students, in turn affecting their confidence and performance outcomes. The concept of ‘appreciation’ (as discussed in 6.3.3) yielded mixed reactions from enjoyment to analysis. There seemed to be a lack of agreement on what the term meant, what it signified vis-à-vis literary criticism and the examination, and how it could be communicated to students.

Perceptions of literary criticism and writing a critical ‘appreciation’ were sought from both teachers and students. At undergraduate level, a similar perception was
registered. At post-16 level it is literary criticism, whereas at tertiary level it becomes literary theory. The latter is perceived as ‘hard’ for students for three reasons: ‘the unexpected’ (pp.33-34), ‘work’ (pp.34-35), and ‘teaching’ (pp.36-37) (Eaglestone, 2007). Here I reconceptualise the perceptions in light of literary criticism and ‘appreciation’. The first reason, ‘the unexpected’, refers to the situation where students have not been prepared for literary theory in secondary or post-secondary education (‘it is very rarely explicitly taught at secondary level’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.34), so they come across it for the first time as undergraduate students. In turn, university departments perceive students as being unprepared for it and not knowing what it really entails. They would know about features of texts such as character or plot, but it seems that they would have ‘usually had little training in reading an argument or an analysis’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.34). Although my study was on literary theory, a similar situation was flagged in terms of the ‘unknown’ factor of unseen texts. At this study’s post-16 school, students and teachers have expressed a concern about the unknown and the unfamiliar, because students would not have studied the texts that would eventually feature in the MC Advanced Level English examination. This ensued in tension and fear.

The second reason according to Eaglestone’s (2007) argument is ‘the work’, because ‘The ideas are new and complicated and demand mental work’ (p.34). Once again this refers to literary theory, but if applied to the situation facing students at this post-16 school, then the second reason why they perceived literary criticism as ‘difficult’ was because it necessitated more advanced work than they had imagined or known before. Similarly, writing about unseen texts was no mean feat for the students, and the teachers also seemed to concede that writing was beyond some students’ ability. This can be connected to what Eaglestone (2007) argues about writing (albeit in relation to literary theory): ‘An array of new forms of writing are taken up…and sometimes hard simply because the writers themselves do not know quite how to get where they are going’ (p.35). The last reason for which theory is considered ‘hard’ and literary criticism is perceived as ‘difficult’ involves the ‘teaching’ element, which refers to literary theory being ‘hard to teach and so hard to learn’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.36). The fault does not lie with the teaching or the teachers, Eaglestone (2007) affirms. In relation to literary criticism, a similar sentiment emerged. It was not voiced directly but it was felt among teachers and students when analyzing their words and tone, and during the observed lessons (seminars and tutorials) that there was an unspoken barrier between teaching and learning. On the one hand, teachers did not feel satisfied that their students could not arrive at an expected
level of writing, because most often the responses lacked depth and were merely paraphrases of what the text was about. On the other hand, students felt ‘inadequate’ and sometimes ‘demotivated’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.37). Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that the paraphrase ‘does not equal the poem’ so it in no way can be a ‘substitute’ (p.86). Even though the paraphrase ‘may restate some thoughts or aspects of the evoked poem’ (p.87), it was felt that students’ responses in the examination was a retelling of what they thought the poem was about. Indeed, Rosenblatt warns ‘it is erroneous to say that it sums up the “meaning”’, yet that is what seems to be one perception of the paraphrase among students (p.87).

To challenge these three reasons and the issues they bring about, Eaglestone (2007) suggests that one views the handling of texts as a ‘constantly developing process’ (p.39). In relation to this, he mentions the contribution of two people and their proposed 6 steps (Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster of the English and Media Centre (no reference available). Eaglestone (2007) does not really suggest how these steps can be enacted or what the results may be. Hence, as part of this study’s aims and discussion of results, I am reinterpreting these steps in light of teaching students to handle the writing about unseen texts, as part of the literary criticism component. The first step is all about the student’s response to the text (‘this could be enthusiastic or interested or even a negative response’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). My suggestion is that teachers become more sensitive to the student’s individual immediate reactions to the texts. This would inform the teachers about the different viewpoints held by an array of students and also raise more awareness of what, if anything, troubles the students when reading unseen texts. It would subsequently shed light on the issue of choosing texts.

In fact, one connection based on perceptions was that between the choice of texts, interpretation, and the teacher’s role. Students said that teachers chose texts that did not always appeal to them. They voiced their concern on not being fully able to interpret the texts chosen for them. Consequently, this led students to depend fully on their teachers for the interpretation. The cycle revolving around text choice and interpretation seemed to indicate that the moment students perceived texts as being unappealing triggered in them an abdication of responsibility towards interpretation. It seemed as though they had decided: teachers’ text = teachers’ interpretation. They would be merely recipients awaiting the interpretation. This explained their reliance on the teacher and respect for the teacher’s role in the classroom. However, the individual student’s reaction can be essential. It is connected to the second step, that of considering ‘the responses of other
members of the cohort, in the seminar group or more informally' (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). This could be done by encouraging students to confer with their peers about text interpretation and essay writing (such as how to structure an essay). During observed lessons, this was already taking place in the form of group work (or pair work) that was assigned during the seminar type of lessons. Teachers and students also spoke in favour of group work and peer review.

The third step involves teachers offering students ‘soundbites’ about the text (this refers to ‘short ideas or suggestions that illuminate the text and its context’) (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). This was observed in the form of lengthier and detailed explanations provided by the teachers in class (rather than brief ‘soundbites’), often to make up for the lack of student response to the text. However, providing suggestions about the text’s context seems to be in opposition of the argument that suggests decontextualizing the text (as was argued in relation to Richard’s (1929) Practical Criticism and Bredin’s (1986) support of the approach of removing any reference to the author or background to the text). Once again, this throws light on a potential debate that might vary from person to person: should context be considered when responding to a text? Atherton, Green, and Snapper (2013) alert us to a ‘controversy’ centred around ‘the place of context and interpretation at A Level’; similarly, teachers and students in my study held contrasting views on whether context should be explored to aid the students in their attempt at interpretation. Barry (2003) states ‘our primary interest is in the text rather than the context’ (p.61); however, he admits that the latter cannot be totally disregarded. Instead, it has to be approached with caution because ‘allowing contextualism a completely free rein effectively relegates literary study to the level of a sub-branch of history’ (Barry, 2003, p.61). To mitigate this, it is suggested that ‘a sustainable balance between text and context’ can be attempted, for example, by ‘importing’ context into studies of important literary works (Barry, 2003, p.64).

Teachers could also guide students in the next step to ‘read essays or reviews’ of the text written ‘by other critics’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). This is similar to what teachers and students suggested in the form of model or sample essays (as observed also in a lesson), to get an idea of the style or type of writing involved when responding to an unseen text. Similarly, Atherton, Green, and Snapper (2013) make the following argument: ‘Some teachers might argue that it would be more logical to introduce different critical interpretations by starting with critical texts, getting students to read critical essays and extracts and using these to illustrate the ways in which the texts they are studying
could be interpreted’ (p.133). Teachers in my study felt that sharing critical essays with their students would be helpful because they themselves used this technique when they were students. However, it is advised that such a method might push students to believe that ‘published criticism’ holds or offers a “right answer” rather than one interpretation (Atherton, Green, and Snapper, 2013, p.133). For them it might become ‘a solution to their own interpretative problems’ (Atherton, Green, and Snapper, 2013, p.133). Hence, it is suggested instead that teachers and students could use published critical essays as ‘tool[s] against which they can test out and hone their own interpretations, rather than feeling they should simply bow to authority’; in relation to this, it is advised that ‘teachers need to think carefully about how to introduce these skills and incorporate them in their programs of study’ (Atherton, Green, and Snapper, 2013, p.133).

At the same time, teachers in my study were wary of students finding essays or sources online and merely copying from them instead of using them as models that would ‘guide their response to the text’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). This in turn would affect the penultimate step, which is for students to ‘explore and develop critical positions on the text’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). If students were to use sample or critical essays as inspiration for their writing rather than copying, they would start to question their own writing, to think more critically of themselves as writers. However, it could be considered rather advanced for students aged 16-18 to be self-critical, because it is a skill that takes time.

The above limitation would consequently affect the final step, which sees the student ‘owning’ the critical position. If it is argued that undergraduate students face this problem (Eaglestone, 2007), then one wonders whether it is too much of a pressure for post-16 students to handle reading texts they are unfamiliar with, with the expectation that they produce a written response or what is referred to in the MC Advanced English Level Syllabus as a ‘critical appreciation’. Moreover, the combined pressure of reading, interpreting, analyzing, and writing has to be done within a one-hour timeframe (as part of a three-hour examination, which includes writing two essays about two respective studied texts). For students to ‘own’ a critical position, this would mean that the ideas on the text become ‘naturalised’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). It emerged that it was far from likely for the 18-year-old students in this study to succeed in this endeavour, particularly when they reiterated that every new unseen text reopened challenges of interpretation. It had not become second nature for them to respond and write about a text, but rather every new text made them more conscious and apprehensive of their shortcomings.
The above did not mean they were reluctant to write, if anything, they stressed that more writing practice was needed. Overall, the six steps would ultimately lead to the student ‘coming to be a literary critic’ (Eaglestone, 2007, p.39). However, at post-16 level, this is not the aim when writing about unseen texts. First of all, as stated, it takes years to harness this skill, so by the end of a two-year course in literary criticism, students are most likely to have worked up to the fourth step (through the use of sample essays). Based on the findings, there was evidence that some aspects of the first four steps were being implemented. Whether this was leading to step 5 was not clear, because the transference between the model essays and students’ essays was not mentioned or stated as evident. This prompts further research into the perceptions and effects of sample essays on students’ writing.

6.4.2 Link between Perceptions, Writing Outcomes, and Feedback

Research has shown that there are connections between students’ perceptions of themselves as writers and how they perform on specific tasks (Villalón, Mateos, and Cuevas, 2015, p.659). More specifically, this study drew a link between students’ perceptions of feedback and their writing outcomes. As students seemed to perceive writing about unseen texts to be challenging, their confidence to write well was also affected. Coupled with that, they felt that the feedback received was not always helpful. Ekholm et al. (2014) suggest that students’ feedback perceptions correlated with outcomes in terms of grades. For example, students who perceived feedback as more useful performed better than those who considered it less so. Montgomery and Baker’s (2007) examination of perceptions reveals that students have ‘strong opinions on both the amount and type of feedback given by their teachers’ (p.83). Moreover, Weaver (2006) claims that the teachers’ focus of feedback could influence students’ responses.

This highlights the importance of research on student perceptions, which gives rise to the need for a dialogue (Court, 2014) on how practices and outcomes could be affected by perceptions (Van der Schaaf et al., 2013). In particular, some studies suggest that there is a lack of alignment between student preferences and perceptions of feedback, and teachers’ self-assessment of that feedback (Matsuda, 1999; Goldstein, 2001, 2006). There is a call for further research on ‘the complex relationships in the classroom that affect feedback’ (Montgomery and Baker, 2007, p.83), such as perceptions of teacher...
feedback. Borne out of the data, I attempted to explore the alignment between teacher feedback and students’ perception.

Students’ perceptions of feedback were also connected to whether and how they utilized the feedback. Although students recognised the importance of feedback and attempted to use it, their lack of clear examples of how they could have used it underlines an important discrepancy: one between receiving feedback and responding to it (they knew what they needed to work on but they did not know how to do so). This concurs with Handley et al.’s (2011) view that, even if the feedback is ‘comprehensive and well-constructed’, how useful it ultimately is will ‘depend on [the students’] response’ (p.543).

Students in my study considered detailed and specific feedback as ‘useful’. The difference noted was between understanding and knowing how to apply feedback. It has been suggested that students require ‘more explicit guidance’ in order to maximize the feedback provided (Evans and Waring, 2011, p.185). Wojtas (1998) claims that improvement in students’ work is contingent on whether they understand the feedback’s purpose in relation to the assessment criteria. When students in my study claimed to understand the feedback but were not sure how to adapt it, this seemed to alert a lack of understanding of the assessment criteria.

Students’ perception of feedback was also related to what they knew or did not know of the assessment and feedback criteria. Students did not always seem aware of the assessment criteria. This echoes the claim that ‘students are not exactly sure what it is they are supposed to do when they respond to a text’ (Appleman, 2009, pp.31-32). Moreover, if the feedback was not written in a way that acknowledged such criteria, this consolidates certain claims made about ‘unhelpful’ feedback (Weaver, 2006). It is claimed that effective feedback is either that which verifies (a correct answer) or elaborates by explaining why the answer may not be correct and how to improve it. A balance of both types is advised (Murtagh, 2014, p.518). In relation to criticism, however, feedback on writing needs to address the possibility of flexibility. Instead, getting to grips with interpretation and how to express it in relation to writing outcomes is more relevant. During the interviews, many students hesitated as to how they used feedback. Some indications were:

1. Students did not really apply feedback as much as they would have wanted to;
2. The feedback was not leading to improvement in their writing as hoped for;
3. While students discriminated between effective and ineffective feedback (Chapter 5), they knew that they were not applying it between one criticism essay and another. This was mostly because they did not know how to do it; and
4. They were a long way from becoming self-regulated learners (Nicol 2010), even by the end of their two-year school course.

However, students acknowledged that feedback motivated them to work, but they felt they needed more guidance on how to use it. For instance, they contended that while praise as feedback was motivating, it was misleading them at times. Similarly, it is argued that while praise as feedback can boost motivation and improve performance, it has to be connected to the task rather than to the student’s sense of self (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). At the same time, being aware of students’ sense of self and esteem proved important in feedback. In my study, when students realised that they did not know how to apply feedback, their confidence and motivation to apply it diminished. Motivation to adopt the feedback in this case could have been contingent on the students’ individual level of self-esteem. Young (2000) posits that those students with a low self-esteem perceive feedback as being a critique of their ability, while those with a better or higher self-esteem approach feedback as a tool through which they can enact change. This highlights a need for an awareness among teachers and tutors that feedback (and perception of it) may be connected to self-esteem and motivation issues. This could be another key training issue.

6.4.3 Link between Writing Challenges and Students’ Use of Teacher Feedback

My study examined difficulties students faced when writing and how these affected their use of teacher feedback. An analysis of the students’ and teachers’ responses yielded a connection between the two. For instance, feedback application was impeded by the challenges. Both aspects were also influenced by the students’ perception of writing about unseen texts. Apart from being ‘afraid’ of the ‘unknown’ factor, students perceived writing and literary criticism as challenging and ‘difficult’, which fed into the challenge of applying the feedback.

Students commented that the unseen texts used for tutorials or during seminars were always different, which was the purpose of the exercise (it had to be unseen, that is, unknown to students). Students expressed their concern in relation to this as a fear of the ‘unknown’. They felt that the feedback on one essay was not relevant when writing
another. Very often the feedback was text-specific and related to language use. However, even if the latter issue was resolved (e.g. by sorting out spelling or essay structure ‘errors’), it was not always easy to act on the feedback. Hattie & Timperley (2007) argue that task-specific feedback does not enable students to generalise to other writing, so their confidence to apply it is also undermined. My study revealed that if students seemed to perceive writing as challenging, they were not as confident to write the next essay about a new unseen text. They also felt that the feedback did not guide them towards criticism of a text. Therefore, the discrepancy between the application of feedback and writing outcomes was partly due to there being a long gap in time between one criticism essay and another.

Moreover, students specified that every poem or prose text was different so the need for interpreting anew was required (this was different from studying a set text and referring to the same interpretation). This impinged on students’ inability to act on the feedback. The issue of feedback application is discussed as students’ readiness-to-engage that Handley et al. (2011) explore, in light of Bandura’s (1977) study. Readiness-to-engage is defined as ‘a willingness to invest effort and energy in the activity-at-hand’ (Handley et al., 2011, p.550). This depends on whether the students perceive the task as authentic and what they predict the feedback to be. It is also contingent on students’ self-efficacy, or ‘their sense of being able…to do something about the feedback they receive’ (Handley et al., 2011, p.551). The link with my study is how perception influenced students to believe that they were able or unable to apply the feedback. There was also a difference between perception of feedback and attempts at using it. For instance, students spoke of not being able to use the feedback despite perceiving it as essential to their development. The lack of feedback application, however, could mean that engagement was not as evident. This did not help to address writing challenges. It consequently led to less readiness-to-engage and less self-efficacy in the use of feedback. Consequently, students felt that they wrote disconnected critical essays, made the same mistakes, were anxious over the same issues (such as interpretation and the ‘unknown’ factor), and were disengaged from applying the feedback they perceived to be non-applicable.

The effect of feedback was also not evident as desired. Robinson et al. (2013) mention that students’ dissatisfaction with feedback lies in ‘procedural elements’ (e.g. timeliness), ‘the level of guidance offered’ and their ‘lack of understanding of comments’ (p.260). All these elements are apparent in my study, but in connection with writing about
a more specific literature area. Students did not express dissatisfaction with feedback but rather an uncertainty in applying it.

Figure 6.1 represents a cycle of writing and feedback. At the centre are the (innate) perceptions students harboured in relation to writing and criticism, which might have informed or influenced their practices. After writing, students were provided with feedback, which they tried to act on. Ideally there was a revision, a rewriting of the essay to gauge whether the feedback had been applied (or an attempt to apply it). As the study revealed, however, the students often moved on to write another essay (on another area of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014).

Figure 6.1 The Link between Perceptions, Writing and Students’ Use of Teacher Feedback

In literary criticism, students did not always succeed in applying their teachers’ feedback to future writing. This challenge explains why students might have felt defeated by the prospects of writing about future unseen texts. To overcome this, students suggested more writing practice was needed, which included more reading and a range of different texts. Yet, they knew that the text that would eventually be set in the MC
Advanced Level English examination would be unknown to them. This is why students seemed to perceive the area of criticism as a measure of capability: to test how much the students could really apply themselves to a new text. The point here is that although one could not transfer the content to a new essay, one could work on transferring other skills, such as how to structure an essay, how to present an interpretation, and how to read a text irrespective of the content. Some teachers also suggested adapting reading and analytical skills to a range of unseen literary texts to make feedback on writing about the unseen text more fruitful. Despite some students’ misgivings, others showed an awareness of the areas that one had to work on when writing subsequent essays, such as imagery, theme, and diction. Their awareness was rather generic, however, which meant that the challenge lay in applying what they knew to new texts. This indicated that whereas some of the feedback on writing skills could be utilised in other essays, feedback on content and interpretation was not easily applicable.

6.4.4 Differences between Oral and Written Feedback

Written and oral forms of feedback were discussed during the interviews. It was confirmed that each have their advantages and drawbacks (Buckley, 2012). For instance, the permanence of written feedback may override the oral medium. However, some students in my study preferred verbal feedback because of the detailed explanations and personalised individual attention that were offered by their teachers. The elements of ‘contemporality’ and immediacy are also more evident in oral than written feedback (Fox Tree and Clark, 2013, pp.341-342). Students might consider verbal feedback more ‘effective’ also because it ‘can have a positive effect on the student’s confidence, as well as on retention’ (Buckley, 2012, p.244). The lack of instantaneous feedback in the written format may also explain why some students preferred oral feedback. Some students in my study felt that when feedback was focused on certain areas, teachers would explain more specifically during oral feedback, whereas the written was mostly used to ‘correct’ language use.

The difference between focused and unfocused forms of feedback was connected to the above. I asked respondents to reflect and comment on whether teachers’ feedback focus should be made known to students, particularly whether the teacher should inform students of their focus when reading and marking the essays. Ellis et al. (2008) posit that narrowly focused feedback is more effective than unfocused feedback (where all types of
errors, whether language- or content-based, are noted by the teacher). There seemed to be mixed views on whether students are to be informed (before writing) of the feedback that would be provided. Teachers who seemed to believe that the tutorials’ aim was to develop the students’ writing skills did alert students to the focus of their response to the essay (by telling them what they will be watch out for when marking and giving feedback). Conversely, teachers who preferred not to inform students also seemed to believe that the students were to demonstrate their writing ability via the tutorials. Moreover, these teachers were concerned that students would fuss over certain aspects of writing instead of give equal weighting to all areas of the criticism essay. This echoed the viewpoint of certain students. The latter stated that knowing beforehand what the teacher would pay attention to while writing their feedback might have led them away from presenting all necessary aspects adequately. Other students, however, agreed with being given verbal guidance before writing. Students could benefit from knowing and being aware of the feedback (Ur, 1996) and it is recommended that the focus of feedback is agreed upon before writing, so that students may better understand how feedback works (Srichanyachon, 2012). In this way, it is not merely feeding back to a specific essay but preparing students by establishing criteria that would feed forward and into future writing (Walker, 2009; Price et al., 2011).

Given that both oral and written forms of feedback were provided, this study also explored what information was provided in both. For instance, the respondents’ descriptions and the observations revealed that oral feedback was given on the interpretation and the content of the text, whereas written feedback was provided on structure and language issues. However, there were more differences between oral and written feedback. It was argued that the benefits of oral feedback were not fully exploited. A suggested cause was a time delay in the feedback provided (between written and oral feedback). Wiggins (1997) advises that feedback needs to be timely. Buckley (2012) agrees that ‘the timing of feedback relative to the assignment being submitted could be crucial’ (p.246), particularly the time between students’ writing the essay and receiving the feedback. At the same time, Buckley (2012) admits this is not as straightforward, because ‘the main constraint on written feedback is probably timeliness’ (p.243). Added to that is the ‘pressure’ to ‘assimilate’ written feedback, whereas oral feedback is more immediate. Yet, other studies have indicated benefits of written feedback in enhancing students’ learning, because of its more permanent quality that enables students to refer back to it (Bitchener and Knoch, 2009). Apart from being ‘timely’, it would benefit
students if the comments are ‘personal, explicit, detailed, explanatory and corrective rather than generic’; the aim is for feedback to be ‘developmental’, for students to be able ‘to produce an improved version of their work’ (Court, 2014, p.330). Despite the difference in context, a similar view was echoed by teachers and students in my study.

The time difference between oral and written feedback might also be affecting retention and feedback application. In relation to the former, it was demonstrated that ‘there was no significant difference in retention between verbal and written feedback’ (Buckley, 2012, p.244). However, it was pointed out that the oral format is ‘quicker’ and ‘potentially less time-intensive’ than the written (Buckley, 2012, p.244). Retention, however, was dependent on time, and it is argued that students ‘retained feedback better if it was delayed for a day after a test had been performed’; however, there was no impact on retention if feedback ‘was delayed by one, two or three days’ (Buckley, 2012, p.244). If teachers provided feedback on students’ essays more than seven days after the work has been written handed in, then there was less likelihood of retention. The conclusion here is that feedback would need to be more immediate, whether it is written or verbal.

Oral feedback has its merits but whether it was being fully exploited by students was questionable. Teachers and students reported issues with memory that threatened the effort to apply the feedback, particularly if this were provided weeks prior to another writing task. For this reason, my study suggests that more could be done to make better use of the valuable oral feedback provided so that this does not go to waste, and so that teachers would not feel they were engaging in a repetitive exercise without beneficial or visible effects on the students’ writing.

A suggestion is to find ways in which oral feedback could be more effective (as mentioned earlier). Students in my study considered bridging oral and written feedback. To add to the above research, it was suggested by some students that they could write down the teacher’s oral feedback while it is being given, in a language that students can better understand and then apply in future writing. During the observations, it was not evident whether they were encouraged by their teachers to keep a written record of the oral feedback. From the teachers’ end, it was suggested that tutors could record their thoughts while writing the feedback (similar to think-aloud protocols), which would make their oral feedback more permanent.

Similarly, Lunt and Curran (2010) investigated a method that involved audio recordings of feedback being sent to students through a VLE. Oral feedback could also be sent to students through a podcast. Students expressed interest in this format and stated
that they would understand feedback more if it were provided at the time the essay was handed in. Gould and Day (2013) recommend audio feedback as informative and beneficial, as it can be both ‘detailed’ and ‘conversational’ (p.555). Parkin et al. (2012) investigated the students’ perceptions of their feedback experiences through technology and posit that this format ‘encourages students to engage with their feedback and formulate actions to improve future learning’ (p. 963).

Preferences were also indicated towards an online system of written feedback. When compared to the ‘hard copy feedback’ (Parkin et al., 2012), which students appreciated but did not store it with the aim of reusing it, an online feedback system encourages and ‘increases the likelihood of students revisiting their feedback and feeding it forward into future assignments’ (p.966). It is suggested by Parkin et al. (2012) that such systems are still in development so such research might be ‘limited in terms of the use of technology to support and enhance feedback processes and practices’ (p.964). It could, however, be considered an avenue for further research.

6.5 Researching Writing about Unseen Texts and Teacher Feedback through a Grounded Theory Methodology

Researching writing and feedback via a grounded theory method has provided me with a perspective into aspects that were not intended or pre-planned. Students’ perceptions on feedback was one such strand. This eventually became a central part of this study. The connections I made and the discrepancies that were discussed between the different areas were also data-driven. This attests the strength and potential of using grounded theory in educational contexts, particularly in qualitative research where conclusions are not as easily quantifiable. The richness in the data balanced this issue as it afforded me an in-depth analysis of the respondents’ contributions. By conducting observations and then reporting these in narrative form, I was able to draw out the teachers’ patterns and characteristics, and compare these against the interview data (with the same teachers). I decided to cross-refer the interviews and observations against an analysis of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) and MC Advanced Level English Examiners’ Report (MATSECa, 2014) so as to attempt triangulation as well as corroboration of the findings.

Using grounded theory for research on feedback and the area of unseen literary texts allowed me to explore how teachers’ practices merge with students’ writing
outcomes, particularly in relation to writing about such texts and feedback. A potentially influential aspect of teachers’ perceptions influencing students was related to the reader-response approach. Given that teachers seemed to have perceived reader-response as interchangeable with personal opinion, they proceeded to advise their students against it. Students expressed how they had been cautioned about giving their personal opinion. This is not reader-response, however, so the conclusion here is that the full potential of the approach was not being utilised, and that students might have had the wrong idea of what reader-response really meant and entailed. Another point that emerged from the discussion was whether teachers’ perceptions of writing and feedback affected those of students, and if so, to what extent. My study researched the area of feedback specifically in relation to unseen literary texts because it was felt that this type of writing has not been researched as much as feedback on language essays. The following table summarises the key areas and presents potential conclusions and targets/actions.

Table 6.3: Identification of Areas and Action Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area / focus</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions and practices</td>
<td>Investigating perceptions and their impact on practices, actions, and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback and perceptions</td>
<td>Considering how students’ perceptions affect their reactions to feedback; considering the idea that feedback can help to shape students’ perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ attitudes to writing about unseen texts</td>
<td>Addressing a cycle of anxiety (and how it feeds into students’ writing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format of feedback</td>
<td>Bridging the differences between oral and written feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of feedback</td>
<td>Recalibrating feedback to include recommendations that feed forward and into students’ future writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of feedback</td>
<td>Enhancing feedback application (more specific strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ feedback application</td>
<td>Gauging students’ feedback application (via strategies, such as the creation and implementation of a feedback form – see Appendix 31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table presents finer distinctions and areas of concern that were identified following an analysis and discussion of the findings. It summarizes data-driven reasons and challenges. Potential solutions are proposed in the final column in an attempt to address the challenges.
Table 6.4: Areas, Challenges, and Suggestions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of interest</th>
<th>Reasons / challenges</th>
<th>Suggestions to address the challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difference between how reader-response was perceived / taught and what it really means and involves</td>
<td>Reader-response approach was likened with personal reactions and opinions; reader-response was considered less academic</td>
<td>Redress perceptions of reader-response, possibly through training opportunities or informal discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy between oral and written feedback</td>
<td>Time delay between written and oral feedback; effects of oral feedback are not fully exploited</td>
<td>Record oral feedback more systematically; students write down oral feedback provided; an online feedback system may be trialled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback application: feedback is not being applied from one criticism essay to another</td>
<td>Same writing challenges are repeatedly reported; time delay between one criticism essay and another; feedback is specific to the task so there is less incentive to apply it</td>
<td>Address specific writing challenges; make feedback more applicable between one essay and another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perceptions of literary criticism and writing</td>
<td>Teachers and students perpetuate the idea that literary criticism is difficult; students perceive it as a challenge so they lack confidence to write</td>
<td>Recalibrate students’ perceptions of literary criticism; modify the language of feedback to include discussions on how students perceive criticism and writing; address students’ confidence during feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the findings vis-à-vis the research questions and the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. Some references to the literature are ‘newer’, and were data-driven, in line with the grounded theory method. This chapter aimed at suggesting connections between different areas to understand the literary criticism situation, writing practices and feedback application in this study’s post-16 school. Connections between writing and feedback practices, as well as between feedback application and writing outcomes, were discussed in view of the literature. However, very often the literature on feedback was related to language essays while my study suggests how feedback on writing about unseen literary texts was provided and perceived, what challenges students faced when trying to write or apply the feedback, and suggestions to resolve challenges.
This connects with a section in the next and final chapter, which presents this study’s original contribution to the field. Chapter 7 also summarises the study’s main issues in an attempt to recommend a theory or position. It thereby offers potential avenues for further research, and outlines training implications.
Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

My research focused on the areas of reading and writing about unseen texts, and teacher feedback on such writing. I had not initially intended to explore this area specifically. However, the frustration expressed by teachers and students towards writing, particularly on unseen texts, alerted me to this component of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014). After conducting the pilot study, the aim became clearer when I adopted a grounded theory approach. Carrying out research on these areas via grounded theory helped to support initial anecdotal evidence. From the pilot study an integral part emerged: feedback and its connection to writing outcomes about unseen texts. Apart from exploring how students were prepared for writing, I also researched how they were being provided with feedback on their writing (about unseen texts). Particularly, how, when, and what feedback was given. Consequently, I discussed the perceptions of feedback and attempts at utilising it. I linked the data on students' writing about unseen texts to feedback practices. Through the student-interviews I aimed to provide students with an opportunity to voice their experiences. I observed and analysed the methods and approaches teachers used to help students harness writing and interpretative skills.

In the midst of all this, another unintended outcome was research into perceptions. Specifically, teachers’ and students’ perceptions of literary criticism, of writing about literary texts, of the examination components of literary criticism, the concept of ‘appreciation’ (when reading unseen literary texts), and of feedback. These strands related to perceptions proved salient to the connections between reading, writing and feedback. Such strands may be researched at similar post-16 schools in Malta. One conclusion is that teachers’ and students’ perceptions can be researched at other post-16 schools and analysed in light of those that emerged in this study.

To draw out the above, I investigated the writing and feedback practices at post-16 level of education, because of my professional investment in this level of education. My familiarity with this context spanned ten years at the time of the study, which was another factor I took in consideration. Moreover, this educational phase is not given as much importance in research in Malta because most often the studies that are conducted involve primary and secondary levels of education. Specifically, no previous studies have
been conducted in the area of feedback specifically on writing about unseen texts in a Maltese context so this highlights the study’s contribution to knowledge. Moreover, I believe this study is an asset not only for this post-16 school but also for similar contexts.

I was familiar with the school I chose. The necessary networks were already in place so it was more convenient for me to collect data there, given that I work full-time and had a limited timespan in which to conduct research. Apart from this, an important reason for choosing this school was that, prior to the interviews and observations, teachers had commented that students often struggled with their writing, particularly when they were discussing unseen literary texts at MC Advanced Level English. The teachers’ concerns with the unseen text, which were highlighted in the interviews, led me to focus on this area and relate it to feedback practices. This was primarily because students’ writing did not show marked improvements (after two years).

By focusing on individual cases of students and teachers, I sought to go beyond numbers, averages, and statistics. I wanted to give a presence to individuals who were directly involved in the teaching and learning of writing, and who were affected by the feedback process. The aim for this study was not only to present what a number of teachers did, but also to shift the students from the receiving end to the centre of feedback. Teacher-student convergences of perceptions and practices of feedback were part of the result. There were also differences, such as the discrepancy between what teachers expected of students and what students thought teachers expected of them. This echoes Li and De Luca’s (2012) concern, namely that feedback can be less effective if teachers and students have different views and perceptions (p.3). It is suggested that expectations needed to be articulated more clearly so that students would know not only what feedback to apply but also how to use it for future writing. Feedback seemed to be perceived as much more than error correction, yet students often had the impression that their essays were mainly being marked for errors. A reflection of this was whether the feedback was weakened when the comments strongly highlighted error correction. To address all of the aspects above, the research questions focused on the writing preparation stages, the feedback processes, issues of feedback usability, and students’ perceptions of teachers’ methods and approaches.
7.2 The Study’s Conclusions

Researching writing about unseen texts in connection with feedback practices has led to a number of conclusions, which echo some areas of concern that Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) identified, namely, ‘the impact of examinations; few opportunities for pupils to write; a dominant focus on identification of poetic technique; [and] the prevalence of a ‘right answer’ approach’ (p.149). Apart from these concerns, and despite the claims made by teachers and students that they are satisfied with the feedback system, the feedback on writing about unseen texts was not being applied as expected.

One factor affecting writing outcomes was time. It was felt that more time was needed for writing and rewriting the same piece. Conversely, the time delay between students handing in their essays and getting feedback on them needed to be shortened. This concludes that students had to wait for feedback, because it took time for teachers to read and respond to their work. Based on this study’ findings, timely feedback is recommended, as also mentioned in other research (Wiggins, 1997; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Buckley, 2012; Fox Tree and Clark, 2013;).

Another conclusion was that oral and written feedback were not fully inter-connected. Minimising the time delay between the two types of feedback is one suggestion. Introducing a(n) (online) feedback system could offer more immediate feedback and support to students. It was thought that the oral should consolidate the written feedback, and vice versa. In relation to this, the feedback foci could be better defined for any task so that students would not have to work on too many feedback targets at once. Instead, providing students with a finite number of feedback suggestions could be more beneficial. This is not solely applicable for writing about unseen texts at post-16 level but relevant to any piece of work at any level of education. Consequently, it is essential to consider that teachers’ recommendations to feed forward rather than only feed back (Walker, 2009; Price et al., 2011). The term feedback should not only refer to suggestions on what has been written but it could subsequently involve recommendations for future work. The word back does not have to be perceived merely from a summative perspective. The more long-term process of formative feed forward should be considered too.

Another aspect that has emerged was student voice and involvement in writing and feedback processes. Putting the student at the centre of feedback was often assumed to be happening in classrooms, but whether this was taking place was not fully clear.
What emerged from giving students the chance to voice their concerns was their anxiety and fear of not knowing what text will be set eventually in the examination. This fear needs to be understood better and addressed via further research, particularly whether students in similar contexts have such perceptions. At the same time, students expressed preferences for different approaches or methods. Yet, it was not evident whether they had taken the feedback on board and made it theirs. While it was stated by respondents that feedback was being provided, there were not as many opportunities for dialogue about the nature and language of feedback. This could entail the following ideas (as mentioned and analysed in Chapter 5 and 6): teachers could outline the writing criteria more clearly, but also be more aware of students’ concerns and fears. Together, they could work on addressing concerns and allaying the fears. Instead of merely moving on to another task, teachers and students could hold more dialogues on how the feedback is or is not helping them. It was instrumental to note that students could end up being discouraged from trying to apply the feedback, if they felt that the feedback was too critical. Sometimes a conversation and a clear explanation of what the student did or not do would have sufficed to make the student feel better about himself or herself. Hence, it can be concluded that more dialogue is needed between teachers and students about the nature and types of feedback.

Connected to this was the need to make the students the owners of the feedback. A suggestion would be to devise a system that would boost the students’ contribution. They could have a voice in rewording or building on the feedback. They could also suggest formats that would enable them to make sense of the feedback provided for every task. For example, once can consider a visual or more continuous feedback support system that would involve online tools. Students would feel they own the feedback and it is not merely the teacher’s remit. It would be democratisation of feedback that places students as co-constructors of the feedback they receive.

In relation to applying the feedback, the study concluded that there were reasons for which students were not always successful in applying the feedback. The language that teachers couched their feedback in played a role in this. Using language that the student could understand and relate to when trying to apply the feedback was seminal, so students suggested that teachers avoided vagueness in feedback comments. This did not mean that students did not understand the feedback. However, they often did not know how to apply it and how to improve their writing.
Following feedback application is the perception of its effectiveness. It is conceded that it is difficult though not impossible to measure effectiveness and applicability (Handley et al., 2011). This study concluded that further research on a longitudinal scale would be required for this (as suggested by some teachers). This would involve analysis of students’ writing where the criteria or outcomes expected would have to be clearly defined. This could also entail some teacher training. The study flagged a gap, as mentioned by teachers and students, that the feedback provided was not being applied as consistently, and that there was no evidence of how improvement in writing was registered. In other words, every new essay seemed to be written and marked as though there were no connection to previous work because the same errors or writing challenges emerged and were noticed by the teachers. Despite the fact that students received feedback and were given opportunities to write, such feedback did not prove as effective and the time allocated for writing practice was not considered enough.

The above conclusions hold some implications for further research and training. These are discussed in the next two sections where some reflections and ideas are suggested. Consideration of changes to the feedback system in relation to the unseen text can also be applied to other components of the MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (MATSECb, 2014) that involve writing critically (e.g. feedback on the set texts), as well as to writing in similar contexts to the one as the school’s study. Once again, students and their writing would be at the centre of further research and training implications.

7.3 Implications for Further Research

Some areas have been flagged so that potential projects can be undertaken on an individual or departmental level in similar contexts. One avenue for further research could involve introducing an online feedback system to explore the issue of feedback immediacy (Lunt and Curran, 2010; Buckley, 2012; Gould and Day, 2013). This would see students inputting their work online, and then the teacher would provide feedback on it. Then the students would revise their work, and only after doing so would they receive the mark. The system would be set up in a way that teachers would not have to reread the work, so as to avoid additional paperwork. If sessions are held where teachers meet the students in person, these could be maintained but tweaked to include some practice writing done in class (e.g. draft writing). Moreover, teachers could try to monitor students’ individual progress longitudinally by using a manual feedback tracking system.
This would involve a template for teachers and students to fill in. Once it is filled in by the students to indicate that they have made note of the feedback, then the teacher would assign the mark separately. This could be trialled before introducing the online feedback system.

A more theoretical-based area of research would be a larger-scale longitudinal investigation into the perceptions and fears students have of writing (e.g. about literary texts) and feedback. Research into perceptions can prove insightful for teachers to be more aware of what their students really think about unseen texts, particularly if the ‘students’ understanding of feedback is not necessarily consistent with the meaning of the teacher’ (Van der Schaaf et al., 2013, p.242). One way of doing this is for teachers ‘to check students’ understanding of the feedback and to explain the meaning of the feedback if needed’ (Van der Schaaf et al., 2013, p.242). Research into perceptions connected to unseen texts could be conducted through more interviews, observations, essay analysis, focus group interviews, and questionnaires with students.

To address the above issues of perceptions and text level of difficulty, the next idea for further research could be to determine the types of (unseen) texts and tasks that could yield better writing outcomes. Cliff Hodges (2016) questions ‘what texts should be taught and who should decide?’ (p.13). Rosenblatt (1978) contends that there could be ‘powerful education implications’ if one were to ‘consider texts always in relation to specific readers and in specific cultural situations’ whilst also attempting to ‘honour the role of literary experience in the context of individual lives’ (p.161). However, as things stand, choice of texts is often influenced by the need to include canonical texts in the classroom; for example, Christopher (Appendix9,T3,ln.150) mentions the idea of the canon when discussing his perception of appreciation, as *authors who have been chosen or canonical/ they have been accepted*, so the notion is that texts are selected for the class for practical criticism on the premise that they are considered high quality texts. Research in a similar context has shown that despite enjoying a certain freedom in choosing texts for literary criticism seminars, teachers still resort to texts by white Anglo-American authors that almost always form part of the literary canon (Xerri, 2013). Texts that belong to the canon are defined as those which ‘have acquired an almost sacred status because of their perceived literary qualities’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.13). It is contended that a balance could be sought between choosing texts from the canon (so that students are not ‘disadvantaged’) and those texts that account for changes taking place in different ‘cultural contexts’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.13). Cliff Hodges (2016) suggests that ‘if both
literary reading and writing offer opportunities for exploring and reflecting on otherwise amorphous ideas, there are significant implications for what kind of texts might be read and written within English in schools’ (p.23).

For the above reasons, teachers could take part in classroom research (e.g. action research): ‘Researchers and teachers need to investigate the scope and nature of different literary texts and their value for learners’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.23). This could be done by asking students to write about a selection of unseen texts. There would be a rotation system where the essays would be read and commented on by different teachers to avoid subjectivity or preferences to specific texts. Every teacher could read the essays on those unseen texts that were chosen by someone else. Then the essays would be cross-compared and analysed to see which texts yield more satisfactory outcomes. To ensure a standardised way of responding to the unseen texts, teachers could agree beforehand on a set of criteria and essay structures to be followed. Marking criteria could be created with the syllabus requirements in mind. It has to be also considered that it would not always be possible for teachers to put personal preference towards unseen texts aside, particularly if the teachers choose the texts. To balance this variable, it is preferable if the texts were to cover a range of poets/authors and eras/periods. It is recommended that when students are prepared to respond to unseen texts, the teacher may ‘draw from as wide a range of material as possible, also to encourage reading and engagement with literature beyond the set texts’ (OCR, 2014, p.3). This was echoed by one of the teachers (Emily, Appendix8,T2) who had explained that she chooses a variety of texts of different eras and genres (the OCR (2014) specifies: ‘There is scope to explore different traditions, forms and genres, as well as different literary styles and techniques’ (p.3). The study revealed that the teacher chose the texts.

Following the research, teachers could discuss which texts were more conducive but also consider those that might have been more challenging for students. During the discussions, the teachers could consider ‘the relative quality’ of the texts they would have chosen and trialled in class (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.24). The idea would be to gather insights into practices and perceptions. The insights would feed into the creation of a resource bank of unseen literary texts that would target student-centred practices and boost positive perceptions. Teacher research on reading material and choice of texts is beneficial for a number of reasons. First of all, it ‘leads to qualitatively different insights from those generated by a teacher reflecting on a lesson’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.2). Additionally, it would help teachers to ‘develop as professionals’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016,
Hence, teacher research could throw light on the type of texts that are selected for reading in the classrooms of institutions similar to this study’s post-16 school.

Apart from shedding light on the need for researching reading choices, another seminal area that could require lengthier research is the connection between feedback and writing outcomes. The outcomes could be aligned more clearly with feedback practices. It could be beneficial to start with the writing that is being produced, look at what is problematic (essay analysis would be involved here), and then go back to the preparation approaches, problematizing what is missing between the preparation stages and the outcomes. Feedback objectives and writing outcomes would both be rethought and revised if necessary (in light of the syllabus). Creating a document which clearly articulates both areas and that proposes action points could be considered.

The last research suggestion could be to organise more writing in class in the form of workshops for students. These sessions would target writing about unseen texts specifically. Students would write drafts of an essay, but also engage in revision, editing, and proofreading. The teacher would monitor them during writing, by offering advice on how to edit and revise their work. This would enable the teacher to act as a writing mentor while training students in how to gain more control over their writing. This suggestion is related to the students’ and teachers’ recommendation for more writing opportunities.

7.4 Implications for Training

In order for the above research ideas to be implemented, there needs to be a shift in the teachers’ and students’ mind-sets towards writing about unseen literary texts. For new approaches to be adopted, training could be required. This is particularly the case for an online feedback system, where teacher training sessions enable them to become familiar with digital tools. Students would also have to be guided to input their work online and make the necessary changes to their writing (Guichon et al., 2012; Gould and Day, 2013). Prior to the online system, teachers and students may use a manual feedback tracking system.

For research on feedback outcomes, teachers in schools could involve themselves in research projects. Departmental meetings could be held to clarify the intentions, purposes, and aims of research. Teachers could be encouraged to discuss how feedback takes place, what dialogues are held with students on the feedback processes, and what language of feedback is used. It is suggested that students’ development ‘is likely to be
enhanced it they receive some clear constructive feedback’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.274).
Whatever form it takes, whether it is written or verbal, or ‘a form of assessment specified by the department’, the recommendation is ‘to be clear how assessment relates to learning objectives’ (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.274). What is more, students ‘need to be clear, too’ of such objectives (Cliff Hodges, 2009, p.274).

For the research on different types of unseen texts, teachers may be invited to share texts and practices based on their experiences. It would be ideal to train teachers to conduct action research with their own classes so that teacher research becomes a central part of the department. Action research workshops could be organised by the department by inviting proponents or researchers who have already conducted this type of research. It has to be stressed that the above research and training implications should not be restricted to the study’s school context and writing about unseen texts. The latter two are just the platforms through which research was conducted and data emerged so that I would be in a position to recommend future developments, not only at post-16 level but also at secondary school level. Moreover, research and training can be blended, as shown in the following table:

Table 7.1: Connecting Research and Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research strands to consider conducting with teachers and students at this school and other post-16 institutions</th>
<th>Training requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Trialing different feedback methods; e.g. an online feedback system that accompanies tutorials</td>
<td>a. Training on implementing different types of feedback, including an online system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Following students’ development longitudinally; a recommendation to teach literary criticism to the same students as those in tutorial so as to follow the same students</td>
<td>b. Training on tracking students’ development by using specific systems over a period of time (e.g. using a particular template for teachers and students to fill in; see Feedback Form, Appendix 32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Researching perceptions and effectiveness of feedback by analyzing students’ writing</td>
<td>d. Training on how to analyse the students’ writing (e.g. having specific foci of feedback)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Trialling a series of literary criticism texts and tasks that yield better writing outcomes, and promote feedback applicability</td>
<td>c. Discussion on the structure of literary criticism tasks with the aim of enhancing feedback applicability; to enhance writing outcomes through more opportunities for revision and rewriting of essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Organizing workshops for students with a specific focus on writing</td>
<td>e. Training in organizing and holding writing workshops for students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.5 A Note on Methodology

To explore the areas of my study and reach the conclusions, I engaged in an iterative process of research that spanned four years, from the pilot study to the data analysis, from the literature review to the discussion of the research questions. I found myself returning to the interview tools a number of times, and so it was with the data, as I analysed them in different stages. The semi-structured interviews and non-structured observations were framed within Strauss and Corbin’s (2008) grounded theory method, blended with Charmaz’s (2005, 2006) recommendations. As the paradigm was interpretivist and involved qualitative research, a grounded theory approach proved seminal for the data analysis and discussions.

7.5.1 Researching Reading and Writing, and Teacher Feedback via a Grounded Theory Method – Insights Gained

Researching writing and feedback processes through a grounded theory method was instructional. It provided me with a valid pathway through which I could interpret the data. It taught me how to code and distinguish seminal strands without being affected by personal value judgements or presuppositions. It taught me how to read and reread the data via semi-structured interviews and observe lessons with a discerning eye. Above all, it taught me that research is an iterative process and very often it was necessary to go back to the primary sources, namely the transcripts. During the semi-structured interviews, I also aimed at co-construction to provide the participants with a less rigid framework, particularly in view of the fact that the intention was not to confirm hypotheses. Adopting a grounded theory method has added depth and richness to the data analysis process. It has also enabled me to make more sustainable claims about writing about unseen texts and feedback. There were, however, limitations to the study, as discussed in the next section.

7.6 Limitations of the Study

Conducting research at this level presented various challenges. Despite the constraints and limitations, I was able to research the connections between writing about unseen texts and feedback applicability through a grounded theory method. Locating discrepancies in
the setup of the literary criticism seminar and tutorial system was one of the results. For instance, the time delay, and issues of feedback applicability.

One of the limitations of my study was sample size. The fact that I could not interview a larger amount of teachers and students may have affected claims of generalizability. However, from the outset of this study I clarified that the findings would not be generalizable to all settings but there would be possibilities of transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The interview guides and the structure of my observations could be adapted into tools for further research within similar schools where students are being prepared to write about unseen texts for the MC Advanced Level English examination. I have mitigated the limitations of size by utilising a thorough analysis system of line-by-line coding, axial and selective coding, as well as ensuring saturation of data. All of these stages enabled me to draw on the findings, to make the connections explored in Chapter 6, and to validate my data and connections against the (four) elements of grounded theory (which were referred to as: Processes, Actions, Perceptions, and Challenges).

The dense readings of the data enabled me to create narratives and ensure that the viewpoints expressed were based on teachers’ and students’ experiences (on teaching from the teachers’ perspective and about writing from the students’ position). I was also interested in whether these viewpoints were informed by perceptions as opposed to actions. Conducting systematic observations enabled me to note the unique patterns of individual teachers. I compared the teachers’ responses in interviews to the observations of their lessons. I also compared the teachers’ interview data with the students’. This qualitative form of triangulation helped to balance the risks of subjectivity and face validity.

Another limitation to be mentioned is the fact that although this study attempted to investigate feedback effectiveness, the framework within which to do so was not in place. More longitudinal research is required. This would involve essay analysis and following a number of teachers giving and students receiving feedback on writing. By the time this area of concern emerged, the data had already been collected. Thus, it is suggested that one of this study’s results is the need for research on feedback effectiveness at this post-16 school. Together with this, some avenues for research and training are suggested (above) so that certain issues are examined through more longer-term research. Ultimately, it was hoped that the research conducted would ‘feed back into the quality of
teaching and learning in the classroom’ (Cliff Hodges, 2012, p.7). This was partly connected to the areas of research chosen for this study.

This research journey has led me to many different fascinating paths of the research process. I have considered undertaking action research and even trialling a writing programme at one point. Both presented constraints of time, resources, and availability, so such constraints prompted me to follow other routes. Needless to say, potential action research could take place by trialling a writing programme based on literary criticism and feedback practices.

7.7 The Study’s Contribution to Knowledge

The study’s areas of reading, writing about unseen texts, and feedback applicability, harbour potential for further research and contribute to knowledge in the field. Moreover, the exploration of feedback connected with a relatively under-researched area underlines the study’s relevance. It has also led to evaluations of the unseen text. Moreover, the link between students’ perception and their use of feedback has not been researched exhaustively, according to Hattie and Gan (2011). When conducting research, it is advisable to ‘think very carefully about students’ perspectives when they agree to take part in classroom-based research… to be mindful of how research positions them’ (Cliff Hodges, 2012, p.8). Research of the early years has led to the suggestion that students’ self-perceptions as writers could influence their confidence (Werderich and Armstrong, 2013, p.341. Hence, more research is called for, to examine the self-perceptions of adolescent students as writers (Werderich and Armstrong, 2013, p.341). My study attempted to address this aspect by positioning the students at the centre of the research, by giving them a voice, the opportunity to discuss their experiences of writing about unseen texts, and to share their concerns about feedback application. Examining how their perspectives might have been influenced by their teachers’ views was one slant.

In relation to feedback specifically, previous research focused on content analysis and an examination of the nature of effective feedback (Brown et al., 1997; Mutch, 2003). By exploring students’ and teachers' perceptions on writing and feedback, the need to measure feedback effectiveness emerged and, although it is considered a limitation of this study, there is potential in such research on a longitudinal scale. By focusing on perceptions, it was argued that my study would add value and be ‘of intrinsic interest to the participants’ by offering ‘a contribution to their learning’ and teaching respectively.
From a methodological perspective, the study contributed to research because two elements were added to the grounded theory approach: Perceptions (instead of Assumptions) and Challenges (instead of Consequences). The study also concluded that there were links between the two elements. For instance, certain challenges were grounded in perceptions (e.g. when students spoke of having difficulty with text interpretation, this was connected to anxious perceptions and fear of interpretation). Conversely, the idea that students held contrasting perceptions on writing, literary criticism, ‘appreciation’, and feedback, highlighted or exacerbated their reading and writing difficulties (e.g. when students perceived that application of feedback as useless after considering that every new essay is about a different unseen text, this held them back from making the effort of applying the feedback, which then gave rise to further writing issues).

The study’s contribution can also be viewed in terms of transferability. With the type of methodology used to extract and interpret the data, it is hoped that this study’s processes, tools, findings and outcomes (such as a feedback form, Appendix 32) could be used for further research in similar educational contexts. It can be ‘potentially replicable by anyone involved in the teaching of English’ in a similar situation (Cliff Hodges, 2012, p.9). This study contributes insights on feedback application in relation to reading and writing about unseen literary texts, such as by giving a voice to students.

7.8 Proposed Grounded Theory Conclusions

The study proposes a number of grounded theory conclusions based on the analysis of the findings, and their discussion in light of the research literature. In relation to preparing students for literary criticism, it can be suggested that the reader-response approach holds potential for development and should not be viewed in a restrictive way; it is not merely expressing one’s personal reaction to texts. Teachers’ perceptions of the reader-response approach seemed to indicate different ideas of what it means and involves. The transaction between reader and text could be further developed. This could be useful to similar contexts other than the one presented by this study.

Another issue was the perception of ‘appreciation’. The study concluded that there were contrasting views of ‘appreciation’; however, these could be made to work in symbiosis rather than in opposition. Due to the different views on literary criticism outcomes and ‘appreciation’, students felt confused about what was expected of them.
This tied in with the role and perception of the examination. It could be concluded that although the latter was often considered a determining factor in reading, writing, and feedback practices, it was also the case that learning and development should not be compromised.

Students are on a formative journey, so feedback on writing could be less about marking and more about suggestions for future writing; it could be less summative. Concerning feedback provision and application, it was concluded that there is not enough clear evidence of how feedback impacted students’ future work and whether it was being implemented. This calls for further research in this area at this level and in similar educational contexts, so as to investigate what is taking place and whether such concerns are justified.

The case I make for my study is the following. Although there might be arguments that the connections between teaching, learning, and feedback have been explored in previous research, my study contributes ideas on practices and perceptions in a niche area of feedback: writing about unseen texts. At the same time, this area turned out to be a platform through which certain issues were revealed or flagged, leading to further reflections. First of all, it has been suggested that more dialogues could be held among teachers on reading, writing, and feedback practices. As Black and Wiliam (1998) state, this does not happen often and results in situations where teachers are not aware of one another’s practices and impact on their students (hence, the concept of teaching inside the black box). A lack of dialogue among teachers indirectly feeds into a lack of dialogue between teachers and students. This results in opposing perceptions and expectations.

More dialogue between teachers and students can be held, so that the latter can go from being recipients, to co-constructors, and ultimately to owners of teacher feedback. Students need to understand teacher feedback clearly, and know what is expected of them when applying it. This entails having clearer reasons for which they would stand to benefit from feedback. Dialogues with students could include discussions on what is troubling or worrying them, talking openly and clearly about the writing outcomes, and how feedback can be made more meaningful and relevant to their writing development beyond assessment purposes, and beyond the ‘black box’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998) of the classroom.

Another conclusion of this study was the uncertainty surrounding feedback effectiveness. Inconsistent feedback application and writing challenges seemed to affect the students’ readiness to apply the feedback. In turn, it fed into their perceptions of
writing and feedback application, which were not very positive. Consequently, the effectiveness of feedback was not evident. What this implies is that this aspect requires further research, as stated throughout. However, the end result or aim of the study was not to focus solely on the idea of feedback effectiveness or examination (assessment) as these were but offshoots of the research. Lack of evidence did highlight a gap in the research on evaluating and measuring effectiveness so this study concludes more research could be conducted in similar contexts to this study’s school.

For the scope of this study, the students’ and teachers’ perceptions of feedback emerged as more important because these seemed to inform the practices of reading and writing about unseen literary texts. Researching students’ perceptions became instrumental when these reflected ‘what they are being taught’ (Cliff Hodges, 2016, p.19). In order for research to position students’ perspectives and give them a voice classroom research was the preferred method (Cliff Hodges, 2012, p.8).

Apart from student voice, discussions on feedback effectiveness could also be channelled through teacher discussions. It would be beneficial if, apart from curricular or syllabus requirements, school departments discussed this issue during departmental meetings. In the research literature on reading, writing, and feedback, there does not seem to be much reference to schools’ departmental discussions on how feedback is given, how it is implemented, or even how it is evident and registered. The thought of following up a student’s progress by building on the feedback provided by previous teachers might seem obvious, but it was not mentioned. It certainly has value, as suggested by Black and Wiliam (1998), but it does not seem to be common practice despite the fact that many years have passed since this suggestion.

My study therefore highlights this idea as a possible way forward in advancing the thinking about the nature and quality of formative feedback. The idea is that students would be followed from their first day at post-16 school up to and including tertiary level. This would involve creating and maintaining a record not only of their work but also of the feedback received (e.g. in the form of progress reports, such as the ones used at certain universities). Ideally, this record of development and progress would be started earlier (e.g. at secondary school) so that post-16 teachers would be able to build on what has been already done, rather than start all over every time, which is what seems to be happening (as reported in the findings, where both students and teachers remarked about the problem of students’ work exhibiting the same mistakes and errors in every new essay).
This further strengthens the argument that dialogues on feedback effectiveness can be held first among teachers, and then between teachers and students. Rather than misconstrue lack of feedback application as a lack of effort on students’ behalf, teachers could be more aware of students’ admission and concern: they know what they have to do but not how to go about it, whether it concerned writing about an unseen text or applying their teachers’ feedback. This issue underlines an essential premise about feedback. It should not only mean looking back at a given piece of writing but it should propel the students forward. Moreover, students have to understand that despite being called feedback, it is meant to be applied forward to future tasks (Weaver, 2006; Walker, 2009). If not addressed and discussed, this issue presents a challenge when students are not only writing about unseen texts but also when they will have to write lengthier pieces at graduate and post-graduate level.

One suggestion is to study how feedback is provided at tertiary level, to see how supervision feedback works and how it helps students develop their writing and thinking, and then to transfer a similar system onto lower levels, such as at post-16 or even secondary level of education. Rather than wait until tertiary education to resolve issues, one could research what is done at this level and then work backwards by adopting it at the more foundational levels of education. While my study focused on feedback on writing about unseen texts at post-16 level, it also highlights the importance of dialogues about feedback. An example is researching feedback implementation and effectiveness at thesis supervision level.

Connecting the writing preparation stages and the feedback processes to the unseen text opened up many questions as much as it tried to answer them. Nevertheless, employing a grounded theory method provided the above insights into the writing and feedback processes, which can be further developed by more longitudinal research. In connection to the study’s context, one underlying theoretical premise is to improve students’ perceptions of literary criticism, ‘appreciation’, and feedback application, because these affect not only their confidence but also their performance in writing.
READING AND WRITING ABOUT UNSEEN LITERARY TEXTS
AT A POST-16 SCHOOL IN MALTA:
PRACTICES, PERCEPTIONS, FEEDBACK, AND CHALLENGES

Volume 2 of 2 (Appendices)

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Leicester
School of Education

by

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| Appendix 1 | MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (2016, pp. 2,5) | 244 |
| Appendix 2 | Teachers’ Informed Consent Form | 246 |
| Appendix 3 | Students’ Informed Consent Form | 247 |
| Appendix 4 | Semi-structured Interview with Teachers | 248 |
| Appendix 5 | Semi-structured Interview with Students | 250 |
| Appendix 6 | Standardised Transcription Code | 252 |
| Appendix 7 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T1 (Charlotte) | 253 |
| Appendix 8 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T2 (Emily) | 256 |
| Appendix 9 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T3 (Christopher) | 265 |
| Appendix 10 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T4 (Katherine) | 274 |
| Appendix 11 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T5 (Jeffrey) | 281 |
| Appendix 12 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T6 (George) | 289 |
| Appendix 13 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S1 (Sophie) | 296 |
| Appendix 14 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S2 (Jessica) | 305 |
| Appendix 15 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S3 (Neil) | 312 |
| Appendix 16 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S4 (Ellie) | 323 |
| Appendix 17 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S5 (Chantelle) | 333 |
| Appendix 18 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S6 (Maya) | 343 |
| Appendix 19 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S7 (Jonathan) | 345 |
| Appendix 20 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S8 (Kyra) | 353 |
| Appendix 21 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S9 (Alison) | 361 |
| Appendix 22 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S10 (Alexia) | 371 |
| Appendix 23 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S11 (Martina) | 378 |
| Appendix 24 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S12 (Jeanelle) | 386 |
| Appendix 25 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S13 (Malcolm) | 397 |
| Appendix 26 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S14 (Martha) | 405 |
| Appendix 27 | Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S15 (Nicole) | 407 |
| Appendix 28 | Screenshots of Students’ Codebook | 412 |
| Screenshot 1 | Students’ Perceptions of Writing | 412 |
| Screenshot 2 | Teachers’ Feedback Comments (According to Students) | 412 |
| Screenshot 3 | Teachers’ Feedback Methods (According to Students) | 413 |
| Screenshot 4 | Students’ Attempts to Apply Teacher Feedback | 413 |
| Screenshot 5 | Barriers to Feedback Application (According to Students) | 414 |
Appendix 1 – MC Advanced Level English Syllabus (2016, pp. 2,5)

Term of the Syllabus

This Syllabus for Matsoc Advanced Level English (AM English) is valid for the May 2013 and September 2013 sessions and later.

Aims

A course based on this Syllabus should enable the following to be achieved:

- competence in handling the English language accurately, with minimal errors in grammar and spelling;
- the ability to communicate ideas effectively and through coherent logic and structure in expression and argumentation;
- a knowledge of various aspects and variations of English style, and the ability to apply this knowledge to good effect and ideally with some evidence of stylistic awareness and flair in one’s own writing;
- repertoires of reading across a range of texts in English, both literary and non-literary;
- an introductory knowledge of tools for the critical analysis of literary and non-literary language;
- knowledge, mediated through introductory aspects of language study and linguistics, of different structures, constituents and applications of the English language, in both its written and spoken forms;
- an understanding of the way in which writers use language, form, structure and rhetoric to shape and contribute to meaning;
- an understanding of the ways in which readers respond to, interpret and value texts;
- the development of critical sense in regard to different kinds of texts;
- the development of an ability for personal response to texts and the exercising of independent judgement in their analysis;
- the ability to respond to, describe, explain and comment on language;
- the ability to understand different forms and genres of written English in terms of ideas, intention, expression and appropriateness;
- the enjoyment and appreciation, in a disciplined and critical way, of literary and non-literary texts;
- adaptability across different tasks and purposes in the interpretation and expression of English.

Assessment Objectives

The examination will assess a candidate’s ability to:

- write lucidly, fluently and accurately on a number of subjects;
- use appropriate vocabulary and style;
- summarise or adapt material for a given purpose;
- demonstrate flexibility and adaptability in using studied material;
- demonstrate understanding of the content and purpose of previously unseen material, drawn from a wide variety of sources;
- respond with understanding to texts of different types and periods;
- understand the ways in which writers’ choices of language, form, structure and rhetoric help to express meaning, outlook, attitude and tone;
- demonstrate knowledge of the contexts in which literary works are written and received;
- produce informed, independent and critical opinions and judgements;
- communicate clearly the knowledge, understanding and insight appropriate to literary studies;
- show understanding of some of the key constituents of language at word, clause, sentence and text level;
- show understanding of how meanings and forms in language are influenced by variations in mode and context, including personal, cultural and social factors.
AM Syllabus (2016): English

Literary Criticism

There are two unseen passages for critical commentary in the English AM Syllabus: a poetry passage in Paper I Section C, and a prose passage in Paper II Section B. In each case, examiners will be looking for appreciation as much as critique, as at this level what is looked for as much as anything is ability in the recognition and savouring of literary effect and of striking and stylish use of language. Indeed, one purpose of these passages is to allow students the opportunity to demonstrate sensitiveness to both the distinction and distinctiveness of literary language and effects. Students will also be expected to show awareness of the differences between poetry and literary prose, and to write about both in a manner that indicates familiarity with the tools of critical analysis, particularly in the identification and commentary of rhetorical devices and the use of critical terms and idiom. The unseen texts will need to be analysed in terms of aspects of theme, form, imagery, rhetoric, style and tone (though students will not be expected to write about all of these in one essay: on this point, see the paragraph on the rubric for the questions in these sections, below). Students will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of the aspects of the texts that are uncommon or singular. In poetry, an ability to comment on versification will further inform the assessment criteria, though distinctions between, for instance, iambic and trochaic structures in poetic lines will not be considered, at this level, a sine qua non of the literary criticism essay.

The prose passage will typically be chosen from a fictional text from the nineteenth century or later, and will not be longer than 600 words. Passages will be selected with a view to minimising cultural specificity. However, few passages can be absolutely free of certain contextual cues, and students should therefore not be alarmed to encounter one or two references to unfamiliar contexts in place and time, as marks will not be deducted in the case of those cues not being recognised.

The poem may be chosen from a broader range within literary history, but will not be one that is wilfully enigmatic or obscure, as the focus will be on candidates’ ability to identify and appreciate poetic devices rather than to engage with anything that at this level might come across as cryptic. However, candidates may expect to exercise some interpretative skill in their commentary on the poem.

The wording of the rubric associated with the prose passage may follow this model, which is being given here for the guidance of students and teachers:

In this exercise of practical criticism, you are asked to write an appreciation of the passage below. You may wish to keep in mind some of the following considerations in your answer, and may also comment on any other aspect of the passage that you consider to be worthy of discussion.

- theme and motifs;
- pattern and form;
- character and personality;
- drama and crisis;
- imagery and rhetoric;
- style and tone;
- place, time and mood;
- idiom and register.

The wording of the rubric associated with the unseen poem may follow this model:

In this exercise of practical criticism, you are asked to write an appreciation of the poem below. You may wish to keep in mind some of the following considerations in your answer, and may also comment on any other aspect of the poem that you consider to be worthy of discussion.

- theme and motifs;
- form and structure;
- imagery and rhetoric;
- rhyme and meter;
- style and tone;
- place, time and mood.
Dear Colleague,

Informed Consent

I am conducting doctoral research at the University of Leicester (supervisor: Dr Sue Dymoke). The aim of this research is to explore how teachers at a post-16 school in Malta prepare students (aged between 16-18) to write about unseen literary texts on the Advanced level course. The impact of teachers' methods on students' writing and perceptions of writing will also be considered. Another aim is to analyse the types of feedback provided by teachers and the effects of such feedback on students’ writing. This study will involve gathering data on teachers’ perspectives on and students’ attitudes towards unseen literary texts.

Your contribution to this research is highly valued and your participation is greatly appreciated. With your consent, this will be by means of an audio-recorded interview. Data will be gathered through scheduled observations of literary criticism seminars and / or tutorial sessions and with your consent the researcher will sit in and record the sessions.

The data and results of the interviews will be used for research purposes only. Rest assured that your confidentiality will be safeguarded. As a participant you will not be referred to by name in the write-up of the interview and in the thesis itself. Throughout the research study your contribution will be kept confidential. The recording of the interviews will be stored securely, and destroyed when no longer needed for the study.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign and date this form to indicate that you have given your informed consent. Please note that you can withdraw from the study at any time and you do not have to give a reason for doing so. Should you need to contact me, my email is sx1@leicester.ac.uk.

I thank you in advance for your kind cooperation.

Yours faithfully,

Ms Stephanie Xerri Agius

I have understood the aims and purposes of the research and I agree to participate in the study being conducted by Ms Stephanie Xerri Agius. I am fully aware that my personal details will be kept confidential and that my contribution will be used for research purposes only.

Name in Block Letters

Signature / Date
Appendix 3 – Students’ Informed Consent Form

Dear student,

Informed Consent

I am carrying out doctoral research at the University of Leicester (supervised by Dr Sue Dymoke). The aim of this research is to explore how teachers at a post-16 school in Malta prepare students to write about unseen literary texts at Advanced level. Another aim is to analyse the effects of teacher feedback on students’ writing. This study intends to give you students a voice to share your experiences in reading and writing about unseen literary texts.

Your participation in this research is really appreciated. If you agree to participate in this study, this will be by means of an interview, which will be recorded. Please note that this research is not linked to assessment and will not affect your grades in any way.

Throughout the study your contribution will be kept confidential. As a participant you will not be referred to by name in the write-up of the interview and in the thesis. Rest assured that your identity will remain anonymous and that the results of the interview will be used for research purposes only. The recording of the interview will be stored safely, and destroyed when no longer needed for the study.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign and date this consent form. Please note that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and you do not have to give a reason for doing so. Should you need to contact me, my email is sxal@leicester.ac.uk.

I thank you in advance for your kind cooperation.

Yours faithfully,

Ms Stephanie Xerri Agius

I have understood the aims and purposes of the research and I agree to participate in the study being carried out by Ms Stephanie Xerri Agius. I am fully aware that my personal details will be kept confidential and that my contribution will be used only for research purposes.

________________________________________________________________________

Name in Block Letters  Signature / Date
Appendix 4 – Semi-structured Interview with Teachers

Section 1: Background
1.1 Talk about your professional background as a teacher of English, in particular of literary criticism at Advanced level.
1.2 Talk about training you have received (local, international or departmental)
1.3 How did this training help you to become the teacher of poetry and prose?
   What has influenced you in the way you read poetry? And in the way you write about unseen texts?

Section 2: Reading and ‘teaching’ unseen texts
2.1. How do you ‘teach’ an unseen text?
2.2. When reading unseen literary texts during seminars, how can you describe your teaching approach? What has influenced you in adopting such an approach?

Section 3: Preparing for writing about unseen texts
3.1. How do you prepare students to write about unseen texts? Describe the layout and structure you encourage your students to use for their commentaries on unseen texts.
3.2. According to the syllabus, students are to demonstrate an ‘appreciation’ of the text in question. What do you understand by ‘appreciation’?
3.3. How do you guide students towards an ‘appreciation’? (processes when teaching students how to write a critical commentary about an unseen text).
3.4. (How) does the examination affect the way you prepare students to write on unseen texts?

Section 4: Writing difficulties & students’ progress
4.1. What are some of the difficulties/errors students exhibit when writing about unseen texts? (give examples)?
4.2. Is there a pattern in students’ writing (difficulties)?
4.3. How do students perform in unseen texts essays, compared with other components? What are the reasons for this?
4.4. Has student performance in unseen criticism essays got better or worsened over the years? What are the causes for this?

Section 5: Students’ attitude to writing
5.1 Describe the students’ attitude and approach to writing about unseen texts.
5.2. What do you think influences their attitude?
5.3. (How) does the examination affect their attitude to writing about unseen text?

Section 6: Giving feedback – what is feedback?
6.1. Is feedback a way of intervening in writing? How does it affect students’ development of ideas? i.e. the way they express their ideas before they go on to develop further ideas?
6.1.1. Is the feedback on unseen text essays an isolated activity for every essay, or do you try to establish links between one criticism essay and another? i.e. is the feedback formative or summative? If formative, is it iterative?
6.2. When reading a students’ critical commentary on an unseen text, what is the focus of your feedback? (e.g content, structure, language use)
6.2.1. What is the focus of your feedback determined by? (what is the purpose of feedback?)
6.3. (How) does the examination affect the way you provide students with feedback (on unseen texts)?
6.4. Before assigning the writing task, do you discuss with students what the focus of your feedback is going to be? (e.g. structure, content, other?)
6.4.1. What benefits / drawbacks might there be in discussing the focus on feedback beforehand?

Section 7: Types of feedback
7.1. What type of feedback do you provide your students with? (e.g. oral, written, both).
   Talk about the feedback procedures that you use (during your tutorials).
7.1.1. Can you give some examples of feedback comments / suggestions you provide your students with?
7.2. What do you think do the students prefer – written or oral feedback?
7.2.1. What do you think they benefit from the most?
7.3. Have you ever used digital media to provide students with feedback? For example, using email, VLE or podcasts? If YES, how has this form of feedback benefited your students? If NO, what do you think are the benefits of using digital media for feedback purposes?

Section 8: Remembering feedback and its outcomes
8.1. Is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback? (no – why? yes – how?)
8.2. What is the impact of your feedback on your students’ writing?
   (Do students retain feedback?)
8.2.1. Do students follow up (and make the changes) on your feedback?
   (or do you find yourself giving students the same feedback over and over again? Why?)
8.2.2. How is this evident in students’ subsequent essays? (what type of feedback do students apply the most? e.g. errors most likely to fix)
8.3. Do you encourage students to revise their essay based on your feedback, and then submit a revised version? Why / Why not?

Section 9: Positive outcomes vs constraints in feedback
9.1. Are you satisfied with how students adopt your feedback?
9.2 What are the constraints that impede students from using feedback?
9.3. Is there anything that you would change in how you provide your students with feedback (or how students use the feedback given)?
Appendix 5 – Semi-structured Interview with Students

Section 1: The student’s experience and understanding of literature
1.1. Why have you chosen English at Advanced level?
1.2. Talk about your experience with literature from Form 3 (preparing for your O level) up to now.
1.3. How do you ‘study’ literature?
1.4. Talk about your interests and experiences in reading for pleasure in the last two to three years (if the student doesn’t mention poetry: what about poetry? Do you read poetry in your spare time? If yes, what influences you to read the poetry you do?)

Section 2: Reading unseen texts: teaching methods and text examples
2.1. What methods do teachers use when teaching literature?
2.1.1. What methods do you prefer? Why?
2.2. Talk about your experience with literary texts during the literary criticism seminars so far.
2.2.1. Can you mention some activities you do in class when reading unseen texts?
2.3. What types of texts do you read during the literary criticism seminars? (e.g. types of poems)
2.3.1. Can you give some examples of unseen texts that you find challenging to read? Can you give examples of texts that you are more comfortable reading?

Section 3: Reading unseen texts: ‘appreciation’ and strategies
3.1. Learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the literary criticism exercise.
   What do you understand by ‘appreciation’?
3.1.1. How are you guided to appreciate unseen poetry / prose?
3.2. What strategies do you use when reading and appreciating an unseen poem / prose text?
3.3. What do you think about the poems and prose texts chosen for the tutorial writing tasks?

Section 4: The writing process: guidelines and attitudes to writing
4.1. What is your attitude towards writing about unseen texts? How do you feel when you write about unseen texts?
   If the student mentions particular challenges or difficulties: How do you resolve these difficulties/challenges?
4.2. How are you taught / guided to write about an unseen text?
4.2.1. How often are you provided with such preparation for writing?
4.3. How do plan your written response to an unseen text?
   What processes / stages do you use when writing about an unseen text?
4.3.1. Does your teacher provide you with any guidelines?
Section 5: Feedback: focus of feedback and feedback comments
5.1. Does your teacher inform you what the focus of the feedback is going to be before you write your essay?
   If the answer is yes: how does this help you organize your essay?
   If the answer is no: What are the benefits of knowing the focus of the feedback before writing the essay?
5.2. On what does your teacher give you feedback in your criticism essays?
5.2.1 Can you give examples of feedback e.g. comments given by your teacher?

Section 6: Types of feedback
6.1 What type of feedback does your teacher provide you with? Written? Oral? Both?
6.1.1. What do you think about the idea of receiving feedback in the form of digital media, such as through podcast (recorded audio), Skype or via email/sms?
6.2. What type of feedback do you prefer? Why?
6.3 Can you give examples of teacher’s comments?

Section 7: Understanding and remembering feedback
7.1. How well do you understand your teacher’s feedback?
7.1.1. Do you remember / retain teacher’s feedback?
7.2. How useful / effective is the feedback provided?
7.2.1. Which is more effective – written or oral?
7.3. Does your teacher give you the opportunity to revise your essay and resubmit a second version?
   7.3.1. If not, would you like to be given the opportunity? Would you actually do so? Why/ Why not?

Section 8: Using feedback: resolving errors, feedback application (and barriers)
8.1. How does the feedback allow you to develop further ideas for writing?
8.1.1. How does it affect your (future) writing?
8.1.2. Which ‘errors’ do you feel you are successful in resolving?
8.2. (How) do apply / use the teacher’s feedback? (for future writing)
   Do you engage with the feedback given or merely skim through it?
8.2.1. What stops you from applying feedback in future writing?
8.3. Is there a link between one criticism essay an another? no: Do you think that there should be? Yes: what are the results of this?
8.4. How do you do i.e. perform in your criticism essays compared with other essays?
   What are the reasons for this?
8.5. Is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback?
Appendix 6 – Standardised Transcription Code

Rising intonation (i.e. question): /
Pause: *
Longer pause: **
Nonverbal sounds and gestures: []
T: Teacher
I: Interviewer
Appendix 7 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T1
(Charlotte)

I: Thank you for taking part in this interview. Could you start by telling me about you
teaching and academic background/
T: First I graduated with a BA (Hons) in English and I undertook MA studies I have been
teaching for ten years two of which at this school and two years prior to that part-time
doing tutorials.

I: Have you received any training in pedagogy/
T: I have taught the way you teach yourself to read and I teach the way I was taught – I
had the best lecturers at university when reading poetry I believe having done an MA in
poetry has allowed me to give attention to detail the way you read so
there should not be a formula some poems require biographical background whereas
others can be read isolated us humans we are interested in people’s lives so I believe
students can better understand poetry that is on life e.g. Sylvia Plath

I: So how do you guide your students to appreciate poetry/ What is appreciation to you/
T: I do not use appreciate much in class but the term appreciation is our ability as readers
to respond to language as text to appreciate the imagery to go beyond context it comes
with attention by being sensitive to the characteristics of a poem and how it exploits the
resources of language as well as literary devices to guide students to appreciate you give
them tools to approach poetry in a certain way

I: So how do you go about reading a text with your students/
T: when teaching an unseen text I give them 15 minutes for quiet
reading and a second
reading I think they should spend time on detailed reading and I encourage them to pay
attention to content and form they sometimes work in pairs and other times alone
sometimes they misinterpret the metaphorical as literal then we brainstorm and
paraphrase what they think the poem is about I ask questions according to the organization
of the essay we analyse content theme and form and I ask them almost as an essay
preparing for writing to fit in

I: What are the writing difficulties that students exhibit when writing/
T: mainly problems of interpretation eg. The brevity of life they confuse the metaphorical
as literal and they have issues with interpretation that lead them astray when writing about
the poem they are able to identify figures of speech but listing is common like an
inventory so their writing tends to be superficial then there are problems with language
use such as sentence structure and logic of argument that hinder their ability to
communicate effectively and the inability to write is reflected in an inability to read

I: can these issues be resolved/
T: the errors of organization and structure can be fixed short-term but the language errors
require more time they can be fixed but it is more long-term

I: how do you help them to resolve the organization issue/
T: by asking them to write individual paragraphs eg the tone of the poem it moves them
away from a chronological approach instead there is a focus on the structure of the
paragraph
I: how do students perceive writing about unseen texts?

T: the attitudes vary those who are good at writing love it but those who struggle with writing in general don’t they hate it

I: how do you help them overcome this barrier to writing?

T: by giving them guidelines it helps them to change the way they’re writing

I: you said you try to move them away from the chronological approach – why do they use this method?

T: most probably it is something natural to adopt and follow as you are writing according to how the poem appears on the page I also think it was the approach suggested in secondary school which is where it is coming from especially in having been prepared to write about poetry for exam purposes

I: how does the exam affect students’ perception of unseen texts?

T: the exam is ultimately their goal 60% of students I must say are exam oriented they cannot enjoy or relish literature the exam determines how I prepare students to write as I know I need to guide them towards the exam so we tackle the poems and prose texts of the past papers

I: when you compare the performance of students’ writing in set texts how do they fare against those in unseen texts?

T: I would say that in the unseen students fare slightly poorer if you take the same student’s work you notice the criticism can be weaker as it’s not a studied area so for set texts students can compensate for their writing and interpretation skills by studying a critical analysis on the other hand you can’t get away with it you can’t bluff so in the crit task there is very little help you can train but in the exam it’s harder than the studied components

I: how would you define feedback?

T: feedback is partly an intervention in writing but primarily it is a way of helping and guiding it affects students’ development of ideas you can speak to the group as a whole and highlight weaknesses and strengths

I: what type of feedback do you provide your students with?

T: the feedback in class is mostly oral feedback I give feedback to all in general sometimes the feedback can be misunderstood in class so written feedback makes up for that because through it I can clarify and justify so written and oral both have their strengths and weaknesses

I: do you think it would affect students’ writing if the crit essays were consecutive rather than set apart?

T: there can be links between one essay and another I believe in repetition and reinforcement however attendance isn’t always regular so to ensure that students have heard the feedback is not always possible yet certain things need to be repeated I try to focus on effectiveness and that one needs to integrate elements such as figures of speech for a reason the same with the introduction it must have a purpose

I: what feedback (comments) do you give to students?
T: I give feedback on all areas whether it is content or grammar or spelling a brief
comment I remember is for example to be more clear in writing I want them to understand
clarity how it has been written not only what has been written I provide feedback also to
justify the mark on various aspects it will depend on the student what type of feedback I
give but usually it is both written and oral – I mark the essay out of class and then during
the lesson I explain I prefer written feedback however because it allows the level of detail
that oral sometimes cannot the students then look at the notes while I’m giving them oral
feedback sometimes I also ask them to look at each other’s essays

I: what are the benefits of oral feedback/

T: sometimes it’s more useful and effective instead of generalizing you can explain it if
someone tells us to our face it has more impact how effective it will be on future writing
will depend on putting the feedback to good use and that they hopefully revise

I: what do you think of using digital media to give feedback/

T: I prefer one-on-one but it can be done via a digital platform you can use a podcast but
it might lack the dimension of a meeting face-to-face there’s not much you can glean
from a podcast

I: Would you consider using digital media for feedback/

T: I haven’t explored that medium yet but it is a possibility although the personal contact
of tutorials and students’ contact hours are more important

I: Do you think feedback can be effective and how can this effectiveness be measured/

T: it might be possible to measure the effectiveness given the necessary kind of research,
practice and guidance for example you look at students’ approach through a span of 2
years adopting different methods from the chronological approach to other ways and
evidence of improvement it would have to be followed student by student as every student
would have their own needs

I: in your experience have you been able to see an improvement in students’ writing/

T: it is difficult sometimes because of the lack of consistency in students’ work but when
I do see evidence it is in the following of the guidelines for example how to write an
introduction

I: so how does your feedback feed into your students’ writing/

T: the feedback is in the hope that it will feed forward and allow them to avoid making
certain mistakes one area where feed forward is sometimes difficult to improve but
essential to the crit exercise is the area of interpretation

I: in general are you satisfied with your students’ work/

T: on the whole yes their work is mostly regular and their attitude to writing is positive
there are some restrictions for example they don’t believe they are hardwired to write or
adopt the approach that easily whereas others are more comfortable with their style and
maybe that is where it might be possible to student the way writing improves

I: Thank you for your time
Appendix 8 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T2 (Emily)

I: thank you for taking part in this interview the first set of questions are related to your background in teaching and literature

T: ok

I: what has influenced you in the way you read poetry and even how you write about literature/

T: well basically my professional background when it comes to the educational aspect I mean I’ve got qualifications in EFL I’ve got several qualifications from foreign universities and then I’ve got a BA (Hons) and a Masters in literature and I think that they do sensitize you to literature in such a way that you can try to give your insights pass them on to others and * also when it comes to the Masters degree in particular you learn how to write about literature how to organize your thoughts and not let them go all over the place I think that helps a lot

I: in what way did the Masters help in the way you read/

T: to read in depth not only the writer’s intention but also the reverberation of the words to be aware of the fact that words reverberate several thoughts and several layers to meaning and interpretation as well several routes to interpretation

I: you mentioned some qualifications in the EFL – how have these shaped your practice/

T: I think it does shape your practice because if you take the EFL qualifications seriously for example I’ve got two qualifications from foreign universities you know when I was doing them I took them very seriously indeed and what happens is that they teach you how to be dynamic as a teacher how not to be stationary in the class just taking a single position in the class doesn’t help it tends to make the students go to sleep how to engage the students’ attention and retain it how to use materials and teaching aids in order to teach I think that’s helpful and it’s adaptable for the A level classroom

I: how do you teach an unseen text/

T: well the way I normally go about it is I give them the text I give them time to read it on their own then I ask the class for one or two general considerations or general reactions to the text after they have had 5 minutes in which to read it and have a look at it some general considerations what they thought about it we start by focusing on the subject matter and then what I normally do if I find that the class has found parts of the text rather difficult I go over it with them practically go over it line by line ask them to give me feedback about what they thought the line was saying or paragraph by paragraph if it’s a prose text

I: when you read an unseen text in the seminar what approach do you /

T: reader-response to begin with and then it’s double-layered first you get a reader-response from the students so I don’t normally give them the answer myself I tell them ‘what do you think is going on here/ what do you think he is expressing here/ what do you think are his feelings/’ and then of course the stylistic analysis comes later the analysis is normally you need to base it on at least two three verses not one verse because if it’s a simile its effect will be carried further on
I: does this influence the way you choose a text?

T: well I try to allow it not to because all sorts of texts can come out I mean texts from the Victorian period texts which are more recent texts focusing on male protagonists or female protagonists texts with no protagonists at all because they would be merely descriptive no I try not to let the method influence me because you have to give them everything otherwise you end up giving them what is most adapted to your method that would not be fair towards the students

I: is there a particular way in which you choose your texts?

T: I normally choose them with the exam in mind not with my own personal method in mind

I: how do you prepare students to write about unseen texts?

T: I always give them a lot of hints and I also give them a grid telling them which aspects of the text I normally use a lot of material and handouts telling them what aspects of the text to mention but I do have two templates one for unseen poetry and one for unseen prose which I use regularly I show them a grid and I tell them try and find me for example listing aspects for subject matter who the persona or narrator is the themes the diction motifs symbolism imagery and you know they have boxes where having read the text they’re going to put down some points in relation to the text to complete that grid

I: do you suggest them to write a paragraph?

T: no to begin with I start with points and then I tell them that if their points are properly articulated they can be very easily assembled to form a paragraph after all in literary criticism the idea is not how mellifluous or elegant your writing is with literary criticism the idea is that your writing should provide an in-depth study of the text under analysis

I: what do you understand by in-depth – how do you guide them towards an in-depth study?

T: well what I understand by it is an analysis of the manner by which a writer achieves the effects he achieves in the text

I: according to the syllabus students are ‘to demonstrate an appreciation of the text’ in question – what do you understand by ‘appreciation’?

T: well ‘appreciation’ definitely does not mean whether I like it or not I always make it clear to them even if the text happens to be something that puts them off they have to write about it with a certain amount of objectivity and following the customary rules of literary criticism nonetheless I mean there’s nothing that says that you can only write about things that you actually write and appreciation is an analysis of first of all what the writer – what techniques the writer uses in order to achieve a given number of effects and then of course a resume of what the effects are – what is he trying to do/ evoke pathos towards illegal immigrants or slaves or whatever/ is he trying to make us sympathise with the protagonist/ is he trying to on the other hand make the protagonist appear like a nasty person/ is he reflecting on some aspect of human life/

I: what do you think of the word ‘appreciation’ in the syllabus?

T: I think to me appreciation is to my knowledge in the context of literary criticism an analysis
I: in the syllabus is it clear what it means – if two different lecturers look at the word ‘appreciation’ is it clear/

T: well the thing is this I think it is clear in the context of literary criticism - let me just take us back a generation and a half – I have an aunt who is a teacher she retired recently and my dad was quite a keen reader at school and I still have their copybooks and in my dad’s copybook it says ‘poetry appreciation’ when he used write an essay about a poem they used to study in class it was called poetry appreciation so the word has always meant analysis

I: how do you guide students towards it/

T: you tell them what it means – if they know what it means they will know how to go about it and how to approach it

I: do you refer to this word during your lessons/

T: yes I do from time to time and I do tell them ‘listen appreciation is the writing of an analytical essay not involving the statement of whether you like it or not but it has to follow a number of rules’

I: how does the exam affect the way you prepare students to write an essay on the unseen texts/

T: ok it affects the techniques I use and the way I go about it mainly in the time and word constraints that are imposed by the particular task which is given to them in the exam but of course poetry appreciation I honestly think that there is a good and a bad way of teaching it I think that this is not something that ought to be 100% susceptible to the exam and to the task but at the same time if you’ve got students who have to analyse a passage or a poem in an hour and using a certain number of words and they can’t overflow or they ought not to overflow the necessary boundaries which are placed for them they ought not to write more but they ought to write well then of course you have to persuade them – you have to teach them how to succeed doing all you need to do in an hour

I: you said there is a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ way – what does that mean/

T: well bad way to be honest I don’t really think about – the good way – rather than good we ought to say a manner which leads them in the correct direction a manner which leads to the most fruitful analysis of the text I think that it is a manner which involves small groups of students involves a text which is analysed in detail involves the teaching of certain techniques even thanks to repetition of things in the text you need to draw things out of the text

I: what are the writing difficulties or errors that students exhibit when writing about unseen texts/

T: there are two principle errors which tend to crop up the first is that there are aspects of the text which are very important and which the students don’t notice that are there and they don’t mention them and not mentioning them they would be condemning themselves to earning a lower marker so they don’t mention important aspects or even one key element and that of course lowers their mark in other spheres as well and then there’s also poor structuring of their work I find I think when it comes to writing the main problem with writing – for example I don’t like and I find it rather immature the technique where the student does a paragraph by paragraph or stanza by stanza analysis of the text because that is something that gives rise to a lot of repetition lack of depth in the analysis of the
imagery because there’s no cumulative analysis of the images in the text it’s all done separately

I: do you think there is a pattern in students’ writing difficulties /
T: yes I do yes without a doubt

I: and why is that /
T: I think because they would either have been trained when doing their O level when studying poetry texts for example when speaking of poetry they are taught to do a stanza by stanza analysis or write-up concerning a particular poem they would have studied in class and so for example you have a stanza by stanza write-up concerning Wilfred Owen’s Dulce et Decorum Est which is in the syllabus for the O level literature – if they do it stanza by stanza with the teacher and the teacher gives them a note where the poem is analysed stanza by stanza then it’s difficult to persuade them when they reach A level to do an analysis where different aspects of a text are discussed in separate paragraphs rather than different stanzas of a poem are discussed in separate paragraphs – another thing is that those students who would have been trained for O level literature they are not required to write an essay but have to answer short questions in the unseen

I: has students’ performance in the unseen criticism essays got better or worsened over the years /
T: I’ve been teaching this for 15 years and I can say that it has neither got better nor worsened I think that a lot of it depends on the versatility that the student has in the use of the language but I think the level has remained the same

I: Are there any causes the lack of change /
T: lack of change is not necessarily a bad thing because you do have students who perform very very well and you have other students who are perhaps weaker or whose language skills are not that sharpened or knowledgeable or who do not have such a wide vocabulary who inevitably lag behind

I: is there anything else that causes them to lag behind apart from language ability /
T: it’s language ability and I think it’s also cognitive ability because when something is glaring at you in the face and you don’t even notice it for example if there are several important examples of personification and you have a student who hasn’t noticed them either the student wasn’t paying attention but if the student repeatedly makes these kind of mistakes you know lacunae in what they write you can say the student’s cognitive ability is not that high and it has nothing to do with the task

I: what can you say about the students’ attitude and approach to writing /
T: I don’t think they object having to write about unseen texts – what they have to overcome in the first year is the fear of writing about unseen texts because they wouldn’t have had any practice in the secondary school studies and years and so they see it as a very big hurdle and the teacher as a consequence has to use a number of skills and techniques in order to get them accustomed to writing for example giving them sample essays or giving them sample essays with jumbled up paragraphs and having conversations in class as to which the correct order for such a think would be – I think it’s a lack of experience and also unlike other parts of the exam it is not something that is prepared at home
I: does this influence their attitude towards criticism and in the exam?
T: yes it does because for Maltese students anything that is spontaneous and unprepared
or unprepared for the most part of course much of it would be prepared at home – like
figures of speech or literary terms you study at home – but something that has an element
of spontaneity in it is always scary to the Maltese student because we’re not accustomed
to handle spontaneity in exams I don’t know if in other countries young people have the
same difficulties I would say that they would

I: let’s move on to feedback/ how does it help students develop their ideas/
T: well I mean it depends on whether the feedback is given during lesson time or given
after the student has done the work at home – during lesson time of course you can

I: how would you define feedback/
T: ehm constructive response now feedback can also be peer feedback and this is
something we can encourage students to give their mates in class

I: what are the benefits of peer feedback/
T: to allow students to correct each other’s errors or otherwise to support each other’s
good intuitions you know when a student has a good intuition and everybody agrees that
that intuition is right she would have the support of the class behind her if on the other
hand she says something that is not quite good in the context of the particular poem you’d
ask the other students rather than telling her ‘no that is wrong’ it is not advisable that the
teacher should always come in as someone who is extremely above high above the class
who comes in like a Deus Ex Machina as they say and to say this is right this is wrong I
mean the teacher doesn’t have to have the role of a judge I don’t like that so I say to the
others ‘listen do you agree/ does this makes sense to you/ do you think this could be
expressed otherwise/ has she left anything out’

I: in the tutorials is the feedback on every essay isolated and particular to each each or
do you try to establish links between one criticism and another/
T: no I do try to establish links especially with students who I know are in grave need in
serious need of improvement and yes I do pay attention to what marks they would have
got for previous homeworks – if the news I have to give is negative I speak to the person
on their own I don’t speak to the person in front of the tutorial group and I ask them to
come and speak to me on their own because there are cases where the student would not
be making the progress that I would expect her to make and so I would have to say it in
some way

I: is the feedback formative or summative/
T: * both in fact I scribble all over the essays I write a lot you know I remind students of
something I would have told them in my previous comments to a previous essay so I think
it’s summative in the sense that you always have to give them a mark there’s no option
but then it’s also formative because you know you have the freedom to scribble in the
margin to write them notes tell them you know ‘I’m not satisfied with this last time you
performed better’ or ‘remember what I told you last time remember to refer the text in
the present’

I: how cyclical is it/
T: yes to a certain it is cyclical I mean it I try to see as someone going up the stairs like a
flight of stairs you do have to make the student go up the stairs but occasionally you have
to go two steps down to remember what you did two steps further down and then you come up again rather than a circle it’s more of a question of someone going up the stairs

I: do you feel this is possible even if the unseen texts do not follow each other/
T: yes because tutorial groups are small we keep records and yes we do can remember (sequence of unseen texts – T: I don’t think there would be any benefit in the context of our school because our students have a very tough time a lot is required of them variety we say is the spice of life and when students have a very tough schedule variety is important but the teacher has to keep her records to remind herself and then one gets accustomed to the students so one knows and remembers)

I: what is the focus of feedback in unseen texts and what is it determined by/
T: It is determined by the way students perform in general for example when you have a student who doesn’t know how to structure her essay and who repeatedly structures it poorly and even ignores my advice or instructions in that case my eyes are very sharply trained on how that student has structured her essay on structure language and with many students it’s structures with others for example it’s on content people who leave out important things keep forgetting

I: is the feedback based on what you have in front of you or do you try to give feedback for future-writing/
T: both definitely both because if you’re correcting today you’re doing so with a view to have the student not repeat errors

I: does the examination influence the way with which you provide students with feedback/
T: definitely because very often ok when a student has very poor English or doesn’t express herself well or has a limited vocabulary or something of the sort you do issue warnings with regards to that you have to highlight that it has to be pinpointed but apart from that the requirements of the examination are important because after all our job is not only to teach these students skills but also to see them succeed in their aim at the end of two years

I: before assigning the unseen text and before providing feedback do you discuss with students what the focus of your feedback is going to be/
T: yes I normally tell them in the first weeks when I get to know them I tell them or before they do the first unseen prose or poetry task I always make it clear what spheres of their essays what my feedback will be focusing on yes I do

I: what benefits might there be in discussing the feedback beforehand/
T: the fact that the students know that if they don’t follow certain basic rules ok I’m not going to be draconian in imposing rules after all that would be taking away all sorts of spontaneity that the essay might contain and spontaneity in literary criticism is important I mean you have to let them show their flair if they have any flair for the task but then I have to make it clear to them that certain things will be required of them

I: do you envisage any drawbacks in telling them what your focus is/
T: no if anything I feel that if I didn’t do that I would feel that I am not doing my duty

I: what type of feedback do you provide your students with – oral / written/
T: both
I: in which measure/

T: more written than oral because what I do while I’m correcting you know anything that come to mind any point that I feel I ought to draw to the students’ attention I write down in red basically I normally use felt pen which make me write even faster to speed up my writing you know they’ve got it all written down but then when I’m giving oral feedback I go back to the principal points I would have identified and the points I would want them to alter I and I mention them again

I: have you ever thought of using digital media to provide students with feedback/

T: well the need has never really arisen I mean email yes I had a particular student who had eye surgery and he left me a number of essays and was away for over two weeks and as a result I sent him my feedback via email but that was the only case

I: do you think there are any benefits of using these types of feedback/

T: well yes probably there are but I never actually felt the need to use them

I: which do you think is more effective – oral or written feedback/

T: it depends because with oral feedback you have to be a bit diplomatic if there is something negative as I said you have to be very careful about how to say it in front of other people in the class you have to try not to cause embarrassment you have to try not to make the person feel ashamed you must try not to create resentment against you on behalf of the students certain things it’s better if you write them down in a clear way

I: can you give some examples of comments or suggestions you provide your students with/

T: well I mean if the student’s English is poor I always tell them get more exposure to the English language read more that’s pretty basic - comments or suggestions for example I tell them things like ‘if you’re going to discuss imagery make sure that your discussion of imagery is contained in a single paragraph or consecutive paragraphs and it’s not scattered all over the place in your essay’

I: you said you write many comments – do you write more than 3 or 4/

T: yes more than 3 generally – sometimes I draw attention to the fact that they repeat certain mistakes for example a student in an essay repeatedly spelt a word like ‘marriage’ wrongly so I had to draw attention so if I see repeated errors of spelling or expression those have to be pinpointed

I: what do you think do the students prefer – written or oral feedback/

T: I think they warm up the approach of the teacher – the fact the one tries to always keep it friendly that the attitude is not punitive so you don’t take the role of someone who is imposing punishment or criticizing out of cruelty or wanting to put the students down wanting to make them sad – I think I never had a hostile reaction when I said something negative about students because I think they realize that what I say I say it with kindness

I: moving on to the retention of feedback – do you think you give students the same feedback over and over again/

T: I think feedback gets more exasperated if you have to give them the same feedback over and over again I actually draw their attention
I: why do you think this happens?
T: because they ignore you in all probability or because they don’t put enough effort because any effort – any reasonable error can be reasonably and carefully eradicated
I: what is the impact of your feedback on students’ writing – do you think they retain it well enough?
T: some of them do sufficiently retain it the majority let’s put it this way of those who are committed to doing well in the exam yes they do retain feedback
I: and how is this evident?
T: yes because then you start seeing that things improve – normally they wouldn’t improve with the following essay but they improve with 2 or 3 essays after that but they do improve and certain mistakes are eliminated
I: what type of feedback do students apply the most or which type of errors are most likely to be ‘fixed’ by the students’?
T: the errors relating to the structure of their essays because if you tell them that their expression is poor that takes much more effort or if their vocabulary is limited that takes much more effort
I: does it depend on the type of comment you give them?
T: yes and no * the errors that are the quickest to fix let’s say it takes 2 or 3 essays are the ones related to the structure of the essay eg eliminate repetition – the rest I think it’s not just related to feedback because how are you going to give very specific comments on for example expression/ what I normally do is cross it out with a ruler and write the correct expression above but then what comment can you possibly make/ I just write expression in the margin – I normally give them the best that fits in the context
I: is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback?
T: well I think that it would take a period of a good five months yes I think it could be measured but over an extended period not over 4 weeks because over weeks the student hasn’t had time to improve and apart from that the teacher hasn’t had time to influence the students sufficiently in the positive and right direction
I: how can you measure this effectiveness?
T: well if you’ve got the marks before you – ok we’re taking a very basic summative approach – but the marks give you a good indication of what the students are doing and of their improvement then there are other things I’d say even my reaction to their writing you know normally we teachers have a very good gut feeling from the first two lines we know whether the essay is going to be good or not you know they do give you a certain feeling and you see certain things unfolding or the essay makes a different impression on you from how the previous essays would have had an effect on you
I: when you give students back their essays do you see them engage with the text and read the feedback?
T: yes in fact I actually insist on their taking 3 or 4 minutes to look at my comments I don’t speak and I wait for them to look at my comments
I: you mentioned the mark – do you feel that the mark reflects their performance meaning that do you need to justify the mark?
T: yes I do especially if the mark is poor I do feel the need to tell them ‘listen you did badly here so I couldn’t possible give you a high mark’

I: do they understand it?
T: yes I guess they do

I: and how do you feel they act on that in the next essay?
T: under normal circumstances then in the following crit essay they would act on my comments at least on part of my comments

I: if a student has not done very well do you encourage them to rewrite it?
T: yes I do yes I tell them ‘listen if you feel you want to submit it again feel free to do so’

I: do they do that?
T: occasionally they do yes

I: are there any constraints for them not to do so?
T: well they might be going through a period where they have many tests or many things to do but in general I tell them they can do it later on

I: do you feel that the students who revise would have taken up your feedback?
T: yes they would always have taken up part of the feedback not all of it when they redo their essay at least part of the feedback would have been paid attention to

I: why is this?
T: there are many areas to work on especially if they get a low mark such as a 3 so if they work on it and resubmit it the next time they get a 6 it would be an achievement even though not all the errors would have been corrected

I: in general are you satisfied with how students adopt the feedback and have improved?
T: yes in general I am satisfied of course I am talking of the committed students not those who cannot be bothered I am pretty satisfied with the way the committed students react and respond to my feedback

I: what are some constraints that stop students from using the feedback?
T: lack of time for example I mean the two years that young people follow at sixth form are very intensive lack of time plays a part

I: is there anything you would change in how you provide students with feedback or how they use the feedback?
T: * well one thing I could do is greater use or more frequent use of abbreviations of words I could actually develop my own system I had something similar in the past then I just gave it up and now I’m writing the words in whole which takes up more time – instead I would have a system of abbreviations for literary criticism and inform the students at the beginning of the year what they stand for

I: thank you
Appendix 9 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T3 (Christopher)

I: thank you for agreeing to this interview the first set of questions are about your background as a teacher of English in particular at Advanced level – can you talk about this and your teaching experience/

T: well I was never trained professionally as a teacher as soon as I finished my Honours degree in English I started teaching in a secondary school where the standard was very low it was by sheer coincidence that 11 years into this teaching profession I was appointed here it was a simply a question of coincidence and demand there was a demand and they moved me from one place to another so I just drifted into it when I was placed in a secondary school I had no idea that I would eventually be here but I felt that at first it was difficult of course because you get used to teaching at a very low level although it’s not ideal but when I started teaching here I found that this was my place more than the one that I had before because you know I was dealing with students – because after all my Honours most of it was literature at least here I could use what I had learnt at last after 11 years basically this started in the eighties and up till now it’s been an interesting experience and interesting road and I’m still learning every year with your teaching you learn more from the students from their attitude from new books you find the new ideas so I found it a very interesting journey which I hope continues even if I’m soon finishing here I tend to prefer poetry than prose

I: can you describe your background in poetry teaching/ what has influence you in the way you read poetry and in the way you write about poetry/

T: obviously my greatest influence was the attitude we had at university which was more or less liberal humanism that kind of attitude where you’re walking a thin line between subjectivity and objectivity because objectivity is important after all it’s very important that you present the author’s viewpoint but of course one has to interpret according to one’s reactions and it is like a kind of ‘tripod’ there is the author very important leg there is the subjectivity and there is also the techniques that are not scientific but at least they give you a starting point such as the techniques that have been used for years and years and which may be used consciously or unconsciously by the author but one cannot ignore them at all they are there they weren’t invented they were more discovered than invented but they exist and one has to give them their due importance overall then you have to combine these three points with the spirit of the literary work I mean the literary work has to have spirit I’m talking about that thing that holds it together that makes it gel and unique that ineffability that exists in any work of art which is successful something we cannot put our finger on if I were to take an example from real life from something simple or mainstream even a simple song you know no matter how much a songwriter no matter how hard he or she tries to write a song the result then is something that is felt you know you cannot have a formula for a song the same you cannot have a formula for a poem although there are techniques it’s that spirit that holds it together and makes it immortal

I: how do you teach unseen texts/

T: how do I teach/ ehm it’s for us here it’s a two-year process these last few years we’ve changed the system before it used to be you used to have one group for 2 years so you could for better or for worse monitor them it’s got its advantages and disadvantages and the same applies to the system where we change groups but in that case the ideal is to
work very much on theory in the first year and very much on practice in the second year with overlapping which means you do practice in the first year and you return to theory in the second but the idea is that in the first year – now this all depends on the students because some students have been exposed already to criticism basic criticism while many students have no idea at all so you have to try and make a compromise in the first year I try to expose them to the idea of the poem and try to get as much out of them and then start by making them find out the theme about the poem without any references to techniques yes find out the meaning first of all the topic and then the theme and that abstract concept that the author is trying to communicate with his audience – sorry I’m using his – and then you point out or bring out certain basic techniques of course I start with imagery and diction usually but I keep emphasizing that these tools have a purpose they’re not just ornaments they have to blend naturally with the tone and the meaning of the poem so they have to keep the theme in mind when they talk about the images and then I move on to rhythm now with rhythm – because with imagery it’s quite straightforward although there are various corners of imagery though it looks simple there are various corners – with diction I try also to split it into various categories like I give much importance to the appeal to the senses and the appeal to movement how words can make you hear make you smell etc and also can create movement also the impact of words and the strength of words how words are stronger than others and have negative and positive connotations etc even the sounds of the words the alliteration the repetition the contrast the antithetical structure I mean I try to split these down so that the students will have an arsenal of weapons that they can use the vocabulary they can use when writing because after all when they write the essay they need the language that kind language to refer to aspects

I: how often do you ask students to write in class/
T: what I do usually in class is not to give them a whole essay in the first year when I’m doing the theme in first year I give them a poem and I ask them to write a paragraph about the theme I keep doing this even with imagery or diction because I think it is very important because I keep telling them that there is an element of detective work in criticism especially in poetry and I tend to emphasize poetry more than prose in the first year simply because I think it is more difficult for the students prose tends to be less difficult usually so I ask them to do some detective work and try to have an informed opinion of the poem but trying to find the evidence to see if they are right or not

I: so why do you think prose is less difficult than poetry/
T: because poetry by its nature is concise I mean poetry is a compact thing and because of its conciseness it tends to be more cryptic it tends to be more mysterious it tends to require more reading into it than prose normally I’m not saying that this has always happened but normally with prose the tendency is that prose is more straightforward it’s an extract from a novel or short story so it tends to be explicit – coming back to teaching poetry that’s what I do when I come to imagery what I do is give them exercises to identify images and most importantly not just identify them but how they function in relation to the theme and the same with diction and then I go to rhythm and this is of course part of it is quite technical and I tend not to exaggerate the emphasis I mean when I was young we used to learn all the details about the anapaest and the dactyl you know I try to give them an idea of the stressed and unstressed metres I mention them but I do not give them too much importance first of all because nowadays it doesn’t seem to be very much used in modern poetry secondly because the iambic pentameter is the most widely used in English and thirdly because the examiners don’t seem to be giving it much
importance also there is a question of time it’s important to have an idea but there’s not much time to go into detail the same thing with rhyme although rhyme seems to be easier and then towards the end of the year we talk about the structure of the poem finding parallelism finding framing and also more about the meaning and the tone but we keep doing practice not a lot not as much as I do with the second years in the first year there is more theory than practice

I: what are the advantages and disadvantages of teaching the same students for two years/
T: on a selfish level you need to change I mean if you’re lucky with a good group then it’s ok but I think for academic reasons it is better to keep the same group but still there is the human elements it could be that some students don’t like you there’s stuck with you but I mean theoretically it is ideal that you should continue with the same group because you know where you stand you know what you have emphasized most and can go from a where after all criticism is a very complicated area and it helps over a two-year process it comes through practice a lot of practice is necessary it’s more or less like music

I: how would you define your reading approach/
T: I think it’s a mixture of two approaches you cannot have a reader’s response without knowing the techniques and the style you have to articulate what you think and to do so you need to know the techniques so it’s like art if you’re going to write a review on a painting you need to know about contrasts and colours and the medium the same thing with literature the response cannot be isolated from the techniques from the style from the history also of literature and even from the context in a way because if you take a poet like Larkin or Owen you know you have to know them in their context in their historical and geographical context other authors can be have a universal appeal

I: when preparing students to write about an unseen text what structure or layout do you encourage them to use in an essay/
T: yes – of course I’m not saying that my structure is the right one but my idea is to keep it as simple as possible and to avoid the kind of blocking ehm how can I explain it/ ok let me start again my system is to encourage them to start by giving an overview of the poem in the first paragraph the introduction would be talking about the theme and how this theme is tackled in general and then usually I advise them although I don’t really force it on them it’s not the only system but I advise them to use the chronological method wherever possible some other lecturers prefer according to techniques but that is for me I find it dangerous because first of all it may sound rather cold and I think there has to be a thread and the thread is the movement of the poem or prose passage so if you follow that if you follow the chronology of the poem the stanza form or the story the narrative you can then cross-refer if necessary but there should be a structure and this is in my opinion – now it doesn’t always apply but in general – an introduction should be what the poem is about the attitude the theme and the tone and then you go stanza by stanza I tell them usually to underline phrases that are particularly punchy or effective and then they talk about these and what effect they have and what techniques are being used how they contribute as they go along rather than taking a stanza and writing a paraphrase of the stanza which could be dangerous it’s taking some aspects of that stanza which are particularly punchy like unusual imagery being used or appeal to the senses all that they would have talked about earlier and link them together and in the conclusion round up talk about the structure of the poem
I: according to the syllabus students are to demonstrate ‘appreciation’ of the text – what do you understand by this word/ what is expected of students/

T: well appreciation you know these words they’re all open to interpretation appreciation criticism critique analysis I think more or less is an analysis basically appreciation is analysis when we say criticism all right it is criticism but who are we to criticize authors who have been chosen or canonical/ they have been accepted – so really it’s more an appreciation it’s balances trying to find out what the author was trying to communicate how he managed to do it even touch on our emotions what techniques he uses and how and why successful he has been

I: in what way does the examination affect the way you prepare students to write about criticism/ how does the exam affect students in class/

T: well I mean the fact that there is an exam in this case more than in any other it’s true as in how is this going to help them in life/ to earn money but that is not the issue here we’re not talking about finding a job or getting money but appreciation analysis criticism I feel is part of the process of critical thinking which is important for every human being especially for people who are going to be journalists lecturers whatever psychologists I mean we lack it we need more critical analysis we tend to be to subjective or too opinionated sometimes we don’t really stop to think and I think this is one of the topics of literature that they are going to face something that they haven’t seen before not like the other parts of literature that they study I mean they are going to be prepared for those so even if they don’t know the text well but if they want to there is a chance of them doing well but this because it’s unseen it is it really shows their method it really shows how able they are to analyse a text so I think it cannot be done any better the criticism part shows how good a student is so I think there is nothing wrong with that I totally encourage it as long as the text chosen is the right one and they should be given a text that has some meat that has some substance not something frivolous not something superficial secondly that the person who is correcting has to be quite balanced allowing more personal opinion while also requiring some knowledge of the text

I: what difficulties do students have when reading an unseen text and what are some of the errors they exhibit when writing/

T: the weakest point here I find is they mention the techniques without justifying them they tend to notice that there is for example regular rhythm or imagery but they don’t find a reason for it – it’s not always easy – one of the most difficult things is alliteration they notice it immediately but they can’t explain why

I: and do you see this pattern repeating itself/

T: yes yes I notice it for example alliteration is one of the most difficult things to interpret you have to use your creativity and imagination sometimes you may be right other times you may be wrong but that is the weakest point then there is the problem of understanding sometimes they go completely astray in simple things in both extremes for example last week I gave them a prose passage with the second years they start it was from Great Expectations they didn’t know the book now one of them said it’s in a hostel another said that the lady in her wedding gown her husband had died so sometimes they assume things that’s a bit frightening especially I told them the case of Great Expectations it shows that you’re assuming that you don’t know anything about this very famous book so that is a bit dangerous sometimes they assume too much or sometimes they don’t read between the lines enough they do not do enough detective work
I: compared with other components how do students perform in unseen texts?

T: ehm * I think it depends on the students and when I say that in my opinion it is the actual thermometer of the student if the student is very good you can tell from the way he or she answers a criticism question so as I told you earlier a student can do well in Shakespeare because she’s followed the text in class she’s maybe revised or got the notes but some students when they encounter a text which is totally new they are stunned if they are not prepared well but there are a lot of students who still do well I mean the better students do better in crit they are all-rounded if they do well in crit there is a good chance that they do well in the other areas it’s considered the most difficult

I: has student performance in unseen criticism improved or worsened over the years?

T: I think it is more or less the same but the problem is that students are not being as exposed to literature as before plus in the past we had a smaller number of students the ratio of very good students with those who are weak was bigger now because we have a larger number of students the ratio is getting smaller because so many are choosing English and not many are really prepared for it they haven’t done that much literature in the background

I: what is the student’s attitude towards unseen texts?

T: as I said it depends last year the three groups I had were quite good this year especially the second year group they’re not doing well at all it all depends on the students I suppose there is a slight deterioration and this comes mostly from lack of knowledge of background like mythology and works of literature so even allusions and the limited vocabulary because they don’t read so much but there’s still a nucleus of students that does well

I: what about their attitude to writing?

T: I find that they are much better at writing than they are at discussing articulating it verbally many times I find they are at a loss when it comes to writing even the people who are usually quite weak when they answer questions then they make an effort and the result is surprising

I: why do you think this happens?

T: they are inhibited regarding speaking they need to speak more they are afraid of making a fool of themselves but I tell them not to be it’s self-consciousness but it’s also a question of not being articulate enough verbally

I: does the fact that there is the exam make them more conscious?

T: I don’t see anything wrong with crit in the exam I remind them to work hard for the exam and I tell them that in the exam you’re going to be faced with a text that you haven’t seen before so they have good used to the idea that’s why practice is important

I: let us now move on to feedback – is feedback a way of intervening in writing?

T: not really I mean I try as much as possible to encourage ideas that even did not occur to me or perhaps are different from mine but I always insisted even though this isn’t science still there is need for evidence you cannot just off the top of your head invent something but I don’t really interfere in their style I give them advice even the setup of the essay I discourage of course clumping like saying that there is rhyme abab without any reference to why I try to discourage them from using that kind of style but I try not to interfere too much I try to encourage them
I: in the tutorial the unseen text essays are isolated from one another – do you try to link one and another (how students performed throughout the essays/)
T: I believe there should be continuity – unfortunately the continuity is not in the tutorial so I try in the seminar to do it so I give exercises to my crit group in class and I give them a mark so at least they know where they stand even if it doesn’t count for assessment so that is linked with criticism we do in class now as for tutorials because in tutorial sessions we have different sections which are I cannot say they are disconnected because after all they are English and if you have literature and language I mean the essays after all the structure of the essay the logic how it follows and even the element of proof of justification is always there so yes I try to link one with the other as much as possible

I: is feedback formative or summative/
T: yes yes it is formative and I try to keep tabs on certain students who have a good potential and those who have certain weaknesses sometimes even in criticism you have to correct spelling mistakes unfortunately

I: when you mark a criticism commentary on unseen texts what is the focus of your feedback/
T: I mean the focus should be first of all on the understanding of the poem and the way this understanding is presented and the references so more or less it’s that but of course if they make assumptions which should not be made if they for example present evidence without any reference to its function they have to mention that if the way they use quotations for example they use quotations that are too long in criticism I discourage them or if they just ‘throw’ them without any contextualization I mean of course then if there are spelling mistakes or grammatical ones sentence structure mistakes I mean I have to point them out I cannot abandon them even if you’re doing criticism but the main focus would be ideally ideally on the style of the essay

I: what is the focus of your feedback determined by/ (retrospective or feeding into future writing/)
T: no no no it is mainly retrospective it’s about what they write of course then what they write and then what you say about what they write is going to influence I hope it doesn’t always work but I usually work on what they have

I: before assigning the writing task particularly the unseen text essay do you discuss with your students what your focus of feedback is going to be/
T: no not really because I am assuming that if they have a critical analysis of a poem or a prose passage for tutorials I’m talking now as a tutor so they would have had the background for that during the criticism so I’m not going to spend time telling them what to expect of course I give them hints like if they’re going to have their first Wilfred Owen essay because I know the weaknesses that occur with Owen as they tend to write a paragraph about one poem and so on with no linking before I give them some advice before but I limit that that is not the most important thing but the most important is what they have written

I: what type of feedback do you give them – is it oral or written/
T: a mixture of both I need to comment on the essays of course but I comment also more at length because you cannot write everything so I comment more at length depending on how important the comment needs to be it depends if it’s a spelling
mistake it’s one thing if it’s something about the whole structure you talk more at length
it’s a very amorphous thing there’s no limit there

I: what’s the normal procedure of the tutorials/
T: normally what we do is if they have a poem or a prose passage I read it first of course
they have read it but I read it to refresh after they have written the essay I make a few
comments that I think are quite important and then we start reading the essays and
commenting about each one of them if it’s something that is a small mistake which applies
to a particular person I emphasize it lightly if it’s something that is important overall then
I take more time

I: do you provide the students with support before writing/
T: no no I don’t believe that because they have to get used to the idea of facing it on their
own

I: then how else do you correct the essays/
T: I correct them in more depth and then the following I give them feedback individually
but I don’t spend too much time on that because they would have already been told
(during the reading session) I give them a few comments

I: can you give some examples of comments or suggestions that you provide your students
with/
T: I think I basically mentioned them but yes one of the things I keep saying that they
hover over the text without alighting without really landing on it I mean that’s one of the
main comments I make in different forms they tend to be too superficial they tend not to
in depth the tendency to paraphrase for example in poetry the tendency to be evasive
because they don’t understand it fully and also once again I think this is very important
that they talk about the techniques without mentioning the effect that they have

I: what do you think students prefer – written or oral feedback – from the way they react/
T: once again it depends on the students but I believe the oral feedback is important the
oral feedback is very important you say much more in the oral feedback than you actually
write down if they want to they should give that importance but it’s not always the case
sometimes it (does a swooshing sound and a gesture to indicate) goes over their head

I: do you think they apply the feedback/
T: some do some don’t yes I keep repeating and giving the same feedback that’s a bit
disappointing even with simple things like spelling or the use of certain phrases that
should not be used

I: which are the areas that you think the feedback can be more easily applied/ (errors
that can be ‘fixed’)
T: I might be repeating myself because as I said the very common mistakes in criticism
are too much generalization not going into enough detail – because I encourage them to
find I mean I know it’s like a trick really you take a phrase and you show how it is striking

I: when it comes to fixing the errors
T: yes basically it’s not easy to fix the generalization but I try to emphasize and the
other thing is the techniques that they mention that are not related to the meaning
or tone of the poem
I: is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback?

T: * I don’t think so because it’s a very subjective thing it depends very much on the student on the mood of the individual student it depends on the particular aptitude sometimes the students also have their distractions their problems and weaknesses so I don’t think it is something you measure

I: but can you notice the impact of your feedback?

T: (emphatically) yes I do but I’m afraid I have to admit that as one of my colleagues said we do not make students much better than they are if they’re good we hold their hand we help them and they will improve but if they’re not good they can improve if they want to because we do our best but sometimes they don’t and many times they don’t improvement doesn’t always depend on us it’s not like a machine where you feed it and it gets better it depends on the students’ eagerness on their curiosity and they are young

I: so do they follow up on your feedback?

T: again again it depends very much on the student some of them do many of them don’t you have to keep repeating and maybe something will happen eventually but I’ve seen yes I’ve seen certain cases where students came to me and they said ‘sir this particular topic is frightening something I’m afraid of criticism’ and when I notice that I try to encourage them not to be afraid that it should not always be difficult and I’ve seen improvement with students over the years for example I had this student last year for tutorial and this year I have him for criticism he’s not a star student but compared to what he did last year where he ended up almost crying after each tutorial session he did so badly but this year in criticism when I give them an assignment I could see an improvement there’s a chance that now he will pass but the way he was last year he was almost hopeless

I: so once again it helps to trace and keep tabs on students

T: ehe and not to discourage them or frighten them unless they’re really hopeless

I: why do you think they’re afraid of criticism?

T: they’re afraid of most of them in the exam of going in the wrong direction that’s their greatest fear because they’re afraid that they won’t understand the poem that is their greatest fear because I think the majority if they manage to understand the poem they will do relatively well but they will always be afraid that they will find a poem that is too mysterious or that they understand it wrongly

I: do you encourage students to revise their essay based on your feedback?

T: not really I mean sometimes they ask me ‘can I do it again’ and of course I would tell them to but it’s not something I encourage I believe more in moving on and trying again next time

I: are you satisfied with how students implement your feedback?

T: no not really not enough I mean there are students who adopt the feedback but as we said they are young they lack the intellectual energy perhaps nowadays they have more distractions they have less intellectual stamina

I: what other constraints impede them from using feedback/ what’s keeping them back/?
T: I think it’s more or less apathy you know they come to the lesson they do what they need to do and they don’t do much more beyond that they think they can get away with reading the novel for example they just don’t I mean I’m talking about a number of students of course there’s a nucleus which is different but the majority I’m afraid are like that.

I: you said something earlier about the secondary school years – do you think they are prepared well enough for criticism?

T: well I don’t want to blame anybody because it depends on the students and that education is something holistic it depends on the environment and family etc it depends on many things but I strongly believe that they should be exposed to literature –I’m not talking about the teachers now but the system- that they should be exposed to literature since they are young it used to be more the case in the past now they start doing a Shakespeare play from Form 3 when I started teaching I came from a background of poetry and I started to read poems simple poems I made them stick pictures etc and then I had my first inspection and he said why are you doing poetry/ I still believe that I was in the right then so yes an early exposure to literature is important

I: that is the end of the interview – thank you

T: all right
Appendix 10 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T4
(Katherine)

1. I: thank you for taking part in this interview talk about your professional background as a
teacher of English, in particular of literary criticism at Advanced level

2. T: I’ve been teaching sixth form level since 1984 of course I always had some section of
criticism.

3. I: talk about training you have received (local, international or departmental)

4. T: I graduated BA Hons and then I did my Masters – for that I used my critical knowledge
in the writing of assignments because we had to do a lot of thinking before writing or
analyzing of passages

5. I: how did this training help you to become the teacher of poetry and prose/

6. T: My years at university I still remember them very clearly first of all I was young when
I did crit and I remember I didn’t do too well in it at first my marks were very low we
used to have crit at university specifically and at first my marks were very low and I think
it was because I was immature because by the third year I was getting good grades then
out of ten they were 8 and 9 at least whereas in the beginning they were three or four I
was more mature and also we used to write a lot so we had good models we used to do
crit at university and I also remember very clearly my crit lessons my teacher who always
spoke above the students I hardly understood him he would not even look at the students
towards them but above them but I used to write notes and I used to go home and go over
the poem and the notes so it helped it trained me self-trained partly

7. I: what has influenced you in the way you read poetry/ And in the way you write about
unseen texts/

8. T: automatically when I come to read poetry I always use my critical eye I in fact maybe
that’s why I don’t read a lot of poetry for pleasure because I am automatically analysis
and I stop every now and then so I don’t digest the poem as a whole

9. I: do you think that influences your approach with students in class/

10. T: in class I make sure that they read the whole poem to get the gist of it I mean the content
of the poem what you have to understand and it’s very important that I tell them to see
to the end of the poem before they start writing but I automatically start analyzing straight
away

11. I: when you analyse do you do it mentally or do you write/

12. T: a bit of both underlining at first because I would be hesitant at first probably underlining
and linking but if a word occurs to me which is useful or putting question marks

13. I: how often do you write on texts/

14. T: often – always – if I’m going to use a poem for analysis I need to scribble on it

15. I: but do you write a commentary or just notes/

16. T: usually scribbling around a poem

17. I: so how do you ‘teach’ an unseen text/

274
T: I like to change my ways sometimes for example I get them to read the poem and then ask the usual introductory questions such as ‘what is it about?’ and establishing characters or personas and then sometimes I do it line-by-line sometimes I get them to think about it sometimes I assign to different groups a different stanza to focus on to talk about after having the whole poem they can analyse the stanza sometimes I simply – this I haven’t done this year because I teach first year but with second years I do it – I tell them choose a line or two that they like and everybody says their favourite bit and talk about it sometimes it is the same bit but they may seen different aspects of it and of course we see the overlap that’s an exercise that makes them talk because here it’s very hard to get the students to talk so you have to give them a clear assignment to do so

I: *is it difficult to get them to talk particularly during the literary criticism sessions/
T: sometimes yes it depends on the students

I: *why do you think this is the case/
T: I think it’s the Maltese mentality some of them are not very confident in speaking in English some of them are afraid to say something they think is wrong and will be heard by their peer group

I: *how would define your approach/
T: I think it’s a mixture of reader-response and a stylistic one I can’t not use the stylistic approach because I do focus on the linguistic aspect

I: *with which do you start/
T: * because when you’re telling them to see what is the content and to engage with the poem it’s really the whole poem approach which looks to me as the reader approach sort of like you’re reading it and enjoying it whereas the stylistic approach is the deeper kind and automatically when you’re engaging with the whole poem you’re also engaging with the words I do tend to focus a lot on the words even in my own personal approach and I also tell my students to look at all the words but they all matter even those we take for granted

I: *how do you prepare students to write about unseen texts/ Describe the layout and structure you encourage your students to use for their commentaries on unseen texts.
T: well one important thing is to establish the theme yes - I do use models I did in the past give them some model essays or sometimes we structured it ourselves and also the use of templates –because students here they are so exam-oriented they need that kind of guideline on how to proceed – mind you the body of the essay for example the introduction is often part of a template it’s a summary or a statement of themes

I: *if a student approaches the poem chronologically that is write about a poem stanza-by-stanza/
T: no I’m not against it in fact that’s what I was going to talk about when it comes to the body I always tell them that it depends on the poem there are some poems that are easily analysed in a chronological approach the important thing is not to forget the linking between stanzas

I: *why do you think some might be against that approach/
T: I personally am not completely against it I don’t know in my time when I used to teach students 10-15 years ago we used to do it like that and personally at this level
we should stick to that presentation – first of all the students at this point are at the apprentice stage and I don’t think we should expect – we are expecting too much especially nowadays our students are not exactly avid readers and deep interpreters

I: have you noticed a difference between students today and those of ten years ago?

T: yes yes I would say – of course it depends – because nowadays we have a lot more students so we have more weaker students there are good students but in reality it’s a question of number but when it comes to using the chronological approach I think students feel more confident that students are interpreting the poem well of course they still need to understand the poem as a whole before at university we used to go through the chronological approach mostly this question of the thematic approach is not always easy on a poem it’s not that difficult but on prose I’d say it’s more difficult because you don’t have the whole context

I: what are some of the difficulties and errors students encounter and exhibit when writing about unseen texts?

T: they don’t go deep enough maybe again because they don’t manage to engage with the words – if they do that I tell them dig deep into every word and see what that word is telling them out of context and then in the context I believe they remain a bit superficial when they are analyzing it could be that they are afraid again that what they write might be wrong

I: are there any other errors that students exhibit when writing?

T: yes language errors and interpretation errors – language errors depend on the student while interpretation errors depend on the poem in the second year they are more concerned with how wrong or how good is their interpretation in the first year maybe because we give them easier poems to interpret I don’t have those problems

I: what about when you compare their performance on unseen texts essay with that on the set texts?

T: as regards tutorials unfortunately there is the question of plagiarism when you give them an essay on a novel they study with crit if it’s a poem that they have to interpret then they’re not copying from notes online of course there is a little gap in the sense that – when it comes to literature – that’s why I believe in test that’s why I recommended to the HOD to have tests in the tutorial so that they don’t copy and I think it’s working and with crit – I’ve had students in first year who’ve given me a brilliant interpretation compared to the cohort of students a very good way of writing stylistically structurally a very good essay and then sometimes I have essays that are well-interpreted but marred by language errors

I: the syllabus mentions the word ‘appreciation’ - what do you understand by this term?

T: appreciation involves enjoyment in my opinion so I would expect them to enjoy what they’re doing I personally enjoy it even when I’m doing the same poem twice or third time but I don’t usually do it three times in a year because I have only one group but if I have done it already I personally enjoy it and one of the aspects of appreciation and enjoyment is that you discover things that you not would have noticed earlier

I: as it is mentioned in relation to the examination then (students have to write a critical appreciation) what do you think is expected of students?
T: that’s why I said that I am more in favour of the chronological approach for our teaching purposes because then there is the question of the exam they’re going to tackle an exam and I still remember clearly in my exam because I did the A level in one year and I even remember the poem I had by Matthew Arnold and I remember tackling it stanza by stanza it was a pretty long poem but small stanza very brief and I remember at the end going over it and thinking that there is still something I missed in this poem I could have gone deeper and probably with nowadays students hopefully more mature than I was they are also doing two years and are receiving quite a lot more than I may have received because we didn’t do a lot of tutorials I think they should do well if the chronological approach is established for them.

I: so how do you guide students towards an ‘appreciation’?

T: well in the beginning of the year I use it because everyone uses ‘crit’ here and I do clarify that crit is not finding fault with so yes the word appreciation does crop up maybe not too often because automatically the practical aspect is dealing with a poem interpreting is a very important word

I: you mentioned the exam several times – how does this affect the way you prepare students to write about the unseen texts?

T: yes as I said when it comes to writing I give them those five minutes to write the introduction very often I focus a lot on the introduction I always tell them that the introduction is best written at the end.

I: why do you suggest the introduction being written at the end?

T: because it’s the themes you should have talked about and maybe a general idea of the interpretation of a poem in fact the content is written or summary and of course the statement of themes I do believe in this statement of themes but very often students leave it out.

I: do you do any writing in class?

T: something like an introduction sometimes I do tell them to focus on a stanza if I’m showing them the chronological approach we don’t always have the time.

I: what about the students’ attitude to writing about unseen texts?

T: it is a challenge for them I think both in class and at home they find they don’t come to grips with it but find it rather challenging even in the exam.

I: what about writing?

T: that’s why because of the writing – that’s why if I were to go back that’s why a template like the chronological way – it doesn’t matter if the structure is done chronologically as long as the interpretation is good then at university they will mature more in writing.

I: you mentioned words like ‘exam’ ‘fear’ and ‘challenge’ – where do you think this is coming from?

T: it’s probably the Maltese students’ mentality earlier I said they find it hard to speak in class I think it’s the setup of our education system students are continuously receiving but it’s all input and we don’t know what the output is at least up to this level unfortunately.

I: let’s move on to feedback – how do you define feedback?
T: of course telling them how – there’s oral and written feedback – in class feedback could be by asking them questions telling them to consider their own thinking unfortunately sometimes they go mum they will stop talking if you keep asking them I think some of them feel like you’re persecuting them asking them too many questions but oral feedback can be a way of looking around and asking ‘come on who is going to tell me/ what do you think of this/ do you think that’s the right interpretation/’ in class – in writing I find it easier because I write a lot I tell them to use wide margins and the comments I don’t interpret if for them but write questions like ‘do you think you’re interpreting it well here/’ a lot of them are in the form of questions ‘don’t you think you’ve missed something here/’

I: how many comments do you write/
T: then again it depends for example the general comment is very often how deep they have gone and what it means to be analytical rather than paraphrasing or describing

I: is the feedback on unseen texts isolated (for every essay) or do you try to establish links between one criticism essay and another/
T: with poetry you could be doing a poem because of the expectations of the examiners you could be doing a poem which lends itself to talk about a theme and the diction or imagery related to a theme and then to another one with prose I wouldn’t go chronological I’d prefer to take a global approach but with poetry it’s different but then there are poems linked to the chronological

I: how they perform in one essay and another – do you link these/
T: no in that case not really because it depends on a lot on the poem even on your mood with the time you allow yourself I myself have sometimes interpreted a poem and then I come back to it and then I realize something deeper recently we had a poem for the tutorial and I spoke to a colleague and told him how I interpreted it he didn’t see it my way when I thought about his way I thought that this seems right as well

I: what is the focus of your feedback when reading a critical commentary/
T: on all on everything it’s important that you focus on all areas content language interpretation

I: what is the focus determined by – to look back at what they’ve written or to try and give suggestions for the next task/
T: well I believe in learning from what you’ve written and usually when I correct I automatically think of the task at hand I’m not usually thinking of the next poem but I would expect them to transfer what they’ve learnt

I: how are your comments used by students/
T: hopefully that they are transferred for example when I tell them to dig deep to ponder more clearly on certain words I hope they understand that that is applicable to the next writing task

I: when you said that comment ‘to dig deep’ how do you think students act on it/ Do you find evidence for which students have acted on it/
T: sometimes I do with students who are willing to learn yes I’m thinking of my first year tutorials and I realize for example in another poem they do try to do what I’ve told them I don’t penalize or lower a mark if a student didn’t do it the way I expected him or her to do it as regards planning I have to clarify this about the chronological approach well with interpretation I tell them it must be harmonious there cannot be any contradictions I point out the contradictions

I: again in relation to the examination does it affect the way you provide feedback/
T: not really I do make it a point to think about it but I don’t mention it every time they know about it it’s at the back of their minds but more than that I try to make them enjoy the poem in class

I: before you give them an essay on crit do you tell them what you’re going to focus your feedback on/
T: I always wish I do because I think that would make correction a bit easier but usually I see everything so I don’t point out my focus once I had a colleague who told me ‘you should always focus – this time you have to focus on this aspect’ but I feel that this would shortchange students because I feel that I as a student would like the global picture again possibly as a student I would have the exam in mind and I would want to know what my performance is for the exam

I: what about focusing specifically on some areas – is there a benefit in that/
T: that’s all right if I focus for example on how to write an introduction but that I do in first year for the second year I focus on everything

I: when do you provide oral or written/
T: we start mostly with oral when they come with their written work that usually I would collect then we talk about it after we correct because usually I write notes and then when I give it back to them we do a session or half on feedback and first I tell them to read all that I’ve written and ask them if they have any questions and then I go over – usually I have my notes about their performance – and I point out ‘listen you can read that paragraph because yours was good’ usually I prefer that but it takes lots of time

I: are the oral and written comments similar/
T: well I wouldn’t repeat but I know what I’m looking for in a paragraph for example if a student did it right and I make her read it then I ask another student who didn’t do it as well and say ‘do you notice what you’ve missed’ so in a sense yes the oral and written overlap

I: which do you prefer/
T: * both are important I have to here confess a little bit confess something maybe with the oral I do a lot of talking I find themselves talking again going back to the fact that our students do not talk a lot

I: do you think students respond more to the oral or to the written/
T: I hope they respond to the written as much as I want them especially during this feedback session I think our students feel confident (competent) with a paper in front of them

I: but then do you think they prefer the written or the oral/
T: I hope they prefer the written because with the oral I am also sure (sure ta) that ⅓ of what I say flies away out of the window because we do have to remember that concentration is very difficult that’s why sometimes it’s good to make them write in class as well.

I: what about using digital media to give feedback?

T: I’ve never tried it I wished I did yes there could be ways if you could do like a videoconference online it would be nice getting them to speak perhaps more than in class the thing is sometimes I am bit impatient to wait for their answer I’m blaming myself but in reality I’m blaming the time limit because I have a poem I want to finish it because by next week they would have forgotten it so the time lapse is a problem if we had two hours at one go it would be better (for crit seminars)

I: what is the impact of your feedback on your students’ writing/ how much do the students retain feedback?

T: I think by the end of the second year you see improvement more than in first year.

I: do you think this would be better if you followed the same students?

T: no it’s not really important because in second year you do enough work and it’s more practical than in first year would give them a task every week and maybe every weeks an essay or tests in order to avoid giving them my judgement or interpretation before that’s why I tell them ‘first your interpretation then I see it at home’

I: what type of ‘errors’ do you feel students ‘fix’ upon your feedback?

T: there are students with syntactical errors that take more time I’m thinking of a couple of students I have for tutorial their writing they always lose marks because of syntax and other language errors but then they have a good interpretation of a poem and I can’t penalize them so I tell them ‘I gave you a good mark because you impressed me with your interpretation but you will not get this mark in the exam’

I: do you allow them to revise their essay?

T: to redo it/ yes I offer it to them they don’t always do it they’re too busy doing other things

I: if they do it is there improvement?

T: usually there is of course

I: is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback?

T: yes you tell them to rewrite you can do this week I had a student’s essay she didn’t do very well and she asked me to redo it then I compared and there was an improvement

I: in general are you satisfied with how the students have adopted your feedback?

T: I am and I hope they are too sometimes you get appreciative students who tell you even the word thank you at the end of the session sometimes it’s enough they showed they’ve enjoyed it

I: is there anything you would change in how you provide feedback to students?

T: I wish I could learn and I am open to more learning and if someone had to give me suggestions then I would be open to try other modes of approach

I: thank you for participating in this interview
Appendix 11 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T5 (Jeffrey)

I: first of all, thank you for accepting to take part in this interview - I would like you to talk about your experience as a teacher

T: ok I started teaching in 1980 so I started teaching secondary schools I used to teach Form 3 and Form 4 then I went to at the time they were called Junior Lyceums and again I was teaching Forms 3 and 4 and sometimes Form 5 as well before I came to Sixth Form over here in 1994 and I have been teaching ever since basically when I was in these secondary schools and Junior Lyceum I used to teach language mostly but also we had to prepare them for literature too over here I mostly teach linguistics and language I used to teach crit and have groups for seminars but over the last 5 years I have been doing crit for tutorials

I: what about your professional background/

T: in terms of training and qualifications my initial first degree was in literature so we used to do various periods of literature then my masters is in linguistics and my forte lies in that area

I: how has training shaped your practice in how you tackle poetry in tutorials/

T: right in terms of mostly what I read for my improvement from books of how to tackle critical appreciation of a poem and also by trying to apply my knowledge of language of linguistic and stylistic features to help me by helping me to gain an interpretation of the poem and therefore I try to pass that skill and technique on to my student so mostly yes a kind of two-pronged approach what I’ve read in terms of figurative language of how to look at interpreting a poem and in terms of the formal features of literary techniques as well as the linguistic approach to it

I: what influenced you in the way you read poetry and in the way you write about poetry or unseen texts/

T: I think mostly from what I read in certain textbooks for example methodological textbooks such as Views of Literature such as the book Teaching Literature I think it’s by Croft and therefore there is this idea of first of all you try to instill in students a love of reading because after all that is the primary objective in coming to terms with any text the first thing you do is read it in order to get an idea of what the experience is about what this kind of writing is about and then you begin to take it to bits and pieces and examine its various features in terms of language of literary style and of devices but that comes later the first thing is to actually enjoy it so the first thing is to say ‘this is something I read and I relate to it’ so you ask ‘what are my views of this experience’/

I: how do you approach an unseen text in the tutorial/

T: in the tutorial the first thing that I do is ok first I make the necessary preparations such as photocopy of the text whether it is a poem or a prose passage

I: before they write the essay/

T: (with emphasis) yes before they write the essay ok as an aside for each tutorial assignment I never tell them ‘this is the title and the essay for next week and do it and then we discuss it’ I find it is useful because it also helps me in the sense that I wouldn’t
have to deal with so many problems later on when it comes to corrections so it’s good to
give them some preparation and tell them ‘look imagine you have to write about this title
so what do you think you have to write about and focus on/’ just examining the question
so getting them to understand what they have to do before writing rather than leave them
in the dark so what I do is I make copies of the passage or poem and take them with me
to the tutorial and tell them ‘ok I’m going to give you a quick reading so in 8 minutes
time’ ok and then I start probing them ‘what do you think this is about/ if you were to
write just a single sentence about its theme the general topic can you do it/ do it and let’s
discuss it’ so my objective over there is to get them to read it first time quickly to get a
sense of it then other readings they would be more focused read closely and then
emphasise for example if they see particular words which attract their attention either
because of a rhyme pattern or because of other sounds or because they appeal to their
senses and that sort of thing and then we do a detailed analysis of the poem together

I: when reading the unseen text what approach do you use /
T: ehm ok I think looking at stylistic features but initially I would go to reader-response
‘how did it affect you/ did you like it/’ I know this is not the thing – it’s rather sort of
subjective therefore it’s not the sort of thing required in examinations where there should
be some attempt at interpretation but mostly they’re looking at whether the important
features and aspects have been identified and brought out but I think initially yes you
have to move towards reader-response ok ‘do you think it’s a gloomy dark poem/ why/
why not/ how did it affect you/ did you feel happy reading it/’ and that sort of thing –
initially that’s important because unless we get them to relate to what they’re reading then
it’s very difficult for them to go to that important stage of identifying those significant
features

I: so when you prepare them for writing what is the layout or structure that you encourage
them to use in their commentary/
T: ok ehm it’s important that they plan their writing and therefore I always try to ehm
suggest to them the need to move from something which is generic towards a number of
paragraphs which then tend to be more specific irrespective of what they are writing on
– now if they are writing about crit I tell them that initially what they have to do is either
if they find that the theme is a bit too complex for them then perhaps I suggest that in the
introduction they go to paraphrase whether there are any evident ideas or messages or
experience in its various forms – therefore they start with that and then they begin to
examine the various features ok so the use of particular images which are used in a
particular paragraph or particular words of interest which appeal to their senses or which
help to create these images then move on to structure whether it’s written in one paragraph
or what is the purpose/ so I try to give them this pattern but I also insist that there is not
one sort of template which you can apply for all poems because then some students tend
to write their critical appreciation by going through the poem and combining the features
and imagery as they are going along the stanzas and some of them are able to do a
reasonably good job of it whereas others do a terrible job of it but I’m not going to tell
them ‘look that is the wrong approach’ no I mean if it’s a good job that they’ve done then
I tell them ‘yes that’s ok’ there are possibilities

I: so what about students who adopt this chronological approach/
T: as I said some of them are able to do it – it depends on the poem if it lends itself
to that kind of structure
I: would you discourage students from using it?

T: I wouldn’t write it off no and in fact I have to be honest here and admit for me as long as they’re use of language is good is accurate as long as they’re drawing out the salient aspects the literary aspects of the poem then I’m not so hard on them in critical appreciation I realize the fact that it’s a difficult task the unseen text and therefore I try to reward them for their effort and therefore I try not to be very dogmatic and say ‘this is the approach I want you to adopt’ I think they can use various approaches

I: in the syllabus it says that students are to demonstrate an ‘appreciation’ of the text – what do you understand by this term?

T: I think – I don’t know whether I got this right – but I think by appreciation the examiners are really looking for a kind of disciplined attempt on the part of the students of approaching literary texts – not just sort of inventing things or even expecting some kind of formal literary masterpiece but at least the examiners are sort of urging us as teachers to say ‘look listen whenever you approach a literary text you need to be looking at first of all the experience and therefore how the ideas are brought out and how this experience is brought out by the writer’s or the poet’s choice of words and how these words combine together to form certain patterns of sound patterns of meaning and that sort of thing’ so I think that is what they mean by appreciation but at the same time you cannot quite get what you can call the definitive critical appreciation I mean at least that’s what I think

I: in what way do you guide your students towards appreciation?

T: yes I explain the rubric because there are certain technical terms sometimes they don’t have a problem with theme but sometimes they have a problem with motif so ok I try to be banal over there and point out things they know for instance I tell girls there is a pattern in your clothes and in a similar way a pattern in poetry is a repeated image or comparison it might be a feature which is used figuratively and which appears a number of times in the poem and therefore I try to explain these terms for example we’re doing prose and the importance of narrative technique yes I do explain these terms as regards the rubric as regards the differences between images symbolism and motifs because sometimes they find there is overlap and I try to explain these technical terms

I: does the examination affect the way you prepare students to write about the unseen texts?

T: eh eh yes it affects not in a kind of prescriptive way because as I said as I understand the syllabus and the setters and the examiners I think they’re sort of adopting an attitude where they would like a certain disciplined approach to emerge in students’ performances but they are allowing a certain degree of leeway they’re not being dogmatic in what students have to produce but in a way yes it does influence how we try to prepare students for writing especially during the tutorials I think the job of the lecturer who has them for seminars is more challenging – we need students to reach that level which we think examiners are looking for

I: what are some of the difficulties or errors that students exhibit when writing about unseen texts?

T: ok I think I’ve noticed a variety of errors during tutorials – first of all their use of language even to express certain complex ideas the more complex the idea the more language suffers because they sort of encounter difficulties even to express themselves clearly on abstract concepts and notions and so on but apart from the
use of language I also noticed the fact that they tend to move beyond the ideas and
experiences in the literary texts – rather than being open in the sense of being able to read
and follow that poem or prose passage and trying to assimilate the ideas they tend to latch
on to one particular idea and then extrapolate from that and sort of invent things which
are not in the text but I keep I telling them ‘ok but where’s the evidence for this/ why did
you assume for example that this character has that particular trait/ where is the evidence
for that’” I keep asking them to try to remain sort of focused on the text rather than you
know pick something and they go off at a tangent and imagine things

I: is there a pattern in students’ writing / – for example do students exhibit the same errors
or difficulties/

T: yes ok to a certain extent I wouldn’t call it a pattern I would say that the difficulties
from one student to another are similar in the sense of poor inaccurate use of language
rather simplistic attempt at coming to grips with the stylistic and literary features therefore
they are sort of – if they’ve noticed a simile they write it down without trying to comment
about it or explain why or how this works or what is being compared to what and what is
the effect it creates within the sort of economy within the text itself so they remain in the
simplistic level

I: how do students perform in the unseen texts compared with other components/

T: ok this would depend on the complexity of the literary text but in general I feel that
when they write what I would call an essay on a literary text they are likely to perform at
a lower level of ability than if they were to write a literature essay about a set text that
they’re studying – on the other hand when with the first year students we give them a sort
of guided task in critical appreciation and they have discreet item questions what they
need to focus on so for example they need to focus on ‘explain the kind of narrative
perspective we’ve got in this particular prose passage’ then over there they tend to do
better but when it is up to them to actually think about all these – because there is a logic
why we give them a guided task before we ask them to write an essay so that we point
out what they have to look for when they come to write the full-blown essay you need to
emphasise with first year students I feel that ‘listen this is not a comprehension’ because
some of them think that this is just another exercise in comprehension especially when it
is a prose text so they see a prose text and see another of questions and say ‘ok we’re
going to do a comprehension’ and I try to emphasise that over here the kind of questions
asked require more profound thinking a deeper level of thought

I: has student performance in criticism got better or worsened over the years/

T: ah ok I think that’s a rather difficult question – I think in general terms in my
experience over a number of years that student performance in general not just in critical
appreciation I think it’s gone down from the levels in performance of students that we
used to get let’s say 10 years ago I think it’s gone down so obviously if it’s gone down
over all the areas it’s gone down in literary criticism as well and also because of the fact
that the background knowledge of our students in terms of their literary experiences in
terms of their reading experiences in literature leaves a lot to be desired therefore you
can’t sort of engage students in terms of for example what they understand by a typical
setting for example in the last tutorial which they had of a western kind of situation there
are lacunae in their experience

I: what could you say about the students’ approach to writing about unseen texts/
T: again sometimes they are at a loss initially about how to actually approach tackle a literary text and how to write about it how to begin how to conclude how to develop their ideas and how to brainstorm ideas as a result of their reading but once you prepare them for that but one you prepare them for that once you tell them what they have to look for once you give them some idea about the structure for a plan then even though they might have difficulties in expression of English then at least they are able to do the work – one other thing that I wanted to talk about because this is how they feel about it about the writing sometimes they make the mistake that it appears as if they think that in writing a critical appreciation they need to have some higher order intelligence of looking for some secret clue which they are unable to unlock and I keep telling them ‘look start from the little bit that you can understand ok what is this about/ can you write a sentence about this/’ as I said earlier ‘now let’s try to build on or develop our understanding of it if we look at the clues in the text if we look at the lines there any kind of movement/ any kind of shift/ or change from this stanza to the other stanza/ if this stanza deals with one kind of setting for example the surprise of the persona of a child setting a farm on fire ok so in the first stanza what is the focus on over there/ if we move to the next stanza is there a shift/ is there a change in perspective/’ and I try to point out these features to them but they need guidance

I: how do you define feedback/

T: I think it’s very necessary again the kind of feedback I give it’s both written and orally because we discuss it so first I collect the work after we would have prepared the text and they write their essay and they give it to me during tutorials I collect it take it with me read it correct the essay I do are rather visible and voluminous I correct use of English and expression and I focus on content as well then when I give it back to them my feedback would be mostly on content on their interpretation they would have clear indications of what they’re doing wrong in terms of expression and language but the oral feedback is mostly about the content how they approached it where they had things which were positive in terms of their interpretation in terms of their commentary and things which I expected them to identify and focus on so it’s both content and language –but I need to clarify this point in terms of language it’s mostly the written mode in terms of correcting spelling mistakes sentence structure so they’ve got detailed written corrections as I usually correct other things - in terms of content I rely mostly on the oral feedback

I: what is the purpose of feedback /

T: I think my feedback is retrospective on the task at hand and I need to give them feedback on what they have written and how they have performed so yes a lot of the feedback is centred on what they’ve produced so we can call it retrospective but since we’re doing this and I believe that if they’re writing a critical appreciation about a poem therefore if they identified a number of features which I consider to be really well done then it is a model of how they need to approach another poem irrespective of its content next time therefore it also can affect their future writing so ‘the things that you need to work on now – what are the things that you need to work on now/’ ok let’s say clarify of expression and use of language and ‘when you’re writing the introduction you need to bring out the main ideas in a general sense therefore in the future whenever you come across a prose passage or a poem the first thing you have to do in the introduction is what is this experience about/’ so it is in a sense linked with a future writing assignment

I: do you try to establish links between one criticism essay and another/
T: yes yes in fact sometimes a pattern does emerge those who are able to do reasonably good work they do it consistently I mean it is very rare in my experience to have – ok it does happen that someone completely misses the meaning or interpretation of a poem – but as I said previously if their use of language is good is clear and even if they have some problems in their interpretation I tend to reward good use of language even when I give them a mark so yes I do see a certain kind of continuity if they’re able to identify certain features and comment about them analyse them and explain them then it carries from one literary text to another

I: before the students write the essay at home do you discuss what the focus of your feedback is/
T: I see no I’ve done that in tutorials if I were to do practical criticism seminars perhaps yes I would tell students that the focus of a particular session is likely to be on whether they are for example able to get the meter correct in analyzing a particular poem but in terms of tutorial sessions I tell them ‘look this is the task and I’ve going to read their essay and focus on aspects in an equal manner’

I: you said you give both written and oral feedback – how do you provide them with feedback/ do you explain in a particular way/ (such as individually)
T: yes because I would have the essays corrected in front of me and while I’m handing out the essay I would explain that later they would have time to read the comments but in terms of aspects of the poem I would explain for example ‘look in terms of understanding the poem I felt that you didn’t quite come to terms with the meaning as expressed through words or lines like that so next time I want you to focus more on close reading remember keep in mind the little that you know and how you are going to apply that by looking at the clues’ so yes I do focus individually perhaps let’s say I’d spend five minutes on each student

I: which do you think is more effective – oral or written feedback/ and in what way are they effective
T: ehm I think that the oral feedback is far more effective because since I’m there in front of them I can see them paying attention I can see that what I’m saying is actually registering ok I cannot really have any guarantee that what I’m writing on that essay is being read and not just read by the student but understood sometimes you do get some indication of that because they tell you ‘sir I can’t understand this word you wrote over here – can you please explain/’ then over there it’s a direct indication of them reading the feedback but overall I tend to believe that oral feedback is more effective

I: what do you think of using digital media to enhance the process of feedback/
T: ok I would say since I consider myself incapable of using technological devices but I can still see the benefit of using the media even if I don’t understand but if it makes it more colourful and that interests the people young people are into technology and therefore if it’s something on their mobile or a tablet and they can see colours certain things which they got write and certain things which they got wrong I mean if you’re able to do that it’s going to be colourful and engaging it’s more lively I think it would help

I: do you feel your feedback has an impact on students’ writing/ do you feel your feedback is being applied/
T: I should surely hope so (laughs) because otherwise I would be wasting my time
I: how is this evident in their subsequent essays?

T: it’s evident because you see an incremental even if slow improvement in terms of what we call it ‘the meat’ of critical appreciation rather than being this sort of rather simplistic account of the poem then they begin to draw out certain features and write about them over time there is this slow incremental approach.

I: which ‘errors’ are they most likely to resolve?

T: in terms of identification of the salient features of a particular literary text so for example once they begin to grasp the idea of an image or comparison or a metaphor then they are able to isolate that take it out of the text and write about it but it takes time usually we get these sort of improvements in the second year rather than in the first year

I: do you encourage students to revise their essay based on the feedback?

T: if by revise we mean add or change according to feedback then we have no time for that because we need time for the next tutorial assignment – if we were doing critical appreciation seminars I think that is something that should be considered because editing is extremely important but not in tutorials.

I: are you satisfied with how students adopt your feedback?

T: I think in terms of being satisfied with if and how they apply feedback I think we can’t ever be fully satisfied because there are always areas that we feel that they are not really taking into consideration or working on because sometimes it’s their lack of motivation I wish they would take the feedback more seriously I wish they would work on those areas which I identified that they are weak in and need to improve on but it doesn’t always follow that they’re working on them.

I: what are other constraints that impede them from applying the feedback?

T: constraints I don’t know perhaps lack of drive or lack of motivation on their part ehm perhaps their use of language hasn’t yet improved to the level where they feel comfortable in handling certain concepts it could be a variety their use of language their background knowledge in literature which as I said previously it leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to trying to take that next step in order to assume certain ideas found in a literary text based on their previous reading of similar kinds of text they can’t rely on that.

I: is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback?

T: yes I think it can be measured it’s how they perform in the future it’s whether you’ve asked them do certain things and the next time round they would have seen to them as we said to alter the future work even if it is retrospective feedback it’s also something that I would expect in a way then you would see whether your feedback is working but then it would depend on the type of feedback you give them and even on the type of student – if the student is interested in improving himself or herself then of course you’re going to see a difference.

I: are there any changes that you’ve noticed you’ve made in the way you give feedback?

T: yes yes I think in general terms however not in terms of critical appreciation – in terms of the latter I tend to focus more now on their interpretation of a literary text and in the way that they look for these different literary features rather than correct every single mistake in their language so as not to end up then with too much red that tends to discourage students a lot so I tend to think as I said in terms of language they’d be glossed over and seen to in a language essay where I can concentrate more on them.
but in terms of how they approach a poem then I would like certain things be clear to them

I: did you change anything in how you provide your students with feedback?
T: if I find better ways of getting them to write better essays on critical appreciation yes no doubt I would change them I mean I’m not rigidly attracted to the kind of feedback that I provide at present I think it serves its purpose at present but if I discover other ways of doing feedback yes I would

I: thank you for taking part in this interview
Appendix 12 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: T6 (George)

I: thank you first of all for agreeing to take part in this interview - the first question relates to your professional background – can you talk about your background as a teacher of English, the training you’ve received both local and international or departmental and how this has shaped the teacher you are today

T: all right ehmm I had started off obviously at university I was doing my undergrad in English that was one of my subjects and basically I was doing a BA so that gave me quite an overview of literature linguistics and all the other components that go into a BA course ehm then I went on to do my Honours which was also focused on English then I did a PGCE which focused on the teaching methodologies because then I became interested in teaching I always knew I wanted to be a teacher but quite frankly I was very interested in the subject so I wanted to get an in-depth kind of look at the subject first before I went on to the teaching methodologies at that time when I was at university we felt that the teaching course took away from the concentration from the focus on the literature itself then I started my MA here in Malta but in the meantime things changed and I ended up finishing it abroad there I managed to find an MA which kind of combined my passion of literature and theatre it was the very first time I came across drama in education it is more process-oriented where you can use literature and apply theatre skills so we used texts like Shakespeare we used even literature with children where we made them inhabit characters and to think from the perspective of the characters and also kind of see a different point of view like if it were you how would you tackle this/ and that was very exciting for me and it kind of brought me face to face with the power of literature you know how transformative literature could be and apart from the technical skills of literature which is in the writing it gave me a glimpse into how we can reach students through literature also and that is kind of what I came back with

I: how has it shaped you in the way you approach unseen texts/

T: yes yes it shaped me in that I look closely at even for example what tenses are being used because that makes all the difference because it could mean the difference between a character who has taken a decision or a character who is still in the process of taking a decision and this kind of psycholinguistic connection became very important for me and that is where I go with my literary approach

I: does that influence you in the way you read poetry/

T: the way I read poetry and literature and present it to students I always start with students I tell them 'listen you have to understand this with where you are in this moment in time you have to make the effort to understand this I can help you to understand it but if you do not make the effort to understand it then it is useless’ so the process for me is to make students more aware of the sounds and words how certain words have emotional implications and how they can resonate with your own life and the difference between implication of one word and another

I: how has it influenced the way you write about unseen texts/

T: right now obviously when it comes to writing there are certain parameters which you have to abide with so there are certain things like tone imagery figures of speech which you have to pinpoint when it comes to writing for the exam there are technical skills
which you have to teach but first and foremost I try to get them to enjoy the text and the
reading because I think that if they do not it will just become a stilted kind of approach
and writing about the text

I: so how do you go about teaching unseen texts/ what is your typical crit lesson like?
T: first of all it depends whether they are first years or second years if they are at a more
advanced stage generally I start with them reading the text on their own and reacting to
the text and I allow them – what I generally give in the beginning is an approach to how
they write an essay – and usually my approach is that in the introduction usually they
have to tackle what the passage is about then they have to find the main theme and I
usually refer to it as a tension in the text in the sense that it could be two opposing forces
working against each other not necessarily an opposition but a contrast for example or
two people wanting two different things or – there’s always within a passage you’re going
to find these binaries and generally students tend to like this approach because it gives
them structure so they find this main theme and see how it is developed in the passage
and they usually structure the essay in that way and then they conclude with personal
reactions to it – in the initial phases obviously there is a more technical approach which
you teach them through the text – you know what a metaphor is etc you teach them irony
kind of the foundations

I: which approach do you adopt/
T: I like reader-response a lot it’s kind of my area I feel that if you understand where the
students come from and try to see where there is this intertextuality between who they are
and these texts that we present to them I feel that we would be missing out so this reader-
response is very important for me but then because of the nature of the exam we have to
have a stylistic approach

I: how do prepare them to write about an unseen text/ what approach do you use/
T: as I already told you I give them this template in the beginning I allow them to be free
with it I give them this idea of the introduction being what the text is about then the
thematic approach which is easier sometimes in poetry rather than in prose because that
is something that students find confusing in prose because there are so many different
things that they have to tackle and account for which is not so clear cut as in poetry
sometimes because in poetry in the fact that it is so concise and the brevity so for students
that offers a bit of a while in the prose passages they feel a bit lost so I offer them this
template and I tell them this is just a guide use it adapt it but it will help you structure
your ideas structure your thoughts so after the introduction it’s to find the main theme
usually I try to tell them to find four developments in the text so that you can have 1 target
for each paragraph and tackle each theme from the different perspectives how is the
imagery backing up this theme/ how is the author using figures of speech to bring out this
theme/ I always tell them analysis involves 3 things: the what is being said the how it is
being said and the why it is being said in that way and that is a very very important part
because the tendency is that students are able after a certain while they are able to start
observing the what and they can label something as a metaphor and they can label
something as a simile but then when it comes to the effect that is where most flounder
ehm unless obviously they are helped along but the why is where students usually have
problems

I: and why do they have problems with effect/
T: because they don’t connect because they don’t understand what is being brought across and this brings me back to the reader-response and to the idea of who they
are because if they are not able to connect with what is being said I don’t think they’d be able to analyse what is being said

I: in fact in the syllabus it says that students are to demonstrate an appreciation of the text – what do you think is meant by appreciate/
T: well it’s a very vague word how are you going to appreciate a text/ how are you going to dissect it into parts/ you know imagery on its own tone on its own figures of speech on its own – I think that is a very fragmented approach

I: so what do you think is expected of them in the exam/
T: I think that this is what is expected of them finding what is being brought across and the different ways in which it’s being brought across to them

I: so how do you guide them in this – do you discuss this idea of ‘appreciation’?
T: yes definitely what I do usually in the beginning is to tell them to start reading the text themselves and then ask questions ‘what do you understand is being said/ what do you think this passage is about/ what do you think are the developments in this passage/ how are they being brought across/’ I do guide them and what I do sometimes is that I have a lesson where I give them quite an amount of time to focus and find out things for themselves and then I spend the rest of the lesson discussing it with them and then I tell them to bring their ideas along and I tell them ‘now that we’ve discussed it together write about it’

I: does the examination affect you in how you prepare students/
T: definitely definitely

I: would you prepare them in another way if it weren’t for the exam/
T: I think I would take it at a slower pace and I think I would allow them to come out with things more at their own pace because I feel that sometimes with the nature of the exam we tend to hasten the process and sometimes because we have an exam to prepare for we have to in a way make them aware of things before they are aware of them

I: what are some of the difficulties or errors that students exhibit when writing about unseen texts/
T: something similar to what I mentioned – the effect of what is being transmitted is sometimes lost on them you know somehow I feel that it has to do with the fact that students are losing a sense of empathy the more we go along with the idea of social media and being disconnected we are not being able to see or they rather are not being able to see anymore things from other perspectives and they cannot inhabit the world of the characters and I feel that they miss out a lot why/ because they only see the texts as words and they don’t see the implication of words and they don’t connect with words and the actual meaning and how words together can have different meanings and different levels of meaning

I: what about language errors and structural errors/
T: then we’re going back to the rudimentary kind of problems that we have with writing in English sometimes you get students who have basic grammar problems sometimes you have students who have a problem with sentence length they write long sentences they lose track of their argument most of the times they are not able to back up their arguments from the texts so you have either over-interpretation or...
misinterpretation I always tell them ‘I’m open to interpretation just as long as you back it up from the text’ and that is sometimes it is fairly difficult to arrive to at that point

I: is a pattern of errors in students’ writing – do they keep on making the same mistakes/
T: I find that there is a pattern from year to year you expect the same mistakes and you look out for certain things you know that students are going to start off in a certain way sometimes there are some individuals who have a natural affinity to words but you do start predicting what is going to happen after a number of years

I: how do students perform in unseen texts compare to set text essays/
T: I think that they * in the set texts they perform better they’re studying they’re given notes by the teacher they discuss in class certain things when it comes to them writing creatively I think that they have a problem with that either they’re not confident enough or probably they’re used to the idea that the teacher is the fountain of truth and unless they have the teacher’s interpretation so they can be mistaken so they say ‘I don’t make the effort because I may be mistaken’ and therefore they are afraid

I: what about poetry and prose in unseen – do they do better in poetry or in prose/
T: I think that they fare better in poetry rather than in prose as I said before the nature of poetry because it’s short there’s a certain structure there are certain elements that you are looking for it helps them even in structuring the essay sometimes what they do is that they take the poem stanza by stanza which I don’t agree with but it’s a way of them structuring so it helps them to structure the essay while on the other hand in prose I feel that sometimes they get lost how they structure their essay

I: why do you advise them against structuring the essay stanza by stanza/
T: because sometimes there are certain developments and there are certain kind of circular motions in poetry where you have the last stanza referring the first in the sense that if you’re going to be approaching the poem stanza by stanza you can have a limited perspective so you don’t have that overall picture that a thematic approach offers you

I: that reminds me at the beginning you forgot to mention how long have you been teaching/
T: oh I have started teaching in 1992 then I stopped for two years because of my Masters so it’s 1992 and I have not stopped in between

I: so over these years have you seen any developments – better or worse – in students’ performance in unseen crit/
T: if I had to refer to different elements – when you’re talking about their reaction to the text or their written skills ehm I feel that as far as English in general goes the level has gone down and I feel that certain students are making mistakes which go back to their primary education and the fact that they are now more accustomed to sitting in front of the computer finding information on the internet you cut and paste I think they’re becoming less able to connect with texts and less appreciative and I think sometimes they find it boring the fact that they have to sit down

I: so what is their attitude to reading and writing about unseen texts/
T: I feel that overall there would be individuals who love it but overall girls tend to like it more than boys I might be mistaken but in my years of experiences I think that
I: why do you think so/
T: maybe it’s because girls have a tendency to love more this kind of dissecting and finding the emotional connection within literature maybe boys because they are brought up to be boys and emotions are put under wraps and so there isn’t that kind of emotional openness to texts the other thing that I find is because obviously they find a lot of information ready made for them the effort to read and to write is taxing for them

I: in class in crit how engaged are they/
T: it depends it varies from group to group sometimes you have a number of students who participate a lot for example this year my second year group is an excellent group I enjoy going in even giving them challenging texts because they want to be challenged then there are certain groups you start to realize where you’d have a small nucleus of students who love it then the majority ehm they try to participate but then they find the stumbling blocks

I: does the examination affect their attitude to writing/
T: yes it does many students are studying because of the exam it’s not out of love of it so it affects them as in this is another chore to do I need to pass this exam so that I can go on to university

I: let’s move on to feedback now – what is feedback/ how would define feedback/
T: I find that feedback is more of a guidance you work with what you find and you push according to what you find obviously you know there are certain criteria because of the exam and also there are certain criteria which you would want to push because you want students to love literature so in a way when I give feedback I am very careful about to whom I’m giving feedback can this student take a certain amount of constructive criticism/ or am I going to break the student more if I am going to criticize/ so I usually try to find a strong point and then I push so I tell them if you could… so it’s more of a guidance than telling them ‘listen you’re wrong here or this is not the way it’s done’

I: do you try to establish links between one crit essay and another/
T: yes I do and I try to build from one crit essay to the next first of all I try to expose them to different genres of literature even periods so I try to expose them to classical literature contemporary literature and that is the way I build from one essay to another

I: in the tutorials when reading students’ commentaries on the unseen texts do you tell them what the focus of your feedback is going to be/
T: ehm obviously if they are first year many times they are guided so we are going to look for and the rubric is the same what we’re looking for so ‘listen I’m going to be looking for an essay which deals not only with content but also with techniques’ so it’s a combination of both that’s my kind of focus obviously I see that analysis is being done

I: is your focus determined by what you have so does the feedback look back on what has been written or is the feedback given aimed forward for future writing/
T: yes my comments are first of all there are individual comments and then there are generic comments which are aimed at the whole class I aim at building always arriving to a point where they are writing a good essay which is an essay that has an analytical framework to it and which fits in within the criteria of the essay

I: do you prepare students for the next crit essay/
T: first of all it depends on whether in the next tutorial there is going to be a crit essay or not. But I’m always thinking when giving feedback that what they’re getting from me is to improve for the future. It’s not a question of me giving feedback on this essay and telling you what you did wrong or right, but it’s to keep characteristics for future essay writing to try avoid certain errors and do more of something that has worked.

I: what type of comments do you find yourself writing?
T: for example I tell them this essay is too content-focused in the sense that they constantly narrate what the passage is about and they don’t go into the technical aspect of it. I think that content is being brought across the why part that I told you about before. I tell them the effect is very important. Why did the author choose to use a simile for example? Why that particular simile? So it’s more of a question of these kind of characteristics students have a tendency to repeat themselves a lot, they even in their structuring they mention a point and then you find that they repeat it at a later stage.

I: what type of feedback do you provide? Is it mostly oral or written?
T: It’s a combination of both. I give them oral feedback during the tutorial and we discuss together. But then obviously I correct the essays and I give them written feedback also.

I: what do you think they benefit the most from (or is the most effective)?
T: I think that they benefit a lot from the oral component because they are also able to come up with why they wrote in that way and even discuss if I push forward or I say something myself, they can clarify there and then and I find that if they’re thinking aloud it helps them to remember certain things but then they find that the written feedback is also positive because I myself need to read the essay closely and I do give them some new insights after I’ve read the essay again.

I: what do you think is the most effective in how they write (in the next essay)?
T: I find that both oral and written are both effective although mostly it’s the written because they go back to the essay so I do tend to repeat certain things that I said orally in my written feedback also.

I: what do you think about using digital media for feedback purposes?
T: Ehmm … obviously students have different forms of intelligence and understanding – some people are more aurally attentive if I’m going to speak to you and tell you certain things you’re going to understand me, but others are more visually stimulated so if I’m able to use digital media to represent my feedback sometimes you can structure your feedback better because if you are able to structure it in a visual way maybe then there are benefits in this way.

I: is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback?
T: You can’t precisely pinpoint how effective something is but I do find that students pick on my ideas and I can see the improvement from one essay to the next. Maybe not exactly in the next essay but over a number of essays like they’ve heard it once, twice, three times and then they start to realize ‘ah so this is the way it is done’ and I do see the difference in those students who apply themselves so they do retain the feedback so after a year working with students – especially the first years who come with a certain set way of writing their analysis – you know you see a difference in the way they write and discuss certain things.

I: how is this evident? What type of ‘errors’ are they most likely to address?
T: for example the structuring before in the beginning they would not have an idea of how to structure their essay you see a better plan you see thoughts moving from one to the next eh they see this idea of not only focusing on what the passage is about but seeing how it is being constructed or developed – in the effect they are able to use the text more to back their arguments they put their arguments first rather than simply quoting from the text

I: do you encourage students to revise their essay/
T: yes I do sometimes I tell them ‘would you like to write this again/ knowing what I’ve told you and what I’ve said’ and I give this to the whole class

I: do you notice any differences/
T: ehm they come with a deeper perspective to it in that if they take the feedback and they have really understood and they find that it applies to what they think about the passage – you’ll find the difference so the feedback is more immediate

I: in general are you satisfied with how they adopt or have followed up with your feedback/
T: for some of them yes others don’t have the love of the subject they’re just doing it for the exam so they just write because they have a tutorial or essay

I: what other constraints impede them from using the feedback/
T: * I think it’s kind of lack of personal motivation first of all some of them tell you ‘ah this is too difficult it is too challenging I can’t do it’ or ‘I don’t know how to write about this’ so there are psychological constraints they box themselves in a category and they’re not going to get themselves out of it – there are others who I find have taken English but they don’t like to read the idea that English is a soft option and they think they can get away with anything ehm then there are those who would not have arrived – it’s a question of maturity they would not have arrived at a point where they can appreciate certain things it’s like when you’re learning history and they don’t consider it useful or see beyond

I: is there anything you would change in how approach literary texts/
T: if I had more time -and I used to do this (I had to cut down on it because of time constraints) I used to introduce music and lyrics from songs to connect with contemporary culture – how through lyrics we approach certain poetic aspects – they used to bring their own lyrics and look for metaphors etc I think I would use a multimedia approach to move them towards an affintiy for language to look at how words have an effect on the different senses because I find they are limited in that

I: what about how you provide your students with feedback/ would you consider any changes/
T: I am always open to changes I try to read on books internet and try to find new ideas testing out ideas so I’m always open to – I don’t see myself as having an approach and saying this works and that’s it I have more of an eclectic approach I take from different sources and adapt to my students I even like discussing with people on what they do and then if they tell me it works I would think of trying it

T: that is the end of the interview – thank you once again for taking part
Appendix 13 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S1 (Sophie)

I: thank you for agreeing to this interview - the first set of questions relate to your experience and understanding of literature so why have you chosen English at Advanced level /
S: well from a very young age I’ve always enjoyed stories and at secondary I did enjoy Shakespeare and we read Pride and Prejudice and Wuthering Heights I did enjoy them a lot so ehm when I did my O level and got a good mark I decided to carry on on English because I do like the subject and I was pretty good at it
I: all right so talk about your experience with literature from Form 3 that is preparing for you O level up to now
S: well obviously secondary was much easier than sixth form obviously ehm as I said we did Wuthering Heights and Pride and Prejudice and we didn’t have Macbeth which is pretty hard for a Shakespeare book we had Twelfth Night so ehm as far as Shakespeare was concerned I wasn’t that prepared for sixth form ehm but well sixth form I found it to be very hard and sometimes I think maybe I did the wrong choice because unsee I’m just not good at though because I panic
I: what about the other areas /
S: ehm in secondary I was good I always got 85 and upwards so that did help in boosting my self-esteem regarding English but as I said sixth form I do like English I do love it it’s quite hard which really makes me dislike it a bit at times
I: what do you mean by ‘hard’ /
S: by hard I mean ehm just I don’t understand the poem or there’s a concept which I don’t really understand or I’m shaky about so that’s really just yeah
I: how do you study literature /
S: well first I make sure that I for example when it’s a novel or there’s a plot I make sure that I understand it first and know it like at the tip of my fingertips (means hand) (laughs at language mistakes) and then I just study the characters and the imagery and the style the writer uses and that’s basically it with unseens I just study like various imagery like anaphora alliteration what do they mean so if I see one I’ll know what it is
I: what methods do teachers use when teaching literature /
S: I didn’t understand the question
I: so what methods here (referring to the school) do your teachers use or have your teachers used last year as well when teaching literature /
S: well last year there was a teacher that used to teach me Owen that read the poem and then gave us a summary and then we wrote it and then just further analysed the poem for studying I find that quite easy because I know that his summary is good and if I took it down myself there might be things that I left out or things that I’m not really sure about so I found that method encouraging but for example the crit I also had the same teacher I didn’t really like his method because he used to just show us a poem he used to like ‘that is an anaphora that is that, the poem is trying to do that’ so as far as that’s concerned I really didn’t get quite I didn’t always understand the lesson because I was always writing
down what he tells us not our interpretation for example this year’s criticism teacher is
very very good I found her to be she’s very good because she teaches in a way she gives
us a poem we read it we analyse it first ourselves and then she gives us her interpretation
but at least I know where I’m at because I did analyse and if she says the same points that
I wrote then it’s like ah I knew it (snaps her fingers) that’s always good

I: all right so what kind of methods you prefer / this interaction where you’re given the
space to analyze something on your own first and then
S: yes and then the teacher gives us her interpretation and how she tackled it but it’s
important for me that I have my time with the piece of literature

I: ok talk about your interests and experiences in reading for pleasure in the last two
to three years
S: well to be honest the only time I’ve got for reading for pleasure is mainly in the summer
because in winter I don’t know why I just stop because I’m always too busy and the little
free time I have I’d rather not choose the books ehm so in summer I read
a lot I do read quite a lot I prefer classics mainly ehm I just stop in winter I don’t know
why

I: do you read poetry at all /
S: I don’t read poetry ehm when I encounter a poem when I’m surfing on the web I read
it but it’s not something I look for

I: and why is that /
S: because I find I associate poetry with school I think that’s it so the little free time I
have I rather not choose to do something related to school

I: all right so now we move on to experience with unseen texts during literary criticism
seminars well you already said something about the seminars can you add anything else
about your experience with literary texts during these seminars / your experience with
the texts themselves /
S: well the last unseen poem we did (refers to one during a test) I found it to be very hard
(it was Schoolroom on a Wet afternoon – Vernon Scannell) I panicked I didn’t know what
to write but I’m usually not that troubled in understanding a text I usually understand
them but at times they are pretty difficult but I’m not usually that ehm like ‘what does
this poem mean/’ I usually get the message but sometimes it’s just difficult

I: is poetry more difficult than prose /
S: yes yes poetry is much more difficult than prose ehm prose because mainly I think
prose is just a story you don’t have any hidden meanings usually so it’s clear I find it
much clearer than poetry

I: can you mention some activities you do in a class when reading an unseen text during
the literary criticism seminars /
S: well first she gives us the poem and allows us like 15 maybe generally like half the
lesson trying to analyze it ourselves and then she makes us do the essay plan a very
detailed essay plan at times then it’s like we route our own essay in like half the lesson
and then she gives us additional points throughout this time so it’s always better
because even if you’re at a loss about what you’re going to write she’s there giving
you these little hints so I think that’s very effective
I: and it’s always the same kind of pattern than you follow /
S: usually it’s always the same pattern she gives us the poem and gives us time
I: do you work on your own or as a group /
S: no generally we work on our own very rarely she pairs us up or in a group
I: what do you think about that /
S: ehm well I don’t really think that – when there’s a pair well I can’t – and she’s my friend and she suggests something and I find it to be rather (gnashes teeth to indicate suggestion that might not be appropriate) I don’t want to say No it’s wrong so I generally just go along with it and even if I think it’s completely wrong I just don’t say It’s wrong ehm so I think it’s better to work individually because you know that at least what you think is right you’re going to include that not what others think is (wrong)
I: what types of texts (types of poems for example) do you read during the literary criticism seminars
S: * we read by Emily Dickinson ehm it depends sometimes they’re very long or very short ehm we read all kinds of poems
I: are they set for example according to era to period /
S: hm not really she gave us a booklet full of poems and there’s all types of poets from modern to like a hundred years ago
I: so a poem is read in isolation not according to a theme or according to a strand/
S: no she just picks out a poem and we do it
I: can you give some examples of unseen texts that you remember that were challenging to read? That you find challenging?
S: like examples of poems/
I: yes that in the last two years were they difficult for you to read/
S: Vernon Scanell ehm Schoolroom on a Wet Afternoon we did it in the test hm I think I never encountered a poem where I was at a loss that much because I didn’t understand the concept I just started writing what I thought not – it doesn’t mean I had any backup – nothing but usually I’m not that lost when it comes to poetry but this one yes
I: so generally the ones that you do during the criticism...
S: no when she gives us her interpretation usually I’ve got most of the points she mentions I’ve written them myself but this one
I: how do you feel when you get the points she highlights how does it make you feel about writing about unseen text/
S: it gives me a self-esteem boost because I think all right I’m doing something right then the next poem we tackle I tackle it with that kind of mentality that what I’m saying might be right it’s not just something in here (points to her head/ as in up in her mind) so I think it gives me a self-esteem boost
I: are there any texts you find more comfortable reading/
S like prose/
I: are there any poems or texts you thought were memorable or enjoyable?
S: hm I don’t really * it’s not something we tackled in criticism but Owen (set text) I really like his poetry because it’s not that elaborate English language it’s simple and yet there’s always a profound meaning to it so the element of poetry is there but it’s much more comfortable to tackle in my opinion
I: ok so we move on to reading unseen texts the processes and appreciation now learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the literary criticism as an exercise and in the syllabus there is the word ‘appreciation’ so what do understand by this/what do you think this ‘appreciation’ is/
S: ehm I think in order to appreciate an unseen text you just have to really relate to that piece of text if there’s like in the exam a poem talking about fish I’m not going to relate to it because I don’t like fish I don’t know anything about it so in order to appreciate a poem or prose I think you have to relate to the poem I don’t think you can appreciate all the poems in the world
I: but what do you think the syllabus means by ‘appreciation’/ what do you think they are expecting of students/
S: I think they are expecting us to be like very understanding of the poem that in our free time we read poetry and that we understand it ehm I think that’s what they mean a genuine/general love for poetry
I: how are you guided to appreciate poetry or prose in your literary criticism seminars/
S: I think we are guided to analyze she doesn’t give us like reasons for why the poet does that – she does but doesn’t go in it in much detail so we only analyze we don’t really learn to appreciate I think I never learnt to appreciate not even in secondary I don’t think there’s a method to appreciate I don’t think so
I: you said analysis so do you think analysis and appreciation clash or conflict/
S: ehm I’m not sure because as I said before in order to appreciate something you have to like – it’s mostly a characteristic that you love poetry and personally I don’t think that loving poetry and just genuine appreciation of poetry is anywhere close to being one of my characteristics so choosing English A level I knew what I was getting into I had to analyse a poem but I didn’t I never looked at it in a way that would appreciate poetry I never looked at it that way
I: what strategies do you use when reading and appreciating an unseen poem / prose text/ so how do you process it/ how do you analyze it/ where do you start from/
S: first I try to understand what the poet or writer is saying I read it and then after a general idea I reread it again and look for imagery or rhythm style everything and then on the third I don’t read it three times I never read the poem three times and then I just from the data I gathered I prepare a plan usually it does take me a long time to prepare a plan and then I just start writing an essay
I: in these two years what do you think about your experience with the poems and prose texts for the tutorial writing tasks/ were they very different in level and difficulty and in topic from the seminars/ was there a gap between the tutorial and the seminar/
S: I think there was quite a gap not in everything sometimes I found the tutorial to be rather easy than what we do in class for example there were poems and prose that were really difficult for example prose I find them to be very difficult than the
ones we do in class but the ones we had in the tutorial (refers to the latest one) I found that to be quite easy compared to what we do in class but that’s not always the case.

I: so prose is easier in tutorials and poetry more difficult?
S: yes poetry (in tutorials) is more difficult than the ones we do in class ehm I think that’s the general pattern I noticed

I: do you think there are any reasons for this?
S: I’m not sure I think just that whoever prepares the tutorial and our criticism miss just have different ideas of what is expected from us I think that

I: and how does that make you feel?
S: well it scares me it definitely scares me because I’m the one who is going to sit for the exam not the teacher so what they choose and what they interpret to be an unseen poem that might come out in the exam will directly affect me and my – what I’ll do in the exam so it definitely scares me

I: ok now we’re going to discuss the writing process what is your attitude towards writing about unseen texts/ how do you feel about it?
S: well I find it to be much more difficult to write about unseen texts than literature that I have studied before mainly because I have to interpret the unseen text no one is there to guide me ehm so I definitely find that to be much harder but sometimes I think that I’m more free because I am my own like I know what I’m doing so I then find it easier to write about unseen because with literature (ie set texts) you’re expected to have a much higher level of tackling an essay than an unseen

I: what kind of difficulties do you face/ on the language level or the conceptual level/ what are the challenges when writing about unseen texts/?
S: stylistic there is definitely I find it quite difficult to tackle style because why because even the form of a poem ehm I can’t say for example ‘the poet uses this form because he’s trying to convey that’ or even when it comes to punctuation or rhythm so stylistic I find it to be very hard conceptual it depends on the poem if I understood it then I won’t find it that hard but if not then I would definitely be affect

I: how do you resolve these challenges/?
S: well I try best to interpret them but sometimes when I’m at a loss I avoid them like style I rarely mention it if I don’t have a clear example

I: how are you guided or taught to write about an unseen text/?
S: in the first lesson she gave us a plan what an unseen poem or prose text essay should look like so that’s generally the idea I follow because I found it to be very guided when actually writing the essay I can always go back to that and it makes me feel like I have a structure in my head

I: is it a plan or a model/?
S: well it can consider itself to be a model an introduction a second introduction and then just tackling the things you mentioned in the second introduction that’s the way she taught us how to tackle it and I found it very useful and helpful in exams

I: so how does it make you feel that you have that kind of plan in your mind/
S: eh at ease obviously because there is – I’m not just going in tackling an unseen with no idea of how I’m going to do it

I: how often are you provided with this kind or preparation for writing/
S: well we generally do one every week so as far as preparation I’d say we’re very prepared when it comes to the exam

I: for writing you’re preparing always for writing
S: yes always writing in mind she gives us to do an analysis and to do our own plan so generally that’s the pattern so I think that writing is always in mind

I: so when you plan your written response to an unseen text do you follow that strategy/
S: yes a first introduction to paraphrase what’s going on in the poem the second introduction to mention the themes the form the style things that you will tackle later on in the poem in the main body and then in the main body you just open up everything you mentioned in the second section in detail

I: is it similar to the plan of last year/
S: no not at all he didn’t exactly show us how to tackle an essay he just gave us how to interpret it so it’s definitely different so last year I didn’t have any model in mind I just went along with what I learnt in secondary but this year I have a more clear idea of what they want from me

I: ok so the last section is on feedback so think about your tutorial last year and of course your experiences of this year’s it helps to know so before you write your essay before you hand in an essay does the teacher inform you what the focus of the feedback is going to be/
S: ehm well last year she didn’t she just collected our essays and then nothing generally she would explain next week’s tutorial what we have to do so we do fifteen minutes on the lesson on that but this year I would find it very helpful that I would just focus on one area for example the first lesson we said we would tackle the introduction so I focused – I didn’t only just do an elaborate introduction but ehm but I did focus more time on it and I think that eventually helped me because the following week when we got the essay back I had a more clear idea of what an introduction should look like that’s definitely helpful

I: so how does this help you organize an essay if you had a focus of feedback in mind/
S: well I plan the essay normally and then I just focus more on that focus area I just try to make it more detailed like introduce minor factors that just hit me

I: do you feel that that helps you to achieve a better mark/
S: yes because eventually up to the final exam we would have gone through all these focused points of an essay and well then in the exam you can focus on each particular area and then recall the feedback given and not just in the exam even in other essays ehm for example if my like – if I had to choose like a thing that really troubles my essays is the structure and I try my best to vary the structure and make it more make it better but for the exam it does definitely help me because the focus areas are there and I can focus on each and every one of them

I: what type of feedback does your tutorial teacher provide you with/ was it written/ is it oral/ is it both/
S: (last year) when she was handing out the essay she used to just maybe a minute explaining what we did wrong why she gave us that mark that is the only type of feedback she’d usually give

I: so how do you compare it to this year/
S: it’s definitely a much more detailed feedback last year there were weeks when she didn’t give me feedback just the essay and carry on with the others so it’s much more detailed this year

I: how does that help/
S: it definitely helps ehm because when I have that feedback I keep that feedback in mind for next essay for the next tests I do so keeping that feedback in mind I usually try to improve on things I do so it does help than not having feedback at all

I: so when you said that your teacher last year did not use to give you feedback on certain essays what were the essays do you remember if they were literature essays or unseen essays/
S: generally literature she always had a thing to say about unseen if I remember correctly because unseen most teachers know that the difficult part of an essay – (corrects to -of the exam-) is generally the unseen so she did dedicate more time to that

I: all right so was the focus there on how you tackled the text or also on language/
S: both I think well eh I think she focused more on language rather than how we tackled the essay because language there’s more difficult – eh wrong and right things to do than how to tackle a poem

I: what type of feedback do you prefer/ written oral or both/
S: I prefer written because when I’m rereading my essays when I’m preparing for the exam generally I don’t remember the oral but if I had it written down I can recall what she said to me and that generally helps in exams

I: how well do you understand the teacher’s feedback/ especially the written/
S: well I usually understand it but it’s not always the case sometimes I think I’ve done it right but the teacher says otherwise when I see this I always ask why she said that but I admit that sometimes I just leave it

I: when you are given feedback for instance to improve your structure what do understand by that/ do you understand what that means/
S: I think it’s a little too vague because structure for me it could be like how I structure an essay it could also mean how I structure a sentence so improving the structure can have like a lot of things I can improve upon so I think that giving a more detailed like ‘you did this’ or ‘I didn’t’ quite get this I think that’s the method I prefer

I: so then does oral feedback help/
S: yes it does help to explain – written is a good method but it can be insufficient if it’s going to be alone I think oral explaining the written feedback is always helpful

I: so how useful has the feedback provided been these two years/ do you feel it has helped you improve/
S: yes it did help me improve because my vocabulary increased so like last year’s teacher used to tell me ‘improve your vocabulary’ so I think that feedback helps me to acquire a much larger vocabulary than what I had in secondary.

I: so what do you do to improve your vocabulary/ what have you done to achieve that/
S: well read different books as I said I enjoy classics so in the transition from normal books like I don’t know vampire books which I was a fan of – I still read those but I tend to look for classics because I know that I will enjoy the story and that my vocabulary will increase so I generally did that to improve my vocabulary

I: but then how do apply the vocabulary to your writing/
S: in my last mobile I had a dictionary and when I am reading I keep it close by so I can look for the words and then I save them and at times I would reread them and try to use them in essays

I: so do you look for the words and use them purposefully and consciously/
S: yes yes

I: with regards to the feedback on unseen texts have you felt that in the two years you’ve built a stronger way of putting forward your responses/
S: not really because every poem in an unseen is different so what the feedback on one poem is going to be is going to be different than the next poem so I think it didn’t quite – the feedback on unseen – it depends if it’s feedback on the structure of a particular poem it might be the case that in a different poem I’ll use a totally different approach it depends on the feedback

I: can’t you adapt it to other texts/
S: yes I can but let’s take for example feedback on ehm * content or themes isn’t really useful because for the next unseen poem I can use a different approach obviously feedback on form is helpful because form generally follows a similar approach

I: do you use your teacher’s feedback for the next essay/
S: hm not always because for example I’ve noticed that the teacher this year has addressed my structure in my language so when tackling an essay I always try to keep that in mind but I admit I don’t really go home and reread them before writing an essay

I: did you see any changes from first year up to now in the way your feedback has led you to in future writing improve or perhaps sharpen certain things/
S: I think it did help feedback did help in how I tackle an essay and what I focus on so for future writing it did help me to write a better essay because I know where my problem areas are thanks to the feedback given so yes it did help my future writing

I: ok now did your teacher in criticism or in tutorials give you the opportunity to revise your essay/ did you ever need to revise and resubmit a second version/
S: no but I remember a case that I just didn’t understand the text and I got a very low mark and I wanted to rewrite it but the teacher didn’t force me to do it and I just did it again out of my own will so no I’m very conscious I give school importance so if I see that I need a much better mark I usually don’t have to wait around for the teacher that I have to redo it
I: and have you asked the teacher the reason for the mark/
S: yes plenty of times because sometimes I think that I deserve a higher mark – not just in English – so I just confront the teacher why did you give me the mark
I: and does the explanation justify the mark/
S: neh not always there are teachers who have their own methods of teaching and I just can’t understand it at all so not really there are cases where I said ‘ah ok so I did that’ so not always
I: so is there anything that you would change in how you receive feedback/
S: ehm not really the method this year is ok because the teacher gives feedback to individual students not just the whole class obviously not all students are the same so I think the method this year is very effective because individual feedback is always the best
I: are the tutorials effective/
S: yes yes obviously if there was more time for individual attention one-to-one feedback it would be good but that’s not the case it cannot be the case but I think tutorials help because sometimes people say ‘eh this school they have 30 students in one class’ but the tutorials are enough to get that one-on-one feedback you deserve
I: last question what do you think about the idea of receiving feedback in a different format for example in the form of digital media, such as through podcast, Skype or via email/sms?
S: I think there wouldn’t be any difference because talking to the teacher live or on Skype I would talk same way there’s not difference but I think like live contact is always much better than online I think so because then media like email is much more delayed and I find that when I’m online I’m distracted so even when I’m reading feedback I might be listening to music or just hearing the beeps on facebook ehm so I think that one-on-one contact is much better than online
I: thank you very much
S: you’re we
Appendix 14 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S2 (Jessica)

I: thank you for taking part in this interview - the first set of questions are on your experience of literature why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: because when I grow up I want to become a novelist so yeah I think also at university I want to continue studying English

I: talk about your experience with literature how was your experience in secondary school from From 3 up to now/
S: I didn’t do so well I used to get like very low grades but then for the O level I got a 4 and then I chose English and I went better from then on

I: do you relate your experience to marks and how you got along in the exams or also your experience in class with the literature and the texts/
S: I think literature in general

I: but you felt it was what type of experience/
S: a positive one mainly I’ve learnt much

I: how do you study literature/
S: well first I read the poem then I make short notes of every stanza and then I pinpoint the words which are alliteration or metaphors and I point them out in my short notes

I: what about set texts do you have a different method/
S: oh that’s for the set texts

I: so that was for literature in general so you study it at the level of imagery .../ But do you also employ methods where you study things by memory/
S: sometimes yes especially quotations ehm yes and of course the literary devices

I: what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years/
S: I generally start like 3 books and then I stop mid-way and I finish a book if it’s especially nice but yes I read some books

I: so what are the books that you consider ‘nice’/ that attract you/
S: ehm I’ve read The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood I think it’s very important because it highlights feminism and what society can become in a few years’ time which is something bad other than that I read the Twilight collection and I felt it was impressive and then I read a biography of Mary Bell she was a criminal

I: what about poetry do you read poetry in your spare time/
S: no I don’t (smiles as though embarrassed)

I: any reasons for this/
S: I don’t really understand poetry unless there’s a teacher showing me the ways and stuff

I: what do you associate it with/
S: school and studying so that kinda holds me back
I: and when you come across a poem then what do you do/
S: ehm I might read it but then I wouldn’t understand so after the first read I just let it go
I: do you prefer prose/
S: yes
I: but then do you consider prose more difficult than poetry in the unseen or the other way round/
S: prose in unseen is much more difficult
I: even if you don’t really read poetry in your spare time/
S: mhm (yes)
I: so you find poetry difficult to understand when you read it for pleasure but then unseen prose is more difficult/
S: more difficult in an exam for instance no then generally I would understand something of the poem prose is * well it depends I mean like the past tests I had they were kind of difficult
I: so what is a difficult text in general/
S: ehm well the characters are not exactly pinpointed in a way like the story is not exactly narrated it’s explained but like contains twists and stuff
I: and then poetry what makes a text difficult/
S: ehm if it’s a sonnet I think sonnets confuse me
I: but in the sonnet you have a form to follow...
S: yes but the story behind it generally confuses me a lot
I: so it’s the content
S: mhm (yes)
I: so in your experience with unseen texts during seminars how have your teachers approached this/how have they taught unseen/ what was a typical lesson like/
S: eh well they start off by reading the poem themselves then reread it then they start stanza by stanza explaining the devices like metaphors *
I: do you write anything during the lesson/
S: yes yes the literary devices like alliteration and something about the stanzas
I: so it’s annotation
S: yes yes
I: do you have sessions where you write essays/
S: I used to have in 1st year but now no we don’t write anything
I: which method do you prefer/
S: I think I prefer the teacher reading the poem aloud first because I might misinterpret some words
I: any other activities when you do unseen in class/
S: ehm no it’s mostly the same I prefer last year’s method because we did more writing
we had more practice but this year we do more analysis

I: why do you prefer last year’s method?
S: because the lecturer used to give us essays to work like every single session while this
year the lecturer just analyses a poem and explains stuff but then he doesn’t give us any
essays so writing is more important

I: do you remember any of the texts that you read during your seminars/ any specific
poems/
S: I think last year there was this prose passage and I’ll remember the author when I go
back home but now I forgot

I: can you remember any examples of unseen texts that you found challenging to read/
either in the tutorial or seminar
S: I don’t remember the author

I: but what’s the kind of text that you find yourself comfortable reading/
S: ** well sort of like it’s more explained in a way so it’s not taken from a very complex
book it’s like age-appropriate and well the story is not relatively hard

I: so any texts that you considered were not ‘age-appropriate’/
S: I don’t remember but maybe the one in the exam (end of first year)

I: what do mean by ‘age-appropriate’/
S: ehm because sometimes I notice that the text is taken from something difficult in a way
maybe it’s me but it’s usually the language of the text for example older texts modern
texts are better

I: in the syllabus the word ‘appreciation’ is mentioned so learning to appreciate literary
texts is central to the literary criticism exercise what is your understanding of this word/
what do you think it means/
S: ehm appreciating in a way you don’t just read a poem because you need to learn it or
because you need experience for your exam you need to appreciate what you’re doing

I: what do you think is expected of you in the exam/
S: ehm if you appreciate a poem like when you go to the exam you will most likely do
well much better than the other students who don’t

I: but as this word is in the syllabus do you know what is expected of you/
S: I don’t think I would know exactly I think it’s out of place

I: is it related to analysis do you think/
S: ** no I wouldn’t say appreciation equals analysis but I think that at the end of the day
if I spend ten minutes trying to read a text then I understand that it’s to analyse a poem

I: are you or have you been guided to appreciate poetry or prose in the lessons/
S: ehm I don’t think so

I: what strategies do you use when reading an unseen text alone/
S: I read it like twice then I start – or maybe three times – then I go stanza by stanza and I take out the important literary devices end-stopped lines and caesuras and I jot them down next to the word and then I start scheming my essay how I will divide it

I: are you provided with a plan by your lecturers/
S: no or if they gave us a plan in first year I won’t exactly remember so I don’t go back to the plan of last year

I: when you compare the poems and prose texts chosen for the tutorial are any different to the seminars/
S: ehm I think they’re somewhat the same I think

I: how do you feel when you write about unseen texts/
S: I feel scared because I might misinterpret the poem or the prose and end up receiving a very low mark

I: is it different to the set texts/
S: I feel more confident and much better

I: so what do you think are your difficulties/ what challenges do you face/
S: understanding the poem or prose that’s like the main part and I think maybe having some difficulties in noticing the literary devices which is which maybe I confuse one with the other

I: ok what about difficulties in language or expression/
S: what do you mean by expression/

I: mode of expression – does this refer to how you express yourself/
S: yes

I: are you aware of the difficulties you face/
S: yes

I: what examples can you give/
S: ehm not being able to express myself as like on paper ** tenses when I write that’s a problem structure even linking a paragraph with the next

I: how do you think you can resolve these difficulties/
S: ehm by going back to the essays and repractice work out more essays

I: when it comes to writing about unseen texts you said this year you don’t get much practice in the crit seminar so how often are you provided with opportunities with writing/
S: no in second year no even in tutorials in second year we’re suppose to cover prose passages we don’t do enough we only did one and it was in the tutorial

I: so you feel you’re prepared less for prose than for poetry/
S: yes definitely in first year we did poetry and then the teacher advised told us that in second year we would be doing prose with another different lecturer and well we are doing certain passages but we’re not exactly working out any essays with him nothing
I: when you plan your response for the unseen texts how do you go about writing?
S: ehm well I try to figure out my own way

I: what are the stages that you use?
S: it’s structured according to the poem and stanzas so I choose paragraphs if I’m talking about style and imagery I don’t do them in order I pick stuff and then I find in the passage and write them down

I: are you provided with guidelines how to organize your essay?
S: I think I fixed several contact hours to discuss if I’m doing it right so yes

I: before you hand in the essay for the tutorial does the teacher give you an idea what the focus of the feedback is beforehand?
S: * no I don’t think so no

I: do you think that this would be beneficial?
S: yes because the student would figure it out for himself and the feedback they would know

I: so knowing what you’re going to be marked on specifically you’ll have an entire essay but you might be marked more specifically for introduction or the content the imagery rather than for the whole would this be an advantage or a disadvantage?
S: I think it would be an advantage

I: in what way?
S: so the students would know exactly what they need to focus on primarily and then they move on from there

I: what might be a possible disadvantage?
S: ehm the students will be given ideas like they won’t be doing their part they would be given help

I: so is it better if the student is not guided?
S: in a sense yes because they would give their utmost so they would make an effort more if they are not guided

I: on criticism essays what is the feedback you generally receive?
S: ehm in the beginning of first year I wasn’t going very well in them but then I figured out where I was going wrong and I guess I got good grades

I: why do you think you weren’t doing so well in the beginning?
S: ehm I didn’t understand know how to tackle a poem and I suffered greatly from that I’ve done like three essays or four and I got very very low marks

I: such as?
S: out of a hundred I would say a 30 yes but then afterwards I got like a 60 because I was doing something wrong

I: so was the mark justified?
S: yes
I: and then what did you do to improve it/
S: uhm I well I fixed a contact hour with the lecturer and she told me how to subdivide the paragraphs and what to mention and to give a reason why you quoted that particular phrase so the contact hour helped

I: do you remember any comments that you were given by your teacher/
S: well one comment that I remember is to link paragraphs and to ehmm well when I quote I say why and what is the effect

I: when the teacher provides you feedback in the tutorials is it written or oral/ or both/ and what do you prefer/
S: it’s written * and oral as well I prefer both I think

I: what are the advantages of each/
S: eh well if it’s written I get to remember I get to look back while I’m studying and if it’s well orally then I don’t know I would hear it there and then

I: which do you think is better to apply for future writing/
S: I think it would be written

I: what do you think of the idea of receiving feedback in the form of digital media/ such as podcast, emails or Skype/
S: oh I don’t think it’s necessary the tutorial and contact hours are enough

I: how well do you understand your teacher’s feedback/
S: it’s clear

I: so do you know where your weaknesses and strengths lie
S: yes it helps

I: do you remember any of the feedback/ in general do you retain the feedback so when you write your next essay do you know what feedback was given/
S: yes I try to work out an essay better than the previous ones

I: was there improvement then/
S: yes

I: which areas are improved upon more specifically/
S: tenses eh sentence structure and linking paragraphs

I: so the language errors
S: yes

I: and what about conceptual errors/
S: they’re more difficult

I: why do you think that is the case/
S: ehm well * what do you mean by conceptual/

I: the concept of the poem the content of the poem
S: oh ehm * I think they’re given more marks in language than actually understanding the poem since the poem might be ambiguous in a way

I: which is more effective in relation to this/ oral or written – to improve upon errors/
S: I think the written

I: you said you didn’t do too well last year in some essays did the teacher give you the opportunity to revise the essay and resubmit a second version/
S: eh yes yes she did

I: and did you follow it up then/
S: yes I got a better grade

I: is there anything that stops you from applying feedback in your writing/
S: eh certain times I do end up making the same mistakes but improvement is seen when noticing past errors

I: how well do you perform in your crit essays compared with other essays/
S: I think I do relatively well if I mention the grade somewhat in crit I do better noticing the grades I think language because crit is structural always the same thing basically and then for instance Othello or Atwood it could be different every time depends on the theme or characterization

I: is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback/
S: no I don’t think so

I: that is the end of the interview – thank you once again
Appendix 15 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S3 (Neil)

I: thank you for participating first of all I’d like to ask you about your experience with literature why have you chosen English at Advanced level?
S: my main reason was because I’m going to continue on law studies so it’s compulsory and I like English in general

I: talk about your experience with literature from Form 3 up to now
S: well I had a kind of difficult experience in English literature because in my school it was not an important subject but my teacher used to tell me to continue English because I had potential compared to other students and I liked it so I said why can’t I try to continue

I: so did you feel it was connected to your self-esteem?
S: yes and I got it a 3 and I said I can try

I: how do you study literature?
S: I study the techniques that are used in literature but it’s the area that I don’t study compared to others because it’s nothing expected so I study the techniques first so I can use them in every situation

I: is that for the set texts or for the unseen?
S: for the unseen texts

I: what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years can you talk about your interests?
S: I read the newspaper and on the internet blogs but I don’t read books in general because I don’t like it but if there are books that are linked to studying at school then I would read them as an experience to study but in my mind I don’t see my reading as something for pleasure it’s something for studying

I: so is literature connected to studying?
S: exactly

I: so after A level would you would seek reading for pleasure?
S: no I don’t think so but in itself for example reading the newspaper blogs and things like that they are kind of pleasure but it’s for the informative

I: do you read poetry?
S: no

I: and is it the same reason why you don’t read novels?
S: I think so yes * I enjoy reading poetry and if I randomly see a text or something I don’t mind it I read it and figure out what he’s trying to convey I do enjoy it but I don’t seek it myself
I: now let’s talk about your experience with unseen texts during the seminars of literary criticism - so you can talk about this year and last year so how did your teachers teach the unseen text?

S: well they gave us a kind of plan to ehm move from one part to another and this plan you can use it for every kind of unseen so you have to for example talk about the title and then move on to the introduction and paraphrasing so there is a general technique that you apply for every unseen text

I: what is the pattern you use for reading a text/

S: first we read it just a quick reading to get the general idea then we read it again and we underline the important parts and then we seek for the styles and the techniques used and then we start writing bit by bit before we do a plan every student for himself and then we start writing

I: when you read do you read alone or as a class/

S: this year when we read it we first we read it alone then he reads it us in a slow and you know how the teachers read slow and then tackle it part by part

I: do you have time to write a plan/

S: this year we read it then he reads it and then we tackle it by we don’t do a plan as such imma like l-ewwel naqrawha jaqraha hu imbad jibda jghidilna per ezempju hemm dak l-istajl jaghmel bicca bicca

(Translation: we don’t do a plan as such but first we read it the teacher reads it then he tells us what the style is and does so one paragraph at a time)

I: what methods do you prefer when reading unseen texts/

S: we used to do the same thing this year and last year the only difference is that last year she used to read it to us she didn’t give us the chance to read it ourselves

I: what do you prefer/

S: I prefer reading it myself beforehand because when he’s reading for example you don’t pay attention to some things you lose the track of things

I: are there any other activities that you do in class when reading unseen texts/

S: mhm * no it’s always the same thing

I: what types of texts do you read/ do you remember any types of poems that were memorable/

S: Wilfred Owen

I: can you give examples of texts that you consider challenging or difficult to read/

S: well if the language used is formal or difficult words I find it more difficult to write about it because if there’s a paragraph and I don’t know one word it can ruin the whole concept

I: so you would rate difficult at the language level/

S: yes ehm what I like about unseen texts is that there isn’t a specific answer to them unless you don’t go out of point there is no specific thing to say and write but if there’s difficult language and you don’t understand one thing you won’t understand the concept and background and things like that
I: how would you know that you’re going out of point?

S: well if for example when we had the tutorial test (referring to poem Last lesson of the afternoon) if you don’t refer to * things like education you would go out of point so if you mention transport it’s out of point you have a general topic to write about but then you are free to write about how you think so if you don’t agree with it he agrees and you don’t then you’re free to write about it

I: so do you feel you’re comfortable reading those poems or prose passages where there is a specific topic that is quite obvious/

S: ehe but even if it’s not obvious if I jekk jiena ninduna li hemm certu area li forsi ma tantx huwa viżibbi bhal kulhadd inhossi aktar proud like inkun aktar pumped dak il-hin biex nikteb u l-istat tal-mohh li qed inhosni proud li fhimta aktar min ma fehmiex aktar niktub mil-qalb

(Translation: if I notice that there is a certain area that is not so obvious and that no one else has picked on in the poem I feel more proud I am more pumped at that moment to write and my state of mind that I feel proud to have understood it better than those who did not I write more willingly)

I: is the pride you feel different from the set texts/

S: if you have a set text everyone will write the same thing so if there is something that is not so common or maybe it’s not straightforward and you think you are writing about it there’s – fl-ezami per ezempju jkollna unseen text nghid jiena qed nara hekk imma hadd iehor qed jara mod iehor dak il-fatt li ha jkun hemm differenza nghid mela tieghi ha jkun ahjar jew aghar min hadd iehor/ tipprova taghti aktar

(Translation: in the exam for example we have an unseen text so if I perceive it in a certain way but others read it differently so there will be a different then I wonder whether mind will be better or worse than others so you try to give more)

I: does that worry you/

S: no jekk nifhimha le il-fatt li tifhimha jew le ghax jekk ma tifhimhiex ha mmur lura jekk ha tifhimha tghid ha mmur il-quddiem

(Translation: no of I understand it no the fact that you understand or not because if you do not it holds you back but if you understand it well you do well)

I: in the syllabus and for the exam the word ‘appreciation’ is mentioned it says learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the literary criticism exercise - what do you understand by ‘appreciation’/ what do you think this word means/

S: maybe that you understand what the writer is trying to convey and you don’t just see the physical l-ewwel hağa li tara in the sense li tmur deeper into the poem

(Translation: you don’t just see not the physical the first thing you see but in the sense that you go deeper into the poem)

I: what do you think is expected of you/

S: to try and express your ideas by means of writing but in the same context you try to apply to the text and try to combine your ideas with the ideas of the writer

I: are you guided in any way to appreciate unseen poetry or prose/

S: it depends on the type of text because if the text then again uses difficult language it’s quite difficult to understand so I don’t think that writing (as in texts)
with the difficult language and difficult words is trying to make the student understand
it’s more like I’m showing how good I am at writing

I: can you compare the poems and prose texts of the tutorial and of the literary criticism/are they of a different level/
S: well sometimes they are easier in the tutorial but sometimes they are I wouldn’t say
harder because it depends on how you understand it because there is no hard text but
sometimes in the seminars they give us a more straightforward kind of text that you
understand immediately while in the tutorial you need to think about it maybe because
we do it at home but in the seminar we have 1 hour and we have to finish it in 1 hour
sometimes we don’t finish it and he tells us the general idea if there are five paragraphs
and we do the first two he just skips to the last paragraph

I: do you continue it the following week/
S: no because he tries to make everything fast

I: would you prefer if you did less poems but in more depth/
S: no no le ta ghax per ħezempij ċekk ghandna poem jew text u like fhimta m’hemmx
bżonn nogħod negħmel kollox fid-dettal hu ġitina kif ghandna nahdmuha u like ahjar jkoll li
ħafna ħezempi ħa different kinds like fhimthom kollha mhux daqshekk fid-dettal ħax
nippreferi għandi referenza per ħezempi dik għamilnija
(Translation: no no because for example if we have a poem or text and you have
understood it there isn’t the need to do everything in detail the teacher tells us how to
work it out and that we had better give lots of examples of different kinds like I have
understood the text in detail because I prefer to have references)

I: and the difference in level - does this worry you/
S: no because I prefer if at school they give us difficult texts so that in the exam I’m more
prepared

I: how do feel about writing about unseen texts/ do you feel more confident compared to
the set texts/
S: well I’m obviously more comfortable because there’s nothing that is by heart I have to
remember nothing but it’s a new section new ideas and there’s nothing on my mind so
it’s kind of a break between the set texts but then again it depends on the kind of text if
it’s difficult or not the level of comfort

I: what particular difficulties do you face when writing about an unseen text/
S: personally/ the grammar and the language and the sentence structure I try to improve
but it depends on time and how much I’m into it but I think I have the general idea of
how to write it but then I find difficulty in expressing myself sometimes it depends on the
mood actually

I: all right so this is at the language level - what about the conceptual level any challenges
here/
S: it all revolves around the difficulty of the text if I know what it is about and I have the
general idea of how to write it I have a general plan I stick to it and then I use my
ideologies

I: so how do you resolve these difficulties in language/
S: I personally try not to write long sentences so I don’t go out of point in the same paragraph and for example last year he used to tell us that in a paragraph you have to use a base sentence then you give your points and then in the conclusion of the paragraph you generalize with the first sentence you give so that you start one thing you talk about it and you end it so every paragraph is kind of an essay in itself so that you unite everything together

I: do you feel you have applied this throughout/
S: yes I think that’s the most l-aktar tip (hint) li użajt waqt l-eżami mux ghal-unseen biss imma ghal kul tip ta writing it was not for one section but for all
(Translation: I think that’s the most type of method I used during an exam not for the unseen only but for all type of writing)

I: what other tips were you given when writing unseen texts/
S: to pay attention to what the writer is trying to convey on a more abstract kind of level and to when writing I don’t stick to using the same words try to use synonyms and try to write in a different manner for different situations

I: how often are you provided with preparation for writing/ for example in seminars do you write often in class/
S: yes in lit crit we are actually it’s quite boring but it works we are given a text then we read it then he reads it then we write with him he writes all the things but he gets the ideas from us we are jgieghelna nitkellmu ahna imbaghad jekk ma jiletkellem hadd hu ha jiktibhom l-affarijiet ma nkunux nafu jekk ghandna niktuhom jew le fl-ahhar mil-ahhar mhux ser tohroġ l-istess wahda jekk hemm dak it-text u fhimtha jiena hemm bżonn niktbu l-informazzjoni/ ghax meta nistudja mhux ser indurhom l-affarijiet
(Translation: the teacher makes us talk about the text then if no one speaks up he will write the things that we do not know then if we write them down or not it does not really make a difference because at the end of the day the unseen text will different in the exam so if I understood the text we do in class do we really need to write the information/ because when I study I am not going to refer to such things)

I: don’t you think you need to write anything/
S: sakemm ma jgħdilniex xi haġa li nistgħu nużaw f’kollox jekk ha tkun informazzjoni fuq dik il-pożżija jew text mhux ser niktiba jien fil-fatt hafna mil-istudenti ma jmorruż ghal lezzjoni tal-crit fis-sense jghidu li jafu il-bażi ghax dejjem l-istess haġa naghmlu fis-sens ghandek text ha taqraha u nahdmu fuqha
(Translation: unless he tells us something that we can use for any text if it is information on a specific poem or text then I am not going to write it in fact many students do not attend crit lesson because they know that the base is always the same which we means we have a text and we work on it)

I: does that affect the attendance/
S: mhmm (yes) dik l-aktar lesson li l-istudenti ma jmorruż fis-sense personali u hbieb tieghi … u anki kif tapproccja jekk ghandek lecturer li dejjem jżomm l-istess ton ma jinvolviex ruhu biex iġib l-attenzjoni ta’ l-istudenti per eżempju jekk lecturer jogħtod jikteb magħhom il-fatt li it-teacher qeda tinvolvi ruha taghtipl contribution biex il-lesson tkun aktar interessanti kieku ehe tgħoġobni hafna milli ghax ghandek lecturer vera qeda hemm fuq u ahna qieghdin hemm isfel jekk lecturer tipprova iġġib equal level u
(Translation: mhm (yes) that is the lesson that students skive the most from personal expericen and talking to my friends even when the lecturer adopts the same tone and does not seem involved to capture the students’ attention for example if a lecturer writes with the students she involves herself and gives a contribution so that the lesson is more interesting I would like that more than if you have a lecturer who is detached from the students but one who tries to establish an equal footing with students and tries to involve herself in the lesson then the student will notice and wonder whether they should make more of an effort too)

I: so is the level of engagement of the lecturer as important as that of the student/

S: ezatt l-approach tal-lecturer lejn l-istudent trid turih li ghalkemm vera jien (lecturer) ahjar minnhekk fil-fatt kulhadd l-istess imma li jiena (refers to lecturers) qieghd nithallas biex inti titghalemm imma qieghed tipprova iġġib il-livell l-istess l-istudent qieghed ihossu ahjar hu

(Translation: exactly the lecturer’s approach towards the student you have to show them that even if you as a lecturer are getting paid for the student to learn trying to go down to the students’ level will help them feel better)

I: do you have other ideas – what activities would you be interested in during the crit sessions/

S: li mhux dejjem taghmel l-istess haġa fis-sens li il-lezzjoni jkun hemm xi haġa ġdida fiha halli l-istudent jkun looking forward biex imur ghal lesson mhux dejjem ghandek base u timxi fuqha (i.e. repetition) ghax tghid mmur jew ma mmurx nafu x’ser ġjiru u mu ha nitghalemm xejn ġdid dejjem l-istess haġa u ha tkun boring tipprova ticcassa

(Translation: that you don’t always do the same thing in the sense that there are new things in the lesson so that the student looks forward to go to the lesson you don’t always have a base and work on that (i.e. repetition) because you tell yourself that whether or not you go to the lesson we know what will take place so I think I would leaner nothing new because it is always the same procedure which will be boring and you end up uninterested)

I: going back to writing you said before about having a plan - so how do you plan your response to an unseen text/

S: I try to stick to the plan but then it’s all about the kind of text that is applied to cause it’s always the same you have a text you have this plan and you stick to it you try to apply it

I: let’s move on to feedback - does the teacher inform you what the focus of feedback is before writing and handing in the essay/

S: this year yes but last year we – he used to give us feedback on – in the lesson he used to give us feedback on what we wrote and we used to read about it and read the parts and he used to give us an assessment a kind of mark what he thinks he’s going to give us that moment and we didn’t talk about the next week’s assignment kien ġommna qisna free ghandek dan il-feedback ta’ llum aqrahli l-introduction ha nara x’ghamil u kulhadd kien jaghmel bicca tieghu kien jghidlina jekk morniex out of point jew le u kien jtina cans forsi nerqghu niktbuha u hekk u imma tal-ġimgha ta’ wara ma konna nagħmlu xejn

(Translation: we didn’t talk about the next week’s assignment he would leave it up to us we have his feedback on the task and he tells us to read the introduction so
that we show him what we did and everyone reads a part of their writing then the teacher
tells us whether we went out of point or not and he would give us the opportunity to
rewrite it)

I: which method do you prefer/
S: dis-sena nipreferiha kieku ghax dis-sena naqsmu il-lesson taghtina il-feedback tal-
gimgha l-ohra u imbaghad taghtina informazzjoni ta’ kif ghandna nittekiljaw tal-gimgha
id-diehla hekk inkun nafu - ġibt qishek l-informazzjoni ta’ x’ghandi u x’ ma ghandix
naghmel - mhux qed nahlu hafna hin fuq l-istess haġa - u il-problema ha terġa tkun
hemmhekk -jekk jien m’ghandix informazzjoni ta’ x’ghandi naghmel ghal gimgha id-
diehla jkolli l-istess problema tal-gimgha l-ohra hekk il-lesson maqsuma minn nofs

(Translation: I prefer the second year’s because we divide the lesson into two first she
gives us feedback on the last week’s lesson and then information about the next task to
tackle it is like you gather the information of what I need to do and what I should not do)

I: can you remember any feedback that your teachers gave you these two years/ maybe
any comments/
S: last year the structure of paragraphs in general and how to apply sentences one after
each other to create flow and this year the language that I use but I think I improved from
last year even the marks

I: did you you feel that the feedback was effective last year/
S: yes

I: did you understand the feedback last year/
S: yes (strong intonation) and if we felt we didn’t understand it he tried to create a personal
interaction so even if we had a class of 5 members and he used to spend the entire hour
giving us that kind of feedback he still created a sense of personal involvement between
teacher and student

I: are you given written or oral feedback/ you said that you received feedback during the
lesson last year so what was it/
S: we didn’t write anything in class but on the sheet of paper (essay) he used to explain
and then – kien jispjega dak il-hin u imbghad il-gimgha ta’ wara meta kien itina il-karta
kien jara il-biciet fejn tkun hadt żball kien jikteb fuqha u jispjega dak li kitbu halli ahna
nkunu nafu meta mmorru id-dar u naraw fejn hadna żball nkunu nafu ghal xiex kien qed
jrreferi

(Translation: he used to explain there and then the week after he would give the essay
back with the mistakes pointed out and explain his feedback so when we go home we
would know the mistake he is referring to)

I: which do you prefer/ the written or the oral/ which do you think is more useable/
S: jiddependi kemm tkun qieghed taghti kas jekk iva dak il-hin aktar oral fis-sense inti
milli tisma ha tibqa tiftakru u like ha tużah ghal darb’ohra imma jekk ma tkunx qed taghti
kas ahjar miktub ghax tmur id-dar u taqrah meta trid

(Translation: it depends on whether you pay attention or not if yes then oral feedback is
better because if you listen you remember and you use it for the next time but if not then
written feedback is better because you go home and read it whenever you want)
341 I: what do you think of the idea of receiving feedback in the form of digital media for
342 example the teacher records audio whilst correcting/ or maybe through email or other
343 forms of digital media/
344 S: qatt ma ghamilnijeja jiġifieri ma nistgħax nghid personali imma ma nahlśib li – meta
345 ghandek change mux kulhadd jaccetta b’mod posittiv I mean trid tindara il-haga biex
346 tghid jekk taħja jew le trid tagħmilha ammont ta’ snin imma I mean jekk jkollu lecturer u
347 tghidli ha nagħmel hekk (referring to using the above) nghid ha nara jekk nirrrelatax aktar
348 attenzjoni jew le kif għandi nidiqlo għaliha il-haga u nghid jekk tghoġobili il-haga nghid
349 all right imma jekk ma tghoġobiliex fl-ahhar mil-ahhar l-istudenti ma ghandomx choice
350 ghalkemm jagħtu dik il-possibbilta jew ideologiża ta’ possibbilta li tista titbiddel il-haga
351 mux ser titbiddel I mean mhux qiegħed wahdekk bħala student hawn hafna iktar kulhadd
352 jipprova jaddatta al-method ux
353 (Translation: we never tried it so I cannot personally say but I think that when there is
354 change not everyone will accept it positively I mean people have to get used to the thing
355 in order to say whether it is good or not one must try it for a number of years I mean if
356 my lecturer tells me she is going to use that new method I consider whether I am going
357 to relate to it and be more attentive and how I am going to approach it so if like it it’s ok
358 them but if I don’t ultimately the students would not have a choice even though there is
359 the ideology of possibility now whether something changes or not I mean you are not the
360 only student so the others might try to adapt to it)
361
362 I: going back to feedback comments you said you were given the comment 'to achieve
363 more flow' do you understand what that means/
364 S: yes because fis-sens spjegali dak il-hin bi kliem aktar semplici x’għandi nagħmel allura
365 imbad iktar nifhem darb’ohra ha nerġġa nifhem
366 (Translation: yes because he explained there and then in more straightforward language
367 what I have to do so then I better understand for the next time)
368
369 I: are any instances when you didn't understand the language of feedback/
370 S: personalment jekk mhux ser nifhem ha nistaqsi dak il-hin imma jkun hemm min le per
371 eżempu min jisthi jghid ha nidiher injorant quddiem l-ohrajn fis-sens fl-ahhar mil-ahhar
372 għalik dan u għal eżami tieghek
373 (Translation: personally if I do not understand I will ask there and then but there are
374 students who do not for example those who are shy or concerned that they will appear
375 ignorant in front of other but ultimately it is for your own good and for the exam)
376
377 I: in general do you remember and retain teacher’s feedback/
378 S: yes
379 I: and did you feel it was useful/
380 S: yes yes
381
382 I: before you said that you were given the opportunity to revise the essay or a part of the
383 essay - did you do that/
384 S: ehm in generali qatt ma mort out of point fl-estrem li mhux ser nghaddi bħala marka u
385 iktar kien jagħmilha bħala friendly approach biex itina assessment tajjeb peress li kien
386 jghodd għal-eżami imma kienet tkun hekk ċorsi xi darba jew tnejn nagħmluha f’sena
387 wahda biex itina ic-cans li you redeem yourself for the mark
388 (Translation: in general I have never gone out of point in the extreme that I think I
389 won’t pass he used to give us that opportunity as a friendly approach to give us a
I: how important is the mark at the end of the day/ do you feel it is more important than the feedback/
S: ifhimni is-sena l-ohra kien differenti ghax l-assessment kien jghodd ghal marka ta’ l-ezami imma dis-sena fis-sens ikun hemm hafna studenti jghidulek mhux ser naghem l-assignment ghax iktar nippreferi nahdem per eżempju personali m’ghandix taq’lam jien qieghed żewg essays lura fit-tutorial u ma najsibx li ha ntihom ghax ghandi il-mock tests m’hemmx xi haġa li ha tmissa il-marka li hi importanti fis- sens int ghandek xi haġa ha timxi fuqha m’ghandix importantza – (intonation change) ghanda importantza ghal practice mhux ghax traskuraġni
(Translation: last year it was different because the assessment counted for the mark of the exam but this year (2nd year) there are many student who do not do their assignments because they prefer studying for the mock tests instead of writing essays so they don’t bother if they fall behind on their tasks it is important for practice though to do the work but it is not carelessness if one doesn’t)

I: is it true that students know that for assessment written work is not going to count that much/
S: kiekku is-sistema per eżempju ghandek l-assessment u ha terġa tiehu I don’t know 30% minnha l-istudenti ha jaghut aktar fis-sens ghandek mariki extra ghal-eżami eżatt ghax fl-ahhar mil-ahhar l-eżami li ha tara ikunu qishom practicals
(Translation: it would be better if the system included the school’s work so let’s say you take 30% of the work done and count that as part of your final exam they would be like practicals – he refers to the science subjects that count practical experiments as part of the A Level examination mark)

I: did the feedback given to you allow you to develop further ideas for future writing/ did you apply feedback provided/
S: yes even in the present writing I have Sociology A level and English is needed to write a better essay and the structure is the same so you have to follow step in order to create a flowing essay

I: which errors in language did you feel are easier to resolve than others/
S: jiddpendi mit-tip ta’ writing jew xi haġa specifika bhal spelling jew bhal structure hemm tghid jekk ghandek xi haġa ġenerali li ha tuża ghal kull essay toqghod iktar attent tipprova tbiddilha iktar malajr ara jekk ghandek xi haġa differenti bhal language use mhux dejjem ha tuża l-istess method
(Translation: it depends on the type of writing if it is something specific like spelling or something like structure then that is something you can apply to every type of essay so you can apply more careful and try to change more quickly)

I: is there anything that stops you from applying feedback to future writing/
S: personalment dejjem naghmel l-istess żballi allura irrid niftakar noqghod attent ghal certu sezzjonijiet jigiifieri nafu li ghandi żball u dak il-fatt li nafu li ghandi żball xi kultant jista jservi kontrija stess ghax nafu li dejjem ghandi żball f’sezzjoni ta’ writing ha noqghod aktar attent fuqha nispicca nahli aktar hin fuqu minflok naghmel essay fi tlett kwarti siegħa nispicca naghmel saghtejn u nofs tlieta u xorta jekk ingib marka
I: is there a link between one crit essay and another?
S: naħseb ehe huma they’re not continuous pero ghandek general plan u taħdem fuqha kull tip ta’ unseen text dejjem ha timxi fuqu

I: when you receive the marks how do you feel you perform in crit compared to other essays?
S: personally I think I do better because the fact that in the exam you have a limited time and you have a break from writing something by heart personally I think that I do better then again it depends on the type of essay and difficulty how you think you wrote

I: do you think examiners would be more lenient in crit?
S: ehe naħseb ghax huma jkollhom f’mohhom li dan kollox bl-ament (referring to set texts) u imbaghad ghandek l-idea li fi crit they are free li ha jiktbu xi haġa min mohhom jien naħseb li meta m’ghandezx xi haġa bl-ament imma li ha tikteb inti iktar ha toħroġ kemm inti bravu

I: do they expect more?
S: le ma naħsibx (no I don’t think so)

I: ok finally is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback?
S: *forsi il-manjera ta’ kif they approach you mhux kulhadd l-istess ikun hemm min hu boring jew aktar energetiku fl-ahhar mil-ahhar taqa fuq kif lecturers jaraw l-istudenti u jaraw il-lesson jekk jarawha bhala xi haġa li just qieghed nithallas ghaliha like m’ghedtx naghti dik l-extra tieghi innifsi kieku nkun lecturer nghid nippreferi sejjer ghax xoghol imma mhux xoghol (as in tedious work) li narah xi haġa li tiehu gost taghmel inti (referring to lecturers) ha thossok tajeb u l-istudenti jindunaw u ha jhossuhom aħjar inti ha toħloq hiberija ma’ l-istudenti u fl-istess hin ghandez il-livell ta’ jien qieghed nghalmek u int qed tighallem imma hemm hiberija dak jaghmel differenza

(Translation: * maybe the manner with which they approach students not everyone is the same there are some whose methods are more boring and others more energetic but ultimately it is also how lecturers perceive the students and the lesson if they consider it as something they are just getting paid for then they might consider it tedious and not something they enjoy then the students notice but they will feel better if the
lecturer tries to establish a friendly rapport with the students while at the same time there is the idea that the lecturer is also there to teach then that would make a difference) I: in fact you reminded me of the tone of feedback - how the teacher gives feedback not only the language of feedback used but if it’s constructive criticism praise or critique – how important are these elements/

S: ehe ha nghidlek jekk jiena ghandi xi haża miktuba irrid marka ha ttini marka u ġib marka hażina iridek tghidi fejn more hażin imma b’mod mhux criticism bhall ghamilt hażin u daqshek iridek tghidi fejn mort hażin imma minghajr ma tiskoraggiżi ghax inti fl-ahhar mil-ahhar trid tipprova iġġegħlu ihossu ahjar l-istudent biex vera imur tajjeb jekk vera ghandek ghal qalbek il-marka tieghu jekk jiena ghandi xi haża hażina u għidlti jien ha nieħu gost li għedlti imma li tghidli x’ghamilt hażin u kif nista nimprovja irrid inkun naf kif immur il-quddiem kif ha mmur ahjar

(Translation: let me tell you if I have written something I want a mark so the lecturer will give me a mark now let’s say it’s a low mark I want him or her to tell me why not in a critical way as though I did something wrong now I want the lecturer to tell me why I didn’t perform well but not in a way that discourages me because ultimately the aim is to help the students feel good enough to do better if lecturers really have the students’ progress at heart it is not enough to point out the errors but to explain how to improve)

I: did you always feel the mark was justified after the explanation of the lecturer/

S: ifhimni jekk iġġib marka hażina mhux ser tiehu gost biha fis-sens ha tgerger imma imbghad jekk ha t hemmi ghal xiec mort hazin u kif stajt mort ahjar ehe naccetta ovvjament nipprova nġib marka ahjar darb’ohra mhux ser noqghod ingerger u nehel hemm irrid nara kif ha nimprovja

(Translation: if I obtain a low mark I won’t be too pleased I might grumble but if the lecturer explains why and how I could have performed better then yes I will accept it obviously I will try to get a better mark next time so I won’t get complain but do what I can to improve)

I: ok thank you

S: you’re welcome

(excuses himself for having spoken in Maltese – sorry talli kellimtek bil
Appendix 16 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S4 (Ellie)

I: thank you for agreeing to this interview - the first set of questions relate to your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: ehm * cause in my O levels I really did well both English language and English literature I got a 2 (equivalent to a B+) so and one of my favourite subjects was always English

I: why was it a favourite/
S: the teacher was very let’s just say friendly but I always loved Shakespeare and the way he spoke about love or it was something personal

I: were you influenced by the way the teachers approached literature/
S: not really I was only influenced by the language teacher because she was really outgoing and I really loved her lessons

I: so you had two different teachers right/
S: we had different teachers in secondary school yes one for language and one for literature poems another teacher

I: so this wasn’t in a state school
S: no it was a church school St Dorothy’s we had three different teachers for English for prose and * for poetry different teachers and for language we had a different teacher and then for poetry crit – the same one as poetry

I: talk about your experience in literature from Form 3 up to now – how has that experience developed/ did you grow to love and appreciate it/
S: in a way yes however there were poems like A Small Dragon – those I used to love them but now it’s more like ehm war poems and you like * how am I going to say it/ you appreciate it more because it’s more of a realistic version of literature so some of the poems I really loved them like ehm that one Greater Love I really loved

I: which are the poems you say you love/
S: their theme and their realism in them like I forgot them there was something related to blood how a soldier shows love more to war rather than between two persons

I: was this in secondary school/
S: no this was here I guess I appreciate it more now since we go in deeper detail and all

I: so reading for pleasure – have you done much reading for pleasure in the last two to three years/
S: I don’t have time to read anymore I mean I try to read a chapter every night but it never really works out

I: but if you have the time are there any types of text that you like reading/
S: mostly romance and fiction and science fiction

I: do you read poetry in your spare time/
S: depending on which poetry
I: would you seek it/
S: not really I’m not such a fan of poetry I’m like if I have to study it I will and I won’t be bothered by studying it but looking up for it online and just reading it I wouldn’t
I: do you associate poetry with studying/
S: yes cause then once I read a poem I feel I have to study it or analyse it
I: your experience with unseen texts during the seminars – what are the methods your teachers use when teaching literary texts/
S: ehm in prose she tells us how to divide the essay she tells us to do 2 introductions a body which is divided into 3 paragraphs and then a conclusion at the end and sometimes she tells us to write the conclusion before and then she tells us how to plan it to bring out points about it and underline some adjectives and nouns which help us to understand prose better that’s the way I think and poetry she tells us to look for literary devices like similes metaphors and those and she tells us to pick the theme from different words he chose for example if he used many war vocabulary like that’s the theme most of the time
I: so what do you do during a typical crit seminar/
S: basically first she tells us something in general about what we’re gonna do then she tells us to read it alone then we read it together and then she gives us like 30 minutes to analyse it on our own and then she tells us how we’re gonna divide it and then she tells us what we could write in both introductions different points in the body she tell us in the introduction we write a general analysis of what it is and then in the second introduction we mention some of the themes and some literary devices that are used and in the body we analyse it in depth
I: and do you do any writing in class/
S: yes for example we have this pack we have different prose and poems in it and we write basically points and the points she gives us on the board
I: when you discuss together do you have a chance to give your views/
S: she comes around and sees what we’re doing if we’re on the wrong track she tells us to focus a bit more on that point so that’s actually the voice that we give in the lesson
I: all right
S: and sometimes if we have valid points she tells us to read them in front of the class so that we can express ourselves better and help others to improve
I: do you do a poem per class or a text per lesson/
S: yes we do one lesson prose and another lesson poetry we alternate
I: what about last year’s method – was it similar/
S: * since we have different teachers I find it quite different as in last year’s sir was (facial expression – seems to frowned) this year’s is better for me I mean the method because last year he used to put us off a lot whenever we did something wrong he used to like give us judgemental looks and so on he never really helped me because most of the lesson we talked and we read the texts and scribbled some notes
I: are there any other activities you do in class when reading unseen texts?

S: mostly that pattern mostly we work on our own in the first three lessons we worked with other people just to interact more with different people I guess to make us feel more at ease

I: which do you prefer?

S: I think I prefer working with other people seeing other people’s point of view of how they look at it – it helps me see it from a wider scale

I: what type of text do you read during the seminars – do you remember any specific poems?

S: The Shortness of Life eh * there were ta’ but * Mr Bleaney that was really nice eh

I: what makes a poem memorable?

S: describing in a very detailed way cause I love descriptions and maybe it would have a sense of mystery or end in a mysterious way for a person to keep thinking about it and have his own way of conclusion associating it with love (laughs)

I: so areas of interest?

S: realistic yes yes but then like * like the one I mentioned before that A Small Dragon I loved that one as well so

I: so what are the poems that you feel comfortable reading/ how would you categorise them?

S: the ones that are not associated to poetry for sure I mean they don’t write about poetry I mean realism like about children for example a child that now has grown up and his family is for example jien naf his mother is dead and he writes about his mother and their memories they shared together mostly realism I guess

I: and the ones that are difficult to read?

S: difficult reading * ehm when I guess those poems that have different ** that first give you an impression that they’re writing about something and then he changes completely so you’re like * I would be totally lost so I would find that really difficult

I: how does that make you feel about the exam?

S: eh really ** I mean I’m scared for the poetry and prose crit for the exam cause I don’t know what’s coming out and if I interpret it badly I’m like on the wrong track and can lose a lot of marks I’m really scared

I: in fact in the syllabus, learning to appreciate literary texts is considered central to the exercise – what do you understand by ‘appreciation’/ what do you think it means?

S: analyzing a poem or prose in a very detailed manner (almost rising intonation and smiling out of uncertainty) that’s how I’ve learnt it cause at school we always used to say a critical appreciation so whenever the teacher used to say an appreciation I would normally associate it with criticizing a poem or prose

I: so that’s what you think is expected of you

S: I think so cause in a way if you’re analyzing a poem you’re appreciating it because you’re giving importance to it
I: so in what way do you give importance to a poem?

S: by reading it over and over again and trying to figure out what the poet was thinking when writing the poem and what ideas he had in mind what he was writing about the themes he wanted to express

I: how are you guided to appreciate unseen texts?

S: the structure you mean?

I: I mean have you been guided to achieve this?

S: * I think it was done indirectly like writing it in this way first reading the poem then picking out different words and then saying what the theme is and then saying for example if there was a caesura alliteration personification oxymoron hyperbole and those and then writing a conclusion so I guess that’s the basic structure

I: so do you think it’s like a formula then?

S: in a way I’m guessing that you have to stick to the same process

I: how does that make you feel about the exam?

S: better I guess but I’m mostly scared regarding the themes and if I’m on the wrong track of what it is about that scares me

I: and how do you feel about this whole process?

S: I think it’s essential because it guides you on what to write but for example if there wouldn’t be a lot of literary devices basically you’re in a bit of trouble cause then you wouldn’t know what to write about

I: are there other strategies that you use when you read an unseen poem or prose text?

S: ehm I was once taught that after reading the poem you ask basic questions for example why did he write that certain word/ do I like it for example/ I give my own point of view on it and then compare it to what he was thinking so that would help me understand it better and for example if he was talking about himself so why was he talking about himself in that manner/ you ask basic questions to yourself associate it with the poem

I: ok and when you compare the texts chosen for tutorial tasks – do you think they’re more difficult than the ones you do in criticism?

S: * in the seminars they’re quite easy tutorials I find them a bit hard

I: so what’s your attitude towards writing about unseen texts?

S: I mean I say if I like it or not/

I: how do you feel about it?

S: eh * I prefer writing about a set text rather than an unseen one cause you would know what you’re going to expect therefore you’re like unsettled about what’s going to come out

I: what are the challenges that you face when writing about an unseen text?

S: content wise mostly cause I am really preoccupied by the fact that if I get the wrong impression of the poem the whole essay is going to be bad so except for a couple of metaphors but then you’ll be completely on the wrong track if you don’t grasp the themes well
I: How do resolve these challenges?
S: (laughs) I don’t really

I: Is there anything specific that you have improved upon in unseen texts?
S: Ehm I’ve improved in my vocabulary because I’ve grown in English with different vocabulary because of the way – we speak more in English we hear other people speak in English so it helps with the vocabulary and the way they speak so yes I’ve feel I’ve grown in English

I: What have you done to improve your vocabulary?
S: I don’t know sometimes I try to read different books which are like – what’s the word – they suggest books which are good for and which help us in English therefore I try to borrow them or buy them and I try to read them

I: Are there any areas that you think you’ve ‘fixed’ / errors that you think you’ve seen to over the two years?
S: * I’ve arranged in the general essays like descriptive I feel more comfortable writing them now ehm Shakespeare I guess was always my favourite and also the poems so

I: What do you think are the areas that are more difficult to sort out?
S: Unseen poems and prose

I: And in unseen poems and prose what are the type of errors that are more difficult to resolve?
S: The style you write in for example if the examiner wouldn’t like the style you’re writing in and the way you express yourself about the poem I guess it’s a bit hard to change that

I: When writing about unseen texts did you have lessons in the seminars which guided you specifically to write about unseen texts?
S: Where she told us what to write in an essay you mean?

I: Yes the process of writing and the structure of the essay
S: Yes in the first two lessons she gave use a guideline and then we started reading poems and associated them with the way she taught us and therefore she gave us an example on how to write

I: Did she give you any models to follow?
S: Yes but not a model essay she gave us points

I: So when you plan your response to an unseen text what model do you follow? You mentioned one where you write two introductions
S: Yes I find it quite easy to work with but sometimes I don’t do two introductions I just add them merge them together

I: What does your teacher advise you to avoid when writing?
S: Ehm she tells us not to narrate the poem and say the meaning of it all the time like you have to analyse it not narrate it because the examiner would know what the poem is about so you don’t have to * you lose a lot of marks if you just narrate it
I: **anything else/**
S: to not give our opinion about the poem

I: **but you said you like doing that**
S: I like associating my opinion with his to see what he would be thinking about

I: **with regards to the layout does she tell you what to avoid in the layout/**
S: she never really told us I guess because she just gave us one structure and to stick to it

I: **we’ll move on to feedback now – the focus is mostly on the tutorials and the way you receive feedback and the way you adopt or use the feedback given – before you write your essay does the teacher inform you what the focus of feedback will be/**
S: yes she tells us what to stick to and she gives us pointers what to write in the essay and yes she helps us figure it out

I: **how does this help you organize your essay/**
S: because I would know what to write about

I: **in relation to what/ the layout or the content/**
S: both I guess more associated with the content on what to write cause she gives us different ideas and what we can write about

I: **do you think it would help if you’re expected to write the essay on your own without preparation/**
S: not really I mean in the exam it has to be that way but before with the teacher helping us it’s an easier way because she’ll be guiding us and helping us to know what to write about in the exam it helps me

I: **so even if in the exam you have to be on your own then**
S: yes cause I would like to be prepared with the help she would have given me

I: **all right so what kind of feedback does your teacher give you in criticism essays/ can you maybe give examples of comments/**
S: to link sentences to make it more coherent *

I: **so if you had to identify your weaknesses in unseen texts what would they be/**
S: vocabulary coherence those I guess ehm sometimes I don’t get the point of the poem I feel more at ease writing a crit on prose rather than on poetry

I: **why/**
S: because – I don’t know why – I feel more comfortable doing prose because I think you have more to read therefore it helps you to figure it out what it is more about poem is like a small bit and then you have to stick to it and then if you don’t get it

I: **what are your strengths when writing about unseen texts/**
S: yes we mostly did essays on unseen texts this year and it helped me because before I had no idea what to write about and this year she really helped me

I: **so you felt that having had more essays would have helped/**
S: yes it helped way more
I: and were they continuous/ one after the other/
S: no no

I: do you think that would be more effective/
S: if we had more after each other/ I guess so because you would improve more * cause they are more isolated you would forget what she would have told you and if they were after each other you would stick to what she told you and then maybe help improve the essay

I: would the feedback be more applicable/
S: yes to the next essay

I: and immediate/
S: yes

I: is there a disadvantage of having essays on crit continuously/
S: writing a prose crit isn’t always that nice I guess but it would help a student to improve in their techniques

I: so would the feedback be more formative/
S: yes I guess so

I: as it is do you feel it is summative so the feedback is on an essay in isolation or do you think there is a link between essays/
S: depending on what type of poem for example if one is completely different than the other I guess it’s not really associated but if you have poems kind of related to the same topic it would be really informative

I: you said students wouldn’t think it would be so nice –
S: because for example for me it’s easier to write about poems I would have studied in class because I would know what to write about and in an exam you have only there and then to write it without any notes without having any knowledge about it just have to give your own views on what you think – not giving your opinion what there is written obviously therefore a student wouldn’t really – for me I wouldn’t really like it but it’s there you still have to do it and if someone helps me by giving me information it would help

I: do you feel you have had enough practice in writing about unseen texts/
S: I never think it’s enough because you don’t know what to expect

I: what type of feedback are you provided with/ written oral or both/
S: both she gives us both written and oral cause first she writes points on what good things you did and bad things and then in class she calls us next to her and gives us ehm advice on how we could improve in our essay

I: which do you prefer/
S: both cause they really help me when I go home and for example I would be doing another tutorial which would be the same I would read the points she would have given me cause maybe I - since they’re not continuous I would maybe forget what
she had told me and therefore I would remember (implies by reading the written)

I: so does the written feedback help you/
S: yes and even before the exam I always do this I read the points she had given me therefore I wouldn’t do so badly in the exam

I: do you notice a pattern in the feedback/
S: yes sometimes the feedback would be repetitive I try to improve on them but it’s not that easy sometimes

I: so are you aware of the shortcomings to address/
S: mhm (yes)

I: what other comments or suggestions does the teacher give you/
S: not expressing myself well because sometimes I find it difficult to express myself in essays and using a vaster vocabulary not always seeking the same words that’s my problem mainly

I: what do you think about the idea of receiving feedback in a different format/ through digital media
S: visualizing it for example/

I: through podcast – audio – for example the teacher records whilst she’s correcting
S: what do you mean whilst she’s correcting/

I: a podcast is audio
S: ah she says what a person could have done better for example in a sentence/
I: yes
S: ah it would be easier I guess

I: what do you think would be the advantage of that/
S: knowing what you did wrong in the whole essay not just points

I: what about Skype or email
S: with the teacher/ (intonation indicates surprise and incredulity) it would be more student friendly I guess for example it’s a disadvantage for her obviously it would help the student I guess if example you’re writing an essay and you’re stuck and therefore maybe Skype call the teacher it would be more (smiles) it would be more familiarized maybe even writing an essay together

I: so you said you don’t have any preference in relation to oral or written – what’s an advantage of oral feedback/
S: you might for example remember what she would have told you and therefore – both have their advantages I guess writing is somewhat easier because it’s there therefore any time you can check

I: do you always understand the teacher’s feedback/
S: mostly yes

I: do you always understand what the comments mean/
S: yes but I find it difficult to adapt sometimes
I: do you remember the feedback/
S: most of the time I try to
I: what’s the difficulty/ what impedes you from adopting the feedback/
S: applying it cause I find it difficult to * express myself as I said before so I wouldn’t be that free therefore
I: what do you think can help you to apply it/
S: reading if I had the time
I: do you have opportunities to write in the seminar/
S: not the whole essay no we only did one and then she corrected it – maybe it could help writing an essay with her with the whole class with the teacher writing it together maybe that could be done in tutorials because it’s a smaller group
I: have you ever had the need to revise an essay and to submit a second version/
S: yes cause maybe I wouldn’t have understood it well or maybe I would have drifted from the title and gone out of point and would have to do it again
I: have you done it/
S: yes I’ve done it I think once not once
I: did that help you to improve/
S: cause the teacher then helped me what to write about therefore I understood what she had in mind
I: what about the mark – did you understand why the mark was given the way it was/
S: yes cause she would have given me a reason why she gave me that mark and I would understand that reason
I: what do you think about last year’s feedback/
S: not much feedback was given she just we just had to read it in class one person after the other we just gave us the essay she gave us the mark and sometimes she would scribble something down like more coherence something like that but just basics she never gave us in detail what we did wrong I guess she just marked the essays
I: and does that affect you now/
S: I mean this year’s tutorial helped me more obviously because last year we never really did anything
I: are there any errors that overall you feel you’ve been successful in resolving/
S: ** I mean I just say what I’ve improved on/ improving not actually resolving poetry I guess cause this year it’s easier eh * The Handmaid’s Tale I find it a bit difficult I haven’t grasped it yet those mainly
I: any errors in language/
S: improved not resolved yet I’m trying to stick to coherence now cause I know that’s a weak spot of mine
I: how do you perform in your criticism essays compared to other set text essays?
S: depending on which poem or prose it would have been if it’s something I liked or understood then I would do better
I: all right that’s it thank you
Appendix 17 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S5 (Chantelle)

I: thank you for taking part in this interview – the first set of questions are about your understanding and experience of literature why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: I chose English because at my previous school I had a really good teacher and she made me want to pursue it at Advanced level her take on Shakespeare and poems were very ehm very surprising and I enjoyed her lessons so I decided to pursue it
I: what do you mean by surprising/
S: ehm her techniques that she used with the poems she used she gave us the background of how they were written and why and what they were talking about before we used to analyse the poem in great detail
I: so what about your experience from Form 3 up to now was this part of your experience/
S: in Form 3 I had a different teacher she pushed us harder to in poetry and prose and in Form 4 and Form 5 I had another teacher and we did Shakespeare as well and she – both styles were very different because one pushed us and the other sort of * she let us explore
I: which did you prefer/
S: I preferred the second method also I used to like her as well
I: how do study literature/
S: I write everything on the book so when I’m studying I’m rewrite everything that I would have written in chronological sequence usually the page is scribbled with words but I find it very helpful to write everything down
I: ok what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years/
S: I read everything ehm I mostly like adventure and science fiction but I also dramatic novels
I: what about poetry/ do you read poetry for pleasure/
S: no I don’t read poetry (laughs as though embarrassed)
I: why is that/
S: I don’t know * whenever we have a task I enjoy doing it but I don’t picture myself reading poetry I don’t know why I’ve never read poetry but if we have a task I still enjoy doing it I just don’t enjoy reading it
I: let’s move on to experience with unseen texts during the seminars what methods do or did your teachers use or used during the literary criticism seminars/
S: last year we had a different teacher and he used to do a poem read it to us and analyse it with us this year ehm our teacher has a booklet and she gives us a task she lets us read it first by ourselves and um and we analyse it by ourselves and then talk about it with the person next to us so we compare our ideas with one another
I: which method do you prefer?
S: I prefer this year I find it that I understand more of the passage that we are given rather than last year’s

I: does it help to work individually first and then work with the person next to you?
S: I think it does because first I understand - I try to understand it and if I don’t I can see if the other person – what the other person’s ideas are so I can like if she writes something I say ahh I see where that came from

I: are there other activities that you do during the seminar?
S: sometimes we are asked to do a plan of how to write the essay first the paraphrase and then go into the detail in the body themes and style and the types of diction and analyse it thoroughly but we don’t write the whole essay we just write ideas and quotes we could use in those types of sections

I: so that’s for writing an essay – you work on a plan
S: hmm yes

I: you said you have a booklet – can you remember any poems that you thought were challenging to read or more comfortable reading?
S: there was a difficult one by Elizabeth Jennings ehm I don’t remember what it was though – sometimes I find prose very difficult to write about

I: what does ‘difficult’ mean for you?
S: sometimes I don’t understand what it means what it’s really written about I get confused for example I think of it in one way and it’s completely different what it is actually about so I sometimes I find that very challenging

I: does that worry you – that you have a different interpretation?
S: it sometimes does because in the exam if the meaning is different I would get the whole essay wrong but in poetry it doesn’t happen that much in prose it’s more difficult to understand

I: which is most difficult to write about?
S: prose – poetry I find it much easier than prose I think in prose since it’s a passage I don’t know either I take it for granted that it’s going to be easy but I find it hard because the meaning I don’t understand immediately

I: in the syllabus the word ‘appreciation’ is used – that students should write an appreciation in the exam what do you understand by this term/ what do you think it means?
S: I think it means that you’re given something that you’ve never seen before so you are trying to show in your own ideas what it’s actually about so you kind of appreciate the piece

I: how are you guided to appreciate/ is this given attention when reading unseen texts?
S: * I think it is ehm in my point of view/ (laughs a bit) I think I guess when I’m reading a text I try to understand what it’s about so I guess I appreciate it while I’m reading it so you have to appreciate cause you have to understand you have to go in detail while you’re reading it
I: you said that when you study literature you write notes and annotate – what about unseen texts? what strategies do you use when reading?

S: ehm first I read it twice before I start writing and then I underline quotes personification metaphors ehm things that I see and I write – if I understand I write the meaning – what the hidden meaning behind it really is on the sides and then when I start the essay I try to find the introduction and ehm * I try not to go chronologically but sometimes I find it hard because since it’s written down stanza by stanza I tend to go in that order so everything that I would have written down I try to include it in a longer version in the essay

I: we mentioned the texts chosen for the seminars - what do you think about the unseen texts chosen for the tutorial tasks – are they different or similar in difficulty/

S: ehm it depends because sometimes we do a really difficult one during crit but in tutorial essays we had one that wasn’t that hard and the other one I find it was quite hard when it came to writing about it so I guess it depends on certain passages that are chosen for us

I: do you think that your understanding of the text will vary from one text to another (confirming what she said)

S: nods in agreement

I: so does that worry you (for the exam)/

S: I think yes sometimes I worry because it’s – you get a different interpretation every time that’s because it’s unseen you don’t know what’s coming out and how I will understand it

I: do you think that makes the unseen component more difficult than the set texts/

S: I think it’s more challenging to have an unseen text –prose or poetry – because when you have a novel or a group of poems you study them more in depth obviously so to have an unseen text is something that is new that is never seen before so it’s quite challenging

I: all right now we’re going to move on to writing - how do you feel about writing about unseen texts/

S: it depends on the poem or passage we’re writing about either I love it or either I hate it – if I hate it I feel that I’m not writing well if I like it I tend to flow

I: so your ability to write will depend on your response to the text

S: yes it depends on whether I understand it or not because if I don’t understand it I get a little bit ehm frustrated and I don’t write well

I: you said that you love or you hate now what are the factors that make you love a poem/

S: the aspect of understanding it immediately you get what the poet is writing about so you tend to relate immediately and start writing and hate is when I don’t understand it immediately

I: so what are other challenges / difficulties that you face when writing about an unseen text/
S: I find it difficult to do an introduction and a conclusion because the body I know what I want to write about and I know what I need to include and everything but in the introduction and conclusion sometimes I have no idea what to write cause you have to make an introduction to the poem I find it very difficult

I: all right so going slightly back to the teacher’s method – does the teacher prepare you how to write an introduction?
S: our teacher does cause she tells us to write a paraphrase then you write another you do a second introduction but I tend to go immediately to the body so I only do the paraphrase and I don’t go into much detail in the paraphrase because I think that then I might include aspects that should be in the body so I get a little confused with the introduction and conclusion

I: how do you resolve these challenges/
S: sometimes I tend to write the body first on a rough paper and then see how to conclude but the introduction sometimes I just do a little short introduction which is a little paraphrase because I get worried that I will go into too much detail in the first paragraph

I: are there any other methods that your teacher guides you towards when writing about an unseen text/
S: mostly it’s just doing a plan of the essay but it’s much easier if you do a plan before because you know exactly what you’re going to write about

I: you mentioned something about the chronological approach and that you try to avoid it so does your teacher advise you against it/
S: ehm it depends because last – I think it was last lesson – she told us – we did we went over the examiners’ report and it said that most students went in a chronological approach and some of them it said that some of them that did the chronological approach was good and others it was bad so I got a little confused as to whether I should do it or not so I guess I try not to do it

I: so it’s not completely out of the question – it’s a matter of doing it
S: right or wrong

I: did she explain what the right way is/
S: ehm I don’t quite remember what she said I think she said to not follow it exactly because when you’re writing an essay you should connect each paragraph to each other so I guess eh if the poet is talking about a theme in one paragraph and shows in another they are connected so you can’t go chronologically every time

I: so let’s move on to the feedback process – does the teacher inform you what the focus of the feedback is before handing in the essay/
S: no I’ve never had a teacher who told us they’re going to focus on one thing before the essay last year she usually just gathered the essays and corrected them and she didn’t – none of the teachers used to tell us they’re going to focus on aspects

I: do you think there are benefits of knowing what the focus of feedback is before writing the essay/
S: ehm * it depends because if the teacher tells you she is going to focus on one thing you’re going to tend to write about that one thing and go into more detail on that and I guess in my personal opinion I think I would probably focus on that one thing and the other things I wouldn’t go into much detail so it wouldn’t really be a good essay

I: in the seminars do you get to do much practice in writing/
S: we do a lot of practical work each lesson we analyse either a poem or prose passage and sometimes during the lessons she asks us to write a plan and she’ll correct it and collect it to see if our plan would evolve in a good essay or not

I: do you get much practice to write essays/
S: in the tutorial we get to write essays more

I: what does your teacher give you feedback on in your criticism essays/
S: mostly sentence structure and to go into more specific detail rather than the general I guess it’s both language and the ideas

I: can you remember any examples of the language of feedback used by your teachers/ such as comments to improve your writing
S: I don’t remember quite well but it’s to write more flowing sentences I guess and to not write really long sentences to sort of distinguish between one thing and another so in one paragraph I shouldn’t talk about 3 things I should ehm separate them in different paragraphs so I should I could go in more depth or detail

I: in a typical essay how many types of comments does the teacher give you/
S: a lot of comments which is good because then while I’m studying I can read what the comments are and I can actually get better in writing a much better essay so the idea of comments is really good because last year our teacher didn’t used to give us a lot of detailed comments and it makes me want to try harder to make a good essay so I tend to force myself to do better because last year I used to say ah I got this (mark) ok then – I used to get the same mark each week so I didn’t use to bother to work that hard but this year like if I don’t do well I try to get over it and force myself

I: so if you compare the marks you got this year and last year – would you say there is a difference/
S: last year they used to be over 10 so I used to get like 7s but this year example I get like 19 on 30 for the unseen so I force myself to get at least above 20 so I would be better

I: do you perform better in the unseen or in the set texts/
S: the set texts I always do better because you have the book and take ideas from it but the unseen I don’t do that bad actually

I: can you give an approximate number of the comments you get/
S: more than 3

I: do you remember the comments/
S: sometimes I don’t remember all of them but for example if my teacher tells me to go into more detail I try for example in the next essay I’ll try to go in more depth

I: the type of feedback that your teachers provide you with – is it written or oral/ is it both/

S: ehm last year we used to have written and she didn’t use to go into much depth of what we did wrong so I guess – this year we have both oral and written so it’s much better to have both of them if you don’t remember one thing you remember ‘ah she told me’

I: so how does the oral complement the written/

S: I find that the oral I immediately process it so I still remember it – the written I read it but sometimes I forget I read the comments but I don’t remember but then sometimes before an essay example if we had an unseen text and we have another one I usually read the comments before and try to make a good essay out of the comments

I: what do you think about the idea of receiving feedback in the form of digital media/

S: I’ve never had anyone give me feedback over digital media so I don’t know but I think personally that oral is much better because you understand what she’s talking about so um I guess I prefer oral rather than digital because if I have an email I’ll probably just read it once and forget about it so it’s better to have something that you can remember

I: what other benefits does oral feedback are there/

S: cause during oral comments it’s actually pointed out what you did wrong so it’s much easier to know specifically what you did wrong rather than just have comments on their own

I: can you remember any examples of teacher’s comments/

S: ehm example in one paragraph to go into much more detail or maybe I interpreted wrong in the passage

I: you said you process the oral feedback immediately – what does that mean to you/

S: ehe I think I remember it more – I tend to remember more when someone talks it’s more effective

I: so how well do you understand and remember the teacher’s feedback/ for example you said ‘to go into more detail’ – what does that mean to you/

S: to go into more detail means to include more aspects which could be benefit be included in the paragraph example if you’ve written a quote and you’ve only explained the surface of what it actually means so you have to then go into more detail about what it actually means how the feelings behind it I guess and you go into more depth

I: did you understand your teachers’ feedback well enough to be able to use it/

S: this year I understand it more the teacher is more dedicated to helping us do well in our essays last year we didn’t get that much feedback we used to get a little bit example I used to get a lot about arranging my tenses but it always used to be the same comments I guess I didn’t work to do what she wrote but it was always the same comment so the other aspects weren’t difficult and then this year I found a lot of the things I wrote last year were wrong so it’s much more helpful to have more feedback
I: you said you used to receive the same comments last year – so what impeded you from following them up/

S: because I used to get the same mark and I used to find it was good to get example 7 out of 10 so I usually didn’t use to work hard to get more marks so I used to take it for granted that I did well enough

I: did the mark used to mislead you/  
S: um in a way yes

I: do you think the mark is very important for a student more than the feedback/  
S: I think I tend to focus more on the mark because if we get a good mark it’s like yes I’ve worked hard this week so it’s sort of a prize at the end

I: all right so getting the same comments – how did you feel about that/  
S: either I didn’t pay much attention to the comments that were written or I didn’t use to bother to change my style of writing because of the mark I used to get the same mark anyway

I: you said if the mark was different would it have pushed you/  
S: to work harder to do something on the comment

I: how well do you remember the feedback from one crit essay to another/  
S: I don’t remember much but –because last year we didn’t have much of unseen poems so it was more the aspect of writing about the book and the collection of poetry that we had and I always used to do well in both so it wasn’t that different this year we have more unseen essays

I: is that good for you/  
S: it depends sometimes I get bored of doing an unseen text every two weeks but I like better and more the poetry (set texts) more than unseen

I: why do you think you have more unseen texts this year/  
S: I think to push us more on the critical appreciation it’s important in our exam so I guess they’re trying to push us to get better maybe a lot more students find critical appreciation harder so they’re pushing us harder to get good at writing

I: you said you do one every two weeks so there isn’t much of a gap between one essay another  
S: I don’t know how many exactly but it’s something like that

I: so does that help build up/ the fact that the essays almost follow one another does that help you to improve/  
S: no it depends on what it’s about cause um * it depends on the text

I: what if the comments are similar irrespective of the text – if you have continuous tasks can that help to improve/  
S: yes if you receive the same comments every essay and if it is frequent it tends to make you work harder on what the comments are so I guess it’s beneficial to have an unseen text frequently because it helps you to push more
I: you said you get bored however – why is that/
S: I get frustrated because I prefer writing about the set texts rather than the unseen so
when we have that I say ah (sighs) it’s another unseen text it’s my fear of interpretation
interpreting it wrong
I: does your teacher give you the opportunity to revise an essay if you haven’t done so
well/
S: um I think yes I’ve never done it before but I think so yes
I: if you don’t too well and you’re given the opportunity to write a second version would
you do it/
S: yes I would try to do it again because then the second time you get a more clear
understanding of what it is actually about so I find it much more easier to write it then
I: how does the feedback you’re given allow you to develop future ideas for writing/
S: um having feedback helps you to write more constructed and more detailed essays so
it helps you to get a clear understanding of what you actually have to involve while
writing
I: the feedback you’re given – is it simply based on the text and task or do you think you
can use the feedback for future writing/
S: I think every feedback and comment should be applied to every essay that you write
so for example if you have poetry the comments that are given and the feedback should
be applied to poetry essays the same goes for prose
I: do you feel that it affects future writing/
S: yes I think it does because after reading the comments and talking it over what you
have done it helps me more to understand what I’ve done wrong while writing it so I
can write better
I: which errors do you feel you are successful in resolving/
S: um I think the sentence structure sometimes I still make mistakes but I find that it’s
more easier to fix the specific description I think I would find it harder to write about
than because I tend to don’t go into much detail I noticed that while I’m writing so I
guess I’d find it harder to go into specific detail rather than resolving the sentence
structure
I: what other errors are easily ‘fixed’/
S: tenses ehm * I don’t know my errors are more language-based
I: you said you either process the oral feedback or go back to reading the written
comments – how do you apply or use the feedback/
S: ehm * sometimes I still don’t follow the comments (laughs – embarrassed) cause I
start writing and I just write and write and don’t follow what is written but sometimes I
do
I: but you understand the comments
S: ehe I understand the comments I still go to my old ways when I’m writing I try
not to but sometimes I still go back to my old ways
I: the fact that you don’t follow up the feedback – is it because you read it and that’s it or you try to engage with it/

S: I try to engage with it and apply it sometimes I do like in some paragraphs I go into detail and then in others I don’t I guess I’ve sort of developed a style of writing for myself and it’s very hard to break away from what I’m writing

I: so apart from that – your writing style – are there any other things that stop you from applying the feedback/

S: I don’t know it’s just something I do

I: are they external or internal constraints/

S: mainly internal – external I don’t think so – internal it’s more like my mind it’s – I write whatever comes to mind

I: is there a link between one criticism essay and another – we spoke about the idea of criticism essays being mostly continuous but not following each other – do you think that it would help students to write an unseen text if you had for example three tutorials in a row - do you think it would help/ in order to apply the feedback more specifically/

S: I think if we were to have essays after each other I think you would challenge yourself more to do better every time so I think it wouldn’t be that bad so I think it wouldn’t be that bad to have three essays and I think personally if I were to have three essays and get the same (comments) I would force myself to do better the next time

I: should this be applied to all areas/

S: I think it wouldn’t be that bad because then you sort of finish a big chunk of every section and you get a more clear view of what you should write the next time you have an essay

I: is there any drawback in that system/

S: I think students would get probably frustrated or bored with doing the same essay maybe some students would do well in the first essay they might not do so well in the others because they get frustrated

I: you said that compared to the essays on set texts in crit essays you don’t do so well

S: it depends – in the crit prose I don’t do so well but poetry I sort of manage better

I: what do you think are the reasons for this/

S: I don’t know – prose it’s (looks for words) – I don’t like it – it depends on what the passage is about example the tutorial that we had last (taken from One Black Hill) I didn’t really understand what it’s really about so the essay didn’t come out well I didn’t feel confident about what I was writing so I didn’t like it sometimes I think I take prose passages for granted that they’re going to have everything in them since it’s a longer passage

I: all right last question is there anything that you would change in how you receive feedback/

S: um I think using the feedback I should pay attention to it more to write better essays but I think the feedback this year is much better than we had last year so
there is more attention to the feedback than last year so it’s better to have more feedback
Appendix 18 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S6 (Maya)

Choice of English at A level – S: I would like to pursue a law career I have always liked literature but experience with literature depended on who was teaching it – the teacher is important so if a teacher just explains things it could be boring although it’s easier to understand.

Reading for pleasure – S: I prefer non-fiction like autobiographies because it allows you to be more knowledgeable I do not read poetry for pleasure because I am concerned I do not understand the poem.

Study literature – S: I take notes and pay attention in class then organizes the notes and focus on the important parts of the novel or text.

Teacher’s method of teaching poetry – S: the teacher gives students a poem or prose passage to work on alone then explains to the whole group involving a class discussion or teacher explains the poem bit by bit – I prefer the lesson where things are explained more clearly.

S: It would be good if we could have other types of lessons such as one where students bring in a poem to class and present it or talk about it to the group; another student from another class was given the opportunity of doing this; it would be interesting to do this to see the students’ likes and dislikes as well as to see what poems they choose (matching their understanding); as it is the teacher always chooses the poems and they tend to be about death and the dark side of life.

Poems that are considered difficult – S: those texts which have complex diction or not being able to understand the meaning / message of the poem while poems that are better to understand are those that are about a particular theme; fear of interpreting the poem one way and the ‘correct’ version is completely opposite; this is a problem and worrying for the exam because you don’t know what can come out – it could be helpful to be prepared on a set of themes and the poems are chosen according to those theme.

S: appreciation means to understand what the poet is trying to do or say; we are not prepared directly towards an appreciation but towards an analysis; I think we are expected to give a certain interpretation that matches one that is decided upon beforehand; for me appreciation is more than that – it is connected to what the poem means for me which might be different than what it means for someone else – the problem is that the teacher could tell me that my interpretation is wrong because in the exam it would be but appreciating poetry and prose is like appreciation art – there doesn’t have to be a correct interpretation.

Comparison of tutorial and crit passages – S: the poems/prose passages in crit seemed to be easier because we discussed them in class and the teacher explained whereas in tutorial we are expected to do it on our own.

Writing about unseen texts – S: my level of confidence is 6/10 it is less than the set texts because of the unknown factor and the risk of a wrong interpretation.
S: Challenges/ difficulties when writing: I have had problems with layout and structure. It seems that when a poem is difficult I use the chronological approach because it helps me organize my layout better but if a poem is not that difficult I use a different approach where I focus on aspects like theme and tone; The teacher advises us against the chronological approach because the stanzas don’t exist one by one in isolation but as a whole and the chronological approach is problematic because you risk breaking up the poem in stanzas.

Planning writing – S: I read the poem the first time then the second time and then the third time so on the second reading I start making points and underlining important words; then I think of how I am going to structure my essay so when I make notes I organize them together for example I write about similes together or I could start from the last line of the poem if it’s the most important my teacher said we can do that.

Feedback – S: In the tutorial this year we are given an idea of what we should focus on in writing and when I have a crit essay I look at the one before to check the feedback and corrections; the type of feedback received is related to layout and sentence structure; a typical comment is to pay attention to spelling or word choice.

S: I was provided with written and oral feedback this year – first the teacher writes the comments on the essay and during the tutorial explains; last year the teacher just corrected the essay and gave it back to us – often the feedback was at the end of the essay so it’s not always clearly connected to the essay – that’s why I prefer oral because it’s explained; however I might forget the oral feedback so writing is good when I can refer back to the essays and see what I’ve done wrong to try to improve; if I have to improve vocabulary or spelling I use a dictionary or thesaurus and I’m reading more now than before.

S: The tutorial is enough for the purpose of one-to-one feedback and explanation for other forms of digital media such as podcast could be useful (for example it could help if the teacher explains the correction by recording while correcting).

S: I found the feedback effective mostly and I think I have improved in these two years; I do remember teacher’s feedback but it’s not always possible – the limitations are it depends on the feedback some errors are easier to solve such as language and layout but then spelling is not always easy to fix.

About crit essays following one another: (S) it would be useful for set texts to cover important things and create connection while with crit it’s not going to make a difference if the texts are very different from one another.

Changes in how to receive feedback – /
Appendix 19 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S7 (Jonathan)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions relate to your experience with literature in general – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/ 
S: because in secondary school I enjoyed it very much it was a very nice experience I had good teachers and they taught me to appreciate English and literature ehm and we did like a bit of Shakespeare we did a bit of everything so even though it was not in the syllabus we just experienced things that I would be experiencing here so I really liked it and I thought that perhaps I am going to choose teaching in the future as my career so English would be quite useful too 

I: when you said you had a good experience and texts you did that weren’t in the syllabus what would you say were enjoyable moments/ 
S: I think the way that the teacher used to teach us ehm like role play like Shakespeare we used to do a bit of role play we used to use creative things to try to learn things for example once we did Romeo and Juliet in the form of a talk show and like that it’s like a discussion you can talk about a play but it’s not that formal so it was nice experience 

I: what do you define a good teacher as/ 
S: I think a good teacher would be someone who can interact with the students a good relationship with the students he’s not that formal and not that confident meaning intimate with the students there’s that line but he still can manage to give the students a good time while teaching them the things that are needed 

I: so you said that your experience with literature from Form 3 up to now was positive – do you see any changes between secondary school and here/ 
S: yes quite a change ehm the way I appreciate literature like unseen texts although they’re a bit more challenging I’m starting to see them from a different viewpoint and even like Shakespeare and the books Atwood and Greene ehm they gave me a new perspective to English Literature because even the way that the texts were taught I was forced to research and try to understand the texts better on my own and it was a very nice individual experience more than anything I felt the need to 

I: how do you study literature/ 
S: literature like Shakespeare and Othello I try to use different sources even books and opinions from Spark Notes/ York notes and even the teacher’s notes and I try to formulate my own opinion on the texts and unseen texts I try to practice that’s the only thing I can really do practice 

I: what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years – have you done any reading for pleasure/ 
S: last year I had some time so I did read some things like ehm I can’t remember the name of the author but I read a lot of humorous books and books regarding English history it was kind of satire about English history but this year I didn’t have a lot of time 

I: so do you prefer non-fiction/ 
S: yes I think so
I: what about poetry – do you read any poetry in your spare time?
S: no no I don’t (laughs) I’m not that keen on reading poetry I just read it in lessons when I have unseen texts but it’s not my style

I: why do you say that?
S: I don’t know I haven’t experienced the things that poets experience when reading poems and writing poems I prefer reading sort of books that give me other sources of information rather than reading people’s experiences on their life

I: now let’s talk about unseen texts during literary criticism seminars – what are the methods the teachers use or used during these two years when teaching literature?
S: last year the teacher that we had tried to analyse the text sort of from a generalized viewpoint he tried to teach us to appreciate it he used to talk a lot so we didn’t have a lot of discussion but this year our teacher it’s a different teacher he tried to take a more thematic approach he showed us how to structure our essays so it was quite eye-opening as he taught us how to tackle it ourselves

I: what do you mean by a thematic approach?
S: ehm he tried to look at poems in terms of contrast like for example like altruistic vs pessimistic like things in the poem or passage that bring out contrast bring out characters things like that so when you write your essay you don’t just go from one paragraph to another and it’s unstructured but you try to take a theme and you expand based on the text

I: so which method do you prefer?
S: this year’s it’s much more structured it’s better for the student to approach texts

I: did you get more practice this year?
S: yes we got a lot more practice like in every lecture or two we got a different poem a different text and the teacher provided like tests if we wanted so it was very useful

I: so what was a typical lesson like?
S: ehm we start the lesson by – if we have a prose passage in the first lesson he tells us to read the passage on our own or in groups and we try to formulate our own opinion in a paragraph like an introduction and then we discuss the passage we speak about what we think it’s about the contrast the themes and then he tells us things we might have missed or he discussed it with us mostly so that’s basically the lesson it’s a discussion

I: do you prefer to work on your own or in a group?
S: I like working on my own because at the end of the day I’m going to be on my own in the exam but when working in a group you get different opinions on the passage so it’s quite constructive

I: does the teacher read the poem aloud?
S: in the first lesson when we get the poem or the passage we read it on our own but when we formulate our opinion he reads it with us

I: do you prefer having it read aloud first or not?
S: for me it doesn’t really make a difference it’s just a point of understanding
I: you said that last year your teacher helped you to appreciate—what do you mean by ‘appreciation’ what do you think the word means?

S: he tried to show us the beauty in poetry and prose he tried to show us how the poet or writer expresses himself through his writing he used to read the poem and analyse it very carefully to show us the intricate parts in the passage to show us how to look at these things not just stop at the surface meaning in first year it was very useful

I: in fact in the syllabus and in the rubric of the task there is the word ‘appreciation’—what do you think this means in relation to the exam?

S: in the exam you need to show the examiner that you really understand the poem or the passage and you understand what the writer is trying to say what the writer feels portrays through characters imagery through figures of speech you have to show him that you understand all of these things

I: do you think it is expected of you to analyse?

S: yes of course it’s very crucial to analyse you have to give your opinion on ambiguous things on small details that might give a bigger viewpoint of the passage

I: but does ‘appreciation’ mean analysis?

S: I think that to appreciate a passage you have to analyse it’s very important I don’t think I could appreciate a poem or prose passage if I don’t analyse it

I: how important is it to give your opinion—are you advised to give your opinion?

S: you’re not advised to give your opinion you try to formulate maybe a hypothesis on some ambiguous sentences or details it’s not really giving your opinion on what you think for example if you think the poem is good it’s not about that you just need to analyse detailed parts and give hypothesis on what they might mean

I: can you give examples of texts that you considered difficult to read in the seminars?

S: ehm * let me think I think one that was difficult yes it was quite difficult it was one about it was a prose passage about a man that went to live with one a man that got lost in an area and he went into a house and the people were quite hostile it was quite difficult because almost nobody knew from where the text was from except for the teacher and it was taken just it was not a thematic you can’t take a thematic approach to this passage because it was quite focused on characters and character analysis and the contrast between one character and another so it was quite different from other passages we did and it was not easy to analyse it in a few minutes

I: so what would you rate a difficult text to be?

S: I think a difficult text would have advanced vocabulary it would have intricate details that not everybody could see intricate details that might link to the meaning and what the poet is trying to say

I: you mentioned character analysis—would that be difficult?

S: not difficult but if you’re just—sometimes we don’t get a lot of practice with character analysis so getting it for the first time was quite a difficult task because we were more used to themes and contrasts but once you get to characters and how you approach characters it would be less difficult

I: what is more difficult for you poetry or prose?
S: I think mostly poetry because * well poetry is easier to approach you can approach it
from paragraph to paragraph it’s easier to analyse and it’s shorter so in an exam so it
would less time-consuming but I prefer prose because for me because of it’s length it’s
better to show contrast it’s better to formulate a better argument and essay at the end of
the day for me it’s easier

I: what are the stages you go through when reading a poem?
S: firstly I try to see what the poem is about then I try to analyse paragraph by
paragraph what the poet is trying to say and then I try to look at structure and rhythm
rhyme contrasts between one paragraph and the other figures of speech that the poet
might use ehm I think that’s it and the bridge between one paragraph and another

I: when you compare the texts chosen for the tutorial are they easier or more difficult
than those of the seminar?
S: quite easy yes mostly in the tests the test poem was very easy it was O level standard I
had done it before even the prose passages that they gave us for the tutorial at home I
think they were relatively easier than the ones that we did in the seminars

I: how confident are you about writing about the unseen texts/ from 1-10 how confident
do you feel?
S: I think it would be a 6-7 because I don’t know what the text is going to be so I’m
quite scared I wouldn’t understand it but if I understand it I would be quite confident
because then I would have an aim in mind I would know what the text is about and I
would approach it the way I was taught so it wouldn’t be that difficult if I understand it
straight away

I: so how are you taught to approach an essay on unseen texts/
S: I think firstly you try to analyse from a thematic approach for me it’s easier I try to
identify the themes and contrasts in the passage and I try to build my essay upon those
the fact that I have a structure in my essay and the fact that I can structure it before
starting the essay it’s much easier for me

I: so what do you write about – in the introduction for example/
S: I try to show the examiner what I have understood in the passage I try to show him
what the passage is about

I: in the rest of the essay what approach do you adopt/
S: it depends what the poem is but normally I try to take an approach where I identify
the main parts and then try to link them with the poem or prose

I: are you advised against any approaches such as the chronological approach/
S: not against but they’re two different approaches one person might take the
chronological approach and another would take a thematic approach so it’s just a matter
of trying both out and seeing what works best for you

I: did your teachers advise you what to avoid in essay writing/
S: they told us to avoid like an unstructured approach that parts are put together without
any link because the examiner would get confused and you would get a low mark
ehm they try our teacher told us that we should avoid over-interpretation so
although we need to interpret certain things we still need to be careful of over-
interpretation because that would lower the mark

I: how often do you write about an unseen text/
S: maybe once a week in the seminars

I: in the seminars do you write texts do you write paragraphs or just notes/
S: firstly we write points then we write an introduction we always write an introduction
and sometimes he tells us to write the whole essay so but on a regular basis we don’t
write a whole essay we just write one every two to three weeks I think

I: do you feel that it’s enough/
S: personally I don’t feel that it’s enough but I don’t think I have any more time to spare
I think that’s the only time I can allocate to analysis

I: did your teacher provide you with models guidelines a template to follow/
S: I don’t think so he just showed us the different approaches one can take and just told
us to experiment with it he told us his own opinion on his approaches and what works
best for him he didn’t give us any specific template

I: so have you ever seen what a typical good essay looks like in crit/
S: yes like our tutorial teacher he gave us I think one and during tutorials he also talks
about what the analysis should be and he analyses it with us so it would be easier for us
but at the same time we can see how to analyse a text and what we need to look for

I: did that help – the model/
S: yes it helped quite a bit because you can seen what the examiner looks for and you
can try to adopt the approach that can provide this information

I: now we move on to feedback so what does your teacher give you feedback on in your
criticism essays/
S: he gives us feedback mainly on if the essay is structured or not he tries to show us
points where we might have what we might have missed ehm but overall I think he tries
to look for how we approach the text how we analysed it

I: can you remember any comments that you received on your own essays/
S: I can’t remember any specific things I think our teacher told me I should adopt a
more structured approach because before in secondary and in first year I had an
unstructured approach so that was not very useful

I: do you understand what that means/
S: yes of course I should choose like an approach either chronologically or thematically
and I should follow that approach so the examiner can follow my arguments

I: so you feel you’ve improved on that
S: yes I feel I’ve improved in that quite a bit

I: on language do you receive any comments/
S: not as such in criticism ehm maybe some vocabulary mistakes but mainly no
I: before you write and hand in your essay do you discuss the poem or prose passage beforehand?

S: this year yes we do but last year we did not she just gave us the passage and we had to analyse it on our own but this year our tutorial teacher he analyses it with us he tells us what to do before and he gives us some help but it’s not necessarily help because it’s also useful it’s a good approach

I: so in a way you discuss what the focus of the feedback is going to be

S: yes

I: do you feel that is better?

S: to a certain extent it’s better since you can see what the examiner wants from you and you can give him that but on the other hand in the exam you won’t have any teacher helping you and telling you what it’s going to be about but in seminars we do it on our own so there are two aspects in tutorials we get to know what the teacher wants from us and in seminars we try to approach it on our own

I: what type of feedback do you receive/ oral or written?

S: both I think yes in tutorials he tries to tell us what we did wrong we also write some points and he gives us sheets of feedback so we know what we did wrong and what we need to look for next time

I: which do you prefer?

S: I think I prefer written because oral normally I forget what the teacher had told me and basically if I have it written I can file it and when I’m going to write another one I refer to it

I: do you refer to essays before writing another one?

S: yes of course normally because I try to look for my mistakes so I don’t repeat them

I: do you succeed in not repeating your mistakes?

S: not always sometimes I repeat them twice or three times before I realize something but normally I try to

I: what are the mistakes that you repeat?

S: ehm this issue that I don’t structure my essay and maybe some points which I miss out some details like a detailed analysis of some things

I: how well do you understand the teacher’s feedback?

S: in seminars I understand the teacher’s feedback quite well because he explains it quite intricately so I understand it quite well in tutorials maybe a bit less but I still understand it

I: what is it that you do not understand/ the language of feedback?

S: no maybe he does not explain quite as well but he still explains it very well and I understand it at the end of the day

I: how effective do you feel the feedback has been in these two years?

S: it’s been quite effective because I’ve seen quite a big change from first year mostly from secondary ehm
I: has there been a difference in marks?
S: yes there has been a difference well not a difference in marks as such because in first
year I had let’s say quite a passive teacher she used to give us not bad marks she was
quite strict as well but this year’s teacher he gives us truthful marks even he tries to
lower the grade tells us what we did wrong and he emphasizes it a lot but that’s good
because at the end of the day when I go for my exam I know what I have to do and if
I’m getting relatively lower grades that I’m achieving in the exam I’m going to achieve
high marks so in the tutorial the teacher explained his marking scheme at the beginning
of the year he told us that he is going to be truthful and hard with us so that when we go
for the exam we would get good grades

I: so the mark is justified/
S: I think so yes

I: did you ever need to revise your essay and resubmit a second essay/
S: I only did so like twice in the past two years because I don’t usually rewrite them

I: was it your teacher who gave you the chance to do so/
S: I think so yes the tutorial teacher told us we could do so

I: how did it help you/
S: it helped me because I saw my mistakes and I did not repeat them obviously I tried to
look for things that the teacher told me that I should look for I tried to structure it better
and at the end of the day I got a better mark

I: do you perform better in crit or in set texts mostly/
S: in it depends on the critical passage but mostly I think I perform better in set texts
because you can study them so if you study them well and you formulate your own
opinion on them and you know what you’re going to say it’s not going to be that hard

I: has the feedback allowed you to develop further ideas for writing/
S: yes it helped me a lot ehm different opinions helped me formulate my own and
helped it formulate my approach to these passages so it helped me a lot

I: which ‘errors’ do you think you were successful in resolving/
S: ehm this issue that I had of not structuring my essays

I: what did you do to address it/
S: just before I begin an essay I try to identify the aspects that I am going to structure
the essay on

I: what do you think about receiving feedback in the form of digital media/
S: ehm * maybe email it would be yes I don’t think I would mind for me it doesn’t
really make a difference so I check my emails regularly if someone tells me they will
send me something or tells me about a website I am going to look for it

I: how well have you applied your teacher’s feedback/ do you think you have been
successful in applying it/
S: maybe not in all aspects but in most aspects yes I think I’ve been successful
I: which are the aspects you’ve been successful in/
S: ehm maybe not unsuccessful but certain things that a teacher says small things that a
teacher might adopt in his approach I think I didn’t adopt them because I thought they
wouldn’t help me as much but when I thought they would help me I would adopt them
I: what examples can you think of of things that might not help you as much/
S: I don’t know maybe a teacher’s specific approach to the passages maybe the
chronological approach I don’t think it would help me so much so I didn’t adopt it
I: in fact there are those who advise against that approach – why do you think it is so/
S: because I think if you approach a passage chronologically it wouldn’t be that
sequential maybe – it would be sequential to a certain point but when you approach a
passage from a thematic approach you show the main aspects that you need to talk
about you don’t just speak about the poem what it’s about and just rely on the surface
meaning
I: at present there isn’t a link between one crit essay and another – do you think there
would be any benefits if you had contiguous essays on crit/
S: I don’t think so because if I have three essay after – they would be beneficial up to a
certain extent – but if I have three essays after each other based on crit it won’t benefit
me as much as we have now if they were separate if they’re after each other I may be
repeating the same things if they’re separate I can use the things I have learned
throughout the seminars throughout the weeks and apply it
I: so you feel you would be able to apply the feedback/
S: yes I think so
I: is there anything else – when you said something about the marks what is the typical
mark you get for crit/
S: I think it’s a 7
I: was it similar to last year/
S: no but I can’t compare them to last year because they’re two very different teachers
and they mark our essays I think on very different standards
I: does that affect you do you think/
S: I think so because I don’t know last year’s teacher we didn’t have the relationship
that we had with this year’s teacher and she was not as strict as the – strict in a good
way – but she was not that strict as this year’s teacher I think he tries to be rough on us
so we get a we try to learn from our mistakes but I don’t think I can compare last year’s
mark with this year’s
I: is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback or are you satisfied
overall/
S: yes I think so (as in satisfied)
I: that is the end of the interview – thank you once again
Appendix 20 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S8 (Kyra)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions are related to your experience with literature studying literature here and before in secondary school and then we’ll talk about the methods you prefer when reading literature your experience in writing about unseen texts the focus will mostly be on writing about unseen texts – so why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: ehm I like it I don’t know I like reading I guess and I just like the language
I: can you say anything about your experience with literature from Form 3 up to now
S: I enjoyed it and I don’t know every year you get better and you improve
I: how do you study literature/
S: I like to take scenes and then write points the key scenes and then quotes on the particular scene that’s how I study basically
I: what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years - have you done any reading for pleasure/
S: sort of I find it hard because I get easily distracted
I: what kind of books do you like reading/
S: * I think romantic books
I: do you read poetry in your spare time/
S: no I wish I could I don’t know why
I: what do you mean you wish you could/
S: because I never get round to doing it to like actually reading it
I: what do you think stops you from doing that/
S: other things like computer
I: would you look for poetry if you had to
S: yes
I: as in read it for pleasure
S: yes
I: so what do you like about it/
S: I don’t know I think like how it can one mean one thing to someone and like to someone else it can mean something else like a song more or less
I: what about your experience with unseen texts during the seminars what methods do your teachers use or have used when teaching literature during the seminars/
S: ehm * we read the text or the poem and then we start off by taking down the different themes and techniques to use and then we start building a plan so the intro what we would say and then the body how you should divide the paragraphs
I: any activities that you do in class/
S: what do you mean by activities/
I: do you do any writing or working in groups or in pairs/
S: ah aha we do work in groups sometimes and in pairs and then sometimes we write a small paragraph what they call it/
I: a paraphrase/
S: aha a paraphrase
I: ok so how much writing do you do in the seminar/ do you write regularly/
S: more or less yes
I: is it during every session/
S: aha cause there are sessions where we just write a few notes we’ll be writing still so
I: what type of texts do you read during the criticism seminars/
S: different texts we have a booklet and she gives us texts from books from anything basically
I: what was your experience with them/ did you like them/
S: ehe yes
I: do you remember any particular ones that you will remember/
S: * I have to remember * I can’t think
I: what makes a text memorable/
S: * like the context what it means and the language used if it’s boring you’re not going to enjoy it
I: so were the texts you did in class interesting/
S: yes some and then some were a bit dragging a bit long
I: for prose/
S: yes
I: which do you prefer prose texts or the poems/
S: to be honest I don’t know I always like wonder cause prose I find there’s you can say much more about it since there is a lot and then poem a bit limited in a way
I: in the syllabus it says that to appreciate literary texts is essential to the practical criticism exercise – what do you understand by ‘appreciation’/
S: the way you understand the text I think how you look at it like my teacher might look at the text differently and then you might look at it in a different way that’s why I don’t understand why you can actually correct crit cause if I understand if I look at the poem differently and then the teacher looks at it differently it’s like mine can be right as well not just the teacher’s
I: so what do you think about crit’s place in a syllabus/ that is being marked on it/ assessed on it/
S: I don’t find it pointless because it’s interesting and it helps you it helps a student improve their writing I don’t know I think we all have different opinions

I: how do you feel about this because of the exam/
S: I think you can never be too prepared as in you can never be how do I say it/ you can never be 100% prepared for crit because you don’t know what’s going to come out

I: so what do you think is expected of you when you have ‘write a critical appreciation’ in the rubric/ do you know what’s expected of you in this word/
S: if you understand the text in one way you prove that you quote obviously and you say it happens because of this and then like you give proof not just jot down everything

I: so does that make you feel better - that you can give proof/
S: yes

I: because you said I might have a different opinion from that of the teacher but if you prove it then your interpretation is valid
S: mhm

I: but is it different/
S: but then I might feel better because they’d say ok you know she’s right

I: are you guided at all to fulfill this criteria of appreciation/
S: yes obviously

I: has the word ‘appreciation’ come up in the way you prepare/
S: * yes I guess I don’t know

I: when you read an unseen text what are the stages that you adopt/
S: I read it once then I read it again then I read it highlight what I think i think important and then I start with a plan like I start building the main themes the quotes the imagery and different techniques used then I start writing when I feel I understood the text well

I: so how do you feel when you write about an unseen text on a scale of 1-10 how confident are you/
S: 6

I: do you feel more confident writing about set texts/
S: yes definitely because I would be prepared for it

I: so why is it a 6 for the unseen/ apart from the ‘unknown’ factor what other elements do you feel are challenging/
S: * that I might miss out on a few points

I: what difficulties do you face when you write about an unseen text/
S: to start my essays like what to say I always get confused with my introduction I wouldn’t know if I say too much or too little

I: how are you guided to lay out your essay/ what structure are you advised to use/
I: does your teacher give you any models or template to follow?
S: **
I: do you have a particular layout do you adopt a particular approach for example do you adopt a chronological approach/ or are you advised against that/
S: actually I was advised against that cause I don’t know why to be honest I prefer going chronologically but I was told it’s not right like it’s better to take like the different themes and then write about them
I: what are you advised to write in an introduction for example/
S: what the text is about and that’s it
I: have you ever been given model essays/
S: mm no I don’t think so no
I: so you don’t know what an unseen text essay should look like/
S: no till now
I: so do you think that would help/
S: yes definitely
I: so apart from that do you have any other guidelines/ any other suggestions by teachers what to do and what not to do/
S: * to link quotes and don’t just write them down and * to build your essay on like not just two paragraphs that’s all
I: if you look back at the writing you’ve done on unseen texts what would you say are your weak areas/
S: ** ehm I don’t know I think like how to express what I think about the text is the hardest for me
I: is it language based on content based/
S: I think language
I: do you have particular difficulties with certain elements of the language/
S: the sentence structure yes sometimes I do like I write really long sentences and I get told off for it but I could practice and then you learn
I: have you resolved any difficulties over the two years/
S: yes I’ve improved but I still need to do more work
I: ok now let’s move on to feedback - before you hand in your essay whether it is for tutorial or the unseen crit seminar does the teacher inform you what the focus of the feedback is going to be/
S: ehm yes
I: so does the teacher tell you I’m going to look for the way you structure your introduction or the way you talk about theme
I: *if you are told that the focus will be something specific will this help you organize your essay or will this be a disadvantage/*

S: to be honest I’d really bother about it I’ll just write it and make sure that I’ve included everything*

I: *what feedback are you provided with on criticism essays/*

S: * to improve my language to include more quotes I think

I: *can you remember any comments that your teacher gave you/*

S: to not write I don’t know * to include more paragraphs I don’t know what else

I: *do you usually remember the feedback given/*

S: yes sometimes (laughs)

I: *ok do you remember it if it’s written or oral/*

S: written definitely

I: *what are the advantages and disadvantages of oral and written feedback/*

S: because if I won’t be paying attention then I’d forget

I: *so do you find written helps you/*

S: yes

I: *what about oral feedback– does it have any benefits/*

S: ** not really I guess you connect more with the teacher I don’t know (laughs)

I: ok so have your teachers provided you with both oral and written feedback these two years/

S: yes I think

I: *so for you is written enough/*

S: yes

I: *you understand everything that’s written down*

S: and then if I have a problem I ask my teacher obviously but I prefer written

I: *do you refer back to your essays before you write a new one/*

S: yes so I see where I went wrong and I work on it

I: *so in that way the feedback given allows you to move forward in your writing*

S: yes yes

I: *can it applied to other essays/*

S: of course yes

I: *what do you think about receiving feedback in the form of digital media/ such as through email or podcast/*

S: I don’t mind it
I: do you think it would be beneficial/
S: it’s easier definitely but I still prefer written

I: so even if it’s written via email or form of digital media
S: aha

I: do you feel that in general you retain the teacher’s feedback enough to apply it/ or do you feel that you make the same mistakes/
S: yes but sometimes I do make the same mistakes but that’s me (laughs)

I: do you understand the feedback given by your teachers/
S: yes but it’s usually always the same so I do

I: such as if it’s always the same so you have typical feedback comments that always reappear/
S: ehe my language usually

I: do you feel that in general the feedback provided is effective/
S: yes

I: is it useful/
S: mhm (yes)

I: how do you use it/
S: as I said I go through it before I write another essay so I can improve

I: do you see an improvement in certain areas/
S: aha I do

I: which are the errors that you feel are easier to resolve/
S: ehm the structure of my essays and * that’s it

I: so language is easier to resolve than content but then you still get the same comments on language/
S: ehe yes no wait no mhux the structure I said/

I: the structure of what/
S: how I divide the essay

I: ah ok the structure and the layout of the essay not the language/
S: no no

I: why do you think that’s easier to resolve/
S: * I don’t know I guess when you’re writing you wouldn’t know what you’re saying what you’re writing and then when you reread it you like say I could have written this sentence I could have used better language then structure when you know you have to write it like this you do it well

I: all right ok if you were given the opportunity to revise your essay would you take it up/ were you given the opportunity to revise your essay/
S: for homework/
I: let’s say you didn’t do too well in an essay were you given the opportunity to rewrite
S: yes aha but I never did (laugh)
I: did it happen/
S: yes but I didn’t but I can I could have
I: you didn’t need to
S: no I needed to
I: you were given the opportunity by the teacher so why didn’t you do it/
S: I don’t know I felt like I didn’t need
I: so you looked at the feedback and tried to apply it next time/
S: yes
I: how do you perform in crit/ do you do better or worse than in the set texts/
S: I think it depends on the text to be honest but usually I do better in set texts
I: all right what’s your typical mark for crit/ has it improved over the two years/
S: * it has improved but I can do better
I: so what’s your typical mark for crit/
S: out of/
I: out of a10 maybe
S: six seven (with some hesitation)
I: and in set texts is it better than that/
S: more or less the same but sometimes it’s better
I: if you said that you usually look at the feedback given and you try to apply but you
end up making the same mistakes what do you think stops you from applying the
feedback/
S: ehm * I think if the feedback is not written cause if I have a paper next to me that
says where I went what I did wrong and I’ll be about to write my essay at least I’ll have
it there and keep in mind
I: if it’s written – what stops you from applying feedback/
S: because it’s not written
I: eh I understood so things that are not written down so the essay is corrected
S: yes wait no I’m lost sorry
I: you said when it’s not written down when it’s not there in front of you/
S: when the feedback is not there
I: yes yes but usually you get written feedback
S: yes but not all the time
I: let’s say the feedback is there and yet you feel you’re not applying it is it because of the language of feedback/ is it because I don’t know there are certain difficulties in language that you cannot resolve/
S: ehe I think I don’t know *

I: so you’ve not thought about this idea of applying feedback
S: no not really sometimes I don’t look at the feedback to be honest I just write my essay

I: do you think feedback is important/
S: yes I think it is but I don’t always take notice

I: all right so at present there isn’t a link between one crit essay and another – do you think it would be beneficial if students were given essays on crit following each other/
S: to be honest I like how it is even that crit poetry is with Wilfred Owen

I: in the exam you mean/
S: ehe

I: but for tutorials
S: ah for tutorials

I: if for example you have three essays on crit in a row so you don’t alternate between set texts and crit
S: no I prefer alternating

I: you prefer to alternate – what would be the benefit of continuous essays/
S: that you can remember what you did the week before so you can at least it won’t be like you did it three weeks ago

I: so you can apply certain things in crit even if the text changes/
S: yes

I: what are the things you can apply – that are the same for every crit essay/
S: * what to say in your essay and how to structure it *

I: so if students have a structure to follow and therefore they know what a typical crit essay is what stops them from doing well in it/
S: * that you won’t know what’s going to come out what text you’re going to have like you can’t be fully prepared for it I think

I: is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback/
S: no I’m ok with it

I: do you understand all the suggestions in crit/
S: yes I do
I: ok thank you
Appendix 21 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S9
(Alison)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions I’m going to ask you are about your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: in secondary school I didn’t like literally I hated English but then in Form 5 I started going to some private lessons and it helped me more I started understanding English more in fact I liked reading in Maltese and then I started to like reading in English and then I need English also for my faculty because I want to go in the Bachelor of Laws and I think that was the main reason why I chose English but then during 1st year it was very interesting
I: why didn’t you like it/
S: the grammar it involved a lot of grammar and verbs and tenses and also in the beginning I didn’t like Macbeth but then I started liking it in Form 5 through private lessons
I: what was the difference between school and private lessons/
S: because my school teacher was like very old and used a lot of hard words to explain difficult words and in private lessons my teacher was younger and she explained with a more realistic point of view so we could understand better what Shakespeare was portraying so it helped me more to understand the reason why behind the words
I: you said that last year was interesting – what did you consider to be interesting/
S: I think I started I think I developed my English further especially in the criticism we used to do some criticism in Form 5 but the approach was different because it’s obviously an A level standard and my teacher was very good and he had very good English and his approach was much more easier than other teachers so like he explained in detail but he made it in a fun way so that we could understand so I think that is the main reason
I: can you give examples of this approach/
S: for instance if there is a difficult poem for example and it’s about normally poems are about life experiences he used to take examples from life experiences and try to use them to make us understand the poem better that helped me a lot because I could relate and contrast with the experiences
I: how do you study literature/
S: I don’t like the fact that you have to learn everything by heart I like to be logic and understand and logic things out so that when I have the paper in front of me I could understand and I can work it out I try not to learn everything by heart I try to study in a logical way
I: what about reading for pleasure – have you done any reading for pleasure in the last two to three years/
S: most especially during the summer because during winter I focus on the literature books that I have because I also Maltese so I have the books in Maltese as well to read
so in the winter I focus mainly on school books but in summer yes I do like reading
books for pleasure

I: what kind of books do you read/
S: fiction normally and sometimes I like those detective kind of stuff

I: do you have favourite authors/
S: ehm I don’t have actually but I do like any kind of author but I do not have any
particular author that I follow

I: what about poetry/ do you read poetry for pleasure/
S: no poetry for pleasure no because I don’t particularly like poetry

I: why/
S: cause ehm I am more how do you say it/ the approach like poetry is ambiguous
sometimes you do not understand the main meaning in the poem because sometimes
you think it’s something but probably it’s the other way round that’s why I don’t
particularly like poetry I like something that is written and logical

I: then you said you don’t mind crit
S: yes I don’t mind crit it’s not my favourite because from all the subjects I prefer The
Handmaid’s Tale but I don’t mind it because it’s there you have to do it but I don’t
mind it that much I don’t like reading poetry for pleasure I just do it for school

I: what do you think of poetry/
S: yes I associate poetry with school rather than for my own benefit

I: what about the unseen texts during the literary criticism seminars – what methods
have your teachers used to read and teach the unseen texts/
S: presently my teacher told us to adopt finding the theme first and then you can
develop what are the meanings behind the words the metaphors similes whatever so first
I try to find the theme of the poem or prose to help me understand what is the main
reason behind the text or the poetry and then I start looking at words for examples the
figures of speech exclamation points like that so mainly theme first and then figures of
speech

I: what strategies were you advised against/
S: ehm one of the most important things that my teacher pointed out is that you don’t
need to comment on every single line or stanza because that would take a lot of time so
that is one of the main points they pointed out

I: what does a typical crit lesson look like/
S: we start by – at first we started with the devices how to approach an unseen text what
is the narrator or the poet/ figures of speech the tone different tones and then we started
practicing he normally gives us an unseen text we read it we point out words that we
have never seen and that we can ask about and then we start pointing out the important
devices in the prose and then we discuss it together and recently we had two tests to try
to see where are we where is our level where is our weaknesses and to check
where we can work much more and he can help us work on certain points and
develop it and be good at it
I: have you received any feedback on the tests?

S: yes I only received one of the tests and it wasn’t that bad because the prose text was very difficult it was from Charles Dickens so it was very difficult but it wasn’t bad for the level of the test I had a good average mark

I: which was

S: it was 6 out of 10

I: so what is a difficult text for you?

S: ehm for me a difficult text is like you have a lot of ambiguous words ambiguous meanings and the author doesn’t write in a chronological order so from a sentence you have a place and a certain time and in another you have different setting I think that is a difficult text for me

I: does setting make it difficult?

S: yes cause (laughs) it affects me cause I have like OCD so I want everything in a chronological way after each other so that probably affects me the most so I think the setting needs to be everything behind each other I don’t mind if the setting is old or new the important thing for me is to get the gist of the text and then I can continue and start writing and develop the essay that’s the most important thing for me

I: so what scares you about having to write about an unseen text in the exam?

S: (sighs deeply/ laughs partly) my main worry is that I have a text and I do not understand it like I can’t get the gist of it and that worries me a lot cause sometimes you have texts that you can easily understand and you can get a lot of information but other texts are very difficult and you start panicking and you can’t find anything to write on

I: do you do any writing in class as an activity?

S: yes we do this year actually because last year we did but not as much as this year cause this year our teacher is giving us a lot of unseen text and as I told you we discuss between us and sometimes we work in pairs and we form a structure of the essay like we will say in each paragraph also we had some homeworks we had an unseen text for home as well so that we could like practise because I think the most important thing in unseen texts and poetry is practice because you never know which text is coming out so you have to practise a lot I think it helped me a lot

I: how do you feel about working with someone else/ do you prefer working alone?

S: ehm sometimes yes when it is something that is easily understood I like to work alone but I don’t mind working in pairs because it’s something that I’m used to working in pairs or in a group

I: you said you did a lot of unseen texts – do you remember any unseen texts that you did and that were memorable?

S: yes there was one on technology and the industrialization it was memorable because the structure also reflected the industrialization because it started from a rural place and then it started developing to an urban place and the reader was like on a train because it was like you were on a train and going in that was one that I remembered the most and there was one as well about old generation vs young generation where like the older people were like – not more intelligent – but they had wisdom and teach the young generation so those two were very memorable
I: is it because they are aspects related to life/
S: yes
I: is that what you prefer in literature/
S: yes I think the more realistic the more I prefer it so if it’s something realistic I like
attach myself to it immediately so I can understand it more
I: any poems that you remember/
S: ehm poems (laughs) cause I don’t particularly like poems that’s why ehm
I: or anything that you thought was difficult/
S: ah yes there was one this one we had it for a test it was called afternoons it was about
young people vs not old actually but the younger generation replacing the other
generation because it was about parents looking at their children growing up and
developing so that was one that I remember
I: in the syllabus it says that learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the
practical criticism exercise – what do you understand by this word/ what do you think it
means/
S: ehm I think by appreciating a text it’s not just understanding it and writing an essay
about it I think the main reason behind literary criticism is to understand more like
experiences world views for me that’s appreciating something it’s like understanding
more what the poet or the author is trying to convey to the reader it’s not just a poem to
criticize for an exam it’s like to understand better life and experiences
I: are you guided at all towards this particular perspective/
S: no I think it’s something I understood by myself it wasn’t like someone told me you
have to do this I think it’s my own opinion I think that is appreciating a text
I: do you think this is what you are expected to do in the exam/
S: yes I think so and I think that is the main reason behind this
I: what is the process you adopt when reading a poem/
S: first I read the whole text for the first time to understand what is going on then I skim
read through it so that I can get my major points and I jot down points like theme tone
settings that I can develop the essay and then I start obviously the introduction and then
I start the most important points of the text
I: when you compare the poems and prose texts chosen for the tutorial and those of the
seminar are there any differences in level of difficulty/
S: in my opinion yes cause in the tutorials certain poems and prose that we had for tests
or an assignment the level was a bit ehm – it wasn’t that difficult to handle whilst in the
seminars they were a bit higher in standard they were a bit difficult to understand I think
it helped the seminar ones help me more because they are difficult then you start to
learn from your mistakes that you do that’s why I think there’s a bit of a difference the
tutorial are a bit easier – they are difficult because they are unseen texts but still
compared to the seminars they are a bit easier
I: how do you feel when writing about unseen texts/ how confident do you feel (on
a scale of 1 to 10)/
S: sometimes – according to the text – because sometimes you feel very confident what
you’re going to say you have the correct words and it’s easier to write it but sometimes I
find it difficult to express myself I would have the idea in mind but I wouldn’t know
how to develop it cause either the text is difficult or else I can’t understand the words
it’s according to the text

I: how does that make you feel considering the exam/
S: it worries me a lot because I panic maybe I won’t have time to express it to say
everything and express the opinions but I try to relax and express what comes to my
mind

I: what are the difficulties that you face when writing about an unseen text/
S: ehm as I told you sometimes it is difficult to express what comes up to my mind
because the text is difficult by itself and then it is more difficult to express what you are
trying to say what you think is the poem or text about that is the main difficulties to try
and express myself

I: what about language/ are you aware of any challenges that you have in relation to
language/
S: yes sometimes I do confuse certain verbs and – not spelling mistakes actually but
sometimes it’s the verbs and the sentence constructions

I: do you think you have resolved these difficulties/
S: yes in secondary school it was a good level for secondary school but then obviously
there was a huge change because this is an A level standard ehm but from first year up
to second year I saw a big change the difference in my language – my language at least
developed it wasn’t babyish anymore because in secondary we used to write like
babyish essays you start with ‘once upon a time’ and now it developed further it’s
getting to an A level standard

I: what did you do to ‘develop’ your language/
S: in summer I studied a lot the linguistics I focused on the linguistics and I read a lot of
books as well cause reading helps you more to develop a bigger and wider vocabulary I
think having a good vocab will give you extra marks for expressing the words much
more clearer

I: do you feel you have applied the vocabulary that you picked up from reading/
S: yes

I: what particular strategy did you use to apply the vocabulary/
S: ehm sometimes when I’m reading I like to underline words and then I have like a
notebook it’s there since like Form 1 and I start writing like idioms and certain
vocabulary that I haven’t seen before that strike me I say ah yes if I have an essay I
could use this and once in a while I like to go over and look at it and refresh my
memory

I: what strategies do your teachers suggest you can use to write an essay on unseen
texts/ did they provide you with a template or a particular layout/
S: yes ehm both my tutorial teacher and seminar teacher told us that obviously
you have to start with a good introduction to present a theme immediately and go 365
to the point immediately you don’t start mentioning other stuff that are not useful so
that is a good introduction which represents what the text is about and then you start
tackling for poetry you start tackling stanza by stanza and for prose you start outlining
the main points of the text and images and figures of speech and in the end before
concluding you mention the tone the setting the mood according to the text and
obviously a good conclusion maybe like your opinion and what is something most
important that came out of the poem or the text

I: what are you advised against (as a structure)/
S: in prose my tutor advised us not to comment on each and every single line because
that takes a lot of time also not to start with the tone and setting because that could be
useful in the end so that you can compare with everything before and mention like if
there’s a simile you can compare and contrast with the tone of the simile so that is why
they told us to put tone setting and mood at the end

I: when you say not to comment on every line is it also the case that you were advised
against using a chronological approach/
S: not commenting on every line as in normally a prose text has a lot to comment about
cause it’s obviously you have a chunk of words and figures of speech you can comment
about – not commenting on every line as in just get the main points of the text not like
you start commenting on every single thing and you realize that you’re out of time you
just get the most important points and you comment about them

I: all right let us now move on to feedback – what type of feedback do you prefer/
S: ehm normally I prefer one-to-one feedback ok it’s good that you have comments on
an essay at the end but I normally when the lesson ends I go and ask like why is this
comment that I don’t understand/ where could I get better/ so I prefer one-to-one
feedback

I: which feedback do you prefer/
S: oral

I: what are other benefits of oral feedback/
S: cause when someone writes you understand what they’re saying but I prefer like
getting into detail and understanding in depth like where do I need to get better/ where
is my weaknesses and I would like to know exactly where I need to get better

I: so through explanation
S: yes

I: what about written/ how do you use written feedback/
S: normally I like to go through for example if I had like an Owen essay I see I go back
to the one before and I check the feedback to see where did I go wrong where do I need
to improve and like try not to repeat the same mistakes in the next essay

I: do you use the feedback on essays to feed forward in the next essays/
S: yes

I: even in criticism/
S: yes even for crit because it’s the same when you have feedback you can use it for improvement

I: what other benefits are there of written feedback?
S: I think it helps you to remember for example oral you say it one time unless you record it it’s not there so written feedback it’s there it’s permanent so you can go through and see where you went wrong and you can check your mistakes and apply them for the next essay

I: can you remember any comments that teachers gave you?
S: ehm yes normally my main comment is like my sentence structure cause I swap for example I need to start with a word I put it the second one that is one of the main comments that I get and also sometimes I don’t get to the point immediately I go round and try to explain something it’s because sometimes I don’t know how to express myself so that is why I don’t go to the point immediately

I: what do you think about the idea of receiving feedback through digital media?
S: I think it’s a good idea cause MCAST already uses this approach cause my friends at MCAST when they have assignments they don’t give them the mark instantly but they give them like feedback where did they go wrong where they did very well so they point out everything and they send them through email cause they have a website like ours and they send them the comments through email and obviously this helps you for your next assignment cause you can go back see what you did wrong and apply the comments for the next assignment so I think through digital means it would help

I: so you’re saying that they give them the comments before the mark
S: yes the comments before the mark

I: after they correct and via email/
S: yes after they correct they have a profile they go on their profile and they give them the comments and then they give them a printed copy of the comments and they have to sign it as well that you approve the comments

I: when do they give them the mark/
S: normally during the breaks like ours it’s like an assessment mark they get the marks during the holidays and the breaks

I: don’t they get the mark with every essay/
S: no no because they are assignments not essays not like ours they normally have powerpoints and stuff like that so normally they get like our assessment when it comes out in January and during the Easter holidays so they get the marks during the holidays they receive feedback but not the marks

I: then the mark is totalled at the end/
S: yes according to the task normally they have three tasks which include powerpoint and then you have an average mark

I: what do students think about not receiving marks/
S: they would want to know the mark after all the work but at least they get the feedback so they know what maybe could the mark be cause they don’t get like a
range from 1 to 10 they get merit pass distinction it’s not like an actual mark it’s still the
same

I: do you think feedback becomes more important without the mark/
S: I think so it’s good to have a mark but the most important thing is the feedback
because you know like where did you go wrong and what could you do to improve even
here I consider the mark because I know what kind of mark would I get but I look
instantly towards the feedback because that is the most important thing

I: does the mark match the feedback you’re given/
S: yes normally I never had any problems with marks I think the marks that I got were
well-deserved

I: the mark is justified by the feedback
S: yes it was justified so I never had problems where I said no I think I could have got a
better mark

I: before you hand in your essay or before you’re given the mark does the teacher
inform you what the focus of feedback is/
S: normally in tutorials my teacher explains like what he had to say in the essay and she
points out for example if she sees that there was a certain mistake that was repeated by
everyone she focuses on that certain point it’s according to the level and the mistakes
normally it’s in general but if there’s a certain point that needs more attention she
focuses on that point

I: when you have a crit piece before you write your essay do you prepare for it or are
you expected to do it on your own/
S: in tutorials normally in other essays she gives us – not help – but she explains to us
what we need to say she doesn’t give all the information but she gives us indicators that
we could use in unseen poem and prose she gives us certain indicators but we just read
it together to see if there is any difficulty in understanding certain words and she tries to
we try to discuss it with each other she doesn’t give us like what’s the poem about and
gives us all the information we need we discuss it as a class

I: you discuss it before you write – how does that help/
S: yes I think it helps because apart from getting your own opinion you get other
people’s view maybe it could be useful or not but it’s good to know what other people
think about the text

I: have you had to write out / work on a crit essay completely on your own/
S: yes normally we do that we had for example tests and for the homework when we
had a test the previous week before crit we wouldn’t have time to explain it

I: how did you feel compared to when you prepared for it/
S: it’s always according to the text if it’s difficult or if it’s easy the text determines
everything so if you’re going to do well or not it obviously helps to discuss it before
because there’s something that you wouldn’t understand and you get someone to
explain it to you and it helps but I think it doesn’t bother me that much it helps
me if I work alone so I would be more prepare for the exam
I: when you compare your marks to the set texts do you feel you do better in crit or in the set texts?
S: ehm I think I always have the same mark cause it’s like 7 rarely 6 and then sometimes 7-8 I don’t feel like there’s any particular area in the poetry sometimes I do not understand the poem and I get a lower mark but normally it’s like a 7+/8 so no particular difference

I: have you ever had to rewrite your essay?
S: no it never happened because the mark was justified according to I had written

I: how well do you understand your teacher’s feedback?
S: normally yes sometimes I do understand what they’re trying to advise and what they’re trying to say but occasionally there are some things that I do not understand and I ask why was this written where could I improve

I: can you give examples of what you did not understand well?
S: probably because some people give you very detailed feedback where they explain everything but other teachers they write like points and you’re like what/ what was the reason behind this/ so that is probably what confuses me the most when it’s written in point form and it’s short and it’s not in detail so I normally go and ask about that

I: how effective was the feedback provided in the last two years?
S: ehm it was very effective because normally before I start an essay if I’m tackling an Owen essay I go to my previous assignment and check so here I could improve I see that for example this sentence wasn’t good so I can use it but in another way so the feedback always helps you cause I think it’s the way to improve if you didn’t get any feedback you wouldn’t know where you went wrong or what was good

I: which errors did you feel you were successful in resolving?
S: ehm * not actually resolving but always improving cause like sentence construction I improved a lot the grammar and choice of words ehm also I think the most effective was like the vocabulary cause that reading in summer really helped me and also it helped me to develop like a wider choice of words

I: did feedback affect your writing?
S: yes obviously cause when you have a good understanding of the techniques of the vocabulary and grammar it will help you write a good essay

I: so if your teacher advised you to improve your sentence structure how did you do that?
S: actually it’s not like I worked I tried so if there’s something that I am not sure about if there is a certain sentence that I’m not sure about how I am going to write it or how I am going to put it I research about it and go check in my notes and look at previous assignments to see if there’s something that indicates how I could do it so that is – it wasn’t like something structured that I was like working on and doing assignments about it – it was more like hands-on if there’s something difficult I look it up

I: what resources do you use?
S: I have a book it’s called like Perfecting English something like that it gives it’s like what you need to do it gives you information how to tackle like sentences and grammar like information also sometimes on the internet I look on the
internet cause it’s a very good way of getting what you need to know and also on
previous assignments where I can check the comments

I: from stops you from applying feedback/
S: I think it never happened to me I think I always – the first thing that I look at when I
get an assignment are like all the mistakes I have I flip the page and look at the
feedback so I never stop using the feedback that I was given

I: so the feedback feeds into your writing/
S: yes it helps me I never like read feedback and I was like down or I was going to give
up it always helped me and I say ok for next time I should do this and that it gives me
the boost for my next assignment

I: what is the tone of feedback/
S: ehm normally it’s like constructive criticism cause it doesn’t discourage me but if I
have something like a command it’s very how do you say it’s like authority I would
discourage myself immediately but when you have constructive criticism you know it’s
someone the person that wrote it – it is for your own good

I: all right is there anything you would change in the way you receive feedback/
S: I don’t think so I think the way I receive the feedback it’s good enough and also I
appreciate that teachers although they have a lesson afterwards they still stop and see
where they can help and discuss your difficulties so I wouldn’t change the way the
feedback is

I: and in tutorial the essays on crit do not follow one another – would that be beneficial
do you think/
S: no I think it’s better to alternate because if you do crit in bunches it wouldn’t help
you to practice I think it’s good the way it is it’s like refreshing the memory every time
so I think it’s good the way it is

I: are there any benefits of having contiguous essays on crit/
S: I think that would help you to get better because when you repeat the same things
every week that would be more beneficial because you’re practising the same thing so
you would get better at it but I still prefer the other way round

I: thank you very much
Appendix 2 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S10 (Alexia)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions are on your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: I’ve always been comfortable with English and I also like poetry a lot when it comes to English I think that’s the main reason
I: what do you like about poetry/
S: I don’t know the ability that a poet expresses feelings through poetry for example in Wilfred Owen it really shows the reality as it was and that it was very different than it was pictured by the propaganda I really like that
I: talk about your experience with literature from Form 3 up to now
S: ma nafx x’ser nghid fuqa (I am not sure what to say about it)
I: was it a positive experience/
S: yes it was but it was more simple Form 3 and now it’s more bulky but I still like it
I: how do you study literature/
S: I do my own notes I shorten – first I read the notes and I highlight the important key scenes and then I make my own notes to remember the main important things
I: what about reading for pleasure – do you do any reading for pleasure/
S: right now I don’t have time to read but once I have a book to enjoy I like to read
I: what type of books do you like reading/
S: romance (laughs) cheesy books mostly
I: how do you choose them/
S: I don’t know I just pick them randomly or either I watch a movie and I really like it and I know there’s a novel for example Hunger Games and I download it on my iPad and I read it
I: do you have any favourite authors/
S: Nicholas Sparks I like to read a lot of books by him
I: what about poetry – do you read poetry in your spare time for fun/
S: no no (laughs)
I: why not/
S: * I guess I don’t really understand them as long as we don’t get the main background of the poet which we usually do in class and if I read just a poem I found I don’t always understand it so I think that’s why
I: all right – what methods do your teachers use when teaching poetry and prose during the literary criticism seminars/
S: they tell us how to write the structure of an essay and to focus on imagery to quote to emphasise what we’re going to say I think that’s basically how we do it
I: what is a typical literary criticism seminar / lesson like?
S: we ehm the teacher chooses poems or prose passages and we analyse them so we can know how to do that in our exam
I: do you write during the lesson/
S: yes we often do that
I: what do you write/
S: basically we write something on the poem or the prose passage and the structure of the essay how we would plan out an essay we always do a plan of the essay
I: so you write a plan – do you write essays/
S: sometimes but not always
I: do you feel you have got enough practice and experience in writing/
S: I think so especially this year
I: is there a difference between last year’s approach and this year’s/
S: yes I think so because last year we didn’t focus as much on how to write an essay but more on analyzing a poem and I think this helped more when it comes to practice
I: when you compare prose and poetry which do you think is more difficult to write about/
S: it depends because when it is prose it is taken out of a novel so you don’t get the whole idea but when it’s a poem it’s just a whole thing so you have all the concept it depends on which passage it is but usually it’s poetry
I: what makes a text difficult to read/
S: * perhaps when it’s shorter the writer doesn’t put all his ideas there and you have to figure out what you wanted to say
I: which texts are you comfortable reading/
S: I don’t know (laughs)
I: when you compare the texts that you did during the seminars with those that you did during the tutorials which were more challenging/
S: I think the ones of the tutorial were more challenging
I: why/
S: because * the material was more dense I think rather than the ones we did during our seminars were more straightforward and you could understand them more
I: in the syllabus it says that learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the criticism exercise – what do you understand by ‘appreciation’/
S: I think to really understand what the poet is saying and you give your opinion on the poem
I: what do you think is expected of you in the exam/
S: to give reasons for everything you say to sustain basically what you say
I: do you think it is analysis/
S: it is analysis but it is also a means of expression I think of expressing your opinion on what you think the poem is about because not everyone is going to see it in the same way

I: how important is it to give you opinion/ are you advised to give your opinion or not/
S: I mean not just discuss your opinion throughout but I think it is important to give importance to your opinion when doing critical appreciation

I: and do you include that in your response/
S: sometimes yes

I: when do you feel you do include your opinion/ what kind of poems or prose passages allow you to do so/
S: the ones I can relate to for example we had one in our tutorial test of how students react to education at times how the system doesn’t always is always practical for us students

I: which are the poems you feel you relate to/
S: the fact that ehm a student’s life isn’t always easy and it is like a routine rather than can be enjoyed as a form of learning sometimes it does get that way but not all lessons are that way

I: do you think that those poems that have a clear thematic concern are easier to relate to/
S: I think so

I: which are the themes that you could relate to more/
S: when it regards the environment ehm those are the ones and the main how challenges in life I think in poems there is always this main concept you can always relate in a way but there are poems which you can relate more than others

I: when you do poems or prose passages in seminars are they related to a theme/
S: yes we usually try to relate them to a theme so then when you are writing an essay you build your ideas around that theme

I: do you feel that helps you write a better response/
S: yes

I: what strategies do you use when reading a poem/
S: you read it for the first time just to get an idea and then on the second time you start to highlight the points which you think are most important and relevant and then you start writing a plan before you write your essay

I: when you write the plan what do you plan on/ how do you structure your essay/
S: we first do an introduction a basic introduction and then in the second paragraph we build on the introduction but we get into more detail and then the body we focus on the imagery and the tone and style and then there is the conclusion we don’t usually follow any method for the conclusion so it’s really up to us how we conclude
I: has your teacher in the seminar advised you what to use or not to do/
S: she told us to use the most method which we feel comfortable with but she suggested this method where we first start off with an introduction and then we keep adding detail as we go along
I: are you advised against an approach where you write about a poem stanza by stanza/
S: she doesn’t advise us that we have to go through it chronologically we can even start from the end if we have to
I: all right – how confident do you feel about writing about unseen texts on a scale of 1 to 10/
S: 6 (laughs)
I: ok do you feel confident when writing about set texts (the novels the poems that you study)/
S: yes
I: why is that/
S: because you know that what you’re writing is relevant at least you have prepared your material and if it’s something unseen you I’m afraid that I might have gotten the wrong idea
I: what scares you the most about unseen (in relation to the exam)/
S: that you have a limited amount of time to read and understand the poem and so you might leave certain things out
I: what other difficulties do you face when writing about an unseen text/
S: ehm the content more than language and on the structure how it reflects how the poet wants to bring out the meaning
I: what kind of guidelines are you given by your teacher/ are you provided with models or sample essays/
S: no we don’t usually have sample essays we do them ourselves in class but the lecturer helps us to build our own
I: do you think sample essays would help you/
S: * sometimes but not really for unseen poems I don’t think so because unseen poems are always going to be different I think it’s more useful when it comes to novels we’re tackling
I: ok now let us move on to feedback – does the teacher inform you what the focus of feedback will be before you write the essay/
S: (no response)
I: during the tutorial session before writing do you prepare for the unseen text/
S: yes she gives us feedback
I: so you know what the focus of feedback is going to be
S: usually yes we are given feedback on what we have to emphasise and what we should discuss but not into that much detail
I: *how does this help organize your essay?*
S: It helps me to get an idea of the structure I want to have and the points I want to start off with.

I: *what type of feedback do you receive on criticism essays?*
S: Feedback positive or negative.

I: *it can be both*
S: We discuss everything for example if it’s negative I think it’s more a use of language and then when it comes to positive it’s when you address the poem when sustaining your ideas.

I: *what type of comments can you remember your teacher giving you?*
S: *To further my vocabulary and to encourage good ideas which I have already used*

I: *do you feel you have improved from one essay to another?*
S: Yes.

I: *what did you do to improve?*
S: I try to – if a word wasn’t used in the right context I try not to repeat it again and I try to use the ideas which were positive in my previous essays.

I: *before writing an essay do you refer back to your written feedback?*
S: Yes I do.

I: *does that help you*
S: Yes it helps me a lot.

I: *which do you prefer – written or oral?*
S: *I think it has to be a bit of both because you will remember what you said in class but you have to have something to look back and it’s usually something which is written which you’re going to remember most*

I: *which do you think is more effective or usable?*
S: We should discuss it in class but then you jot down points which are most relevant to you I think that’s the most effective.

I: *do you notice if you repeat the same mistakes?*
S: Yes I do tend.

I: *what are the mistakes you tend to repeat?*
S: *I repeat the same word for example ‘show’ instead of using a different word I use the same word throughout the essay*

I: *but you are aware of that?*
S: Yes I am aware and I have tried to change it – I’ve changed it.

I: *what have you done to change it?*
S: Using a thesaurus.
I: what do you think of the idea of receiving feedback in the form of digital media/

S: I think if it is done in class it is more effective rather than the media because I think
the message is delivered more effectively in that way

I: but this would mean adding on not removing the tutorial – do you think it would help/

S: adding on yes might help

I: how well do you understand your teacher’s feedback/ how well do you understand the
language of feedback/

S: yes it is specific sometimes it does get technical but I think that is what we are
expected to do in the exam

I: do you understand the language of feedback/

S: yes I do

I: so you know what you have to focus on to improve/

S: I believe so

I: do you remember the feedback well enough/

S: not always but I read them at the end to see maybe the comments

I: the essays on crit do not follow one another – do you think it would be beneficial if
they were contiguous/

S: * I don’t know but since the exam is not going to be a continuous – I don’t think it
would be that effective because if it is continuous then it would help you get a better
mark but what you’re going to get in the exam isn’t going to be a continuous pattern
and what you’re going to find is completely new and I think we have been adjusted to
that

I: ok what kind of mark do you get for your criticism essays/

S: we didn’t have a lot I think but usually an 18 out of a 30

I: and last year/

S: I don’t remember

I: so the highest mark

S: the highest mark I think a 20 or a 21

I: do you perform better in set texts than in crit/

S: I think I perform better in set texts

I: did you ever need to revise the essay and were you ever given the chance to write a
second version of the essay/

S: no I don’t think I have ever been advised to do that

I: would you do it if you were given the option/

S: perhaps if it is was something which was really challenging and you really didn’t
understand it I think it would really help

I: how does feedback allow you to develop ideas for writing/
S: it helps you to adopt new methods and rather than using the same ways so it doesn’t get boring because if you always plan out your essays the same way I think it would not help you to improve your mark but if you adopt new ways to write your essay I think it’s really useful

I: what stops you from applying feedback?
S: time usually (laughs) cause we’re continuously pressed by deadlines not just by English but since we have other subjects I think it limits us to focus

I: do you feel you have had enough practice/ 
S: last year we didn’t have a lot I think this year it is better but then you have to focus on what’s more important I think the other texts are very relevant

I: ok is there anything that you would change about the way you receive feedback/ 
S: perhaps have more feedback sessions rather than just hand in our essays and discuss what we did in the essays 

I: so you mean to discuss 
S: just discussion sessions 

I: all right thank you
Appendix 23 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S11 (Martina)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions relate to your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: I chose English at Advanced level because I wanted to leave my options open and I thought English was a great option to become a teacher and English teacher or even as an English teacher as a summer job for foreign students
I: all right so you are aiming at teaching specifically/
S: no I used to think that I was going to become a teacher but now I am looking at going to ITS next year and going for the course of hospitality management
I: what about your experience with literature from Form 3 up to now/
S: the very first few years of studying literature I wasn’t getting high marks in the 50s and 60s but then as a continued studying since at school I believe we had very good teachers I got very high marks and I was very happy last year that I managed to get high marks even O level in English Literature I got a 2 so I was very happy and it’s a nice subject I love English literature
I: when you said you have improved – what have you done/ how do you study literature/
S: I study it by referring to other poetry not just the ones we do at school and working out essays on my own not in an essay form but I jot down some points and this helps me a lot and I also like to read novels
I: and is there a method that you use when studying literature/
S: yes and I try to read my notes a number of times before and sometimes I write important quotes and attach them to the walls around the house
I: you said you had very good teachers – what is a good teacher for you/
S: a good teacher is one that she knows the poems the we are working on but she knows others as well and she makes reference to them so we can maybe write them down and have reference to them and also one that can help you with other aspects maybe you find a point which is a bit difficult and you ask her and she will help you as well
I: ok what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years – have you read anything for pleasure/
S: in secondary school we used to get books from the library and every week we had to write a summary this helped me to – because before I didn’t like reading at all but this helped me read and then as I entered [school name] I continued reading on my own I borrow books from the library
I: so why didn’t you like reading and what helped you change that/
S: because before I didn’t I used to prefer to watch films or other activities but I didn’t look at a book I only saw it in school curriculum
I: so how did this idea of the summaries help you to enjoy reading/
S: yes because they made us read and as I read I noticed that there were books that really I liked
I: are there any books that you remember reading and enjoying?
S: I read various books I don’t really have a specific author but the last book I read was Wise Children and it was by *and it was a funny it was a humouristic book and a narrative as well *

I: you said that your teacher used to refer to other poems at the same time whilst doing a poem – did that help you and encourage you to look for other poems?
S: yes yes and I read them at home on the internet and then I jot some points down

I: so do you read poetry for pleasure/
S: (laughs) – I don’t read poetry as such it’s not my favourite thing I prefer reading a novel but I do read to improve my writing

I: and now when you are home do you sometimes look for poetry on your own even without anyone having told you or suggested to you/
S: no (laughs)

I: so you look for the poems if someone tells you about it
S: mhm yes

I: you said that you jot the notes down
S: yes some points about the themes and sometimes I have difficulty in finding the themes or the mood and tone and I search for the different themes and then I can maybe highlight the theme in the poem

I: what methods do your teachers use when teaching literature/ (the unseen text)
S: last year we read some notes from the book and then we practiced first from the book so we read the poems or prose and then we tried to work out in class together with the teacher and then we saw the sample answer

I: did the sample help/
S: yes a lot

I: how did it help you/
S: because we learnt new words how to describe poems and to write about the poem and then from the teacher and then we learnt from the book as well how to structure the sentence better

I: how is it different from this year/
S: this year we are more practical we are referring more to past papers and we’re doing the same thing but we are working out together or with the teacher and then we correct it together

I: when you work on your own first how do you feel about that/
S: I feel that it’s a bit challenging but it’s a better way to test my ability in crit and then when comparing to other students I learn from my mistakes

I: are there any other activities that you do during the literary criticism seminar/
S: and then when the teacher told us about the different eras of poetry and different authors
I: how did that help you/
S: ehm maybe when we have the poem in the exam we won’t really know exactly in which era but it helped because even if we have a familiar poem poet it is very helpful because we feel more confident and we can be more specific and the examiner will realise that we know what we are talking about
I: what texts do you consider to read/ what makes a text difficult/
S: a text that has words that I don’t understand because when I see a word that I don’t understand sometimes I start thinking about it and I get mixed up instead of moving on I find it irritating a bit
I: is there anything else apart from word level difficulties/
S: when a text is long for example and maybe the message is unclear
I: do you remember any examples of texts that you consider difficult/
S: **
I: can you think of texts that you are more comfortable reading/
S: ehm poems – when it’s more practical for example when we did – I forgot the name – the one of the farming – I think it was Digging – it had diction related to farming but I still understood it so unless the words are a bit tricky I do understand and I like it
I: in the syllabus it says that learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the practical criticism exercise and in the instructions you are told to write a critical appreciation of the text – what do you understand by the word ‘appreciate’/
S: that we don’t only see the poem or the text as something like an ordinary text but we see the message and we go between the lines and understand the really message behind the poem
I: what do you think you are expected to write about in the exam (in relation to appreciation)/
S: ehm we write about the themes and the figures of speech and not just mention them but also explain and also about the character
I: does this mean an analysis/
S: * yes but still relating to the poem as a whole
I: do you think you’ve been guided to appreciate/ has the word come up/
S: well sometimes especially our generation and since we learn it at school we read poetry just because we’re studying it we do not really appreciate because like I said for me appreciation is reading between the lines and it doesn’t come to me appreciating the style the length and the level of writing so it’s a bit difficult
I: which do you think is more difficult for you prose or poetry/
S: prose because we made a lot of emphasis on poetry and less on prose
I: are there any other reasons for this/
S: because in poetry we know about the figures of speech we can find them and write about them but in prose it’s more about the images
I: *do you think the images in poetry are clearer/*
S: yes

I: ok how do you feel about writing about an unseen text/ on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident are you/
S: 7

I: *are you more confident on the unseen or the set texts/*
S: more confident on the unseen

I: *why is that/*
S: because for the poems we have to study we don’t have a lot but I think they pretend (expect) that we go into more detail about it

I: *about the set texts/*
S: yes

I: so you feel more confident about unseen texts because you think you’re expected to go into less detail
S: yes

I: *what other reasons are there for being more confident about unseen texts/*
S: **you don’t really have to study and you know what you have to look for obviously you have to study what you have to look for but over the years you remember these but for prose the novels for example we have a limited time for example The Heart of the Matter or The Handmaid’s Tale we have a year each to study them with the lecturer and it’s a bit of a short time

I: *what difficulties do you face when writing about an unseen text/*
S: sometimes the poems especially because they are not written by Maltese people or by people that have – because sometimes the authors have a different background and sometimes if they mention different aspects which I don’t really understand it can be confusing and whilst reading the poem and I can blank out

I: *by background do you mean setting and place/*
S: yes

I: and you said they are not written by Maltese people
S: yes because it’s written by British authors and last year in a tutorial we had a test it was about a person that had passed away and it was confusing because they put this person in a coffin and they left him there for 3 days and in Malta this is not a custom so I got confused (laughs) I thought he was maybe sleeping I couldn’t understand

I: *what other difficulties do you have when actually writing the essay/*
S: sometimes I find it difficult to use different link words and also to start a paragraph because I can start a paragraph and continue but the first sentence is a bit tricky

I: *what do you do to resolve these challenges/*
S: I plan before I plan some link words that I can use and some beginnings that are maybe good for the exam and also **can you repeat the question/*
I: what do you do to sort out these challenges?
S: I forgot

I: it’s ok – when you had tutorials and literary criticism seminars were you provided with a plan for writing/ were you guided how to write/
S: yes during our lessons

I: what was the layout that your teacher suggested you could use/
S: our teacher made sample essays and in the margin she wrote for example diction theme and we could use the same pattern obviously depending on the poem or prose we could change the different paragraphs

I: so she gave you sample essays – what else/ other guidelines
S: no response

I: so how do write your essay/
S: I jot down some points and then I usually start with a paraphrase and next I go for themes and it’s the same order and then diction and figures of speech and structure and then conclusion

I: what do your teachers advise you against/
S: at the moment our tutorial teacher always tells us not to use ‘we’ but to use ‘the reader’ and we always write ‘we’ (laughs) to use link words more often and I remember that each paragraph has to have one idea

I: is there a layout that your teachers have told you not to use/
S: mm yes writing about the poem according to how it is for example each paragraph you write about each stanza

I: in order/
S: mm

I: why do you think you were advised against that/
S: because maybe you won’t be tackling each aspect accordingly

I: now let us move on to feedback – what kind of feedback does your teacher give you when writing about unseen texts/
S: mm * to use link words and not to use ‘we’ but ‘the reader’ to use more formal diction and include more quotes from the poem or prose and explain further

I: all right and do you remember any particular comments that the teacher gave you/
S: as I said she always mentions the ‘we’ and about the conclusion that we should never write any bad comments about the poem because obviously it is chosen even though we don’t like it maybe it is sort of a piece of art I think those

I: before you write the essay do you discuss the poem together with the teacher in class or are you expected to do it on your own/
S: no we do not discuss it with the teacher sometimes we discuss it during the literary crit lesson but not with the tutorial teacher
I: what is a typical tutorial lesson?
S: ehm every week the teacher reads each essay and she comments about them in front of the students so we learn from each other’s mistakes
I: when the teacher reads the essays does she give you written or oral feedback?
S: she gives us oral feedback and we write comments while she speaks and then she writes comments after she corrects it at home maybe
I: so she corrects it at home and then she brings it back
S: yes
I: does she give you oral feedback then?
S: no
I: so the oral feedback is during the reading lesson – it is immediate
S: yes and sometimes she doesn’t manage to correct everyone’s
I: if she does not correct yours does she then give you more detailed feedback?
S: yes
I: how has this feedback system helped you?
S: * it has helped me not to repeat certain mistakes sometimes I still make silly mistakes and also learn from others for example when she is reading a better essay I write certain words and try to use them next time
I: you said that you also write notes during the feedback – does that help you to understand the feedback?
S: yes
I: all right so is it more usable?
S: yes it is
I: how well do you remember your teacher’s feedback?
S: I try to read the points before I write another essay and sometimes I do forget (laughs)
I: which do you prefer – oral or written?
S: ehm oral
I: why?
S: because even though sometimes it can be a little bit intimidating because everyone is hearing you try to remember next time so she won’t repeat the same things in front of your friends (laughs)
I: so is that some kind of deterrent – to be singled out for attention
S: yes
I: what about written feedback – how do you use it to your benefit?
S: ehm I use it to refer to it next time and I also read it before an exam
I: which do you think has been more effective – oral or written?
S: both because when she says something to me I write it as well so it’s basically both
I: what do you think about receiving feedback in the form of digital media/ such through email or podcasts
S: it can be effective but in my case I prefer if the teacher tells me directly one-to-one
I: were there any situations where you had to rewrite an essay?
S: yes
I: were you given the opportunity to rewrite it?
S: yes and they do correct it but the mark for a tutorial remains the first one
I: so you do it to improve your writing and not the mark
S: yes
I: speaking of marks – what is the average mark you have received for the unseen texts?
S: 6 or 7
I: has it always been like that?
S: eh no it improved a bit last year I used to get 7 but this year it’s a bit (laughs) more like 6
I: so it is less than last year
S: eh no it improved a bit last year I used to get 7 but this year it’s a bit (laughs) more like 6
I: does that scare you because of the exam?
S: yes (laughs) the unseen poem especially but after all it’s an exam you don’t know what’s going to happen
I: is the mark justified – is it properly reflected in the comments and feedback given?
S: yes
I: how does the feedback given allow you to develop your ideas for writing/ how do you apply it?
S: when the teacher gives us for example you use words and she changes them to make them more suitable or more professional
I: when she edits the work
S: yes
I: so that is when you see an improved word is it better than just a comment?
S: yes
I: if you have comments such as ‘improve your vocabulary’ do you know how to apply that feedback?
S: yes but obviously if she says that I should improve my vocabulary there are certain words that she should –not should- but that she can change
I: so you prefer it when she edits your work and gives you the alternative/
I: what other strategies do you use to apply your teacher’s feedback?
S: *I do not rewrite the words but maybe read it more than once

I: are there any ‘errors’ that you have resolved?
S: yes I have to try to include link words and this has helped me not just to improve my rating but also to manage and link each paragraph together and *

I: what about the content?
S: content I’ve tried to keep with the structure and develop more on the content

I: the tutorial essays are not contiguous (not after each other) – does that affect you in any way?
S: I don’t believe the tutorial essays are enough if I find that I have a low mark for example I will write more essays different ones and then give them to teachers so that they can correct them as well

I: would there be any benefits of writing 3 essays after each other on criticism?
S: yes I believe so because we need to train and after all if we continue building up and writing more essays then finally the last essay I believe would be better for the exam

I: is there anything else that you would change in how you receive feedback?
S: ehm * no

I: so you are satisfied?
S: yes

I: do you feel that it is understandable usable and effective?
S: yes)maybe we have a sample essay for the essays we do

I: for the tutorials
S: yes

I: that you are provided with sample essays
S: yes

I: all right thank you very much
Appendix 24 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S12 (Jeanelle)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions relate to your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: I have chosen English at Advanced level because when I grow up I want to be a speech therapist so I need the subject and I like it
I: what has your experience with literature been like from Form 3 up to now/
S: ehm I don’t understand a lot of poems so I think I have been struggling for these years and I hope that in the exam I understand it
I: when you say you struggle what is with the set texts or with the unseen texts/
S: I think it’s with the unseen texts
I: (after I’ll ask about unseen) – how do you study literature/
S: I don’t have a strategy for literature I just read the poems and some notes I think that’s it
I: ok what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years – have you done any reading for pleasure/ do you read for pleasure/
S: not poems (laughs) I don’t read poems for pleasure ehm but I read books
I: what kind of books do you read/
S: books like adventure stories and romantic stories ehm last summer I read Fifty Shades of Grey (laughs) and I read Hunger Games those are the trilogies that I read
I: what do you like about trilogies/
S: ehm I don’t know (laughs)
I: are you attracted to trilogies in general/
S: no I just like the stories
I: ok and you said you don’t read poetry
S: no
I: so you wouldn’t seek it you wouldn’t look for poetry in your spare time
S: no
I: why not/
S: because I don’t like poetry ehm at home I have a book full of poems but they are childlike poems so
I: why do you think you don’t like poetry/
S: ehm it’s because you don’t have a story for me I think they don’t have a story or even I don’t understand them so I think that I have a point to read poetry
I: ok so has this affected you in English at Advanced level/
I: what is your experience with poetry like in the syllabus/ in unseen texts for examples
– how have you progressed with unseen texts/
S: * as time goes by I think I’m getting better *
I: when you started first year how did you feel during seminars/
S: ehm * I felt a little laid back because my seminar teacher wasn’t that good I felt
I: what was a typical lesson of crit like last year/
S: ehm she talked about devices every single lesson and I didn’t understand much
I: did you do any practice in first year/
S: only a few poems
I: did you feel the lessons on devices helped you grasp the meaning/
S: a little and then I went home and researched some of those devices and I took notes
I: did the individual research help you more/
S: yes
I: when you had practice in poetry what was the typical lesson like when you read a poem/
S: we read a poem and the teacher just gave us some points about themes and tone
I: did you read the poem together or on your own/
S: I don’t remember exactly but I think it was on our own
I: so the teacher did not read the poem aloud to you
S: I don’t know I can’t remember
I: would you prefer if the teacher reads the poem aloud first and then you read it on your own/
S: yes
I: what’s the benefit of that/
S: because I think if you hear the poem aloud it’s more easier to understand it
I: now does it have to be before or after you read it on your own/
S: I think it doesn’t matter
I: did the teacher give you the opportunity to work on the poem alone first before discussing it with the rest of the class/
S: I don’t think so
I: so it was mainly she giving you the ideas
S: yes
I: what about this year – how do you feel the process has changed in the way you do unseen texts in class/
S: I think it’s better when we read it all together but last two weeks when we didn’t read it together I didn’t understand it

I: which was the poem/

S: (student looks into file) this one ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’

I: ok that was when the teacher gave you the task to do it on your own so what did you find challenging when you had to do it on your own/

S: I don’t know it’s just I didn’t understand it the themes and everything

I: and then did you have a lesson where you discussed it together/

S: yes and then I obviously took points

I: did you understand it then/

S: yes

I: now in the exam you’re aware that you have to do it completely on your own so when you had that experience of doing it on your own how did you feel then/

S: I felt a little scared because I know that in two months’ time I will be doing this exercise alone in the exam and it will affect my grade so I took it as a challenge as a mock test for the real exam

I: what scares you about tackling an unseen poem or prose text alone/

S: that I obviously don’t understand it and there will be some words which I don’t know or I haven’t seen before

I: so which method do you prefer – when the teacher explains everything to you or when you are allowed to explore the poem on your own and then discuss it as a class/

S: the one I prefer when the teacher reads it first and then we take points and then we discuss them together

I: so not on your own/

S: no

I: are there any activities that you did apart from the typical crit lesson – where there particular activities that were different/

S: * I think it was always the same pattern

I: do you like that idea of repetition/

S: yes

I: what advantage does it have/

S: I think that in the exam you know what to do step by step and in the exam I will not freak out (laughs)

I: all right what types of texts do you read in the criticism seminars – do you feel that there has been a good balance of prose and poetry/

S: I think that we did a lot of poems but not enough prose passages

I: why do you think that might be the case/
S: ehm * I don’t know but for me I think we have do both the poems and the prose passages because in the exam they’re going to be both of them

I: in first year did you get to do any prose at all/
S: I think we only did one or two

I: the texts that you had to discuss these two years – what did you find challenging about them/
S: I think the questions on effect I didn’t know what to write about on effect or I find it difficult to look for themes in poems

I: what do you consider more difficult poetry or prose/
S: I think it’s poetry

I: and why/
S: because poetry has words which are different from prose passages

I: so is it vocabulary/
S: yes

I: do you prefer answering on unseen poetry or prose/
S: prose

I: for that reason/
S: yes

I: so you feel less scared on prose/
S: yes

I: do you think that’s why teachers do more poems than prose texts/
S: I don’t know if other students are like me and they feel more scared of poems but I think that’s the reason

I: ok in the syllabus it says that learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the criticism exercise and in fact you have ‘write a critical appreciation’ of the piece – what do you understand by this word ‘appreciation’/ what do you think it means/
S: I think it is to dig deeper into the poem and see the message*

I: what do you think you’re expected to do to fulfill to succeed in bringing out appreciation/
S: to bring out the effect of every word in the poem and the themes and why the poet wrote that way

I: do you equate appreciation with analysis/
S: * I don’t know

I: are they similar/ or do they contradict each other/
S: no answer

I: are they different processes/
S: I think so
I: so are you expected to appreciate or analyse/
S: I think it’s to analyse
I: are you guided at all to appreciate/ has this word ever come up/
S: ehm no I don’t think so
I: do you know what you have to do when you have ‘write a critical appreciation’/
S: yes I do
I: so it’s clear for you/
S: yes
I: all right and when you read a poem how do you go about it/ let’s take this one ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ – what strategies did you use when reading the poem/ can you take me through the stages that you adopt when reading a poem/
S: I first read it and I obviously reread it and then I look at the structure and the versification how many stanzas and rhymes and I take notes if in the second reading I did not understand it I reread it till I finally understand the whole poem and then I search for look for themes and tone
I: do you start by looking at the poem in terms of its language and then you work your way towards the theme or you try to start from the big picture and then you work your way down – is it bottom up so you start from language and structure and technical elements until you arrive at theme/ or is it top down you start from theme and general elements and then you dig deeper/
S: yes I think it’s not the same for every poem but in general it’s bottom upwards
I: all right and how does that help you understand the poem/
S: I think if you understand the language it will just it will come to you
I: do you think that the prose texts and poems chosen for the tutorial are more difficult or less so than the ones you do in seminars/
S: ehm normally I find them not that hard but this poem and the last poem we had for the tutorial (‘Taxing the Rain’) I didn’t understand it that well
I: what didn’t you understand about it/
S: the point of it all then I had to search in the internet to finally understand it
I: and then did you understand it better with some research/
S: yes
I: what is it therefore that makes a poem difficult/ you said the words
S: yes
I: when you don’t understand the whole point of it – what other elements make a poem difficult to analyse and understand/
S: vocabulary and long sentences because you start reading and it’s a long sentence I just I don’t continue to understand the whole point
I: when you say long sentence is the use of run on lines for example/
S: yes and even long stanzas the one we had in tutorial
I: this one ‘Taxing the Rain’/
S: yes

I: and that’s why it was more difficult for you to understand
S: yes

I: all right when writing about an unseen text on a scale of 1-10 how confident do you feel/
S: about 6 because I find it difficult to start in the introduction and then when I start analyzing what I’m going to say it just comes

I: so to begin is difficult
S: yes

I: do you feel more confident when writing about the set texts/
S: yes I think it’s better because I study for it and I know the material

I: so the idea of not knowing (being unseen) scares you
S: yes

I: what if the programme were such that it’s still unseen but instead the poems would be categorized under themes for example the theme of relationships conflict nature and the environment and the poems might come out under that theme you wouldn’t know what’s coming out but you would still have an idea of the theme – do you think that would help guide students/
S: I think it’s a beginning to know about the theme

I: what difficulties do you face when you said you get stuck on writing an introduction – what other challenges do you face while writing/
S: also to conclude all of the ideas and to write the essay I think it’s the structure and know if theme comes first or in the middle

I: are you aware of a particular structure that you’re supposed to use or you’re not certain yet/
S: I’m not certain yet I just write theme in the first paragraph the second about imagery and style and in the third tone structure versification and then I conclude

I: all right so you have an idea what areas to write about but the layout
S: if I’m doing it right or now

I: in these two years have you been guided how to write and structure a response to an unseen text/
S: last year it was a bit of a disaster but I think it’s better

I: do you feel you’re being guided this year/
S: yes
I: ok what about in tutorials – do you discuss how to structure an essay on crit/
S: no

I: or are you just expected to write the essay straight away/
S: yes

I: so before you write the essay the week before you hand in the essay – would you
prepare or discuss what you’re going to write about/ do you read the poem together
before (you hand in the essay) or are you completely on your own/
S: it depends whether we have time or not but in most of the cases we don’t discuss it

I: do you feel it would be good to discuss the unseen texts/
S: yes

I: how would you feel about writing about the poem or prose/
S: it would make me feel more confident and easier for me to understand it

I: do you think that’s necessary for the set texts or is it more important for the unseen/
S: ehm I think it’s for the unseen it’s better

I: you said time is a problem
S: yes example last week we made some points because we were few in the tutorial so
we had more time to do this task

I: this was before you wrote the essay
S: she gave us points about this week’s tutorial – it’s about The Handmaid’s Tale

I: so it is about the set text and that was because you were few in class – how did that
affect you/
S: I think that’s better for me to prepare my essay and I have already points to do in my
essay

I: so you know what the focus is
S: yes

I: so if you know what the focus of feedback is before in the sense that you know what
the teacher will be looking out for will it help you organize your essay/
S: yes

I: in what way/
S: to know what to write and I don’t go out of point

I: what type of feedback does your teacher give you in tutorials on unseen crit/ what
feedback did you receive/
S: last year I wasn’t that good and I usually got about 5 and now this year my teacher
likes the way I link the narrator to the reader and my mark is better

I: in what way are you creating a link between narrator and the reader/
S: ehm I write with the details and with what the narrator tries to picture * it
depends on the poem
I: you said it’s better now because the teacher creates a link between the narrator and the reader
S: no no I said that the teacher likes the way I write my essay because I include the link between the narrator and the reader
I: so does that mean you include your own opinion and response?
S: yes
I: when do you that?
S: it depends on the poem if there is that link
I: what kind of comments do you remember receiving on your writing?
S: ehm in essays I tend to write vague and I don’t go in detail about the poem
I: do you understand that because of the comments/ because you receive similar comments?
S: yes
I: so can you remember a typical comment or two that your teacher wrote at the end of the essay?
S: that I’m vague
I: ok do you understand what you have to do with the comments/ do the comments allow you to improve/ do you understand the comments?
S: yes I know what I’m doing wrong but I don’t know how not to be vague
I: ok so how do you address these challenges and difficulties?
S: I try to write ehm my ideas more clear
I: so you don’t know how to address how you can resolve?
S: no
I: have you ever discussed with your teacher how you can improve/ how you can do it?
S: no (laughs) I never asked her
I: ok but do you understand the language of feedback?
S: yes
I: do you get the same comments on unseen texts?
S: ehm last year my tutor used to tell me about my essays being vague but now this year I think it’s getting better and my last week’s assignment wasn’t vague
I: has the mark t improved – you said you started with a 5 out of 10 /
S: yes now it’s 6 and 6+
I: all right so which areas have you improved on/ language-wise and content-wise: which are the problem areas and what do you think you have ‘fixed’ or tried to fix/
S: I think I’ve been better in introductions and the structure and imagery
I: how to write about imagery

S: yes

I: what about language areas/ which were the problem areas that you felt you needed improvement/

S: the vocabulary I usually have some problems of structure in sentences but it’s just

I: so do you think that the mark was not due to your language but to the way you structure your response

S: yes and I think it’s also my ideas of the poem

I: do you think that that can be improved on (content) of writing the proper and expected response/

S: yes I think it can be it needs to be but I don’t know how

I: is it because of the different types of poems or in general/

S: I think it’s in general

I: are you aware of a typical essay looks like/ have you ever seen a model of a crit essay of a good crit essay/

S: I think so yes I have one of last year my tutor gave us

I: so have you analysed that model to see what makes it a good model/

S: yes

I: so do you try to follow it and write something similar even if the poem is different/

S: yes the model essay includes a lot of phrases from the poem and my tutor told me that I don’t link my ideas to the phrases I just put them in the essay and I don’t link them

I: are the suggestions doable/ do you think that you can improve on it/

S: yes

I: when providing you with feedback does the tutorial teacher provide you with written or with oral feedback/

S: I think it’s a mixture of both

I: what is a tutorial like when the teacher gives feedback/

S: first she reads all the poems of the students then whilst she is correcting them she highlights some mistakes the student did and obviously the good parts she had

I: when you say mistakes can you give any examples/ what’s the focus there/

S: she said not to repeat them

I: what type of mistakes are they/ are they language based or content based/

S: it depends it’s not always the same but I think it’s about the theme or the words of the essay

I: then you get the written feedback after/

S: yes
I: does the teacher give your further oral feedback after correcting or not?
S: no

I: so does she correct the essay in class?
S: yes

I: does she correct them at home and then she gives them back to you the following week?
S: yes yes

I: so she gives you back the essay with feedback in written form
S: no I think – she writes a few points on our essay and then the following week she discusses them individually

I: which do you prefer – the written or the oral?
S: I think it’s the written

I: what advantages does it have?
S: because it’s permanent and if you forget what she said you have it there

I: when you said the teacher reads the essay in the tutorial and gives feedback is that a blend of written and oral – then you take it home and do you refer to your essay before writing a new essay?
S: I just see some points but I don’t refer to it

I: so the written feedback does not affect your future writing
S: I just know what to do

I: since the essays on crit are not contiguous – do you remember the feedback of the crit essay before writing a new one?
S: no I just go where I put my previous essays and I see

I: do you refer to your essays before you write?
S: yes

I: does that help you not to make the same mistakes?
S: yes but not every poem is the same

I: so with every new poem you make new mistakes
S: not new mistakes but yes maybe some new mistakes

I: what do you think is the advantage of oral feedback?
S: there is an advantage because the teacher is telling that moment what she thinks about your essay

I: when you hear feedback about other students’ essays do you learn from their mistakes?
S: yes and if it is a poem I just write the feedback she told them

I: in general do you feel the feedback was effective?
S: last year it wasn’t the teacher was too strict with us

I: and how did that make you feel/
S: I felt scared and insecure of my work but now it’s better

I: did you feel the need to revise your essay and resubmit a second version/ were you given the opportunity to rewrite an essay/
S: no

I: would you have done it/ to improve the mark/
S: yes yes

I: do you feel the mark is justified through the feedback given/ does it provide a reason why you got that mark/
S: yes I think the mark obtained shows your work and for me when I get a 6 it shows I have to work harder

I: what do you think about receiving feedback in the form of digital media/ through email or podcast/
S: I feel that the tutorial is enough

I: all right is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback/ are you satisfied with the feedback so far/
S: yes it has helped me be more confident

I: all right thank you very m
Appendix 25 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S13 (Malcolm)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - let us start with your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level/
S: well I love writing I’m trying to write and search on the internet on how I can write better sentences you know my passion or I’d rather say my ambition is to become a writer or a scriptwriter somewhere between those lines obviously I thought English is as close as you get to that path also I chose Economics and Accounts and although they are boring subjects which help you academically career and getting a job-wise but I wanted to choose something that I personally actually like not that I don’t like the other subjects but I do have a certain preference

I: what about your experience with literature from Form 3 up to now/
S: ok from Form 3 it might be a little difficult to remember but I could say something about The Heart of the Matter ehm I do like the book and you know from my understanding and interpretation of it it has really deep elements which I understand you know life meaning religion ehm judging others that are very very important meanings but personally I don’t believe it is adequate for students at this age because most of them just see everything on the first level ehm most students will just read the book and believe it’s just about a depressed man who commits suicide and about religion ‘boring stuff’ well I’m using inverted commas here but you know personally I do like it religiously I’m an atheist however from a very objective point of view I still understand it then if I move on to other books for example this year’s Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale I love that book I mean it was very well written I love how imagery and the scenes are depicted she paints the scenery and I think what makes Margaret Atwood’s book more adequate is the fact that it is very realistic

I: ok so how do you study literature/
S: ehm * well usually I just read the book myself again you know out of class time then I just write a couple of essays on the different themes for example let’s take Othello I wrote an essay for personal reasons sometimes I do give it to the teacher to correct you know some probably which are mistakes but usually that’s what I do I write an essay on the theme for example of jealousy I believe it comes from what it is derived for example jealousy is derived from people’s perception that he is inferior to others just because of his race I try to link everything together

I: what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years – have you done any reading for pleasure/
S: yeah I do I’m not going to say I’m an avid everyday reader because ok that would be a lie but you know recently I’ve read books such as Brave New World ehm Fahrenheit 451 which was a little confusing but it was nice you know other such books I’ve only started reading you know intensively during the past two years I can’t say I’ve been an avid reader since the age of 3 it would be a lie but yeah I do read for pleasure

I: what has pushed you to start reading more intensively/
S: well the fact that you can’t write without reading that’s impossible and you know that has actually affected me because when I try to you know open a Word Office and try to write everything was really really – I was rereading everything and I said Oh God this is
all wrong I started getting ideas from this books or that book certain things like how
they depict a scene in the forest for example or in a room or in a prison you know I
think to write you need tools and to get tools you need to extract information from a
variety of books

I: what about poetry – do you read poetry in your spare time/
S: no (laughs) I do like the idea of poetry but I don’t know no I don’t read in my spare
time eh I would say the reason because if I had enough time I would I would try at
least but you know currently

I: apart from time constraints is there anything else that stops you from reading poetry/
S: I don’t hate poetry I do like it I do enjoy it but I don’t actively seek it I do appreciate
it but sort of like art I don’t spend a lot of time looking at different kinds of art

I: let us talk about your experience with unseen texts during the literary criticism
seminars – what methods do your teachers use when teaching literature during the
seminars/
S: well usually we get a text and we read - sorry the teacher reads it aloud and we go
through it line by line or he asks us read it ourselves afterwards and do our
interpretation

I: which method do you prefer/
S: I do prefer - hearing the teacher reading it and then reading it on my own that’s fine –
but I would think that the problem with unseen texts is that they don’t have a lot of
context so unless you know the poem beforehand you’re going to say Ok what is this
about/ ehm it happened to me a variety of times for example last time we read a poem
by Aldous Huxley if I remember correctly about a kind of insect but I forgot the name
anyway I was completely blanked out and that was just two weeks after reading A
Brave New World and I still couldn’t understand it and then the teacher told us that it’s
about the lack of meaning in life and you know then you’re like wow ok instantly
everything connected but unless you have the context in your mind the fact that I found
difficulty

I: do you think it would help if students are provided with a short note on c
ontext/
S: yes something on context I think would be extremely helpful at least on the theme or
something because it is a little difficult – for me I don’t find any problems when it
comes to prose and reading poetry like Owen I can discuss it

I: which is more difficult for you to understand poetry or prose/
S: poetry mostly because I’m more exposed to prose than poetry

I: what other activities do you do when reading unseen texts in class/
S: usually we are told to underline words we don’t know and then discuss them or the
teacher asks us to underline the important the things that we think are important and
discuss them to be honest I prefer if the students focus on what they know rather than
actively seek the words they don’t know just get the gist of the poem first and discuss
what the poem is or at least provide the context of what the poem will be about
beforehand

I: all right – do you do any writing during the lessons/
S: yes we do sometimes essays on poems and (laughs) I mean I would lie if I said that we never try to check the meaning of the poem on the internet but you know and the people who try to check the meaning behind a poem by using the internet by surfing the internet aren’t just those who you know let’s say those who do not care as much about the subject but even those who you know are better than me at writing and at the subject so I think yes from all the aspects and parts in an exam the part which I would most hesitate and be apprehensive about would certainly be the unseen text

I: what is it that worries you about the unseen text (in relation to the exam)/
S: the lack of context the lack of knowing what’s going to be there I mean it’s something completely new you already know about Margaret Atwood you already study about it and then it’s like no matter how much you study or how well you know the technicalities and metaphors and iambic pentameter you can’t really know what’s going to appear in the unseen text and more than the technical aspect because you can always ok find the technical aspect but what about the main idea behind the poem what if you interpret it in a completely different way/

I: so what do you think is the purpose of the unseen text in the exam/
S: I would hope that it is managing to identify the technical aspects but if it was about how well can you understand what the writer what the poet is trying to say through his poetry I think it’s very subjective it’s a very subjective thing for me a poem it could be about something and I think I can manage to provide ehm to provide arguments to sustain my interpretation but it could still be completely wrong so there is that element of instability you can’t be sure of that and I hate that

I: what about examples of unseen texts – you mentioned Aldous Huxley – can you think of or remember texts that were challenging to read/
S: ok this might require some thought * no I can’t remember anything on my head

I: so in the syllabus it says that learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the practical criticism exercise – what do you understand by this word ‘appreciation’/
S: well I would think it is asking you to analyse the technical and the moral aspects behind the poem and what the poet is trying to show what he is really trying to show under the you know the first layer of the reading and ehm how he is trying to show or he’s going to use or she sorry if they are going to use synonyms to show similarity or they’re going to add contrast you know imagery how you know I do enjoy that aspect I do appreciate it and ehm I usually can identify them but as I said it’s not always that

I: so you think appreciation is like analysis
S: yes I do think it is more personal than just an objective analysis but yes I do have a feeling that it is analysis

I: during the seminars are you guided to appreciate/
S: ehm yeah usually it’s ‘Write a critical appreciation’ I don’t know if we ever used the word critical analysis but when I’m going to take the word appreciate is to you know appreciate the value of something well I would say I do appreciate the value of a poem but I think I would appreciate it more if we are introduced to this poem in a different way for example we start a lesson on a subject then you hand out a poem on that subject rather than you have to read a poem on its own

I: in isolation
S: yes exactly

I: so for example adopting a thematic approach would help
S: yes a thematic approach

I: how do you read a poem/ (can you take me through your reading process/)
S: well first I read all of it one to two times sometimes when I’m finding difficulty I read it to three times easily (laughs) ehm then I think I start to underline the bits which are most important you know which show the most meaning and which convey the most emotion and theme and then hm ok so reading underlining then I probably start looking at the questions to see what I should be looking for but I would need a couple of minutes to try and understand and create an image in my mind of what whoever wrote the poem is trying to say what it is it’s true meaning then I start writing

I: I will ask you about writing soon – when you compare of the tutorials are they more difficult than the ones you read during the seminars/ S: the difference between ehm I think they are of the same difficulty actually to be honest I find writing a critical appreciation on the prose texts harder than writing it on a poem because a prose text is even more isolated than a poem at least with a poem you have an entire piece but a prose citation you have a very small bit of a much larger story and for example I remember Fahrenheit 451 I completely missed the point I thought that it was about this fireman who ehm is setting houses on fire to then get the appraisal of extinguishing them and saving the people and I thought that was the point – with prose texts you have a very small bit of a much larger element component

I: so you are more exposed to prose and it is easier for you to understand but then when writing about it it is more challenging
S: yes

I: but do you still understand prose more than poetry when you are reading it/
S: it depends if it is an unseen poem or prose I prefer an unseen poem because at least you have – even if I have the lack of context and not always interpreting it in the right way – but when it comes to unseen prose I think it’s more difficult both reading and writing about it

I: so when writing about unseen texts – on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident do you feel about writing/
S: well ehm hm * (sighs) no I don’t feel that confident when writing about an unseen text I mean I really like writing but when I’m going to read a small excerpt from a story without context and actual conversation the element of interpretation plays a big part and in an exam where skill is being valued I don’t think it should be that subjective I mean obviously there are some elements and if you sustain your arguments but yeah I feel apprehensive about writing unless I understand the text completely there is a (laugh) high chance that I would go either out of point or I would keep going like ‘it would seem that’ or ‘perhaps the writer’s trying to show that’ or ‘maybe this is about’ I would go around without actually getting to it because I got scared and last time that’s what I did I wasn’t sure when I read this certain text I had multiple interpretations of what it could be and I chose one and went with it because it was probably the closest to the actual interpretation but then you know I tried to mention the other ‘maybe it seems that’ and the teacher told me that I shouldn’t because then I
would be deviating too much and reading too much into it that’s usually the problem you’re either reading too much into them or you’re not reading enough into them

I: so on a scale of 1-10 how confident do you feel/
S: 6 (with some hesitation)

I: do you feel more confident about set texts/
S: yes

I: apart from the difficulties that you mentioned are there any more challenges that you face when writing about unseen texts/
S: no I think that is usually the main problem the interpretation

I: what about language issues/
S: language not really I don’t find that difficult to write

I: how have you been guided to write about unseen texts/
S: usually for unseen texts well I used to write chronologically and then I’ve been taught that it would be better instead to categorise each paragraph for example a paragraph about the theme and you spot and identify the technical aspects and the imagery and all elements that support the theme and with each paragraph you do the same thing you know you move for example to the actual technical aspects like metaphors and diction and you see the elements how they convey certain aspects of the poem

I: you said you used the chronological method – why did you use that/ where did that come from/
S: I think because as you read the poem you’re you know first I’m going to do the body first paragraph then second you know it comes instinctively whether you want it or not but then you realize it’s not very very effective or efficient because you keep repeating the same thing over and over again usually in a poem you have the same technical elements present continuously throughout the paragraphs so when you’re going to write about the first paragraph and then the second you’re going to have an overlap and I think in an essay of 600 or 500 words you can’t really afford that

I: apart from that reason why have you been advised against using the chronological approach/
S: ehm for efficacy to be more accurate and concise I have a problem with conciseness and so you know I find it was more effective to use the method where I could highlight an aspect and talk about it what sustains it not the chronological order at first I thought this is good then I read it and I thought ok here’s the same thing over and over again for example the first paragraph would go ‘the diction shows that’ and then go to the second paragraph and you’re saying the same thing

I: all right so how do you plan your response on an unseen text/
S: hm first I highlight all the aspects I can identify then I know I try to mentally sort them what each of them is trying to convey then I start writing everything down ehm for example I plan an introduction which is usually a paraphrase and at the end of an introduction I mention some of the technical aspects I don’t give examples those I leave for the second paragraph usually in the second paragraph I focus on ehm
the thematic aspects and then I go into more detail in the third paragraph where I go into things such as metaphors and imagery alliteration and such technical aspects but – then in the second paragraph I also go with diction – then in the fourth paragraph which would be after the technical I would go through structure and layout of the poem and then the conclusion.

I: are you provided with any models or samples/
S: mm usually I do blank out when I see an unseen but then as you read the title and you have ‘comment on motifs themes’ I’m ok

I: have you ever been provided with a model essay/
S: oh sorry ehm yes (rising intonation) I’ve been mm my first tutorial teacher did provide us with plenty of samples and the one I just talked about – diction and technical aspects – it’s based on that sample ehm also I did some slight modifications to it since another teacher helped with providing another sample which is very similar so I’ve combined a little of both

I: let us talk about feedback now – before you hand in your essay do the teachers inform you what they will focus on in their feedback/
S: yes I mean usually they do tell us that they are going to focus on – not whether you got the interpretation correct but if it is sustained thoughtfully and constructively so that’s always phew if I got it completely wrong but it did happen a couple of times but I said ‘ok I’m not going to get a 1 out of 10 but at least maybe I get a 5’

I: what is the feedback that you receive on your criticism essays/
S: I remember one specific poem about a girl who’s dancing and then there is the observer and he speaks that she is on fire and I actually (laughs) took it literally that she’s on fire and I took it that way and I thought that’s it about the danger of going too far with fire in fact it was about how she was so brilliant she seemed to be on fire but you know even if I got the interpretation completely incorrect I still go an acceptable mark of around 70 or 60 because I got the technical aspects right maybe not in the actual accurate context but I got them so you know that made me feel confident about that I felt really glad and grateful

I: when your teacher gives you back the essays is there a pattern/ does she give you the same type of feedback/
S: yes either do not read too much or you could exploit this a little more or ehm it was meant to be figurative or literal you know those are usually the things

I: how well do you understand your teachers’ feedback/
S: yes I do understand them I don’t always actually agree with them I mean sometimes I get a little frustrated but you know I do

I: do you have any examples/
S: you know for example reading too much or not reading enough into something I always make sure to not provide that definitive answer it would seem like that and I believe that as long as you provide something that sustains an argument or that there isn’t another element that isn’t effectively against your own interpretation I don’t believe it is talking too much about something

I: what type of feedback does your teacher provide you with/ is it oral or written/
S: usually written and then if you ask about it you get oral

I: which do you prefer?
S: * I would prefer probably an auditory discussion or correction on the essay rather than something written but you know ehm the thing is that written will always be there and an auditory explanation will stay in my brain for the longest of five minutes when it’s written when I’m looking back at an essay I’m going to see the paragraph and ok and yes (that and that)

I: why do prefer oral feedback?
S: sometimes some points get across better when they’re explained orally rather than written that is the main advantage I mean a teacher could always employ both techniques and aspects

I: what do you think about the idea of receiving feedback in the form of digital media such as through podcasts or via email/
S: ehm I don’t know I’ve never seen something like that actually – actually I wouldn’t really like it because you wouldn’t get that chance to explain yourself I remember an essay I think for my TEFL course the introductory essay and I went over the top with it I was written feedback on it and I felt I couldn’t explain the reasons as to why I wrote the way I did

I: how did you receive it/ via email/
S: yes via email and I wasn’t frustrated about it but I felt helpless when it came to justifying my writing

I: you said that you understand your teachers’ feedback quite well - how well do you remember your teachers’ feedback/
S: yes I do regards something I know I’m not very good at it probably sticks in my mind very well for example not using the chronological approach that sticks

I: you feel that is a kind of ‘error’ that you were successful in resolving
S: yes I do believe that

I: are there any other ‘errors’ you have resolved/
S: sometimes I used words like ‘ignite’ and you know the words used can be either over the top or a little out of context and you know I remember this year’s tutorial teacher talking to me about that he praised me for you know the broad lexis but he told me not tone it down but to manage it in a better way that really helped me you know I learnt how to write in an effective manner

I: was the feedback effective/
S: yes I feel that it was very effective

I: did you ever need to revise you essay/
S: ehm I don’t think I but you know I do get urge to rewrite my essay the day when we hand in the essay then I realize something and I go ‘oh God what have I done?’ especially this year as we do a class correction and you know the teacher asks the student to read the first paragraph and it is completely different than mine and I’m
‘oh God what have I done/’ and I feel like going home and hiding behind something so yeah that does happen but usually it’s ok

I: is there anything that stops you from applying feedback in writing/
S: I do make sure to analyse the feedback given to me and how I can integrate it next time and work on it I do believe it is extremely important

I: is there a link between one criticism essay and another/
S: no not really

I: would it help if criticism essays were contiguous/
S: ehm hm I’ve actually never thought about it I do think it would have a certain element of drilling correct writing but then there is also the fact that if you’re going to do something at the start of the year I mean if you’re going to do a bunch of critical essays together in one month then you would probably forget them so yeah ok I do see its effectiveness in the short run

I: how do perform in your crit essays compared with other essays/
S: um well I’m going to grade them – if it were to be an unseen poem or an unseen text those are usually my weak point then criticism essays on something that I already know for example like Wilfred Owen I do feel really ok with that but my strong point would be narrative and language essays

I: ok is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback/
S: um

I: are you satisfied with the feedback/
S: yes I think yes

I: do you feel you have progressed well in writing in these two years/
S: yeah I hope so I mean I do look at the essays

I: do you go back to the essays before you write/ do you reread the feedback/
S: I do sometimes yeah I do

I: how often do you do that/
S: it depends on the kind of essay

I: if you’re going to write a new criticism essay do you go back to previous ones/
S: yes I do sometimes if I know there’s something you know an aspect or a certain kind of feedback and then it’s not clear in my mind I do go back to it

I: all right thank you very much
Reading experience and studying literature – S: I’ve always been interested in reading if you look in my bag there’s always books that I read; I read everything from romance to non-fiction and history; to study literature I take down notes and then study the main areas like themes, imagery etc.

At school I liked literature but I didn’t like all the books some were boring I liked the Grammatisator by Roald Dahl but not Macbeth – there’s too much death and killing and I don’t think I relate to that but I like Othello even if some scenes are heavy.

Reading for pleasure – S: I read a lot but I prefer prose; I don’t read much poetry because I don’t know why maybe it’s because it’s difficult to understand sometimes.

Teaching methods – S: The teaching methods of this year and last year were similar: we discuss a poem or prose passage in class and we’re allowed some time to read it on our own then the teacher asks us questions and we discuss the main areas.

This year’s teacher suggests we use a stanza by stanza approach while last year we were advised to write paragraphs in an essay according to areas like themes imagery etc; we had more practice last year in writing because we used to write an essay one week do a poem in class another week; this year we didn’t do much writing I think almost none at all. In the tutorial then we had more essays on criticism but I thought we would have more on prose (as that’s the focus in 2nd year) than poetry; I consider prose to be easier because it’s taken from a short story like a gobbet so it’s more explicit while a poem begins and ends somewhere so if you don’t understand what it’s about it can be difficult; poems that are difficult are those that do not deal with themes that we can relate to; for instance there was this poem that I really liked because it was about a dancer who had died and how they celebrate her – I felt I could relate to that because I like dancing I dance so it was a subject that was familiar to me; it would be easier if we had themes or aspects that we knew were coming out in the exam even if the poems are unseen then at least we would have an idea of the areas or subject topics; I am scared of the criticism part because you never know what’s coming out and if I’ll understand the poem or not; at the same time we have had a lot of practice this year but it’s never enough.

Appreciation – S: I associate appreciation with analysis and criticism and that is what we had got used to even at secondary school; appreciation also means to understand and relate to the poem; the poems during criticism seminars are more difficult than the tutorials but I think that’s ok like that we’re prepared for the exam.

I don’t mind writing about unseen texts but I don’t feel 100% confident mainly because I’m afraid I’ll not understand it well or that my interpretation will be off track;

Challenges when writing – S: to analyse more in depth, to express myself more clearly and to work on showing what I have understood.

Difficulties resolved – S: I have improved on certain areas because last year I had a contact hour with my teacher and I understood what I needed to work on; before I write a new crit essay I go back to my teacher’s feedback and look at the comments and try to
apply them but it’s not always possible or easy because it depends on the text; another
problem is time because in the exam you wouldn’t have the time to read the poem and
analyse it for one or two hours which would be ideal

The layout of the essay – S: we are guided to write a paraphrase first and then
paragraphs on each stanza (chronological) when I read a poem I first read it to get the
general idea then I read it again and underline important literary devices like similes
metaphors alliteration etc then I think of how to fit them in in an essay the difficult part
is to explain and express myself what the effect is so I keep the basic questions in mind
like what is he saying? How? Why is the poet using these words?

Tutorials – S: in the tutorial we prepare to read and write on a poem or prose before we
write it at home this helps to know what I need to focus on and to check that I have
understood it well; even if in the exam we are on our own I feel this is a good
preparation to give us the confidence when writing about unseen texts.

The teacher gives feedback on practically everything from structure to content or
spelling and the way I wrote; his feedback is very detailed but it mainly focuses on
areas like language, understanding of poem, how I expressed myself in the themes and
that is an area that I need to develop more how to develop the themes; I find the
feedback very useful and I prefer written feedback because I can remember what he said
by looking at the comments on the essay and then I can look at them when I prepare to
write the next essay (he just needs to change his approach maybe how to address us
because sometimes it’s discouraging when he says you did this wrong) written is better
than oral because if I don’t remember the oral feedback then it’s more difficult to apply
it; with written I can reread the comments even if sometimes it’s still difficult to apply
the suggestions; last year when I didn’t do too well I rewrote the essay after discussing
and understanding the poem better; as for the mark I don’t ask my teacher why he gave
me the mark because he is the teacher and if he gives me a mark I shouldn’t question it
even if I don’t like it – it’s for our own good

Feedback – S: the feedback given is based on the essay on the poem but I use it to write
my next crit essay; the essays on crit are not continuous but if they are it would be good
because you can see if you improve and how you improve; but then it’s good to have
different essays like on Shakespeare or Owen because you change a bit

Difficulties when applying feedback – S: sometimes I don’t understand the comments or
I forget to apply them if I don’t understand I find my teacher in his office and I ask him
to explain which he does and then it’s better

‘Errors’ that she successfully resolved – S: maybe I understand poetry more now than
before but I still feel I need to develop areas like themes more; in language I think I
have improved in sentence structure

Performance in essay writing – S: it depends on the poem or prose passage but usually I
do better in the set texts because I sort of know what can come out and I have studied
the text but then if it’s a poem that I really like and understand well I could do better in
it

Changes in receiving feedback – S: maybe include more writing in class this year
or more focus on prose because that’s what we were told last year and the
teacher’s approach to be more friendly and less critical of everything all the tim
Appendix 27 – Semi-structured Interview Transcript: S15 (Nicole)

I: thank you for participating in this interview - the first set of questions are related to your experience of reading literature – so why have you chosen English at Advanced level?
S: I have always enjoyed English and I write so it helps and I want to continue my studies in English also so it’s important to me
I: talk about your experience of literature from Form 3 up to now – has it been a positive one/
S: it’s been very positive in terms that I have learnt a lot about literature but mostly it was these past two years that the literature was more relevant I guess to our age group because the work we used to study in our secondary school although interesting it was mostly not relevant to us in the sense that we couldn’t exactly relate to it so it was harder to engage with the actual studying and reading of it
I: so did you find the set texts and unseen text here relevant/
S: if not all were relevant they were interesting because it broadened your knowledge in a way that wants you to actually learn more
I: how do you study literature/
S: I go over the reading the notes are important also but mostly I read and reread until I actually understand the text itself
I: what about reading for pleasure in the last two to three years – have you read anything for pleasure/
S: I’ve read quite a bit for pleasure I’ll admit that this year with the studying reading for pleasure has taken the sidelines but I’ve read quite a bit mostly I’ve been reading diaries for instance ehm or poetry but diaries are very interesting to me cos you get to see the psychological aspect
I: you said you read poetry – so you actually seek it
S: yes
I: how do you look for poetry/
S: unfortunately in Malta you do not really find many poetry books in bookshelves in stores if you go to the mainstream bookshops
I: you don’t/
S: you don’t really find much – you find the usual like Shakespeare but if you want more than that you have to either order online when I went abroad to London it was amazing there is such a selection available but in Malta it’s not – or else you have to very specific bookstores which are very hard to seek too
I: how do you get to know about a poet/
S: either online I tried to keep track of blogs and they post either a quotation or excerpts of a poet’s work so from there I find out about poets also I’ll admit through the criticism lectures here I did find some poets which I do enjoy reading

I: do you have any favourite poets so far/
S: I’ll admit that Sylvia Plath her work and life story are amazing she went through so much that but then I also find poets which remain anonymous their work is amazing as any professional poet

I: let’s talk about unseen texts during the criticism seminars – what methods do your teachers use when teaching literature/
S: usually it’s more of a – we read it once to understand the text and then they’ll see what we can grasp from it then if there’s something we’re not exactly grasping we’ll read it again and we sort of try and wrap our heads around it

I: how much time are you allowed to analyse it on your own/
S: I guess we’re given around 10-15 minutes to actually read it and make our own notes because to really understand it you have to make notes here and there so we’re given 15 minutes to read it make notes and actually understand it

I: any other activities that you do in class/
S: we go over a lot of literary terms sort of the theoretical part of it not just the practical

I: have you enjoyed the texts that you’ve done in the seminars/
S: normally yes – some of them are a bit outdated in the sense that you’ve seen them before so working a lot of past papers although it’s very good and it’s important ehm we’ve mostly seen them before through our own studies so maybe if we had to have other texts which weren’t always seen in past papers – but at the same time I know that past papers are important obviously because you get to know the layout and they also set the bar

I: do you find the texts during the criticism seminars are more difficult than those of the tutorial/
S: not really I think that the ones for the tutorial are set quite right in the sense that there’s a good balance between complicated and less complicated which is also seen in past papers

I: can you give any examples of unseen texts that you considered challenging (or otherwise)/
S: challenging – ehm pointing them out – this year they were all quite challenging that is to be expected but they were never challenging in a way that I couldn’t wrap my head around them entirely they were always something that once I read once twice thrice I managed to actually write about

I: in the syllabus it says that ‘learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the practical criticism exercise’ – so what do you understand by appreciation/
S: I guess ehm when you – it shows in everything in my opinion once you actually enjoy and appreciate something it’s easier to wrap your head around it and actually understand so I guess appreciation is more than knowing the theory and
all that it’s something which you yourself have to enjoy – ehm if you do not enjoy
literature English is going to be very hard for you to continue I personally think
I: do you think the idea of appreciation is synonymous with analysis/
S: ehm not really because you can always appreciate a piece of work but not really
analyse it but then you need to appreciate it to be able to analyse it
I: has this word ever come up in the seminars/
S: not really it was never really mentioned or discussed to be honest
I: what strategies do you use when you read an unseen poem or text/
S: I obviously read it once I get the overall sense or what is very obviously stated in
terms of the literary mechanisms used I just underline it instantly then I read it the
second time and note the not-so-obvious parts so after I analyse it at face value I read it
a third time to ensure I got everything
I: how confident do you feel about writing about unseen texts (from 1-10)/
S: actually I feel quite confident I would say it’s 7 or 8
I: do you feel more confident writing about set texts or unseen texts/
S: I feel more comfortable in unseen because the seen are very set very strategic but
when you get to unseen texts it’s clear that – although they look for particular things
from the student it’s also more subjective it’s not exactly something you’re taught
during class as in ‘listen the themes are A B C’ it’s more personal
I: what particular difficulties have you had when writing about unseen texts/
S: I guess when a piece of work is too unclear sort of the meaning is hidden very deep
so until you actually grasp what it’s about it can be frustrating – language wise I haven’t
got any problems because usually we have texts with modern-day language
I: what strategies do you use to resolve this issue/
S: I guess in terms of definitions I get the meaning from its use in the sentence
I: do you do any writing in class/
S: ehm last year we did more writing than this year to be honest ehm cos last year we
were constantly writing during our lessons
I: did that help/
S: yes it helped a lot first of all you’re guided by someone so you know you’re setting
off on the right foot and also you’re constantly getting feedback on your work so it
helps a lot
I: what type of feedback do you get (even in tutorials) – written or oral/
S: both usually cos ehm our teacher used to correct the work and there used to be
comments but then she used to explain further sort of ‘you could have done this and this
by saying so and so’
I: can you give any examples of comments that you felt were helpful/
S: I guess when they actually where not just giving a mark and writing ‘it could be better’ but writing ‘you could use more literary terms such as…’ which would increase your mark if you did this – so it’s feedback that actually leads you somewhere

I: which do you prefer written or oral/

S: in a way I prefer oral cos it’s actually explaining more than just written

I: which is easier to remember/

S: -laughs- written cos it’s actually possible to go back to

I: do you go back to your writing and to the comments/

S: not that I go back to the text itself but more to the comments I keep them in mind – I say ‘ok this is where I went wrong’ or ‘this is what I should improve upon’

I: how well do you understand and remember your teacher’s feedback/

S: it depends what type of feedback it is – when it is pointing you in a direction I keep it – just for myself

I: in the long run which do you think is more effective – written or oral feedback/

S: personally I’d say oral but I can’t say that written doesn’t have any effect

I: what do you think about the idea of receiving feedback through digital media/

S: none of my teachers actually used it much but I think as efficient as digital media is it will never I think replace certain aspects of written comments and actually explain the comments

I: before you’re assigned an essay to write do you discuss what the feedback is going to focus on/

S: yes usually

I: do you have an idea of what the focus of the teacher’s correction is going to be/

S: yes usually they explain what they’re looking for and then point out certain points that you could have added

I: in what way does this help you organize your essay/

S: it allows you to see what you did and your can evaluate your work not just have someone else do it for you so as long as it helps to know where you are

I: how did the feedback in these two years help you develop your writing skills/

S: I feel it helped me a lot because I found out how to structure essays in a way which is better than the usual secondary school type of essay so I guess my work seems of a higher level than it did in Form 5

I: which errors do you feel you have resolved successfully/

S: structure mostly and explaining ideas sometimes that is the difficult part

I: is there anything that has stopped you from applying feedback/

S: no not really
I: how well do you perform in the essays on unseen texts (compared to the set texts)/
S: I do quite well in both I think but I feel more confident in unseen
I: is there anything you would change in how you receive feedback/
S: no but I guess not everyone thinks the method of giving feedback in the same way I
guess that were to be more universal it’s better but I do understand it is also very
subjective not everyone is looking for the same thing but in certain ways I’ve had
teachers who do not give any feedback at all and others who give a lot of feedback so it
is a sort of imbalance
I: all right thank you very much
Appendix 28 – Screenshots of Students’ Codebook

Screenshot 1 – Students’ Perceptions of Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ perceptions</th>
<th>Students’ perceptions of writing (including on lit crit and on set texts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>(On confidence in writing) I think it would be a 6-7 (because) I don’t know what the text is going to be about (on the chronological approach) I’m not against it there are 2 approaches One person might take the chronological approach and another would take the thematic approach. It’s trying both and seeing what works best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Sometimes I find prose very difficult to write about In tutorial we had a poem that was was quite hard when it came to writing either I love it or I hate it - if I hate it I feel that I’m not writing well if I like it I tend to how (ability to write) If I don’t understand it I get frustrated and I don’t write well (if you get what the poet is writing about so you tend to relax immediately and start writing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Level of confidence 6/10 less than the set texts because of the unknown factor and the risk of wrong interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>In the tutorial then we had more essays on criticism but I thought we would have more on prose (as that’s the focus in 2nd year) then poetry I don’t mind writing about unseen texts but I don’t feel 100% confident it depends on the poem or prose passage but usually I do better in the set texts because I sort of know what can come out and I have studied the text but then if it’s a poem that I really like and understood well I could do better in it suggestions: maybe more writing in class this year (in 2nd yr) more focus on prose because that’s what we were told last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Confidence in writing rated as 6 (feels more confident about set texts) yes definitely because I would be prepared for it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>(writing about unseen texts) actually I feel quite confident I would say it’s 7 or 8 I feel more comfortable in unseen because the seen are very set very strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxim</td>
<td>I don’t feel that confident when writing about an unseen text I mean I really like writing in an exam where skill is being valued I don’t think it should be that subjective I mean obviously there are some elements and if you sustain your arguments and build a good argument I do get an urge to rewrite my essay the day when we hand in the essay well I’m going to grade them - if it were to be an unseen poem or an unseen text those are usually my weak point then criticism essays on something that I already know for example like Wilfred Owen I do feel really ok with that but my strong point would be narrative and language essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanette</td>
<td>About 4 (level of confidence - writing about unseen texts) yes I think it’s better because I study for it and I know the material last year I wasn’t that good and I usually get about 5 and now this year my teacher likes the way I think the narrator to the reader and my mark is better yes now it’s 6 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariva</td>
<td>Level of confidence writing about unseen texts: 7/10 more confident on the unseen because for the poems we have to study we don’t have a lot but I think they pretend (expect) that we go into more detail about it (my comment: so you feel more confident about unseen texts because you think you’re expected to go into more detail? Reply: yes) you don’t really have to study and you know what you have to look for obviously you have to study what you have to look for but over the years you remember those but for prose the novels for example we have a limited time for example The Heart of the Matter or The Handmaid’s Tale we have a year each to study them with the lecturer and it’s a bit of a short time I don’t believe the tutorial essays are enough (I find that I have a live mark for example I will write more essays different ones and then give them to teachers so that they can correct them as well maybe we have a sample essay for the essays we do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Screenshot 2: Teachers’ Feedback Comments (According to Students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments received as feedback on students’ writing</th>
<th>Comments received as feedback on students’ writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maxim</td>
<td>(writing to make it more coherent: trim, make vocabulary coherence clear, I guess what I sometimes don’t get the point of the poem and expressing myself well because sometimes I find it difficult to express myself. I essays and using a richer vocabulary not always seeking the same words that my problem mainly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanette</td>
<td>I see what you did help me improve because my vocabulary increased so I took last year’s teacher used to tell me ‘Improve your vocabulary’ so I think that feedback helps me to acquire a much larger vocabulary than what I had in secondary I think it’s a little too vague because structure for me it could be how I structure an essay it could also mean how I structure a sentence as an important the structure can have a lot of things I can improve upon so I think that giving a more detailed like ‘you did this’ or ‘I didn’t quite get this’ I think that’s the method prefer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariva</td>
<td>(on writing a different one and then give them to teachers so that they can correct them as well)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>(on writing a different one and then give them to teachers so that they can correct them as well)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>(on writing a different one and then give them to teachers so that they can correct them as well)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

412
Screenshot 3: Teachers’ Feedback Methods (According to Students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ feedback methods (student point of view)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Nora</em> (received both oral / written feedback) our teacher used to correct the work and there used to be comments but then she used to explain further usually they explain what they’re looking for and then point out certain points that you could have added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Malcolm</em> I mean usually they do tell us that they are going to focus on whether you got the interpretation correct but if it is sustained thoughtfully and constructively usually written and then if you ask about it you get oral feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Juanita</em> (Topic of feedback) to know what to write and I don’t go out of point first she reads all the poems of the students then whilst she is correcting them she highlights some mistakes the student did and obviously the good parts she did I think it’s a mixture of both (oral and written feedback) she writes a few points on our essay and then the following week she discusses them individually (Learning from others’ mistakes) if it is a poem I just write the feedback she told them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Martha</em> (not to use) yes writing about the poem according to how it is for example each paragraph you write about each stanza because maybe you won’t be tackling each aspect accordingly it has to be direct words and not to use ‘yes’ ‘no’ the reader is to use more formal diction and include more quotes from the poem or prose and explain further about the conclusion that we should never write any bad comments about the poem because obviously it is chosen even though we don’t like it maybe it is a sort of a piece of art every week the teacher reads each essay and she comments about then in front of the students so we learn from each other’s mistakes she gives us oral feedback and we write comments while she speaks and then she writes comments after she corrects it at home maybe yes it is immediate but sometimes she doesn’t manage to correct everyone’s (yes amount of oral feedback) maybe we have a sample essay for the essays we do</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: The feedback methods are described based on the students’ perceptions of their teachers, highlighting both oral and written feedback, and the importance of constructive criticism.

Screenshot 4: Students’ Attempts to Apply Teacher Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ approach to feedback</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Chantelle</em> sometimes I don’t remember all of them (the teacher’s feedback comments) if my teacher tells me to go into more detail I try in the next essay I’ll try (to do so) go into more detail means to include more aspects example if you’ve written a quote and you’ve only explained the surface of what it actually means so you have to then go into more detail about what it actually means this year I understand it more I try to engage with it and apply it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Maya</em> when I have a crit essay I look at the one before to check the feedback and corrections I do remember teacher’s feedback but it’s not always possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Martha</em> Before I write a new crit essay I go back to my teacher’s feedback and look at the comments and try to apply them but it’s not always possible or easy because it depends on the text I can remember what he said by looking at the comments on the essay and then I can look at them when I prepare to write the next essay With written I can reread the comments the feedback given is based on the essay on the poem but I use it to write my next crit essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kyra</em> I go through it before I write another essay so I can improve what to say in your essay and how to structure it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nora</em> not that I go back to the text itself but more to the comments I keep them in mind – I say ‘oh she is where I went wrong’ or ‘this is what I should improve upon’ it depends what type of feedback it is – when it is pointing you in a direction I keep it</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: The students describe their strategies for applying teacher feedback, varying from rereading comments before writing to keeping notes on areas for improvement.
Screenshot 5: Barriers to Feedback Application (According to Students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ approach to feedback</th>
<th>Barriers to feedback application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chantelle</td>
<td>last year I used to get the same mark each week so I didn’t use to bother to work hard but this year if I don’t do well I try to get over it and force sometimes I still don’t follow the comments if I start writing and I just write and write and don’t follow what is written I understand the comments I still go to my old ways when I’m writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>the limitations are it depends on the feedback some errors are easier to solve such as language and layout but then spelling it is not always easy to fix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>if I don’t remember the oral feedback then it’s more difficult to apply it sometimes it’s still difficult to apply the suggestions (of written feedback) (on teacher’s feedback comments) I try to apply them but it’s not always easy because it depends sometimes I don’t understand the comments or I forget to apply them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyla</td>
<td>sometimes I do make the same mistakes but that’s me my language usually I think if the feedback is not written cause if I have a paper next to me that says where I went what I did wrong and I’ll be about to write my essay I’ll have it there you won’t know what’s going to come out what text you’re going to have like you can’t be fully prepared for it I think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanelle</td>
<td>I know what I’m doing wrong but I don’t know how not to be vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>time usually (laughs) cause we’re continuously pressed by deadlines not just by English but since we have other subjects I think it limits us to focus last year we didn’t have a lot I think this year it is better but then you have to focus on what’s more important I think the other tests are very relevant (on not having enough time / practice with unseen tests)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

personalmente dejem nagrmitel intext sihali allura irud sthahar nooghod attent ghaf certu sejnjeljet (glebert sa if ghahdi shal) udak daf felett la nuf if ghahdi shal xi kualni jata jueri koomi tress ghas nuf li dejem ghahdi shal aiwejoni ta’ writing ha nooghod attar atten huqqa siipsica sahli attar his fugu midfaq dahit essay if diett keftu sihga nihicca nagrmitel sahju u nof dieta u xorta jik inajh marka huza fiha nihla naqta qadih negh anemm tajj cift u xorta ghiha huza fiha psychological |

Elia | applying it cause I find it difficult to (pause) express myself as I said before so I wouldn’t be that fine therefore not that the teacher doesn’t sit down next to you and helps you write it not the whole essay no we only did one and then the corrected it – maybe it could help writing an essay with her with the whole class with the teacher writing it together maybe that could be done in tutorials because it’s a smaller group |

Sophie | not really because every poem in an unseen is different so what the feedback on one poem is going to be is going to be different than the next poem so I think it didn’t quite – the feedback on unseen – it depends if it’s feedback on the structure of a particular poem it might be the case that in a different poem I’ll use a totally different approach it depends on the feedback yes I can but let’s take for example feedback on essays (pause) content or themes |
Lesson: feedback (tutorial) session on poetry criticism essay (test)

1 hour (1st half hour – on essays; 2nd half hour on set text by Graham Greene)

4 students – 2 males, 2 females (1 female student wasn’t present for the test)

T: ok so I had a look at these essays and we’ll spend the first half hour or so on this task and then move on to Greene (hands out essays) let’s start off by reading the poem (Teacher reads the poem aloud) ok so as a group for the most part you did well ok most of you are trying to move from a more a general appreciation of the poem the kind of overview introductory approach to a more detailed analysis with commentary * some of you made mistakes you realized as soon as you walked out of the door or the first chat you had with your friends ok but what I’d like us to focus on is perhaps the final part of the poem which went uncommented on by all of you many of you chose to ignore it perhaps because you didn’t understand it or you didn’t understand it well enough now what is the situation here? What might we write in the first paragraph? What do we usually write in the first paragraph in a critical essay?

Student (male): to state the obvious

T: we state the obvious and we write a paraphrase so what might you bring in in a first paragraph?

Student (2nd male): basically there is this son who disobeys his dad I think it was his dad and basically apparently he disobeys him many times and his dad got mad at him and struck him and the child is upset and then he visited him while he sleeps I couldn’t really understand the last part exactly

T: ok father visits son

Student (2nd male): then basically what I understood I think the father regrets

T: very good it’s the word I was waiting for he regrets it and then he addresses who?

Student (1st male): God

T: he addresses God in this prayer ok we also learn early on that the mother that the son’s mother is dead that is a detail that one or two of you referred to and ehm made a good point out of ok so we stated the obvious that is our first paragraph in the second paragraph we would do what?

Student (1st male): you go into more depth

T: very good in the second paragraph you introduce your writing now not the poem but your areas of focus and we said at this early stage we’re simply going to mention them by way of giving an indication ok it will give your essay direction and an examiner or a teacher reading your work can already see you are in control of your writing you know where you’re going to take it ok at this stage you might introduce stages relating to what? * Bernice?

Bernice: relationships?
T: ok so what might that fall under? Which heading might that fall under?

Bernice: theme

T: ehe what else? Remember we talk about poetry beginning with an ‘s’?

Bernice: style?

T: style technique and figures of speech poetic devices yes relationships you use the plural why?

Bernice: because there is the son and father, the mother and son, and the father

T: the son and mother however subtle that is and?

B: God

T: and God good more ok let me give you maybe 3 minutes to read it again because it’s been a while and it’s unreasonable to expect you to remember you can also look at your own work at this stage and see which points I might have cause to correct and which others I relate to (gives them time to read and compare with their essays)

T writes on board:

1. State the obvious
2. Overview – mention indication, direction
3. Themes Style Relationships

T: ok Luciano anything you think will have sufficient prominence in your body paragraphs that needs to be mentioned or anticipated early on thematically or stylistically? *

Luciano reads from his essay: the sounds in verses 3, 4, 5 and 6 are loud (inaudible)

T: so we’re looking at sound choice of words and then you look at which words in particular?

Luciano: ‘dismissed’ ‘unkissed’ and ‘dead’ the sound ‘d’

T: ok the repetition of ‘d’ and we might also say that it’s cacophonous (writes the word on the board) I might have mentioned this in relation to Owen ok of Dulce et Decorum Est ‘chocking’ ‘drowning’ a sequence of caco in Greek means harsh pho is sound so we’re looking at the use of harsh sounds the opposite of that would be euphony again pho is sound and eu here this time means soft think of the word euphemism that you might be familiar with when we use soft language to express a harsh cruel reality that has the same root so cacophony and euphony – euphony is the use of soft sounds in poetry and cacophony is the use of harsh words like ‘k’ ‘g’ ‘d’ and ‘s’ ‘f’ ‘l’ so yes good point Luciano looking at sound that’s perhaps a detail

Luciano: when you said more of this so?

T: so I mean this is I comment this do it again what were you doing well here? You were looking closely at language ok I can even if I have never read the poem your essay gives me a feel of it ok and that’s an indication of a good essay sometimes some of you manage to write an entire essay without bringing in this
close reference so more of this means that’s good work keep it up more of it ok so sound more Rebecca you didn’t write you weren’t here for the test but you might wish to contribute a reaction? We’ll be coming to the end of the poem soon I’d just like to revise this introductory movement how to go about it

Rebecca: the rhythm?

T: what about it? * Is there a particular regular structure that the poet follows when he comes to that (blank)?

Rebecca (shakes her head to signify no)

T: no ok good what do we call that?

Rebecca: free verse

T: free verse good ok with lines of varying length and what about rhyme once we’ve touched upon this point? Have a look at the rhyme scheme

Luciano: what does the free verse do in the poem itself? Why does the poet choose free verse?

T: well it allows as the word suggests it allows you more freedom ok it doesn’t have to follow a particular pattern and use so many syllables per line ok and

Luciano: in the exam you can say and this poem also rhymes free like

T: yes

Luciano: it’s associated

T: not always ok not always it’s true but as much as possible we would try to somehow place our comment within the overall meaning or within the overall meaning of the poem however it is wrong to try to do so when there is no evident reason for instance one of the comments that comes out most is when students for example say that ehm the poet uses a particular rhyme scheme because it mirrors his mood when there is no evident link between his mood and ABCD ok or ABBA now if you feel that this particular rhyme scheme contributes to creating a particular atmosphere or mood for instance sometimes rhyme can give a poem a particular nursery rhyme like tune in that case yes go ahead and make a link Luciano but if in this case you made a valid point but what link can we make between a father’s violent behaviour towards his son and free verse? Ok nothing comes to my mind personally and there needn’t be but in passing you would in order to show that not only are you aware of this critical term but you’ve also identified it as it is being used in the poem we can say something like ‘in this poem in which the poet uses free verse’ so it wouldn’t really be a sentence whose the main goal of which is to say that he uses free verse you would simply use it in a clause in passing ok in that way it flows it’s smooth and you’re also flaunting your knowledge ok what about rhyme? Is there a strict pattern?
Lesson: Literary criticism seminar (1 hour)

Teacher starts by dividing class in pairs so they can do pair work.

T: I am going to ask you to do some pair work and I need you to be in twos (moves students around and pairs them up; takes attendance) We can go to the section in the book which I had told you last time we’re going to be tackling we spent a number of weeks talking about poetry and we will come back to poetry later on in the year we still have lessons to go don’t worry poetry we’ll come back to it I wanted to start today talking a little preparation talking about essay writing and essay planning and structuring because that is part of our syllabus this year and it is something which I am going to start training you to do today you will see that I have given you a sample essay which I have written myself now one thing I want you to pay attention is also the language that is utilized in this essay because you have to learn how to use that kind of language yourself with a certain amount of versatility so that by the time the exam comes along next year practically next year at this time you’ll be taking your exam you have to have learnt how to use the language you’ll be seeing in use today in the sample with versatility ok? That’s important (* two students walk in late)

So as usual whenever you have samples of literary criticism essays pay attention to the language as well as to the structure now as you know people there are certain things about literary texts that literary criticism serves to tell us (teacher scolds students to put away food) literary criticism as you always are being told -especially by me I’ve been pestering about this since the beginning of the year but it’s useful I can assure you- is not a summary literary criticism has nothing whatsoever to do with summary writing in fact in the literary criticism text you are not expected to write the story of the text in fact you could assume that your reader has read the text with great care already prior to your being required to write a literary criticism essay about it so you don’t have to narrate the story you don’t have to summarise or anything of the sort you can mention events characters things that take place in the story of course you can but you have to mention them in the spirit of analysis analyzing how the text how the story is conveyed rather than in the spirit of analyzing the contents the content is not going to be very very important except as far as your analysis of how this content is conveyed is concerned the important thing is not the story but how the story is conveyed is the drama emphasized? Is the drama downplayed in the text? Is something very serious being made to appear less important? Is something not that important something rather trivial being made to appear very important and serious? And how? In what ways? Those are the questions that literary criticism concerns itself with not what happens but how this is conveyed *

Teacher writes on board:

‘Literary criticism concerns itself with the means, the devices which are used to convey a specific content, being the subject matter’ –that’s what we normally call the content in literary criticism to the reader ok? That is the principal aim of literary criticism the methods employed to convey particular experiences to the reader give rise to different kinds of writing (* Teacher writes on board)
For example tragedy comedy irony parody etc all right? You tell me why why is this the case? This is the case people because a given content can be conveyed in several different ways we can talking about the same thing but by approaching it in several different ways we create different works of art let me give you an example for example an experience which is essentially sad can be treated as a tragedy ok but it can also be treated with irony I’m thinking of 18th century satirical writers satirists satirists are people who for the most part pull the legs of politicians and satirists exist even today there are quite a few who specialize in satire which is a rather vicious kind of irony now these people in the 18th century I’ve got Jonathan Swift in mind I’ve got Henry Fielding in mind ok these people um used to see a lot of corruption going on in society they used to see politicians grabbing public money becoming rich by appropriating poor people’s money from taxes um putting their friends in positions of power when these friends are not good enough they are not educated enough they’re not capable of carrying out the duties which are required by these positions of power and they put them in these positions of power simply because they are their friends a corrupt state so satirists observed their own country they saw it as a corrupt state and they wrote about it but rather than making it appear all very tragic they used their sense of humour to make it appear ironic ok for example by depicting England as Jonathan Swift famously does in Gulliver’s Travels as Lilliput the land of the dwarves of the little people ok he compares them to little people he describes them as little people to make them appear ridiculous sort of you’re all fighting for power amongst yourself but you’re nothing but a nation of dwarves you’re nothing but a nation of little powerless people so it very much depends on the use the fact that my country (putting herself in Swift’s position) is a very corrupt country in order to write tragically and to say Oh my God you know things are going to the dogs the situation is terrible it is a ghastly country to live in the quality of life is rubbish and what have you or otherwise I can take it humorously and I can convey the same message but in an ironic way in other words making fun of the object described now parody is when we imitate when one is describing lower class individuals who are rough and have no education and they are described in terms of upper class individuals or the other way round they are the imitating the behaviour of other groups that is normally called parody they are parodying other groups they are imitating of course imitating badly other groups ok so from a tragic situation you can create several different works of art depending on your mood of course the mood at the time of writing is very important and this requires different devices and you as students of literary criticism will learn how to identify these devices very well ok now the text we had agreed to deal with today to tackle today is the text concerning Little Paul which is taken from a section entitled Analysing Prose which is on page 178 where we have passages for comment and the picture of Little Paul here in bed looking ill and this comes from one of my favourite books of all times this comes from a novel which I love very very much and which I’ve read twice I think I should read it again it’s a wonderful book people entitled Dombey and Son ok Dombey and Son is the name of a company you know like when we say Thomas Cook and Son but it’s also the name practically it describes the dynamics which we have in the Dombey family because the father has the great fault a great fault of seeing his family as a company he doesn’t treat the people in the family as human beings he treats them as though they were employees which is something tragic for his family now let’s have a look at the passage so Passages for Comment and we’re going to try to use the skills that we know in order to write about this passage ehm Miriana could you kindly start reading please?

(Miriana reads passage) good Alison go on please
Alison: I don’t have the book

T: you don’t have the book? Both of you? What carelessness Marie Grace go on

(Marie Grace reads)

T: ok ok now Maria can you tell us what you think the text is about?

Maria: ehm the boy’s observations

T: the boy’s observations ok what else

Maria: what he sees around him

T: what he sees around him ok why is what he sees around him very limited?

Maria: he’s stuck in his bed

T: he’s stuck in his bed ehm Anthony do you think he can actually see the river that we hear? Do you think he can actually see it what do you think? * does anyone know? (no response) given the fact that he is stuck in his bed is it likely that he can actually see the river?

Anthony: no

T: no not really what do you think Maria Busuttil the other Maria what do you think is the situation of this boy?

MB: he is sick

T: he is sick ok * and what contact does he have with the world outside how does he make contact with the world outside Maria?

MB: he only sees the world from the window

T: ok he only sees the world from his window the windows being high up he can’t normally see much but he has contact with the world through which sense which one of his senses? * his hearing eh? He has auditory what we call auditory contact with the world and there is a lot of indication here that he listens a lot he listens to the river etc and another thing that he sees is the actual change in light outside his window given the fact that he can’t get out of bed he can follow the sun’s passage across the day probably from when it come up in the morning to when it reaches its height at noon to its descent in the evening to the actual arrival of night to the moment when the lamplighter lights the street lamps ok all these things are you know observed by the boy in fact listen to this (reads from passage) ‘as it grew later in the night and footsteps in the street became so rare that he could hear them coming’ ok since you have very few people walking you can almost hear people’s individual footsteps we are not told the people in the street became rare we are told footsteps in the street became rare which in all probability indicates that he can’t get out of bed doesn’t see the people in the street but actually communicate with the street through his sense of hearing now what are the two things Hannah which are normally described as flowing forward? (no answer) what two things flow forward in this text?

Hannah: the river?
T: the river the river which is unstoppable he occasionally had these dreams of wanting to stop it with his bare hands and what else moves forward while the little boy lies in bed? Michaela what else moves forward?

Michaela: the sun and time?

T: ok so you’re saying the passage of the sun across the sky during the day and time yes time too is going forward you know the boy’s life poor thing is passing by while he can’t do anything but lie in bed ok and this is the way in which the pathos of the boy’s existence is brought out he lies there of course as Michaela tells us the passage of the sun across the sky repeatedly again and again with the boy sitting there of course indicates one thing it indicates that this boy day after day after day lies in his bed notice how the child is in a sense described as unfortunate because the word poor is used with reference to him ok we are told ‘Paul had never risen from his little bed’ and then we are told ‘leaning his poor head upon her breast he told Floy’ Floy is short for Florence in his language ‘his dream and smiled’ ok even for example the fact that the child cannot get out of bed is even brought to our attention in paragraph 2 where we are told he used to observe the light very carefully and we are told ‘as the reflection going away and the gloom creeping up the wall’ as though the gloom were being personified ‘the gloom came creeping up the wall’ you know that when eve is on its way the sun goes down in the east and the gloom rises in the west you know the shadows rise in the west so the child can observe all this a gloom rises on the opposite wall on the wall facing his window and he is seeing all these little changes in light an indication that he sees he observes these things with great attention and another thing be careful here in paragraph two we are told his fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river now what is ‘fancy’ people? Give me another word for fancy?

Female Student: like

T: pardon?

Student: it’s when you say ‘to like’

T: ehm no that’s the very here fancy is a noun

(another) Student: thoughts?

T: thoughts pardon?

Student (male): attraction?

T: hmm no no Angelo because that is related to what Hannah said actually I would say imagination his thoughts his fancies you know your fancies your wonderings of the world imaginings so his fancy we are told had a strange tendency to wander to the river which he knew what flowing through the city now is it important people? I mean he knew there was a river through the great city but he couldn’t see it evidently because it was his fancy that traveled to it presumably now he thought how black it was that’s very true the River Thames is a pretty spooky river at night I don’t like walking on the banks of the Thames at night ok nowadays it’s much better than in those days but nowadays it’s true that London is a very touristic city and all the year round it’s filled with tourists you’re bound to see the river lit at night but it is not a beautiful river to look at night not even by day it’s pretty majestic it’s a large river it’s deep too but it is not what we would call beautiful because it is heavily polluted and apart from the
fact that the sky in London is always overcast the fact that the sky is grayish the river then reflects the colour of the sky and it’s grayish too when it’s not brownish which is worse in those days it was brownish it was dirtier because the sewers used to empty themselves in the river so just imagine a city of a good 2.5 million people in the Victorian now it’s around 10 million still you can imagine with the sewers emptying into the Thames you can imagine what a sight it could have offered ehm (provides further information about navigation on the River Thames) Dickens was in love with London and the Thames at the same time having being brought up near the river it remained with him sort of like a haunting presence and we often get the impression that to him it was spooky he walked along it every day and the child over here is expressing this a fascination with the river you know you have many characters in English novels just as you have characters in American novels fascinated with the river that is the Mississippi ok in America you have in Mark Twain and in other novels you have the Mississippi river that joins north and south (tells them about Huckleberry Finn who decides to move from the south to the north where his friend ‘the nigger’ will be no longer persecuted) just as the Thames joins London centre with the periphery and this fascination with the river I can assure you can be encountered even today now in the passage we are told there is the river that flows through the heart of the city flowing through the great city (reads from passage with emphasis) there were things when we were children that used to scare us you know in the case of Little Paul he is both aware of the importance of the river and at the same time frightened by it and in fact we are told his sister Florence would comfort him many times his recurrent nightmare is that of trying to stop the flow of the river (teacher lowers voice) this child is ill it is highly probable that he has this sensation that he might die so why do you think he is desperately trying to stop the onward flow of the river with his bare hands? Tell me what he’s scared of what does it tell you Alison?

Alison: he is trying to stop to push death away he is so scared of his own death that he is trying to push it away?

T: yes in trying to stop the flowing of the river what other onward flowing is he trying to stop?

Alison: time?

T: time very good very good make these associations in your head when you are actually analyzing your texts because these are the sort of associations the writers develop in their work in fact look at the third paragraph of the text the child also had insomnia poor thing he didn’t sleep at night (reads parts of the passage) so he’s trying to stop the swift and rapid movement of time because we are told he can’t see the river we are told that he knew that somewhere in the city the river was flowing though in all probability he didn’t even hear it (continues reading) so that crying out might also express the fear of death for the child he fears that his death is coming on because his health doesn’t improve as a consequence he wants to push that time away now the only one who seems to understand his situation is Florence she is his sister we are not told here but for your information she is his sister now people in an essay if I were to ask you to write an essay about this text and I can assure you that in the exam texts from Charles Dickens come out all the time in the exam because he was such an amazing writer if we don’t take an interest in this sort of writing what on earth should we take an interest in? now when you write an essay about literary criticism and I’ve already talked to you about this but it’s my job to
remind you so what aspects of a literary texts do we normally write about in our literary criticism essay? What does our essay touch upon in other words? Generally speaking? (no answer) now let me ask you the first question in the introduction you are normally expected to tell the examiner something about what the text is about in brief ok? You’re going to show him what you understand the text to be about ok? Now what do we call what the text is about in literary criticism?

Student (female): subject

T: subject very good so subject matter comes in in the introduction (writes on board) you don’t mention you don’t go into subject matter anywhere else in the text ok what other aspects in the text are we expected to write about in our literary criticism essay? Come on Rebecca just mention another one? Another aspect of the literary text? (no answer)

Angelo: theme?

T: theme or themes * how do we say the language used by the writer in the text?

Student (female): diction?

T: diction how do we say the figures of speech that the writer uses?

Student (female): imagery

T: imagery ok writers use motifs as well motifs goes with both imagery and with diction let’s put it with diction because motifs are words things mentioned that are given a particular meaning for example as we were saying he mentions the river repeatedly but he mentions the river also with the passage of time associated so the river comes to represent the passage of time in the text (writes on board) ok? Now when you talk about the way the text is organized the paragraphs the length of sentences punctuation used * structure all right form and structure form is the number of paragraphs length of paragraphs etc structure is the kind of sentences which are used whether they’re short whether they’re long when there is punctuation used (*; writes on board) now in the conclusion to your essay what particular points would you say are important to mention? In a conclusion to a literary criticism essay people remember this is an academic exercise do not leave out your conclusion by the way because quite a few of you have a tendency the paragraph on structure and form is not the conclusion there has to be an ulterior conclusion something else that comes beneath all this all right now what would you say the conclusion should contain? What would you put in your conclusion?

Student (female): what the poet or author tried to bring across? The main ideas?

T: ok you can rephrase your main ideas the main ideas expressed in the essay

Student (female): there would be a lesson that they try to convey

T: yes but if there isn’t a lesson because over here we can’t say that there is a lesson for example

Student (female): I think if not lesson then the message
Student (female): maybe with the boy he is trying to convey the message of stopping time that we can’t stop life passing away

T: ok so the desire to live you’re saying? Ok but we are sort of rephrasing it

Student (male –Angelo): in the conclusion we can include a summary

T: summarise the points you have made but then you could also talk about one particular aspect you’ve kept for the end on purpose Angelo what I’m saying is there’s no need of saying anything outrageously original at the end there’s no need but then if you have a point I mean Miriana is bringing it to mind for example she’s saying of the association of river with time you can say at the end of the essay even if you’ve already mentioned the association of river with life you can say for example (provides a statement spontaneously) ‘in this text Dickens very ably succeeds in portraying the boy’s anxiety to live in terms of his relationship to the Thames and his dream of stopping its onward flow’ for example so what am I saying Angelo? As Hannah told us you sum up in a basic manner the principal points you would have made in the course of your essay and then you sort of bring in a punchline where you sum up the principal thing that in your opinion Dickens has achieved in this text ok the most important aspect is the comparison between the onward flow of the river and the flow of time so why not present that as our final punchline sentence at the end of our conclusion? We sum up Dickens’ principal achievement here we say something like in this text Dickens very ably succeeds in portraying the boy’s anxiety to live in terms of his relationship to the Thames and his dream of stopping its onward flow’ or stopping its onward movement you are summarizing and you are doing that with brevity and with a certain conclusive ring which is evident now I’m going to give each pair of you a little essay now if later on you want a copy of the essay proper I’ll be able to give you a copy next lesson work as a pair what I’d like you to do is in the empty place in the empty gap every time to write what is the paragraph about which aspect of the essay is the paragraph about? And also I want you to order them I want you to put them in the correct order in which in your opinion they should appear in an A level essay all right ok you can start now I’m not telling you that this is the definitive essay now what I’d like is that one of you should keep the essay in your book next time you sit next to the partner with whom you were working today so that we continue discussing but today we’re going to do the basic bit

(students work in pairs for 6 minutes)

remember that for example with diction and imagery given the fact that there is a lot to say there might be more than one paragraph

To Angelo (working individually) T says: you’re going to try to put it in the correct order or that which you think is best and write down the numbers over here and write down what you think is being dealt with in every individual paragraph for example diction subject matter

To class: now if we don’t manage to do it all today we’ll start next lesson with it

To class: now on the ordering of the paragraphs we don’t necessarily have to agree there are different structures which are acceptable
T monitors the pairs (who seem to be very engaged and thinking carefully about ordering and structure) and gives feedback

T: ok people so let’s check one thing we’re going to be talking about the actual content of the paragraphs so the first one let me start with the paragraph (reads paragraph) what’s that paragraph according to your analysis?

Student: subject matter

T: therefore it is what part of the essay is it?

S: the introduction

T: the introduction did you agree with Alison ok good now over here the paragraph which says which starts with these words ‘Dickens uses sympathetic words such as ‘his little bed’ and ‘his poor head’ to encourage the reader to identify with the sick child’ Myra what’s being tackled here?

Myra: the motifs

T: motifs?

Myra: because he mentions the recurring river

T: reference to river ok but then we have words like ‘little’ and ‘poor’ those are not motifs those are words which encourage our sympathy no? so we would say diction and motifs in this paragraph *now the paragraph which begins ‘as night falls the light of day fades away as the gloom starts ‘creeping up the wall’ Paul watches the gloom deepen what did you say is going on in this paragraph? The repetition of deepen deepen what does this analyse? Naomi? What does this paragraph tell us?

Naomi: diction and motifs

T: ok you said diction and motifs

Student: imagery and diction

T: yes I said diction and imagery because we have the repetition of deepen we have creep which is personification we have peaceful stars which is also personification so diction and imagery rather than motifs then ‘the narrator is closely attuned to the boy’s thoughts and feelings’ what did you say Rachel for this one?

Rachel: eh diction

T: diction yes this one just diction because we are told ‘quite tranquilly’ ‘waiting patiently’ and then towards the bottom we have onomatopoeic words and similes as well so diction and imagery could be mentioned here another paragraph ‘in this passage the sentence structures are long and cumulative’ they add one added to the other so what’s this paragraph about Marie Grace

Marie Grace: form and structure

T: form and structure more structure rather than form because he doesn’t tell us how many paragraphs there are so it can’t be form so structure (reads another paragraph) so Michaela?
Michaela: the conclusion

T: that is the conclusion very good put these in your book and next time we’ll talk about the order of paragraphs
Appendix 31 – Observation Transcript: T3 (Christopher)

Lesson: Literary Criticism seminar (1 hour)

Lesson is divided into parts

Part 1 (T introduces lesson and poem with focus on practice and working on assignment in teams)

T: we’re going to continue from last lesson ehm we’re going to do some more practice but last time it was too much of my own voice so today we’re going to try and do some practice you’re going to work in teams ok? Ehm how many of us and (counts students: there are 9) ok I’m going to give you a poem it’s not in your pack and you’re going to read it together explain some difficult words and I’m going to give you an assignment to do not a whole essay some of you are going to write one paragraph and the rest are going to write another paragraph etc so let’s have a look at the poem first it is a poem if I’m not mistaken written in 1938 by a poet who wrote mostly for kids for children but he also wrote poems which are difficult ehm I’m sorry about the very small type right it’s the poem on the right hand side (gives students a handout with three poems on it) called Dry August Burned now some poets prefer to give a title to the poem which is part of the first line all right it’s something which some poets do it’s not always done but some poets do it has anyone of you read it before by the way? Hm no? ok now although the poem has no stanzas this time we’re going to try and split it into three parts I’m afraid those who do not have a partner will have to work alone ok? (divides the poem; confirms if everyone has a copy and proceeds to read the poem aloud – the students have not read it yet alone)

Part 2 (T reads the poem aloud and divides the poem for students to work on)

T reads poem aloud

Part 3 (T re-reads parts of the poem to explain words and then sets task)

T: right ehm * you’re supposed to have already got the subject matter it’s not the theme you know it’s the poem is about something or someone so there’s a focus there the someone now I’m not going to ask any questions now I’m going to just check about the vocabulary there aren’t many difficult words there ‘blood-blubbered’ blubbered you know it’s sort of swollen ehm ‘the clanging of dangling chain, voices that rang./ Out like a leveret’ leveret is a small hare it would be very young ‘to feast her glistening bird-clear eyes / On a team of field artillery’ you know what artillery is I suppose ehm ‘Gay’ there means colourful happy you know glorious ‘thudding by. / Spur and gun and limber plate’ limber plate is part of a carrier where we used to carry candles you know the horses used to track this kind of limber plate for small guns for small canons ‘Flashed in the sun. Alert, elate, / Noble horses, foam at lip’ if there’s something you don’t understand tell me ‘Noble horses, foam at lip / Harness’ harnesses you know these are related to horse-riding eh ‘stirrup, holster, whip’ also ‘She watched the sun-tanned soldiery, / Till dust-white hedge had hidden away - / Its din’ had hidden away ‘Its din into a rumour thinned’ (repeats reading of these two lines) ‘The laughing, jolting, wild array;’ array is like a display ‘And then – the wonder and tumult gone – tumult is noise ‘Stood nibbling a green leaf, alone, / Her dark eyes dreaming…She turned, and ran, / Elf-like, into the house again. / The hare had vanished…
‘Mother’, she said, / Her tear-strained cheek now flushed with red, / ‘Please, may I go / and see it skinned?’ Right I’m going to write the questions on the board so that you know what you have to do these are standard questions ok these are not questions related to this poem only but questions which I told you about in the very first few lectures which you have to ask yourselves when you are doing crit so who’s going to – (starts dividing class into groups) ehm Adam with whom are you going to work? You want to work with (points to two students) (and to the students asks:) do you mind?

Students: no no

T: can I give ehm Kim and Ines the first question ok you are going to write about expressing the overall meaning and tone of the poem so you’re going to give sort of an introduction (writes the questions on board: write a paragraph expressing the overall meaning and tone of the poem paying specific attention to theme) ok so you’re going to work together and discuss read it carefully a few times you don’t have to go into details just the overall impression of the tone and what do you think the poet is trying to say here now ehm Maria and Martina and Luanne are going to do the last part so the closing paragraph shows and defines any connections of framework you know which part is connected with which cross-references and other aspects of structure ok it’s quite a difficult question (writes on board: In a closing paragraph show any connections, framing, cross-references and other aspects of structure that contribute to an overall meaning of the poem) now I need more people actually (some students were absent) so Samuel may I ask your cooperation and ask you to work on your own? Can you work on the first few lines ‘Dry August Burned’ till ‘Wept out her heart to see it there’ (first 5 lines) and you’re going to of course find examples interesting examples of diction imagery and other literary device the same applies to you (refers to the other students) but I’m going to give you lines between ‘Sharp came the clop of hoofs’ till ‘The laughing, jolting, wild array’ (14 lines as they are in a group) it’s quite a long piece ok try to find interesting aspects things that strike you where there is imagery diction rhythm and other devices you know under diction we usually consider onomatopoeia alliteration assonance and other aspects and you do the last part (to the third group) ‘And then – the wonder and tumult gone –’ so I’d like you to work as quickly as possible write it coherently because we’re supposed to have time at the end to go through to read your essay the introduction paragraphing and the conclusion ok (jokes) I’m going to keep you quiet a bit or keep quiet you can talk any questions before you start?

Student (female): yes we right just a paragraph?

T: right just your paragraph an introductory paragraph that covers as if you’re introducing the essay and then we’ll move according to the paragraphs sort of we go to Samuel (who is working alone) and the rest

Part 4 (students work on reading and writing)

Students discuss (sometimes in Maltese) and talk about how to structure and analyse the poem. Total working time for students on writing: 18 minutes approximately (from 11.40 – 29.30 ). The teacher allows students to work one their own keeping a distance (he sits at the desk) so that he gives them space and does not monitor or intervene excessively. This could indicate his attempt at encouraging peer learning while boosting their independence and autonomy. He does not set a strict time limit but every now and then checks in.
T checks in while students are working: all right Chris? Maria? (students nods in acknowledgement to indicate they are proceeding well)

The student who is working on his own is initially uncertain about the task – he did not understand what he has to do or look for exactly so the teacher explains that he has to focus on imagery, diction and other devices. He guides him by asking him to think about the ‘strength of words’ and ‘what strikes you?’

Samuel: what am I meant to find?

T: ehm examples of imagery diction and other devices that strike you you know don’t take every single word actually it’s phrases for example what can you say about ‘stood nibbling a green leaf”? eh and ‘elf-like’ and the last line and also the penultimate line ‘Her tear-stained cheek now flushed with red’ you know what strikes you there? The strength of the words if anything is being compared to anything else if there is an interesting aspect of rhythm (reads the line with a certain emphasis on beat and rhythm) ‘her – tear-stained cheek – now –flushed – with –red’

Student (female): ‘wept out her heart to see it there’

T: pardon?

Student (female): there’s a line (refers to the line above) does that mean that she cries for it to be killed or she cries because it was killed?

T: no she cried because she saw it dead she wept her heart to see it dead to weep your heart out is hyperbolic a hyperbolic expression of her pain an exaggeration weep her heart out she felt sorry for it to be killed it was common in hunting you know in those times hunting hares but for the girl – it impressed her a lot and she cried

Student (male): so why does it say ‘Please may I go to see it skinned?’

T: you know what skinning is? Skinning a rabbit? Eh?

Student (male): yes

T: they used to eat rabbit they used to eat hare but then they developed some sickness and they stopped eating them she wanted to go and see it skinned I mean this is the contrast this is the most important aspect of the poem first she was crying her heart out you know because she saw it dead and then in the end she wanted – what made her change? This attitude this is the important thing remember I told you also there is link with the date it was 1938 after the first world war and very close to the second world war * which was imminent you know they were already signs that the war – ok this is not extremely important but it gives you some clues – part of your job is identifying detective work as I told you because this is the whole point of the poem what makes her change her attitude

(students continue working)

T: try to round up in a few minutes because otherwise we won’t have time to discuss

(more time)
T: ok let’s start with the A team (jokes) how are you doing? (checks in on students’ progress) (to a group asks:) do you mind if we start with yours

Students: we’re not ready, we’re still writing and discussing

T: ok but remember when you’re writing an essay in an exam you would have 45 minutes so in 15 minutes you have to be able to write a paragraph – is anybody ready?

(one group are ready) you’re ready and you’re ready ok so let’s give them a few minutes and then we can start with yours or we won’t have time it doesn’t need to be perfect – as long as we have a vague idea…

T: ok let’s start – (addressed) Nigel, Jasmine and Neil (to collects students’ work)

Part 5 (T collects students’ work and reads it aloud to the class; this is followed in every group’s work by commentary and discussion)

T: (reads) ‘The young child’ according to Sam ‘represents the innocence and purity found in each inexperienced human being. She weeps at the sight of the undoubtedly disturbing image of the helpless bloody body of the dead hare. The child portrays the innate natural factors of the human and that despite this violence, the bloodshed, even when this may be considered necessary. In this case the hare was killed for food. The ABABC rhyme scheme seems to mimic the sobbing of the young girl’ ok ok ehm it’s – you have talked around it really you haven’t found any interesting aspects of literature literary devices ehm for example the alliteration of ‘blood-blabbered’ you know which seems to emphasise – I mean alliteration is difficult to interpret it can be very subjective – but the ‘blood-blabbered’ eh it seems to conjure up the image of something that looks bloated to me ‘eyes that stare’ the eyes that stare perhaps looking directly at her even though the hare is dead but it’s looking directly at her ‘while a small child that stood nearby / Wept out to see it there’ ehm as I said there is hyperbole here this is very important I feel - the extreme reaction of the child weeping to see a dead rabbit which was quite a common thing you know hunting and killing rabbits it was quite a common thing and what you said makes a lot of sense of course I mean ‘the disturbing image of the helpless bloody body of the dead hare’ is quite ehm quite powerful now whether human beings are innately innocent or not you know is something that is controversial among writers because there are some writers who say no I mean for example Lord of the Flies Golding and even Graham Greene in one of his short stories ehm they seem to give the impression that beneath the veneer of civilization this layer of civilization we are basically savages but there is there are two important issues here the child the reaction of the child is exaggerated usually you know children do not have fifty shades of grey they have black and white either good or bad ehm and there is no sort of in-between they go from one extreme to the other usually and her ingenuousness the fact that she is naïve the fact that she weeps in an exaggerated fashion seeing the dead rabbit I’d really say good effort of course but you could have included you know – work closely with the text it’s important to the examiner that apart from giving an overview and your impression you should also find phrases all right sentences words that have some particular effect it’s like the secondary body really it’s no fun because the body is quite good to look at if it’s whole sometimes you have to dissect we have to find certain aspects that stand out more than others

Student (male): (explains) I did them in point form and I needed to sort of refer to them
T: ok you say alliteration of the letter ‘k’ don’t forget alliteration is a sound not a letter because alliteration uses a sound a consonant sound so you would have ‘k’ and ‘c’ for example I mean it doesn’t really matter they could have the same sound you refer to the fact of monosyllables is very important the sound of monosyllabic words is very important because it quickens the rhythm also the ‘k’ sound the very strong harsh sound which attracts the attention and the emphasis in this part is on sound first she sees and then she hears eh she’s attracted by the sound and there is something rhythmical which is very important all right eh ‘the horses clopping’ lots of words related to horse-riding simile of girl being compared with a rabbit and this is also an important issue which should have come out what you were supposed to write the linking of the girl with a creature ok she imagines herself ‘out like a leveret she ran’ she’s part of this nature she’s part of this nature that’s being destroyed and there are other comparisons ‘bird-like eyes’ ‘nibbling a leaf’ later on ehm harsh consonants of course there is the words which are onomatopoeic which are ‘thudding’ and ‘clang’ and the alliteration ‘clang of dangling’ ‘the clop of hoofs’ which is also onomatopoeic so these are really powerful and they are powerful not just for us but they are powerful for the girl that’s why the girl leaves the dead rabbit and goes outside and there is ‘a team of field artillery’ they’re going to you know it’s a group of soldiers and they are glamourised they look glamorous they attract her attention this is what is important here eh (reads from essay) ‘the hunters are compared to military’ ‘there is the use of run-on lines’ but anyway you have some very good points I wish you had written it more coherently but you have some very very important points here which is very encouraging I don’t know what you said about ‘the clang / of dangling chains’ run-on lines what do you want to say about the run-on lines?

Student (male): that it also quickens the pace of the poem

T: with run-on lines not necessarily usually the end-stopped lines give it a more – in fact the end-stopped lines for example (reads part of poem where there is full stop) ‘Spur and gun and limber plate / Flashed in the sun.’ we haven’t talked about hunters here we talked about soldiers so she sees the dead rabbit hears the sound of the soldiers goes out and she is enchanted by the glamour the gun there’s also visual imagery there she talks Walter de la Mare the poet talks about the ‘sun-tanned soldiery’ you know the ‘glistening bird-like eyes / On a team of field artillery’ she’s feasting her eyes ‘Gay to manoeuvres, thudding by’ ‘Flashed in the sun.’ the horses forming a ‘din’ you know this kind of very romantic very glamourous impression of the army right anything else what about (points to another group to give their writing)

T: (reads) ‘The tone in this poem is strong. It emphasizes the young age and innocence and the change a young girl goes through throughout the course of the poem’. There is a narrative here there is a sequence here there is a narrative although the purpose is not the narrative so we listen to the girl it’s like an anecdote it’s like a short story ‘the girl is shocked and sad at the sight of the dead hare on the kitchen table. She was brainwashed by the soldiers outside, marching heroically by’ this is exactly what you know in my opinion that she is changed she is transformed by seeing the soldiers ‘her attitude was changed when she was subjected to the propaganda for violence. The meaning goes beyond the little girl. People are easily influenced. When she walked back in she asked to see the hare skinned – it was a big change, something that people other than herself didn’t take notice of’ so I think we’ve become aware there you captured the whole spirit of the poem ehm I don’t know if Kim would like to share with us you know very good (hands back paragraph) it would be an excellent
 introduction to the crit essay (reads another paragraph) ‘the tone of the poem in the beginning is more soft and sad as the innocent girl sees the dead rabbit in front of her. As the poem progresses the tone becomes more vivid’? What is the word there? More ‘wild as the soldiers appear in the vicinity and then greatly contrast the beginning of the poem with the end which is shocking as the young girl is keen on seeing the rabbit skinned. This shows how impressionable the young innocent girl is at the same time how much the soldiers can affect and change her whole mindset. Their behaviour can influence and it seems that they’re either quite aggressive or show a tolerance for violence’ I think this is also very good ehm you seem to have to emphasise the impression of the child rather than the glamourisation of violence you know you’re doing Owen so you’re familiar with this idea of propaganda the idea that soldiers dying for your country being a hero is important and this has influenced has changed her attitude towards nature now she doesn’t mind seeing a dead rabbit even worse still she is keen to see it skinned by seeing the soldiers being glamorized ok she is now ready to see violence in action she’s not squeamish anymore about seeing a dead rabbit ok right let’s see (points to another group) ehm I thing on the whole you’ve done very well I mean it’s not an easy poem it was set in an exam many years ago

Student (male): sir if they give us something like this in the exam will they tell us the dates how they are here or?

T: they don’t normally give dates the date you mean?

Students (male): the year it was written

T: no no they don’t normally give the year when it was written

S: so how would we know when it’s

T: there’s no need to know I mean let’s say you didn’t know the poem was written in 1938 let’s say this poem was written in 1970 1975 Afghanistan Vietnam there’s always you know – so you would have – of course you can gather the period by the description of the soldiers I mean the type of artillery that is being used you know it’s typical of that period it’s just after the first world war before the second world war it’s not really important you know (reads) ‘The child’s innocence is being corrupted by the exposure to the merciless slaughter of war. This exploited childhood forces the child to identify herself as one of the soldiers going to war. It’s a place where there is no compassion as shown by the paradox where in the beginning she is feeling sad to see the dead rabbit but now she is eager to see it skinned. The connotation of the colour ‘red’ in ‘her tear-strained cheek now flushed with red’ symbolizes the death of the girl’s childhood’ yes I think it’s very good let’s have a look at the actual poem you mentioned some very interesting points here you took the colour red ‘the wonder and tumult gone’ of course there’s a great contrast here the word wonder shows that she was sort of enchanted she had time to think ok ‘stood nibbling a green leaf’ alone the idea of nibbling a green leaf all right seems to show us that she is part of nature that she is going to see it skinned she is like the leveret which we mentioned before when she goes in the house and asks with her tear-strained cheek flushed with red’ it was a different reaction her face is still wet from the tears but she is now flushed with excitement because she has been converted indirectly by the soldiers she has seen ‘please may I go and see it skinned?’ (gives back students their essay parts)
T reads another part: ‘Considering this would be before the war it seems like there is something eating away at something good. It was after the first world war and a reconstruction but also that the second world war was upon them and nothing held but fear. It shows how the child feels and what she thinks as she asks to see the rabbit skinned. This shows how crying over loved ones the people who were fighting were the ones they cried for. The poet stresses his used of punctuation which throughout the poem and he manages to change the tone poem from somber to upbeat’ this last part I think is very good I think I made a mistake in telling you this idea of the war because then you tend to read into it too much you do have to find things that are there between the lines but do be careful not to exaggerate ok there is a glimpse of war but it’s not necessarily actual war it’s a parade the soldiers showing off so try to Adam it’s a very intelligent thing but try to you know balance that intelligence so be careful not to connect everything with war. Do you have any questions? Are you happy with the analysis? I mean I’m quite happy myself I mean this worked last time this worked today so I see you next week.
Appendix 32 – Observation Transcript: T4 (Katherine)

Lesson: Literary Criticism seminar (feedback on an essay about an unseen poem)

Poem discussed in the previous lesson: ‘Five Ways to Kill a Man’

Teacher takes attendance and notes to those students who were absent (to make them more aware of their absence).

I hope you got the paper with you. I am going to give out the corrected work and I am going to give you some time to look through my comments and corrections and if you have any questions either write them down or else take a note so that you’ll ask them later on because it could be we’ll be discussing them. Your marks are not spectacular I gave a lot of 5s you’ll see why just one or two 6s, 6 minus and a couple of fours as well and you’ll know why (hands out students their essays) Julia we are doing literary criticism not literal ok all right have a look at your work and take out the poem we need it in front of you have a look at my comments I have some general comments first of all about the marks as I told you 5 is the average mark I’m afraid eh those who got a 5 at least they tried to give a good interpretation of what’s happening of the content of the poem ok if I gave you a 6 it probably means you impressed me with some comment – not good obviously (referring to the mark) – but with some good comment or some detail of interpretation analytical detail rather than descriptive I’m coming back to that how you describe how you talk about it and 4 of course it shows that there is lack of depth especially for a couple of you who skipped a stanza or two because you didn’t understand it apparently ehm of course you don’t have a good interpretation now in general as I told you let’s say 99% of you gave a general interpretation a paraphrase of what’s happening in the poem it’s fine you thought that was enough but in general you didn’t analyse you didn’t dig deep as I usually tell you into the words and above all when it came to techniques most of you noticed from the very first paragraph what I would call useful techniques for example the technique of sound enjambment because it has to do with run-on lines following enjambment and run-on lines you talked of pauses in general or caesuras it’s fine it’s good to notice these things but although it could be one of the first things that strike you it should be used as part of your essay as part of your interpretation of what’s happening if there’s for example most of you commented about the alliteration on the fifth line ‘the cock that crows’ it’s fine all right it’s ok but it’s not enough it’s an interesting technique and useful if you need to refer to it you have to fit it in with meaning of the poem what is the impact of that harsh sound the ‘k’ sound there? Obviously you’re talking about the murder there of the killing so at least fit it in how it reflects the harshness of the moment all right you commented about the stanzas and the structure nobody mentioned free verse although you spoke about the fact that it has no rhyme it’s good all right and you commented about the last stanza being shorter fine but in general I’m not talking about everyone but in general you didn’t say why you think that stanza is like that all right some of you said it makes you stop and think it’s the most effective but what is the content of that stanza which makes the fact that it is short important? That’s what you have to ask yourself look at the techniques in terms of the content keep that in mind …there were some of course who commented properly like for example Katrina (mentions student’s particular work) well she’s absent she wrote that
there is no rhyme and she said possibly this is because there is no harmony it suggests that there is no harmony in the situations being described these are situations of death this is very good linking the rhyme with the content that sort of thing

As I said before now Rebecca is here you gave an explanation of the literal details for example you took the first episode and you explained them which is fine but you are still on the level of the literal

Rebecca: but there weren’t many metaphors and similes

T: yes we’re coming to that actually there were a few it’s true but even then remember when I spoke about imagery I always told you there are literal images these are all five of them literal images they create a picture a situation so that’s imagery on its own listen Rebecca what you said was fine you had to say more ok I realized you were enjoying writing although you have to look at the structure of your sentences because one collapses into the other without punctuation ok so do we need to go into all the images? If you had two or three hours fine you can but in reality you pick the details from each stanza which are significant as I told you last week all you need to do is write a paragraph on each stanza which is but then you need to be selective there were some of you who barely wrote anything on each stanza just two or three sentences there were some who wrote short paragraphs a few general comments I need to give now also use the present tense some of you used the past tense we are not doing history here we are doing literary criticism so we comment on what’s important to us now and the simple present tense there was one of you who kept saying ‘he is describing’ ‘he is saying’ and that sort of thing there’s no need to use the present continuous. In this case there was the presence of a persona which presents itself as you noticed in the last stanza so it’s good to use the word persona although some of you use speaker which is also fine and there were still a few who stuck to poet it’s not going to ruin your essay this is not a controversial topic here where the poet definitely wants to detach himself however it is a particular poem because of its tone ehm the tone which we’re going to talk about what tone is it?

Student (f): irony

T: the irony eh? A couple of you didn’t notice this and in this particular tone usually the poet would want to detach himself so all right in this case the word persona would have been better but I didn’t penalize those who wrote poet ehm ‘start off’ this is one comment this expression in your essay which I really hate ‘the poet starts off’ ‘the poem starts off’ it’s colloquial ‘starts’ is enough for the conclusion a couple of conclusions I wanted to comment on Rebecca for example you moralise in the conclusion poetry is not always written to give us a lesson although the lesson that we sometimes get from a poem could have to do with the theme we try at this level not to conclude ‘this poem teaches us’ or ‘it shows that we should not’ that’s moralizing ok try to avoid that I’m referring to poetry in general here and also Nicole

Rebecca: I didn’t say that the poem actually teaches us I wanted to say that was symbolizes bloodshed

T: yes ok it’s not said directly it’s true but the hint was there and also Nicole you seem to speculate in your conclusion don’t speculate about something as though it’s opening a new argument in your essay conclude means finish what you’ve been discussing ok now we can have a look at the stanzas any questions so far? (pauses
to allow students to ask questions) all right read the first stanza on your own (they reread the poem; she notes that some students were absent and had not read it) let me give you some time to read the poem so those who were here you refresh your memory and those who weren’t would try to understand let’s see what it’s talking about what are the stanzas about? Now when you’re reading a poem the first time (and even second time) you take a pencil and mark / underline what strikes you write what you’re thinking if something occurs to you some words write it down from the very first reading if possible

After they read

T: how is the development of this poem? Each stanza covers a situation can we list the situations to get it out of the way to make sure that everybody understands the situations what are they? What is the first situation? The death of Christ the crucifixion of Christ all right at this point that’s what you notice then you refine ok? The second one these are five ways to kill a man

Student (F): the middle ages

T: the middle ages yes how do you notice it’s the middle ages?

S: they way he describes the images like the sword and the battles the castle

T: all right the castle these are typical things and it’s in a particular country as well England ok right but there isn’t a particular episode a particular war or battle that took place in England in those times ok the third one

Student (F): the first world war

T: yes some of you missed this incidentally two of you skipped this stanza somehow they couldn’t tell what it is about then they said it’s from some fairy tale which was quite interesting it looks like a fairy tale (laughs) but come on it’s not something beyond you to understand and some of you – although the first world war is so obvious you’re doing Wilfred Owen this year – said you just use gas to kill him and even the word ditches and the word gas is enough and the phrase hat made of steel so your problem is the lack of visualization you need to visualize when you read a poem or literature ok unless you visualize you don’t go into the poem and engage with that poem yourself within it ok? Ehms fourth stanza? This yes second world war even if you might not have noticed it at first ok because there were some who said the age of airplanes but a couple of you thought that you throw a man off an airplane rather than throwing a bomb you said throwing a man (laughs gently) ehms it’s interesting that there was one particular person who missed they didn’t talk about world war 2 and later on referred to psychopath as Hitler which is true later on but this person shows that he wasn’t thinking he didn’t plan before because if anything you don’t of Hitler in the next paragraph you talk of this paragraph you’re talking about this stanza I was a bit surprised here…only one person mentioned nuclear weapons rather than the atomic bomb I was a bit surprised that you didn’t mention the bomb on Hiroshima if you need to mention it – you don’t have to – but at least you mention the atomic bomb was part of the second world war in fact ok? And the last stanza? What is it? What kind of killing is this? (repeats) Easy come on read it

Student (f): Natural death?
T: it could be natural death but after what? What do you do to this man? What does it say? It seems that he is living somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century when the poem was written it could be the twenty first ehm it could be he dies a natural death after you? what have you done to him? Do you shoot him or anything? How does he die?

Student: you just left him alone

T: you leave him alone ok what kind of death? Of being neglected of depression probably there were a couple who mentioned suicide which is also possible but don’t think he kills himself because it’s not obvious there say possibly in the form of suicide because of course if a person is isolated is abandoned is ignored by others he feels isolated and those were the five ways now only one or two noticed – let’s speak about the voice we said persona but how is the reader involved in the poem? What do you notice about the tone? Does the persona speak in a difficult way? Come on let’s put it this way what were the difficult words in the poem? ‘psychopath’ maybe

Student (Rebecca): cumbersome

T: cumbersome yes and it’s a key word and we’re going to try to try to guess the word if you don’t understand it straight away I think that’s all we don’t have many difficult words quite simple quite straightforward quite familiar in the tone ok and who is he addressing? He is addressing the reader saying what? Telling us what? * what is the format of this poem? Do this do that he’s telling us what?

Student (f): he’s teaching us how to kill a man

T: he’s teaching us very good word he’s teaching us how to kill people actually because you get to kill more than one he’s teaching us he’s giving us?

Student (f): instructions

T: instructions Only one wrote ‘instructions’ there were two who wrote the word recipe which was very good it looks like a recipe a list of ingredients in fact the method each one of them if you look at it as instructions the method itself is simple tell me the method point them out what are the actual steps? The method? What’s the first one? To kill a man by the way we spoke about Jesus since we realize that they had to the historical period we’ll go back to the crucifixion of Jesus it is a very particular episode if you put it in the historical situation it is not the death you know not only Jesus was killed many others were killed like that it is the Roman way of punishment nobody mentioned that that Jesus was killed the same kind of death as that of criminals so if you want to elaborate you can mention a historical period like the Roman times but with specific reference to a very famous crucifixion ehm I was talking about how the poet describes each method the words chosen now we’re going to see them not in detail one by one but first overall we’re going to get a general impression ok of the whole poem come on what is the first method? What should you do?

Student: crucify

T: the word crucify is not there how is it described?

Student: by making him carry the cross
T: it says carry the cross and most important

Students: nail

T: **nail** a simple method nail and then it’s so stressed that you have hammer the nails home as well that alliteration there which stresses the horror of it ok the second stanza what do you do?

Student (f): pierce the metal cage?

T: pierce the metal cage and what’s the image here?

Student (f): the suit of armour

T: the armour that’s an image there one perceptive student actually spoke about this there aren’t many verbal images literal there are a lot because you see everything happen in front of you but verbal images there aren’t a lot it’s true but one student spoke about this cage the suit of armour being a cage and gave meaning what meaning? The suit of armour described as a cage it could be protecting but the idea of cage it’s a trap as well so there is the suggestion that the soldier whoever he was or the knight in protected but also trapped he has no choice and he’s killed through it so there’s also a situation a contradiction ok the third one?

Student (F): blow gas

T: blow gas at him the fourth one this is even simpler

Student: you press a switch

T: press a switch and the last one? You just leave him. If you consider those you see them progressively you notice that they get more complicated or less complicated?

Students: easier

T: it’s easier all right the first one you need another person to hammer the nail the second you need another person too but there’s a sword in between the third one is more distant and it gets further and further away so you visualize so the methods are simple or difficult?

Student: simple

T: let’s look at the ingredients now it is like setting a practical and what do you need? What do you call them?

Student (f): apparatus

T: apparatus or props ok in fact each stanza lists them the first method there’s a list now are you going to comment in your writing on why – what is the impact of listing for all of them? What is the impact of listing?

Student (f): they are very important

T: yes the important ingredients or props that are needed ehm what else any other comments? In the first there are things that you can carry the second one they get bulkier trees a lot of men a prince two flags a castle it gets bulkier to carry if you
want to do it – the third one well we go back to miles an expanse ehm a plague of rats and incidentally plague is also another important aspect plague it suggests what?

Student (f): sickness

T: sickness there’s illness disease and the fourth one what are the ingredients what are the props? are they easy to obtain? Definitely not the land that no one needs for several years in fact several factories systems of governments complicated institutions ok and the last one comes back to being simple somewhere in the middle although even this is difficult because there are not details given to make it look simple so what can we say about the ingredients? Are they as easy? Do they match the methods? The methods get easier do they match the methods? (students nod no) Definitely not the ingredients the props get more complicated the methods get simpler and simpler what is this situation?

A situation of contrast that is the irony that is part of the irony there is a lot of irony this is irony of situation where the methods get simpler but the list of things the needed objects seem to get more complicated and here we could come to that word cumbersome what do you think it means? * is he saying there are many easy ways to kill a man or is he saying there are difficult ways to kill a man?

Student: easy?

T: you think it’s easy? He could be saying it’s easy he could be saying both: it’s easy but it’s complicated all right so whether he’s saying it’s easy or complicated but the point is he’s saying both and that is where there is this contradiction that creates the irony the contradiction between I repeat the easy ways and the complicated props the easy ways incidentally we imagine them we visualize them but there is language to support the fact that they are easy notice how they are presented you can make him carry sort of or you can these are alternative ways but then you need so the ‘but’ here means you may blow the gas but then –you need the ‘but’ so notice in all the stanzas there is this juxtaposition do you remember this word this juxtaposition -very good word- juxtaposition of opposites ehm all right and it’s seen throughout what next are we going to notice? * you also said that it is to teach somebody suggested it seems to what to teach let’s think about it is he teaching me? What is he teaching me? How is he teaching? Is he serious? * now we’re moving to tone (of voice) not situation – the irony of the situation – sorry I’m going back a bit the situation of irony if you visualize the ironic situation you also notice something else the more equipment – in the first situation you need only one person in the second one you still need one but in the third one you need many more and in the fourth one you need millions – the simpler the action gets the more effective it is the more killings you do that’s also a contrast – let’s go back to tone some told me he wants to teach but is he really serious? Usually teachers are serious is he serious here? In his tone?

Students nod their head – no –

T: no how would you describe his tone?

Student (f): he is kind of offhand

T: offhand? Very good this is the kind of word that you might use here for tone – offhand careless carefree * you need to be aware of what words you are going to use in your essay other words like flippant – flippant is mocking – ok he’s mocking what’s he mocking? * is he seriously telling me ‘listen this is how you
are going to kill a man’? or is he mocking the fact that men can be so cruel? Mocking cruelty but making it sound like ‘oh it’s entertaining to go and kill a man you know’? so if you notice that sense of fun for a subject which is serious this is called black humour a couple of you did mention humour but you didn’t develop it it’s not enough and irony is a form of humour you are overturning things you are noticing there is an overturning of situations it’s considered humourous it is a form of humour so those of you who mentioned humour must have noticed something there but you just did not dig deep in the situation where is the humour? In fact there was one of you who said that the poem has a sad tone it has a sad subject but it doesn’t have a sad tone it has a tone of fun (refers to some students who talked about tone; Ianika said there is not tone in this poem – it’s impossible (says this with laughter/ gently); Katrina said it’s a sad tone and yes Bernice and Julia mentioned it too) it’s good to elaborate so that explains the tone there’s more to it (T refers to her notes) oh yes we still need to talk about the theme that’s very important so far listen this is all discussion before you start to write ok we spoke about the voice we mentioned the intention although it seems like he’s teaching he’s doing it in a tone of mockery all right we still need to come to the last stanza we noticed some of the images the cage the plague there is another one the one of the mud ‘the mud sliced’ all right sliced through the ditches what does it suggest? The word ‘slice’? is it a haphazard cut? Is it an action which complicates things? It complicates slicing is something elaborate when you slice a cake you need a knife here to slice mud you need a particularly elaborate plan where to put those ditches the word ‘slice’ shows the attention given it furthers the argument of complications of difficulty you see how you use words you don’t need to go into each and every word but use the words which back up your arguments in this case the argument of cumbersome and easy of the fact that they look easy juxtaposing easy and complicated all right so we saw the images now we’ll come to the theme as I always say it’s one of the important things to do well in an essay think of the theme and you don’t think about it straight away after you read it for the first time you need to have done what we have done so far to come up with the theme and then decide on that and possible when you are developing your points refer to it now theme what theme do you suggest here? (refers to students’ work) I know there are a few interesting suggestions I wanted to read them out to you some of you wrote suggested a theme after the first paragraph as usual some of you left it till later that I don’t like it’s as if you went through an exploratory journey in the poem and then you say ‘ah yes now I know what the theme is’ that’s not the right way ok (laughs) all right have a look at what you wrote and we’ll discuss what theme to come up with

Student (f): death and murder

Y: death death and murder you said? Fine who else said death? Do you think it’s good to say death? It is about death fine but does it cover the real meaning of the poem? Because when we say death it could mean a person dying in an accident or natural causes so death is not a very good choice you said murder at least murder would be a bit better these are forms of murder ok death is too general and murder is a bit better but murder of what? You can be more specific murder of humans of man man murdering man now does that cover the whole poem? This poem goes through what? Through the?

Student (f): ages?

T: through the ages through centuries so man murdering man through the ages any suggestions? I want you to tell me yourselves there are people who came up with one word as well a one-word theme is not bad ‘war’ was given by one or
two is it good? Is this about war? Was Christ killed in a war? No so it’s not enough to say the poem is about war your theme must cover the whole poem there are some who said the uselessness of war but you then forgot the last stanza what do you notice in the poem which could come up in the choice of theme?

Man murdering man through the ages is fine

Student (f): the insignificance?

T: all right if you bring in the notion of the insignificance you’re including in the mentioning of tone because it is presented as insignificant all right eh if you want to but I wouldn’t I can leave it for tone later on incidentally since tone is so important in this poem I think you can actually write about tone in the introduction you would say the tone in the poem is ironic at least that it gives the examiner pleasure to see that one of you said sarcastic I know that for you in everyday life irony is like sarcasm but remember that sarcasm hurts this is not intended to be pungent here it is intended to say ‘how ridiculous man is. He’s doing all this in order to kill’ ok looking at theme what do you notice? come on look at the ingredients look at the props what does it show even that it is through the ages the last one is pressing a switch if I have a switch it involves what? It involves technology doesn’t it so if you are perceptive enough you can say this man murdering man through the ages and you can change something the wording the word progress ‘man murdering man as he progresses through the ages’ amidst progress through the ages because that brings in the irony of the situation we’re getting better in one thing but worse in another because we used to kill one person at a time now we’re killing millions at a time you see if you are perceptive you see? I’m not expecting such details but at least be more specific about the choice of words I always tell you think about it carefully one person spoke about the dangers of modern living for a theme is that good? Does it cover the whole poem? Why? I think it’s talking about the last stanza? Somebody wrote this: ‘in the method of killing throughout history there is waste’ is that a good thing? What’s he thinking of here? I know there is a hint of understanding the theme but he’s thinking of the methods and forgetting the last method you have to include everything all right one final thing the irony there is another kind of irony I gave you this poem on purpose to consolidate what we did about irony a couple of weeks ago do you understand the irony in tone? Showing the contrast between him being flippant but the subject being serious? The irony in situation eh a situation which is presented as easy and complicated at the same time there is further irony of situation – of course this is if you had two or three hours – in each stanza for example the story of Jesus was he a criminal (students indicate no) so it’s a harsh method of killing but it was of an innocent person

Student (f): I saw the story of Jesus to mean something related to war because I asked why did the poet choose the story of Jesus for crucifixion? Maybe to point out the dangers of religion as in holy war I thought many of the wars are because of religion

T: that’s good an interesting comment but somebody said something else to justify this religion thing

Student (f): because I mentioned (reads from her essay) ‘the poet might have said the crucifixion of Jesus Christ commenced the different religions. Many people believe that if others do not follow their same religion don’t deserve to live’

T: ok the second part is more elaborate but the first part is more relevant let me tell you why because you can say the first death is a brutal killing an
extermination of somebody but the start of Christianity which led to some wars
incidentally you could notice irony of situation even in the banquet thing somebody
mentioned this when mentioned the banquet they said it’s odd you know having a
banquet and killing at the same time and that brings the irony the juxtaposition of
something fun with something horrid even in the third stanza you have song you need to
imagine to understand this they are singing they are dying and choking they are wearing
helmets but yet they die helmets are protective gear but yet they die ok and in the fourth
stanza there is destruction put against progress all right one last thing I wrote the word
‘waffle’ in your writing ‘waffle’ means like ‘it’s easy to imagine what he’s writing
because it’s as if you are there’ that’s waffle (in Maltese – paroli vojt – means the words
are not doing anything significant) all right just write descriptive or vivid but not waffle
thank you very much
# Appendix 33 – Feedback Form

**Part 1: Filled by tutor (after reading essay)**
- **Task:** guided task / semi-guided task / essay (underline where appropriate)
- **Unseen text:** prose / poetry (underline where appropriate)
- **Title of unseen text:**

  A. **Feedback foci** (e.g. essay structure; language use; analysis of literary text in terms of aspects of theme, form, imagery, rhetoric, style and tone*; produce informed, independent and critical opinions and judgements of text*; recognition of literary effect*)

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

B. **Feedback comments** (in connection with foci)

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

C. **Areas to work on** (in connection with the above feedback foci)

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

D. **Action to be taken** (for rewriting the criticism essay)

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

E. **Discussion of written work** (after tutor fills in Part 1; during tutorial)

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

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**Part 2: Filled by student following a discussion with the tutor**

A. **Areas worked on** (together with a rewriting of the criticism essay)

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

B. **Challenges / difficulties of writing about the unseen text**

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________

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**Part 3: Filled by tutor (After reading the revised version)**

- **Essay resubmitted:** Yes / No
- **Implementation of feedback:** Yes / No
- **Mark on resubmission (After implementation of feedback):** _______
Procedure to Use the Feedback Form

Step 1: In the tutorial, the teacher collects the student’s essay on the particular unseen text set for that week (this form can also be used for all tutorial essays irrespective of the syllabus component). A brief discussion is held and feedback foci are agreed on. The tutor fills in Part 1A. In this way the student knows what the tutor will focus on during marking and providing feedback.

Step 2: As the tutor is reading and providing feedback (after the tutorial; in the office or at home), Parts 1B-1D are filled in.

Step 3: In the next tutorial, the tutor discusses Parts 1B-1D with the student and together they fill in Part 1E for additional comments.

Step 4: The student is handed the essay and works on a redraft. Parts 2A and 2B are filled accordingly after working and reflecting on the feedback provided.

Step 5: The student resubmits the essay and Part 2 of the Feedback Form, at which point the tutor rereads it and fills in Part 3. This could be done during the Feedback and Consolidation tutorial (which is scheduled by the department). The mark given on resubmission would count for assessment.

(* the feedback foci above match the assessment criteria outlined in the English Advanced level syllabus)
## Appendix 34 – Events of the Observed Lessons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of ‘Event’</th>
<th>Codes for ‘event’</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Teacher input (and the teacher’s language)</strong></td>
<td>Teacher gave instructions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher explained (in detail; e.g. giving definitions)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher elicited students’ response</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher’s language of explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher’s language of feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher’s language of questioning (use of leading questions / closed questions / encouraging tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Preparing for reading and writing: processes</strong></td>
<td>Teacher prepared student for reading (and analysis)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher read the text</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher analysed and discussed the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher prepared students for writing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher set writing in class</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Teacher feedback and response to students’ writing</strong></td>
<td>Teacher read students’ writing and provided feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher praised students’ work or contribution</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher critiqued students’ work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher confirmed or did not confirm students’ interpretations to an unseen text</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher offered a neutral response – neither confirms nor corrects</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Interaction patterns (initiated by teacher or students)</strong></td>
<td>Teacher addressed the class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher addressed particular students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher set pair work or group work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher asked students to work on their own e.g. reading or writing about an unseen text</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student asked a question to the teacher / a student initiated a discussion on an aspect of the unseen text</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5. Responses to student’s contribution and output in the lesson</strong></td>
<td>Teacher offered a personal response</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher provided a technical response</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Response was initiated by the teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Response was uninitiated by the teacher; student asked question or offered a response</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher’s tone of response (e.g. encouraged students’ contribution)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher’s length of response (e.g. long explanations or brief answers)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher repeated advice or suggestions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher rephrased / paraphrased</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher extended students’ contribution by explaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher confirmed students’ contribution</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Assigning writing tasks in class and for home (follow-up to the lessons)</strong></td>
<td>Teacher and students read an unseen text (in class or at home)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher and students analysed an unseen text</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students wrote a critical commentary on an unseen text (either an essay or in paragraph form)</td>
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Appendix 35 – Observation Transcript (Coded): Charlotte (T1)

Observation: CHARLOTTE (T1)

T: (refers to the passage they had to collect from Agenda she had assigned for reading in the previous lesson) I’m now going to give you 10 minutes to read it again and as you read it please I’d like you to plan more or less what you’re going to be writing so let’s imagine this is a passage that you have to write about in your exam with a prose passage I would advise you to spend the first fifteen minutes reading and planning and then you use the subsequent forty-five minutes to actually write the essay now is there anyone who can remind me what approach we’ve used so far? When we’re planning an essay? (no response) a first introduction about what?

Student (female): it states the obvious

T: ok it states the obvious so we give a general we use the phrase state the obvious because it’s memorable because it sticks what we mean by that is we give a general overview of in this case the passage content now here you have a narrative ok it’s a text that has a narrative it’s not descriptive or reflective text so you would point out the main (pause) events in this narrative good what do we then go on to introduce in a second introductory paragraph? Any ideas? (no response) if the first paragraph introduces the text the second introduces what?

Student (female): what it’s about?

T: no (does not use a harsh tone but a prompting one) (pauses to wait for other students to respond)

Student (male): the style level of detail ehm (pause) themes maybe

T: ok we said that – good – we said that this paragraph has the function of introducing your foci what your essay will move on to the level of more detail in the body paragraphs right? So introduce (writes on boards)* your essay more than anything else focusing on thematic concerns yes and stylistic features do we at this early stage bring in details and quotes? Do we analyse as such?

Student (male): no

T: no ok here you’re mentioning outlining what will then be analysed in more detail later ok so body 1 then if you’ve highlighted three themes here you might focus on two of the themes you’ve mentioned another body might look at the stylistic features you’ve pointed at here ok so the organization of your essay depends a lot on these first fifteen minutes there is no formula ok and please avoid please avoid going through the guidelines that you’re given think of the (pause) think of the poetry test you had a critical analysis of the poem you might have had The Follower Mid-Term Break I don’t know when you do you have your tutorial as a group?

Students: Mondays
T: Monday so you had Toys (by Coventry Patmore) ring a bell?
Students nod in agreement.

T: yes now you might remember that you had a list of guidelines so you had
[crisis and drama, character whatever imagery style you have a whole list those
are guidelines they're not a strict formula what do I mean by this? Just because
you have a list of fifteen or so critical terms doesn't mean that the poem that
you're dealing with or the prose passage that you're dealing with will lend itself
to such an analysis they might help you you might say yes look I can comment on
imagery definitely so allow them to help you not to shackle your way because
there were one or two students in my group at least that tried to write a
paragraph on each and every term or guideline that they had there in the rubric
[corrected] we said that we start from the abstract that's why fifteen minute
preparation is very important because at this stage you can say okay I can write
a paragraph on this theme then I can move on to show how the stylistic features
being what it may it could be a highly descriptive passage a passage that uses a
number of similes as you have here it makes interesting comparisons and then
will develop that in a second paragraph ok and ideally we would move away from
a chronological (pause) approach to the text it is a quick big year in the
examiners' report it was in fact outlined as one of the approaches that students
use but I would attempt to move away from that approach what do I mean by
chronological approach? You write a paragraph on the first paragraph of that
extract then you move on to write another paragraph on the second part of the
passage now we can avoid that kind structure our essay differently by looking at
thematic concerns and content first then we might move on to stylistic features
and how these stylistic features further bring out [pause] the thematic
concerns you've already outlined if at all it might not always be the case that it is
so now I'm going to give you back your essays for the most part we're doing well
as well as the paragraphs you wrote on the poems for the most part we're doing
good let me just talk you through Maria Stellini for instance did a very
good job let me just talk you through Maria Stellini's essay her first introduction
she gave a feel of the passage that it's written by Charles Dickens set in
Mauritius that it has a very descriptive that it is very descriptive and it focuses
on the people living in that area as well as the place itself the setting and she
moves on to a second introduction where she brings in the third person
narrative that it's a slightly hot August day and that a number of features of style
help to establish this including she says repetition use of adjectives
personification and imagery all of this she says brings out effects of the sun on
the place and the people and she hasn't immediately in a second paragraph moved on
to analysis and that has given her essay what I like to call poise control she had
control over her writing and she has also given direction to her essay I know as
an examiner as a reader that this student will look at these themes and these
stylistic features know where this essay is going and more importantly she
knows where her essay is going because sometimes we're writing a first
paragraph and we don't know we have absolutely no idea what the second
paragraph will be about you have no control there now it's not easy of course
and it's not possible unless we plan now you might be having to start and many
of you do that let's put it that way after five minutes you've already written your
first paragraph your introduction now if we're going to adopt this method you
should do this
This is a good feature of 1. "Use of language and imagery" - She's quoting metaphors like "one great plane of fire" close references. We need it comes in the body and a simile like "like a white hot arrow in another paragraph she comments on the fact that there's a shift in setting in the passage you will remember maybe it's been a while, initially we're in the harbour then we move to the? A prison cell ok so she allows here a paragraph to focus on and she wrote here in the margin prison, tone and writer's attitude. Good because we know that when Dickens starts his description of the prison cell he uses a particular tone a tone of admiration of sympathy? Or of condescension and judgment? (In Maltese asks students to react) of what?

T: of judgment and she comments on his variety of tone focusing on words like 'vermin'. The unseen vermin that refers to the prisoners and that's clear there that we have an indication that the narrator does not approve of these prisoners. Good. Ok so some of us are definitely doing very well Maria, Marcus good work as well, you're just missing a conclusion, you need a conclusion where you perhaps in which you go back to some of the main themes and the more salient aspects of style. Very good work. Carefully pace the setting and the spelling but otherwise that's a very good essay. Try to include some repetition towards the beginning then it's like you got your style right ok sometimes some of you have a problem with the first paragraph or two that might mean that you would have to revise or produce the early paragraphs. Christabel. Not here today, (Teacher remembers that she didn't take down the marks and asks to collect them again) so let's pause here and I'll take these back in the meantime can we all start reading the passage; hopefully revising it and organizing some form of plan. I'm going to give you these full criteria to do so ok now do we all have the passage? A copy of the passage? Ok let's start.

T: Sarah very good, this was very good Marquita. To another student please pass this to the back. (To Marquita) Some students are not present about 4-5 passes the work (already commented on to Marcus, Maria Stellini and Aaron).

To another student. Tasks: do you want to do this again? Ok have a look it's just that I corrected them yesterday I did them in one sitting Danielle good work on 1. "Use of language and imagery" I'm glad because now I know the work be careful with your introduction and conclusion you do not introduce the main subject of the text you introduced the text as a whole in the introduction its effect avoid that ok we said that in the introduction we stick to the obvious what is this passage about? Yes it's about the effect of the sun on the harbour the people and then it's about a prison cell or same with the conclusion you focused on the benefits of the sun so what is something that you're going to move away from it's a good start ok you
be improve upon (referring to introduction and conclusion) ok so good Michelle very good make a distinction between narrator and author ok and focus more on features of style choice of words and introduction that has to help it introduce your approach ok like we're doing today introduce an approach so that it's not an intro and then immediately we have details ok Jonas good work revise your work before hand it in you are missing an important word and some spelling mistakes you can avoid look at them a lot two words he same but it's a good essay considering that it had no conclusion and that you had some mistakes that could have easily been avoided work more on structure by structure I mean organization of your paragraphs now today we're looking at that closely so pay attention

T: (addresses class on the passage they read about and wrote on) so themes the themes in this passage have you read it?

Students nod in agreement

T: what would you say this passage explores? Is it about the love the injustice? Is it about (pause) death? Is it on the pain that we have to go through in life? What is it about? What is it themes? (pause) ok it's about a person who is trying to do what? (interuption by clerk) he wants to make money he wants to gain independence so he has left home and he's trying to start life anew by doing what he loves - stylistic features style answer the question how does a writer use language use vocabulary to bring forth the themes and to create a particular mood or setting so with stylistic features we're looking at tone imagery narrator use of language figures of speech when you look at Charles Dickens' extract from Little Dorrit we looked at parts of speech not even figures of speech because we said it was a text that made full use of adjectives use of certain nouns adverbs ok so that is what we mean by style and very often Jonas these are worked in the rubric to guide you but as I said it doesn't mean that you're going to be able to tackle each one because we have to work with what the text uses and explores you still have three minutes you should have by this stage written a plan however and importantly continues handing out essays to students Aaron Marcus good you need a conclusion good (to another student) you're doing very well it talks about the passage students wrote about: it's first and foremost a narrative you can see a series of events but it is also descriptive yes we could say it's a descriptive passage that narrates the very decisive moment in the narrator's life it was a decisive moment because had he failed to set out what he had to do his life would have taken a completely different turn so that's your fifteen minutes of preparation it's up to you to judge how effective these fifteen minutes were how well-spent they were we had some distractions in an exam you'll be sharper more attentive obviously but by now you have an idea of some of the body paragraphs if not all and what this passage (pause) centres around so let's start we said first paragraph states the problem can anyone ok let me ask Danielle what would the obvious be here? What are we dealing with?
Danielle: because he travels around (pause) and it's as if he sleeps rough

T: (good ok) he was sleeping rough for a week... (not clear) ok yes a first person narrator who leaves home so far we've not out to impress the examiner by critical acumen skill we just want to show that listen this is what the passage is about and I got it. he leaves home to start life anew in Southampton to play the fiddle or violin (pause) we get the impression that he is keen on starting an independent life what about his emotions? We might hint briefly at his state of mind and his emotions (pause) Amy is he confident that he would be successful?

Amy: no

T: no ok

Amy: he's very insecure and hesitant about his music

T: so there's hesitation there's expectation as well as hesitation expectation hesitation and what do we learn is the result? Emma? What's the result once he's out on the streets? Is his venture successful?

Emma: no I don't think so

(pause)

T: you may look at the passage again look at the passage does he give up or does he pursue him his dream of earning his own money and doing what he loves best we get the impression he plays the violin so he doesn't settle for an office job he's doing what he loves best did he give up or did he return to the street the next day?

Student (male): he makes progress

T: he makes progress it is slow it is not easy he has to learn what?

Student (male): the tricks?

T: the tricks of the trade ok so progress slow we might say yet he gets there ok so that's the general overview that is what the passage outlines Jonas (raises hand to comment)

Jonas: can you say that he was determined?

T: doesn't understand so asks: can you say?

Jonas: can you say that he was determined?

T: yes there's determination he doesn't give up yes emotions and state of mind now we bring in a bit more detail in a second paragraph we introduce the fact of our essay what we will focus on in our essay so we said that we (pause) we should give due consideration to content and themes as well as style how this doesn't have to be a fully comprehensive paragraph let's say for the sake of argument that up at this point you only have two themes in mind and one aspect of style that has struck you fair enough mention those if then as you read on and as you write you say I might focus here on the particular use of words or diction.
I didn’t mention in that first paragraph never mind so long as you give an indication that’s fine you can bring in — you can’t be fully comprehensive otherwise you’d be writing a thesis by the end of it ok it’s just an indication just a sign that I know where I am going so content and themes Michelle please.

Michelle: (long pause) first he works at this and then he looks back and he sees he’s gained experience and even praises himself at the end.

T: what at the end?

Michelle: he is happy of the photos he had.

T: very good so Michelle touched upon a very important point I don’t know how many of you noted this what can we say about perspective because perspective is interesting here yes you have the first person narrator so as such texts to be it’s a more personal and intimate narrative of a person’s very important stage in life (pause) but (pause) is the narrator far removed from that very decisive moment? Has time elapsed or not? Look at the final paragraph please and answer this question not out loud as yet (corrects herself) not the final but the penultimate line 36 so you’re seeking to answer the question has time elapsed from this particular stage in the person’s life? (gives students time to read)

Student (male): from when Ms?

T: from when he was out on the street for the first time in Southampton playing his violin (students read)

Jonas: yes.

T: Jonas says yes Marcus? (Marcus nods yes) Marquita? How much time has passed Marquita?

Marquita: um (pause) it doesn’t say um it doesn’t specify.

T: yes it is specified read again you don’t have to rush take all the time you need ok and in that paragraph we learn exactly how many years have elapsed since that life-changing

Student (male): thirty

T: so it’s thirty years now that’s something interesting and Michelle hinted at it when she said he looks back and he treasures that moment he looks back and he treasures that moment and in fact he still has what Michelle?

Michelle: the photo.

T: a photo of himself back in those early days and that’s interesting because this is how an older man looking at a younger self does he feel that he is still the same man? Read that same paragraph again please does he feel that he’s still the same man? And underline for the time being keep it to yourselves does he feel that he has changed and how does he portray himself through that description of the photo? Underline underline words you’d like to quote in your analysis phrases that you’d like to unpack and analyse because we’re very good at identifying...
Sara: because he speaks of his past self as if it's someone else

T: very good excellent and what which detail allows us to conclude that? The use of the pronoun?

Sara: he

T: he's speaking about himself but he feels so far removed that he says in line 41 'he wears a sloppy slouched hat' 'heavy boots' 'baggy trousers' 'his shoulders' 'and from the empty face gazed a pair of eggshell eyes unhatched' and unrecognizable now he can barely recognize himself so it's interesting because we see a self-portrait here but one that is removed from oneself ok so that's interesting perspective and yes Michelle spoke about confidence as well as fear in the face of the unknown confidence fear unknown this was not a time of Google Maps so he might have searched Southampton town to get a good idea of the surroundings to familiarize himself with the place before he goes there ok we get the impression that this is set perhaps in the 1950s 1960s and before he goes there the only thing he knows about the place is what people have - look at the first paragraph now what people have told him ok so it's the unknown it's new and the unknown can be exciting yes but it can also be intimidating because we don't know what to expect good Marcus anything else? Something you would focus on either content or theme?

Marcus: ehm it's not a pretty place the people are harsh like the landlady

T: definitely the landlady so we can build a character and how he portrays the landlady but I don't think we can generalize here because some of the people that ehm give him money and some of the people that he meets in the streets tend to be friendly but definitely yes the landlady is harsh she is ehm we have the image of her pointed to you might pause to focus on when you're detailing her character yes anything else Maria?

Maria: ehm the theme of independence?

T: independence yes you might relate that to confidence the desire to start life anew Independence (pause) as a life-changing moment (pause) what about the diction? And what about figures of speech we can pause on one or two interesting figures of speech let me ask you to look at lines 16 to 25 read them carefully I'm not going to hint at anything but some things should be glaringly obvious upon a first or second reading for the time being let's keep things to ourselves (allows students to read silently) if you might refer this to fear how do you know that he's feeling scared? That the prospect of playing the violin in the streets is a scary one? You know that because of the language that is used now let's try to put our finger on these words these phrases that allows to conclude that there is (pause) In this character a certain amount of fear trepidation Jonas is ready to tell us. Tell us
Appendix 36 – Observation Transcript (Coded): Emily (T2)

Observation

EMILY (T2)

Teacher takes attendance.

To now this is going to be the last lesson we’re going to do on the language of poetry ok we’re going to do (pause) today’s lesson together trying to go over the information in the book with as much detail as possible and then next week we’ll move on to essay writing and we’ll come back to the language of poetry and the language of prose later on in the year or last two lessons of the course I’ll come back to the language of poetry especially ok? (pause) but as I told you last term we had to move on to essay writing for a number of classes this term and we’re starting on that next week so now let’s take a look at what we were talking about the language of poetry and we talked in particular with reference to The Two Daughters of Persephone the poem by Sylvia Plath ok now we’re going to move on to a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins it’s on page 122 (pause)

Ok now Gerald Manley Hopkins for your information was one of the great sonneteers of the English language ok he was British but unusually for a major artist in Britain he was a roman catholic and not just a roman catholic but also a Jesuit all right he was a priest and he is one of the great sonneteers of the English language together with people like Shakespeare, John Milton, um John Keats as well Gerald Manley Hopkins is one of the great sonneteers of the time and he was also very innovative in the way he wrote sonnets the fourteen-word poems as you know he also initiated different styles of his own ok so Gerald Manley Hopkins is famous for his expertise in the use of the English language he had an enormous vocabulary at his disposal but in spite of having this enormous vocabulary he was also very rich in the production of neologism ehm in all of his poems there is either the use of unaccustomed vocabulary you know you come across one or two words even in his poems you know the poems in which he used the most ordinary vocabulary we’re going to come across one or two words which are not normally used all right they exist in the English language but they are not often used ok or as in this case he’s actually going to invent words of his own for the sake of the poem all right? So that within the poem he will have created new (pause) not just created a new poem but also created new words for the poem here is an example of a poem in which he uses unusual syntax so the emphasis is not going to be only on neologisms as such but on the syntax on the way he builds sentences and you can see that there are certain cases where the syntax absolutely doesn’t make sense if you are literal-minded when you read this poem you say this poem doesn’t make sense for example there’s one of the verses of this poem as you’re going to see which consists in a list of adjectives all right now I always tell you and all your teachers tell you use of a maximum of two or three adjectives before a noun and make sure that when you use your sequence of adjectives they are actually followed by a noun over here we have a sequence of adjectives there are six in all no sorry I think there’s more than six um and they are not followed by a noun they are not followed by a noun at all so this is exactly the sort of thing we find in Hopkins in fact we’ve got (counts) only two three no there are six adjectives which are not followed by a noun ok ehm
there's also verses where you don't have a verb ok and as we're saying the sentence structuring is also pretty original so not only are words left out but the sentence structuring the syntax is also non-standard let's put it this way ok so analyse how Hopkins does this how Hopkins uses unusual syntax and omits words Miriana would you kindly start reading the first stanza of the poem?

Miriina reads the poem

T: stops Miriana ok go on Stefan

Stefan continues reading poem

T: ok ok so Gerald Manley Hopkins and the title of the poem you know even the title of the poem is a bit of a riddle when it comes to the vocabulary I'm sure that you found one or more words that you didn't understand that you were not familiar with am I right? There were a number of words that we tend not to use that often and I can assure you I mean he wrote at the end of the 19th century so some of these words would not have been in common use even then by they would be in the dictionary but they wouldn't be regularly on the mouths of people on the street you know several of these words for example he uses 'dappled' ehm 'May God be blessed for dappled things' now dappled technically speaking means spotted ok however where the spots are not perfectly circular ehm they might be ehm patchy spots eh untidy spots for example the backs of cows often are dappled they have white spots down their necks cows but they're not perfectly round spots they're like patchy now that's the thing they're like messy spots and he's also going to say that the backs of trout when you look at trout in a pond you see that their back they are grey as you know but their backs have pink spots and that is also a reference to the dappled patches that you encounter on these animals' backs in fact pied beauty it's also interesting to note that he made a compound noun as you know beauty is a noun do you agree that beauty is a noun?

Students nods in agreement

T: beautiful an adjective beauty is the verb beauty is the noun so the title of the poem people is pied beauty and one interesting thing you'll tell me and a thing I asked myself when I was preparing this lesson one thing he's done Gerald Manley Hopkins is taken the word beauty which is a noun and he's turned it into a compound noun a noun made up of two words pied people is an adjective (pause) and beauty is a noun now when you get the adjective and you tie it to the noun it just becomes a longer noun the adjective becomes part of the noun all right now for your information pied what it means it variegated eh of many colours having many colours having several colours (long pause) colourful so he's actually as you can see he's actually ehm using the word pied in order to introduce the idea that he is bringing forward in his poem the idea of the celebration of the beautiful and the colourful (pause) the poet uses all the adjectives and all the descriptions that his poem includes as what? What is he trying to achieve by means of these descriptions? (no response) who is he praising? For these variegated objects that we have in the text?

Student: God?
T: (confirms) God eh in fact the first verse says 'Glory be to God for dappled things' and at the end we have 'Praise him' as well ok (pause) and what he is telling us 'Glory be to God for dappled things' for things with these little patches on them ok 'for skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow' all right brinded cows are a particular kind of cow they have particular patches what do you think he means by 'skies of couple-colour'?  
Student: several colours?  
T: couple-colour two eh skies made up of two colours grey and white maybe blue and white hm the skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow brinded as we were saying spotty spotted (continues reading poem) 'for rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim' ok moles are things like this (shows them) spott so for moles for rose-moles why do you think he's calling them rose-moles?  
Student: for the colour  
T: the colour so what colour would they be do you think?  
Student: pinkish  
T: pinkish reddish yes for rose-moles all in stipple once again stipple is spotted stippled is spotted (long pause) and rose-moles would you say have you ever encountered this word before rose-moles? (students nod to say they didn't) I've never encountered if either outside this poem and in all probability it is mentioned in Gerald Manley Hopkins ok you've got the word moles which is a noun an ordinary nouns which means regularly and he's actually added the adjective rose in this case it's a colour adjective ok rose over here is not acting as a colour that is a noun but it's a colour adjective he's added the colour adjective to it and turned it into a longer noun rose-moles (rereads line) 'for rose-moles all in stipple upon the trout that swim' now this is interesting look at the second at this phrase that's coming now notice also the semi-colons that separate the different phrases here ok semi-colon 'Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls;' semi-colon here 'finches' wings;' semi-colon again ok now under normal circumstances people you have to know and you probably know already that in a clause which is subdivided from another clause by means of a semi-colon we normally need a finite verb (uses Maltese) under normal circumstances what it normally implies when you separate the sentence into two is that you've got a finite verb finite means a conjugated a normal conjugated verb you put a finite verb on one side and a finite verb the other do we have finite verbs in these phrases separated by semi-colons? Do we have them? If we look at this phrase here (rereads) 'for rose-moles all in stipple upon the trout that swim' ok but trout that swim is describing the trout not the rose-moles which are the subject of the phrase here do we have finite verbs describing the subject? (no response) Look at this 'Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls;' (pause) do we actually have a normal verb here?  
Students: no  
T: no 'finches' wings;' do we have a normal verb here? Conjugated verb here (students shake heads to mean no) no so one thing to keep in mind people is that focus on what you are told to look at verbs.
over here we don't always have the finite verbs you know because these are not proper clauses not clauses which we would normally subdivide by means of semi-colons ok so 'for rose-moles all in stipple upon the trout that swim; Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; what do you think he's talking about here? Fresh-firecoal what sort of adjective do you think this is? What is he describing? (pause) no response it's interesting eh it's interesting to look at it reading it and reading it I try to see what he's trying to say here (pause) Fresh firecoal chestnut-falls (pause) first of all fall falls is what part of speech? If I say the falls so I'm talking about waterfalls the falls ok what part of speech is that? If I say the falls the waterfalls? Fall falls isn't a compound noun it probably is chestnut-falls is the falling of chestnuts the colour of fresh firecoal ok chestnuts as you very well now are a dark brown or a blackish dark brown ok firecoal is sort of you know the firecoal they used to manufacture on farms those days was also dark brown from dark brown to black in colour so chestnut-falls what I think people he is referring to here is the chestnuts that fall off the trees the chestnuts that descend the tree you know the force of gravity pulls them to the ground when they are ripe ok fresh-firecoal chestnuts-fall I think he's telling us here chestnuts the colour of fresh-firecoal (long pause) fall from the trees (pause) you see fresh-firecoal he actually changed it into a compound adjective so chestnut-falls so chestnuts falling from the trees and the action of the chestnuts falling is actually turned into a noun why because we have the plural s and the plural s can be applied only to a noun not to a verb so notice as I was telling you the other day how compact the language of poetry is over here it took me (counting from 1-10) 10 words to say what it took him four words to say technically speaking not 4 but 2 because if you make a noun compound it becomes 1 so he had 2 words he used 2 words to say something which I had to describe roughly with 10 words and I wasn't particularly detailed here I just told you the very basic the very essence ok so that is the evocative and compact of poetic language all right fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls finches' wings what's a finch?

Students: a bird

T: large or small?

Student: ehm not sure

T: small small ok so finches' wings once again finches tend to be ehm brown little birds with white reddish ehm greyish sometimes also spots on their wings but the important thing is they're brown for the most part ok finches' wings (reads) Landscape platted and pieced' what does he mean here? Plotted and pieced (pause) you know people that a piece of land especially a piece of land that has been fenced off from other pieces of land is what we call a plot of land no? ok so it's either fenced off or there's some sort of indication of where the perimeter of the piece of land lies all right that's a plot of land ok so plotted and pieced we would say divided into pieces or something of the sort no? so what do you think he's talking about? If the title of the poem is Pied Beauty then why is he referring to this? Stefan
Stefan: it was a land that was sold or ruined by.

T: I wouldn’t say ruined! Stefan I wouldn’t say ruined because the overall tone of this poem is very positive eh it’s very enthusiastic it’s very cheerul so ruined no there’s no indication of the fact that we’re meant to think we’re meant to assume that this piece of land has been ruined no why do you think he’s bringing in the piece of land the pieces of land which have been planted and piece what’s he trying to do between the different pieces of land? (pause) what aspect of nature as the poet describing it here is being emphasized in this poem? What aspect is being emphasized?

Student: that they are different? They have different eh

T: different? what if I say pied variegated? (pause) different? (prompts colours)?

Student: colours?

T: colours different colours ok so imagine looking at a patch of land which has been planted one plot is fenced in and probably belongs to Farmer A and the other one belongs to Farmer B now as you very well know either in Spring or in the case of Great Britain in Autumn all right because in Britain the principal harvest occurs in Autumn all right in other words they allow – it’s not like Malta in Malta the principal harvest occurs from about June ok they bring in the crops the crops would have grown during winter and they bring in the crops before the terrible heat of summer begins and in summer most of the time the land runs more or less wild or they put in a summer crop they sow a summer crop but the principal crop would have been removed that’s why we call them summer fruit because they would have just harvested it from the fields that’s why it’s so very good totally fresh ok and we have that crop which is even tomatoes for examples they are collected before the terrible heat of summer begins now in Britain it’s a different story in Britain they leave the fields lie fallow in winter when much of Great Britain freezes over much of the agricultural land freezes over so in winter they don’t grow much then at the very beginning of March or the end of February they sow and they let the plants grown throughout summer over there summer is normally not as destructive as it is here because the summer is not so terribly hot and they actually harvest in autumn so this might be autumn that’s what gives me the impression that it might be autumn ok if you’re on a hill and looking down at cultivated land this happens when we go to Mdina no beneath Mdina there is a lot of cultivation going on a lot of arable farmland and you look at the fields and all the fields are different colours because it all depends on what is being grown on the fields ok if you have marrows for example growing on the field the field would be of a particular colour if on the other hand you have fruit cultivation the field would be of a different colour if you have pumpkins the field would be orange you know these different colours that depend on the plots on the way in which the fields are subdivided to produce different things so here I’m helping you myself if this were to come out in the exam it very well might because it’s not a very long poem and at the same time it’s at the right level of complexity for A level students ok because of course with A level students you have to give them something substantial to dig their teeth into as we say if the poem is very easy you don’t get that much in it about as that might be the sort of things that might come out always ask yourselves why is he mentioning...
the field is sown. From this, the farmer will decide whether to plough the field or not.

In Malawi, the fields are normally kept bare for the next year. In some cases, they may be kept fallow for a few years before being ploughed again. The farmer will usually plough the fields in the dry season, when the ground is dry and easy to work. The plough is a crucial tool for this process, as it helps to break up the soil and prepare it for planting.

The process of ploughing involves the farmer using a plough to till the soil. The plough is guided by the farmer, who stands on the back of the plough and steers it in the desired direction. The plough is pulled by a team of oxen or a tractor. The farmer will usually plough the entire field before starting on the next section.

After the field is ploughed, the farmer will then sow the seeds. This is usually done by hand, with the farmer scattering the seeds evenly across the field. The farmer will then cover the seeds with soil, using a hoe or a similar tool.

The farmer will then wait for the crops to grow. This will take several months, depending on the type of crop being grown. Once the crops are ready, the farmer will harvest them, using a sickle or a similar tool. The harvested crops will then be either sold or used as food for the family.

In conclusion, the process of ploughing and sowing is an important part of the farming cycle in Malawi. It is a skilled and complex process, requiring knowledge of the land and the crops to be grown. By following these steps, the farmer can ensure that the crops will grow and thrive, providing food and income for the family.

[End of text]
counter, original, spare, basic when it’s itself shh ‘strange; Whatever is fickle,’ now here this personification ‘Michaela please come on I can you well from here – now with this personification ‘All things fickle’ under normal circumstances who is fickle? (no response) what’s fickle? You should know these words people (admonishing tone) come on what’s fickle? (no response) fickle, people is a person who easily changes his or her mind does it answer – If her says ‘All things fickle’ isn’t there an oxymoron there? Things fickle? Can a thing be fickle? Can a thing pick and choose? No all right fickle means for example a television audience as soon as you’re watching a programme it annoys you a bit you change channels all right so you’re fickle you’re not faithful to that programme you change channels all right so ‘All things fickle, freckled’ with swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim; what words are those? What sort of words are those? ‘swift’ ‘slow’ ‘sweet’ ‘sour’ ‘freckled’ under normal circumstances who has freckles?’

Student: people

T: people very good and he’s saying he’s calling the dapples and the spots and the things ‘freckles’ so what is he doing to those things?

Student: personifying them

T: personifying them very good ‘Whatever is fickle, freckled’ (who knows how?); With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim; what words are those? What sort of words are those? ‘swift’ ‘slow’ ‘sweet’ ‘sour’

Student: opposites?

T: ohh ‘sweet’ ‘sour’ ‘adazzle’ ‘dim’ they’re all the opposites of one another ok so when you have opposition here we have opposition within the same verse what do we call that what part of speech what figure of speech is this (prompts antithesis) an-ti? When you have opposition? One word being the opposite of the other? (no responses) an-ti-the?

Students: antithesis

T: antithesis all right one word is antithetical to the other we have three pairs of words where one is antithetical to the other three pairs of adjectives (pause) (writes on boards: one is antithetical to the other) ok antithetical remember that in opposition to (writes on board) (pause) so ‘with swift, slow, sweet, sour, adazzle, dim’ notice the absence of verbs here and the absence of nouns notice no verbs no nouns ‘He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change’ (pause) what’s fathers-forth do you think? First of it is a noun or a verb? Fathers-forth? Is it meant to be a noun or a verb? He fathers-forth

Student: a verb

T: a verb very good what do you think it means more or less? (pause) ‘He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change’ the way in which the verse is organized is already a little misleading because we would normally say ‘He whose beauty is past change fathers-forth’ ok there you have a relative clause despite describing the him ok he fathers-forth he creates we could say he
produces 'He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise him.' Ok now fathers-forth you told me it's a verb fathers-forth do you not realize that it's as though he was telling us he becomes the father he becomes a father he repeatedly becomes a father (used Maltese) forth means if I produce something and I send it forth into the world as it were I send it forwards so he fathers-forth I would say that he becomes the father of 'He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change' you can't change the beauty of God it's past change it's been there for too long it's been there for too long to change when we say something is past something what it means essentially is (in Maltese: so much time has passed that now you cannot change it; now it's established no?) so he fathers-forth he produces whose beauty is past change do you agree with me that it's as though he's describing God? This is a relative clause referring to God? 'He whose beauty is past change fathers-forth: Praise him' now Praise him here who is being addressed in the final verse of the poem? Who is being addressed?

Student: the reader

T: the reader eh Praise him he seems to be ordering the reader ok so there is

direct address to the reader of the text part so now look a minute at the sample
response where he's going sort of – I have actually added a bit more because
while I was reading many ideas came to mind that he's going to give you the basic
concentrated essence of this of his use of language (reads sample response)
Hopkins omits words and writes very concentratingly as I told you here we
have 10 words in the book you have 4 or 2 so he writes very concentratingly in
his poem praising God 'One particular characteristic he uses is double-barreled
words' words made up of two parts eh such as couple-colour rose-mole fresh-
firecoal fathers-forth each of which would require more words to paraphrase
their meaning so if I were to tell you take these 4 words and describe what they
mean in prose you would give me definitions of 6 words in all probability of
words of 8 words ok as in the case as I showed you on the board (continues
reading sample response) ok so this is another thing fresh-firecoal and because
chestnuts are cooked on fire and then they open them and eat them and fires are
made to warm us and to roast the chestnuts (reads description of fathers-forth
from sample response) he senses deeply but is not possessive because he sends
his children forth into the world (uses Maltese: he doesn't keep them himself)
(continues reading sample response) he just gives us the words and that we
have to make sense of what he's trying to say as you can see (continues reading)
ok so with words like 'adazzle' and 'dim' which one of our senses is being
referred to?

Student: sight

T: Eh the sense of sight of course if we have 'sweet' and 'sour' what sense does
that appeal to?

Student: taste?

T: taste very good Indeed if we have 'swift' and 'slow' our sense of? Movement eh
movement speed he does not need to spell out with extra words what he's
referring to (continues reading sample response) so again a great creation filled
with change and a great creator (reads) now the great creator remains
I want to ask you to read a text at home. It’s not that we’re not going to read it here, but given that we have a lot of work to do on it, I’d rather if you read it at home as well in preparation for next time. The text I’m going to ask you to read (looks for text in the book) is a passage on little Paul. Here it is: pages 178-179. Where you have passages for comment and I’d like you to read passage 1 prepare it for next time as we have got a lot of work to do. We’re going to read it as soon as you come in but it’s best if you read it at home. Thank you.
Appendix 37 – Observation Transcript (Coded): Christopher (T3)

T introduces observer to class so that they know what the purpose is.

T: Right now we have come to the point where we have to start; we have already started actually doing some practice we have done enough theory; this year we're going to do as much practice as possible ehm not so much writing practice you'll do a lot of that next year but theoretical practice if I'm not mistaken last week we covered a poem by Vernon Scannell called Schoolroom on a Wet Afternoon today we're going to try something else there is a poem by Wilfred Owen which is not on our syllabus it used to be but we're not doing it anymore (pause) yes page 45 have we done The Last Laugh or not? Now this is not it is not a brilliant poem ok I mean (pause) technically it's very interesting that's why we're going to do it so in a way it's good that it's not on the syllabus why it's been chosen.

(T hands copy to observer)

So The Last Laugh we're going to try the process once again the process of writing a critical essay ok and this process involves various steps as we have seen; we're going to apply these steps once again today so the first thing to do is to read it the first time try to get the feel of it ok so the first step is to read it once (pause) and try to get the feel of it the meaning (pause) mostly and the tone ok? And then the second step would be to see if your ehm your conclusions are justified you know there's some detective work as I told you already that you have to do when analysing a poem sometimes the poems are quite long or more straightforward sometimes you may have to sort of dig deeper into them read between the lines as we say ok so the second step would be to try and find justification for your first impressions (pause) and then the third thing would be to expand on these justifications all right so you would find mostly it is phrases in phrases (pause; writes on the board) and other techniques that contribute to the meaning and the tone ok so you would think of all this before you actually start writing it might look like a lot but it actually does not take that long so first you try to form an opinion and then you try to find if you are right about your opinion because I wanted to get you a particular poem that I did in the past and students used to sort of get mixed up it used to place them in difficulty just to make them realize that it's not always ehm the face value that counts sometimes it goes deeper ok sometimes a word a phrase may put you off that's why you need to read it the second time and try to find justification for what you have decided and then try to find the techniques this is the thing try to find the techniques I mean you have the paper and the pencil you have marked it underline or use a highlighter whatever you will need to use in the exam because we are aiming at the exam this stage now ok so you try to find the techniques and when we say techniques it's not just phrases; the dictionary the imagery but also the rhythm all right the rhyme the use of repetition for example are there any rhetorical questions? Things that we have covered more or less ok so there are the things to look for before you start writing and then of course the writing will involve first of all the introduction which would be ehm more or less a vague idea of your impression ok this could be just a summary of what you have
understand there are no hard and fast rules remember what I told you that you are walking on a tightrope between objectivity on one side and subjectivity ok it is your own personal response but you cannot be too liberal I mean you have to rely upon what the author is trying to say you cannot invent things you cannot moralise you cannot judge the author have to (pause) give your own impressions but based on the evidence that you find ok so it's a very thin line between subjectivity and objectivity so moreover the introduction could be either like a kind of thesis statement how you're going to talk about the poem or you give the overall impression of what you think of the poem in the introduction ok and then the technique I would recommend is to more chronologically according to the poem so if the poem has four stanzas you can dedicate a paragraph - not necessarily - but you can dedicate a paragraph to each stanza if it doesn't have stanzas you can take it bit by bit ehm but remember that cross-reference going backward and forward is not a bad idea at all recommended so let's try to apply these varied techniques to this poem in a poem ehm which we find reflected in many of the other poems is anybody familiar with this poem? Has anybody seen it before? Not necessarily is it a kind of stylised poem it's a bit artificial ehm not very you know (pause) it lacks (pause) in art you have what is known as ineffability something that you cannot put your fingers on something a kind of spirit a kind of soul the poem lacks that but it provides a good academic exercise ok I'm going to read it for you try to follow I'm going to ask you don't be afraid of Ms X she won't bite you she won't criticize you if you make mistakes just feel free feel comfortable as you normally do well as most of you do because not everybody ehm I'm going to read it and try to get the first feel of it and then tell me what you think ok we're going to do brainstorming afterwards ok (reads poem)

Well-known decision to read it aloud instead, clearly if not

Explain the technique of writing a poem in a poem just explain it

The obvious thing which we can immediately notice but I'm not going to say anything to help you find things ehm may I remind you that we are looking at a part of the meaning and the rhythm and the tone and the rhyme we are looking also for the obvious technique like imagery choice of words especially choice of words that appeal to the senses to the five senses ok we talk of the five senses and if there is movement in the words then they conjure up, images of something so let's start come on impressions? Yes Samuel let's start with you what can you tell me about the poem? In general or some vague idea

Samuel: it uses onomatopoeia

T: it has some examples of onomatopoeia ehm this of course has a function that of sound ok auricular ehm apart from that it also contributes to the ehm what else what does it contribute to? Examples of onomatopoeia in this case? It makes it more?

Samuel: more real

T: yes it makes it more real more alive what else do we notice about - don't forget something else we have to look for in a poem look for conflict always look for a kind of conflict - think of an idea (pause) it tends to focus on conflict to look for
Emphasis repeat because he sounds pleased with the observer.

T: the title is ironic and what does it remind you of?
S: they weren't actually laughing in that situation
T: pardon?
S: (raises her voice): they weren't actually laughing
T: who wasn't actually laughing?
S: the soldiers
T: the soldiers weren't actually laughing but there was someone or something laughing there yes?
S: interaction is more fluid/spontaneous
T: (different student): the things which were actually killing them

T: yes it's the weapons that are laughing so a weapon laughs last last last best so who has the last laugh here who has the last laugh? I mean you have to see it in the context a context which you're familiar with you studied poems by Owen eh the idea is that the media the civil authorities the church represented the military going to fight as something heroic as something enormous eh? Somebody or people who didn't go to war were considered chickens eh so the idea of going to war – but he is presenting the other side a different view here that it is actually the weapons that are the victors that are the winner here they have the last laugh not the soldiers ok let's go from there something else eh yes
Kim: perhaps you can say something

Kim: the diction that Owen used is different ehm important to what each person said

T: yes very good point we are now talking about the structure of the poem she's described something about the structure of the poem there are three stanzas and each stanza represents the reaction of a different person according to that person's background according to that person's ehm most sensitive part of his life so if we look at – let's start with the last stanza the last stanza the reaction of the soldier is? What is it Kim?

Kim: that he thought of his loved ones

T: he's thinking of his loved ones ok probably his girlfriend these soldiers most of the soldiers were young of course we know that we have the advantage of knowing that I mean in the exam a poem that you have never seen before it doesn't really matter it's not very important but since we have this advantage now we know that these soldiers were mostly very young people so the idea of 'my love' ehm shows that this soldier's first thought is of the person whom he loved and the other stanza the one previous to that Nigel?

Nigel: it's the parents
T: once again because he was a young man we have this kind of reaction ehm mama and papa so his reaction is to think of his parents now of course there could be a kind of irony there because his parents were could have been the people who actually encouraged him from the experience of another poem you've seen the parents could have been the people who actually encouraged him to go to war ehm the first one the first one is a bit ambivalent and Wilfred Owen actually expresses this ambivalence deliberately perhaps ok when he says 'Oh Jesus Christ I'm hit' ok and died whether he 'vainly cursed' or praying indeed it doesn't matter whether he 'vainly cursed' whether he was swearing when he said 'Oh Jesus Christ' ok or whether he actually was praying we can say it's not really important so we have seen that each stanza depicts a particular reaction now this is something that you can include when you are writing your introduction writing the body of the essay there is a definite a clear structure in the poem now where does the conflict lie? Who can tell me? (pause) What conflict do we have between what between who? Ok the protagonist here the soldier is an (abstract) protagonist what is or who is the antagonist?

Student: the war

T: yes the war the weapons so what about the imagery used in this poem? What can you say about the imagery in this poem? A very simple aspect of imagery which we covered in the very first session —

Student: personification

T: personification which is an extensive metaphor in the poem extended personification of the weapons as human beings and this gives us a kind of impression that the soldiers are on the battlefield on their own I think it was Derrida who came up with the brilliant idea that when we die, we die on our own even though we may have people around us we die on our own I mean when you're dying nobody is dying with you they may be sad they may be grieving but you are dying on your own and there couldn't be a better example of this the soldiers on the battlefield it doesn't matter whether they're English or Italian or German they are dying on their own their only companions are the weapons and the weapons we discover a few about the representation of the weapons that they are callous (pause) insensitive (pause) they are hostile and they are also mocking ok now we're going to try and identify that after we read the poem a second time, so let's read it the second time now with the knowledge of a justification like I said for your first impression ok but when you're on your own be careful am I justified in saying this or that? Ok so let's read it on again why don't we have somebody else read it? Ehm Audriane do you mind reading it?

Audriane reads the poem (T corrects pronunciation of shrapnel)

T: ok great now let's see what diction does he use here what aspects of diction we talked about the imagery and the imagery here is not really that difficult you know this is mostly an extended metaphor extended personification of the weapons ehm but there are some more subtle issues here there's a kind of irony in lines in the second line usually and also the choice of words I mean I'm not saying that the choice of words is the best example because as I said before it's
466


explain example of laugh/mocking by imitating the
different sounds.

Element of mockery which is expressed through different ways of laughing:
guffaw (mimics guffaw) and titter and then you have grin and hooted (mimics
hooted) all these types of mockery all these words that indicate mockery so the
soldiers' effort which is so commended by the authorities and by the armchair
patriots are actually brought to nothing they are ridiculed by the weapons even
the human beings they are mechanical devices right let's try now in each stanza
now of course what we're doing and being quite successful but when it comes to
writing this down you know it's not so easy because you have to write an essay
but this is the first step it's not the final step let's talk about the second stanza.
let's have some people who haven't said much are you into now or not Mattia?
Ok try to say something about the second stanza (pause) of course one other
thing that many people failed to notice that is typical of Wilfred Owen is the use
of half-rhymes rhymes that are not so immediately obvious and this has a kind
of effect of disappointment when we did the poem last time and we had that kind
of family rhyme there was a bouncing effect normal rhyme when you have family
rhyme it gives it that bouncing effect this is the opposite effect eh that the rhyme
being used here is not complete there is something missing so it feeds this kind
of disappointment which is after all what this poem is about it's about
disappointment so we have 'dying' indeed all right you have 'dad' and 'dead' yes
so tell me explains rhyme

Mattia (male): ehm when a soldier dies there is a sense of nostalgia when they
say that he dies what he's seeing is mostly as a childhood because he starts
smiling and it says that he dies smiling like a child

T: childhood yes it's as if he's going back to the womb childlike smiling as if he's
going back to that moment of birth basically and this actually you know there is
Irony here because he's calling for his mother here smiled at nothing childlike
being dead ok so he's dying and the reaction of the weapons here is different in
the first case it was 'in vain vain vain' it's a very strong reaction here we have a
different kind of reaction Ines can you say something about this? (read stanza)

Ines: it's as if it's telling him you're a fool for listening to your parents

T: sorry?

Ines: it's like telling him Fool for listening to your parents

T: hm yes ok ok that sort of the weapons are mocking the soldier that listens to
his parents yes and the splinter spat of course there's the hissing sound here you
know and uttered the two consonants the repetition of the consonant sound 't'
-oh and the repetition of the 's' sound fricative sound which works very well with
mockery with ridicule hissing you know when you are when you have a
performance that the audience doesn't like there are various ways of showing
disapproval like hooting booing hissing when there's a villain and the audience
goes his and they hiss so the hissing sound is a kind of signifies mockery eh
ridicule making fun of ok eh we come now to the third stanza yes?

Student (male): sir?
468
Interview with Emily (T2)

I: thank you for taking part in this interview the first set of questions are related to your background in teaching and literature

T: ok

I: what has influenced you in the way you read poetry and even how you write about literature?

T: well basically my professional background when it comes to the educational aspect I mean I've got qualifications in EFL I've got several qualifications from foreign universities and then I've got a BA (Hons) and a Masters in literature and I think that they do sensitize you to literature in such a way that you can try to give your insights pass them on to others and * also when it comes to the Masters degree in particular you learn how to write about literature how to organize your thoughts and not let them go off over the place I think that helps a lot

I: in what way did the Masters help in the way you read?

T: to read in depth not only the writer’s intention but also the reverberation of the words to be aware of the fact that words reverberate several thoughts and several layers to meaning and interpretation as well several routes to interpretation

I: you mentioned some qualifications in the EFL – how have these shaped your practice?

T: I think it does shape your practice because if you take the EFL qualifications seriously for example I’ve got two qualifications from foreign universities you know when I was doing them I took them very seriously indeed and what happens is that they teach you how to be dynamic as a teacher how not to be stationary in the class just taking a single position in the class it doesn’t help it tends to make the students go to sleep how to engage the students’ attention and retain it how to use materials and teaching aids in order to teach I think that’s helpful and it’s adaptable for the A level classroom

I: how do you teach an unseen text?

T: well the way I normally go about it is I give them the text I give them time to read it on their own then I ask the class for one or two general considerations or general reactions to the text after they have had 5 minutes in which to read it and have a look at it some general considerations what they thought about it we start by focusing on the subject matter and then what I normally do if I find that the class has found parts of the text rather difficult I go over it with them practically go over it line by line ask them to give me feedback about what they thought the line was saying or paragraph by paragraph if it’s a prose text

I: when you read an unseen text in the seminar what approach do you?

T: ready response to begin with and then it’s double-layered first you get a reader response from the students so I don’t normally give them the answer myself I tell them ‘what do you think is going on here? what do you think he is expressing here? what do you think are his feelings?’ and then of course the stylistic analysis comes later the analysis is normally you need to base it on at least two three verses not one verse because if it’s a simile its effect will be carried further on ( ) it method to prepare for student response (ready response)

I: does this influence the way you choose a text?

T: well I try to allow it not to because all sorts of texts can come out I mean texts from the Victorian period texts which are more recent texts focusing on male protagonists or female protagonists texts with no protagonists at all because they would be merely descriptive no I try not to let the method influence me because you have to give them everything otherwise you
end up giving them what is most adapted to your method that would not be fair towards the students

I. is there a particular way in which you choose your texts?

T. I normally choose them with the exam in mind not with my own personal method in mind.

I. how do you prepare students to write about unseen texts?

T. I always give them a lot of hints and I also give them a grid telling them which aspects of the text I normally use at the exam and handout telling them what aspects of the text to mention but I do have two templates one for unseen poetry and one for unseen prose which I use regularly. I show them a grid and I tell them try and find me for example listing aspects for subject matter who the persona or narrator is the themes the diction motifs symbolism imagery and you know they have boxes where having read the text they're going to put down some points in relation to the text to complete that grid.

I. do you suggest them to write a paragraph?

T. no to begin with I start with points and then I tell them that if their points are properly articulated they can be very easily assembled to form a paragraph after all in literary criticism the idea is not how mellifluous or elegant your writing is with literary criticism the idea is that your writing should provide an in-depth study of the text under analysis.

I. what do you understand by in-depth? How do you guide them towards an in-depth study?

T. well what I understand by it is an analysis of the manner by which a writer achieves the effects he achieves in the text.

I. according to the syllabus students are to demonstrate an appreciation of the text in question.

T. well 'appreciation' definitely does not mean whether I like it or not I always make it clear to them even if the text happens to be something that puts them off they have to write about it with a certain amount of objectivity and following the customary rules of literary criticism nonetheless I mean there's nothing that says that you can only write about things that you actually like and appreciation is an analysis of first of all what the writer - what techniques the writer uses in order to achieve a given number of effects and then of course a resume of what the effects are - what is he trying to do? evoke pathos towards illegal immigrants or slaves or whatever is he trying to make us sympathise with the protagonist is he trying to on the other hand make the protagonist appear like a nasty person is he reflecting on some aspect of human life?

I. what do you think of the word 'appreciation' in the syllabus?

T. I think to me appreciation is to my knowledge in the context of literary criticism an analysis of the syllabus it is clear what it means - if two different lecturers look at the words 'appreciation' it is clear.

T. well the thing is this I think it is clear in the context of literary criticism - let me just take us back a generation and a half. I have an aunt who is a teacher she retired recently and my dad was quite a keen reader at school and I still have their copybooks and in my dad's copybook it says 'poetry appreciation' when he used write an essay about a poem they used to study in class it was called poetry appreciation so the word has always meant analysis.

I. how do you guide students towards it?
I: how does the exam affect the way you prepare students to write an essay on the unseen text?

T: Well, bad way to be honest I don't really think about it. The way we ought to say a manner which leads them in the correct direction a manner which leads to the most fruitful analysis. We think that it is a manner which involves small groups of students involves a text which is analysed in detail. I involved the teaching of certain techniques. Even thanks to repetition of things in the text, you need to read things out of the text.

I: What are the writing difficulties or errors that students exhibit when writing about unseen texts?

T: There are two principle errors which tend to crop up. The first is that there are aspects of the text which are very important and which the students don't notice that are there and they don't mention them and not mentioning them would be condemning themselves to earning a lower mark. So they don't mention important aspects or even one key element and that of course lowers their mark in other spheres as well.

I: Do you think that there is a pattern in students' writing difficulties?

T: Yes, I do. Yes without a doubt.

I: And why is that?

T: I think because they would either have been trained when doing their O level when studying poetry. For example when speaking of poetry they are taught to do a stanza by stanza analysis or write-up concerning a particular poem, they would have studied in class and so for example you have a stanza by stanza write-up concerning Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum est' which is in the syllabus for the O level literature, if they do it stanza by stanza with the teacher and the teacher gives them a note where the poem is analysed stanza by stanza then it's difficult to persuade them when they reach A level to do an analysis where different aspects of the poem are considered.

I: I'm not sure I follow that. Have you noticed that this is the case where students are taught to do stanza by stanza analysis?

T: Yes, I have.
a text are discussed in separate paragraphs rather than different stanzas of a poem are discussed in separate paragraphs – another thing is that those students who have been trained for O level literature they are not required to write an essay but have to answer short questions in the unseen.

I. Has students’ performance in the unseen criticism essays got better or worse over the years?

T: I’ve been teaching this for 15 years and I can say that it has neither got better nor worse, I think that a lot of it depends on the versatility that the student has in the use of the language but I think the level has remained the same.

L: I think it’s been much better.

I: Are there any causes for the lack of change?

T: Lack of change is not necessarily a bad thing because you do have students who perform very well and you have other students who are perhaps weaker or whose language skills are not that sharpened or knowledgeable or who do not have such a wide vocabulary who inevitably lag behind.

L: Language issues.

I: Is there anything else that causes them to lag behind apart from language ability?

T: It’s language ability and I think it’s also cognitive ability because when something is glaring at you in the face and you don’t notice it for example if there are several important examples of personification and you have a student who hasn’t noticed them either the student wasn’t paying attention or if the student repeatedly makes these kind of mistakes you know laccune in what they write you can say the student’s cognitive ability is not that high and it has nothing to do with the task.

I: What can you say about the students’ attitude and approach to writing?

T: I don’t think they object having to write about unseen texts – what they have to overcome in the first year is the fear of writing about unseen texts because they wouldn’t have had any practice in the secondary schools years and so they see it as a very big hurdle and the teacher as a consequence has to use a number of skills and techniques in order to get them accustomed to writing for example giving them sample essays or giving them sample essays with jumbled up paragraphs and having conversations in class as to which the correct order for such a think would be – I think it’s a lack of experience and also the fear of other parts of the exam and it is not something that is prepared at home.

L: Does this influence their attitude towards criticism in the exam?

T: Yes it does because for Maltese students anything that is spontaneous and unprepared or unprepared for the most part of course much of it would be prepared at home – like figures of speech or literary terms you study at home – but something that has an element of spontaneity in it is always scary to the Maltese student because we’re not accustomed to handle spontaneity in exams. I don’t know if in other countries young people have the same difficulties I would say that they would

I: Let’s move on to feedback. How does it help students develop their ideas?

T: Well I mean it depends on whether the feedback is given during lesson time or given after the student has done the work at home – during lesson time of course you can

I: How would you define feedback?

T: Ehm constructive response now feedback can also be peer feedback and this is something we can encourage students to give their mates in class.

L: Peer feedback

T: Ehm...
I. What are the benefits of peer feedback?

T: To allow students to correct each other's errors or otherwise support each other's good intuitions you know when a student has a good intuition and everybody agrees that that intuition is right she would have the support of the class behind her if on the other hand she says something that is not quite good in the context of the particular poem you’d ask the other students rather than telling her ‘that is wrong’ it is not advisable that the teacher should always come in as someone who is extremely above high above the class who comes in like a Deus Ex Machina as they say and to say this is right this is wrong I mean the teacher doesn’t have to have the role of a judge I don’t like that so I say to the others ‘listen do you agree does this make sense to you?’ do you think this could be expressed otherwise? has she left anything out?

* Co-constructive feedback.

I. In the tutorials is the feedback on every essay isolated and particular to each each or do you try to establish link between criticism and another?

T: No I do try to establish links especially with students who I know are in grave need in serious need of improvement and yes I do pay attention to what marks they would have got for previous homeworks – if the news I have to give is negative I speak to the person on their own I don’t speak to the person in front of the tutorial group and I ask them to come and speak to me on their own because there are cases where the student would not be making the progress that I would expect her to make and so I would have to say it in some way

Feedback provided individually or in front of the class.

I. Is the feedback formative or summative?

T: * Both in fact I scribble all over the essays I write a lot you know I remind students of something I would have told them in my previous comments to a previous essay so I think it’s formative in the sense that you always have to give them a mark there’s no option but then it’s also formative because you know you have the freedom to scribble in the margin to write them notes tell them you know ‘I’m not satisfied with this last time you performed better’ or ‘remember what I told you last time remember to refer the text in the present’

Formative feedback.

I. How cyclical is it?

T: Yes to a certain it is cyclical I mean I try to see as someone going up the stairs like a flight of stairs you do have to make the student go up the stairs but occasionally you have to go two steps down to remember what you did two steps further down and then you come up again rather than a circle it’s more of a question of someone going up the stairs again.

I. Do you feel this is possible even if the unseen texts do not follow each other?

T: Yes because tutorial groups are small we keep records and yes we do can remember.

Sequence of unseen texts – T: I don’t think there would be any benefit in the context of our school because our students have a very tough time a lot is required of them variety we say is the spice of life and when students have a very tough schedule variety is important but the teacher has to keep her records to remind herself and then one gets accustomed to the students one knows and remembers.

I. What is the focus of feedback in unseen texts and what is it determined by?

T: It is determined by the way students perform in general for example when you have a student who doesn’t know how to structure her essay and who repeatedly structures it poorly and even ignores my advice or instructions in that case my eyes are very sharply trained on how that student has structured her essay on structure language and with many students it’s structures with others for example it’s on content people who leave out important things keep forgetting
I: is the feedback based on what you have in front of you or do you try to give feedback for future writing?
T: both definitely both because if you're correcting today you're doing so with a view to have the student not repeat errors

I: does the examination influence the way with which you provide students with feedback?
T: definitely because very often ok when a student has very poor English or doesn't express herself that well or has a limited vocabulary or something of the sort you do issue warnings with regards to that you have to highlight that it has to be pinpointed but apart from that the requirements of the examination are important because after all our job is not only to teach these students skills but also to see them succeed in their aim at the end of two years.

I: before assigning the unseen text and before providing feedback do you discuss with students what the focus of your feedback is going to be?
T: yes I normally tell them in the first weeks when I get to know them I tell them or before they do the first unseen prose or poetry task I always make it clear what spheres of their essay what my feedback will be focusing on yes I do feedback focus on before着手

I: what benefits might there be in discussing the feedback beforehand?
T: the fact that the students know that if they don't follow certain basic rules ok I'm not going to be draconian in imposing rules after all that would be taking away all sorts of spontaneity that the essay might contain and spontaneity in literary criticism is important I mean you have to let them show their flair if they have any flair for the task but then I have to make it clear to them that certain things will be required of them

I: do you envisage any drawbacks in telling them what your focus is?
T: no if anything I feel that if I didn't do that I would feel that I am not doing my duty providing focus is part of my daily job

I: what type of feedback do you provide your students with - oral? written?
T: both

I: in which measure?
T: more written than oral because what I do while I'm correcting you know anything that come to mind any point that I feel I ought to draw the students' attention I write down in red basically I normally use felt pen which makes me write even faster to speed up my writing you know they've got it all written down but then when I'm giving oral feedback I go back to the principal points I would have identified and the points I would want them to alter I and mention them again

I: have you ever thought of using digital media to provide students with feedback?
T: well the need has never really arisen I mean email yes I had a particular student who had eye surgery and he left me a number of essays and was away for over two weeks and as a result I sent him my feedback via email but that was the only case

I: do you think there are any benefits of using these types of feedback?
T: well yes probably there are but I never actually felt the need to use them

I: which do you think is more effective - oral or written feedback?
824

1. what do you think do the students prefer – written or oral feedback?
T: I think they warm up the approach of the teacher – the fact that one tries to always keep it friendly that the attitude is not punitive so you don’t take the role of someone who is imposing punishment or criticizing out of cruelty or wanting to put the students down wanting to make them sad – I think I never had a hostile reaction when I said something negative about students because I think they realize that what I say I say it with kindness.

2. moving on to the retention of feedback – do you think you give them the same feedback over and over again?
T: I think feedback gets more exasperating if you have to give them the same feedback over and over again I actually draw their attention

3. why do you think this happens?
T: because they ignore you in all probability or because they don’t put enough effort because any effort – any reasonable error can be reasonably and carefully eradicated

4. what type of feedback do students apply the most or which type of errors are most likely to be fixed by the students?
T: the errors relating to the structure of their essays because if you tell them that their expression is poor that takes much more effort or if their vocabulary is limited that takes much more effort

475
I: Does it depend on the type of comment you give them?
T: Yes, and no. The errors are the quickest to fix. Let's say it takes 2 or 3 essays are the ones related to the structure of the essay. Eliminate repetition - the rest I think it's just not related to feedback, because how are you going to give very specific comments on, for example, expression? What I normally do is cross it out with a ruler and write the correct expression above but then what comment can you possibly make? I just write expression in the margin. I normally give them a correction that fits in the context. They provide their feedback.

I: Is it possible to measure the effectiveness of feedback?
T: Well, I think that it would take a period of a good five months, yes, I think it could be measured but over an extended period instead of the 4 weeks because over weeks the student hasn't had time to improve and apart from that the teacher hasn't had time to influence the students sufficiently in the positive and right direction.

I: How can you measure this effectiveness?
T: Well, if you've got the marks before you - ok, we're taking a very basic summative approach - but the marks give you a good indication of what the student is doing and of their improvement. Then there are other things. I'd say even my reaction to their writing, you know, normally we teachers have a very good gut feeling from the first two lines we know whether the essay is likely to be good or not, you know, they do give you a certain feeling and you see certain things unfolding or the essay makes a different impression on you from how the previous essays would have had an effect on you.

I: When you give students back their essays do you see them engage with the text and read the feedback?
T: Yes, in fact, I actually insist on their taking 3 or 4 minutes to read at my comments. I don't speak and I wait for them to look at my comments. If you mentioned the mark - do you feel that the mark reflects their performance meaning that you need to justify the mark? If the comment is valid here so I couldn't possibly give you a high mark. I justify it. This is the feedback of the students.

I: Do they understand it?
T: Yes, I guess they do.

I: And how do you feel they act on that in the next essay?
T: Under normal circumstances then in the following essay, they would act on my comments at least on part of my comments.

I: If a student has not done very well do you encourage them to rewrite it?
T: Yes, I do yes. Do you tell them 'listen if you feel you want to submit it again, feel free to do so.'

I: Do they do that?
T: Occasionally they do yes.

I: Are there any constraints for them not to do so?
T: Well they might be going through a period where they have many tests or many things to do but in general, I tell them they can do it later on.
Appendix 39 – Interview Transcript (Coded): Christopher (T3)

Interview with Christopher (T3)

I: thank you for agreeing to this interview the first set of questions are about your background as a teacher of English in particular at Advanced level – can you talk about this and your teaching experience?

T: well I was never trained professionally as a teacher as soon as I finished my Honours degree in English I started teaching in a secondary school where the standard was very low it was by sheer coincidence that 11 years into this teaching profession I was appointed here it was a simply a question of coincidence and demand there was a demand and they moved me from one place to another so I just drifted into it when I was placed in a secondary school I had no idea that I would eventually be here but I felt that at first it was difficult of course because you get used to teaching at a very low level although it’s not ideal but when I started teaching here I found that this was my place more than the one that I had before because you know I was dealing with students – because after all my Honours most of it was literature at least here I could use what I had learnt at last after 11 years basically this started in the eighties and up till now it’s been an interesting experience and interesting road and I’m still learning every year with your teaching you learn more from the students from their attitude from new books you find the new ideas so I found it a very interesting journey which I hope continues even if I’m soon finishing here I tend to prefer poetry than prose I read poetry and in the way you read poetry and in the way you write about poetry /

T: obviously my greatest influence was the attitude we had at university which was more or less liberal humanism that kind of attitude where you’re walking a thin line between subjectivity and objectivity because objectivity is important after all it’s very important that you present the author’s viewpoint but of course one has to interpret according to one’s reactions and it is like a kind of ‘tripod’ there is the author very important leg there is the subjectivity and there is also the techniques that are not scientific but at least they give you a starting point such as the techniques that have been used for years and years and which may be used consciously or unconsciously by the author but one cannot ignore them at all they are there they weren’t invented they were more discovered than invented but they exist and one has to give them their due importance overall then you have to combine these three points with the spirit of the literary work I mean the literary work has to have spirit I’m talking about that thing that holds it together that makes it gel and unique that inessential that exists in any work of art which is successful something we cannot put our finger on if I were to take an example from real life from something simple or mainstream even a simple song you know no matter how much a songwriter no matter how hard he or she tries to write a song the rough thing is something that is felt you know you cannot have a formula for a song the same you cannot have a formula for a poem although there are techniques it’s that spirit that holds it together and makes it immortal.

I: how do you teach unseen texts?

T: how do I teach/ ehm it’s for us here it’s a two-year process these last few years we’ve changed the system before it used to be you used to have one group for 2 years so you could for better or for worse monitor them it’s got its advantages and disadvantages and the same applies to the system where we change groups but in that case the ideal is to work very much on theory in the first year and very much on practice in the second year with overlapping which means you do practice in the first year and you return to theory in the second but the idea is that in the first year this all depends on the students because some students have been exposed already to criticism basic criticism while many students have no idea at all so you have
to try and make a compromise in the first year I try to expose them to the idea of the poem and try to get as much out of them and then start by making them find out the theme about the poem without any references to techniques yes find out the meaning first of all the topic and then the setting that abstract concept that the author is trying to communicate with his audience sorry I would go and then you point out or bring out certain basic techniques of course start with imagery and diction usually but I keep emphasizing that there are always a purpose they're not just ornaments they are not just gimmicks they have to blend naturally with the tone and the meaning of the poem so they have to keep the theme in mind when they talk about the imagery and then I move on to rhythm how with rhythm because with imagery it's quite straightforward although there are various corners of imagery though it looks simple there are various corners with diction I try to split it into various categories like I give much importance to the appeal to the senses and the appeal to movement how words can make you hear make you smell etc and also create movement also the impact of words and the strength of words how words are stronger than others and have negative and positive connotations etc even the sounds of the words the alliteration the repetition the contrast the antithetical structure I mean I try to split these down so that the students will have an arsenal of weapons that they can use the vocabulary they can use when writing because after all when they write the essay they need the language that kind of language to refer to appeals

T: what I usually in class is to give them a whole essay in the first year when I'm doing the theme in the first year I give them a poem and I ask them to write a paragraph about the theme I keep doing this even with imagery and diction because I think it is very important because I keep telling them that there is an element of detective work in critical especially in poetry and I tend to emphasize poetry more than prose in the first year simply because I think it is more difficult for the students prose tends to be less difficult usually so I ask them to do some detective work and try to have an informed opinion of the poem but trying to find the evidence to see if they are right or not

L: so why do you think prose is less difficult than poetry?

T: because poetry by its nature is more a compact thing and because of its conciseness it tends to be more cryptic it tends to be more involved it tends to require more reading into it than prose normally I'm not saying that this has always happened but normally prose the tendency is that prose is more straightforward it's an extract from a novel or a short story so it is more explicit coming back to teaching poetry that's what I do I come to imagery what I do is give them exercises to identify images and most importantly not just identify them but how they function in relation to the theme and the same with diction and what I go to rhythm and this is also part of it is quite technical and I tend not to exaggerate the emphasis I mean when I was young we used to learn all the details about the anaep and the dactyl you know I try to give them an idea of the stressed and unstressed metres I mention them but I do not give them too much importance first of all because nowadays it doesn't seem to be very much used in modern poetry secondly because the iambic pentameter is the most widely used in English and thirdly because the examiners don't seem to be giving it much importance also there is a question of time it's important to have an idea but there's not much time to go into detail the same thing with rhyme although rhyme seems to be easier and then towards the end of the year we talk about the structure of the poem finding parallelism finding framing and also more about the meaning and the tone but we keep doing practice for at least as much as I do with the second years in the first year there is more theory than practice

what are the advantages and disadvantages of teaching the same students for two years

L: the year or perception of the difficult concept to see students transfer this perception into relevant informed opinion
T: on a selfish level you need to change I mean if you’re lucky with a good group then it’s ok but I think for academic reasons it is better to keep the same group but still there is the human element it could be that some students don’t like you there’s this student talk and it’s stuck with you but I mean theoretically it’s ideal that you should continue with the same group because you know where you stand you know what you have emphasized most and can go from a where after all criticism is a very complicated area and it helps over a two-year process it comes through practice a lot of practice is necessary it’s more or less like music I think’s mixture of two approaches you cannot have a reader’s response without knowing the techniques and the style you have to articulate what you think and do so you need to know the techniques so it’s like art if you’re going to write a review on a painting you need to know about contrasts and colours and the medium the same thing with literature the response cannot be isolated from the techniques from the style from the history also of literature and even from the context in a way because if you take a poet like Larkin or Owen you know you have to know them in their context in their historical and geographical context other authors can have a universal appeal you have to know them and the verse that you have to read in a very particular way and they can’t be read in a very different way I when preparing students to write about an unseen text what structure or layout do you encourage them to use in an essay T: yes of course I’m not saying that my structure is the right one but my idea is to keep it as simple as possible and to avoid the kind of blocking ehm how can I explain it ok let me start again my system is to encourage them to start by giving an overview of the poem in the first paragraph the introduction would be talking about the theme and how this theme is tackled in general and then usually advise them although I don’t really force it on them it’s not the only system but I advise them to use the chronological method wherever possible some other lecturers prefer according to the techniques but that is for me I find it dangerous because first of all it pays sound rather cold and I think there has to be a thread and the thread is the movement of the poem or prose passage so if you follow me if you follow the second half of the poem the stanza form or the story the narrative you can then proceed if necessary but there should be a structure and this is in my opinion now it doesn’t always apply but in general an introduction should be what the poem is about the attitude the theme and the tone and then you go stanza by stanza I tell them usually to underline phrases that are particularly punchy or effective and then they talk about these and what effect they have and what techniques are being used how they contribute as they go along rather than taking the stanza and writing a paraphrase of the stanza which could be dangerous it’s taking some aspects of the stanza which are particularly punchy like unusual imagery being used or appeal to the senses all that they would have talked about earlier and link them together and in the conclusion you talk about the structure of the poem I according to the syllabus students are to demonstrate appreciation of the text what do you understand by this word what is expected of students T: well appreciation you know these words they’re all open to interpretation appreciation criticism critique analysis I think more or less an analysis basically this appreciation it is an analysis when we say criticism all right it is criticism but who are we to criticize authors who have been chosen or canonical they have been accepted so really it’s more an appreciation it’s balancing trying to find out what the author was trying to communicate how he managed to do it and on our emotional what techniques he uses and how and why successful he has
I. In what way does the examination affect the way you prepare students to write about criticism? How does the exam affect students in class?

T: Well I mean the fact that there is an exam in this case more than in any other it's true as in how is this going to help them in life to earn money but that is not the issue here we're not talking about finding a job or getting money but appreciation analysis criticism I feel is part of the process of critical thinking which is important for every human being especially for people who are going to be journalists. Lecturers whatever psychologists I mean we lack it we need more critical analysis we tend to be subjective or too opinionated sometimes we don't really stop to think and I think this is one of the topics of literature that they are going to face something that they haven't seen before not like the other parts of literature that they study I mean they are going to be prepared for those so even if they don't know the text well but if they want to there is a chance of them doing well but this because it's unseen it is it really shows their method it really shows how able they are to analyse a text so I think it cannot be done any better the criticism part shows how good a student is so I think there is nothing wrong with that I totally encourage it as long as the text chosen is the right one and they should be given a text that has some meat that has some substance not something frivolous but something superficial secondly that the person who is correcting has to be quite balanced allowing more personal opinion while also requiring some knowledge of the text.

I. What difficulties do students have when reading an unseen text and what are some of the errors they exhibit when writing?

T: The weakest point here I find is they mention the techniques without justifying them they tend to notice that there is for example regular rhythm or imagery but they don't find a reason for it - it's not always easy - one of the most difficult things is alliteration they notice it immediately but they can't explain why.

I: And do you see this pattern repeating itself?

T: Yes yes I notice it for example alliteration is one of the most difficult things to interpret you have to use your creativity and imagination sometimes you may be right other times you may be wrong but that is the weakest point then there is the problem of understanding sometimes they get completely astray in simple things for example last week I gave them a prose passage the second years they start it was from Great Expectations they didn't know the book now one of them said it's in a hotel another said that the lady in her wedding gown her husband had died so something they assume things that's a bit frightening especially I told them the case of Great Expectations it shows that you're assuming that you don't know anything about this very famous book so that is a bit dangerous sometimes they assume too much or sometimes they don't read between the lines enough they do not do enough detective work.

I: Compared with other components how do students perform in unseen texts?

T: Ehm I think it depends on the students and when I say that in my opinion it is the actual thermometer of the student if the student is very good you can tell from the way he or she answers a criticism question so as I told you earlier a student can do well in Shakespeare because she's followed the text in class she's maybe revised or got the notes but some students when they encounter a text which is totally new they are stunned if they are not prepared well but there are a lot of students who still do well I mean the better students do better in crit they are all-rounded if they do well in crit there is a good chance that they do well in the other areas as well as considered the most difficult.

I: Has student performance in unseen criticism improved or worsened over the years?

T: In my awareness that students find it difficult.
T: I think it is more or less the same but the problem is that students are not being as exposed to literature as before. In the past we had a smaller number of students. The ratio of very good students with those who are weak was bigger now because we have a larger number of students. The ratio is getting smaller because so many are choosing English and not many are really prepared for it. They haven’t done that much literature in the background.

I: What is the student’s attitude towards unseen texts?

T: As I said it depends last year the three groups I had were quite good. This year especially the second year group they’re not doing well at all. It all depends on the students. I suppose there is a slight deterioration and this comes mostly from lack of knowledge of background like mythology and works of literature so even allusions and the limited vocabulary because they don’t read so much but there’s still a nucleus of students that does well.

I: What about their attitude to writing?

T: I find that they are much better at writing than they are at discussing art. They are usually quite weak when they answer questions then they make an effort and the result is surprising.

I: Why do you think this happens?

T: They are inhibited regarding speaking they need to speak more. Many times I find they are more at a loss when it comes to writing. Even the people who are usually quite weak when they answer questions then they make an effort and the result is surprising.

I: Does the fact that there is an exam make them more conscious?

T: I don’t see anything wrong with crit in the exam. I remind them to work hard for the exam and I tell them that in the exam you’re going to be faced with a text that you haven’t seen before so they have good used to the idea that’s why tested is important.

I: Let us now move on to feedback – is feedback a way of intervening in writing?

T: Not really. I mean I try as much as possible to encourage ideas that even did not occur to me or perhaps are different from mine but I always insisted even though this isn’t science. You need evidence you cannot just glibly top of your head invent something but I don’t really interfere in their style. I give them advice even the setup of the essay I discourage of course, clumping like saying that there is rhyme abut without any reference to why I try to discourage them from using kind of style but I try not to interfere too much. I try to encourage them.

I: In the tutorial the unseen text essays are isolated from one another – do you try to link one and another (how students performed throughout the essays)

T: I believe there should be continuity. Unfortunately the continuity is not in the tutorial so I try in the seminar to do so. I keep exercises to my crit group in class. I give them marks so they know where they stand and even if it doesn’t count for assessment so that is linked with criticism we do in class now as for tutorials because in tutorial sessions we have different sections which are I cannot say we are disconnected because after all they are English and if you have literature and language I mean the essays after all the structure of the essay and how it follows and even the element of proof of justification is always there. So I try to link them with the other as much as possible.

I: Is feedback formative or summative?

T: It’s feedback formative and I try to keep track of certain students who have a good potential and those who have certain weaknesses. Sometimes even in criticism you have to correct spelling mistakes.
I: when you mark a criticism commentary on unseen texts what is the focus of your feedback?
T: I mean the focus should be first of all on the understanding of the poem and the way this understanding is presented and the references so more or less it's that but of course if they make assumptions which should not be made if they for example present evidence without any reference to its function they have to mention that if the way they use quotations for example use quotations that are too long in criticism discourage them or if they just ‘throw’ them without any contextualization I mean of course then if there are spelling mistakes grammatical ones sentence structure mistakes I mean I have to point them out but I cannot abandon them even if you're doing criticism but the main focus would be ideally on the style of the essay

I: what is the focus of your feedback determined by (retrospective or feeding into future writing)
T: no no no it is mainly retrospective it's about what they write of course then what they write and then what you say about what they write is going to influence I hope it doesn't always work but I usually work on what they have

before assigning the writing task particularly the unseen text essay do you discuss with your students what your focus of feedback is going to be?
T: no not really because I am assuming that if they have a critical analysis of a poem or a prose passage for tutorials I'm talking now as a tutor so they would have had the background for that during the criticism so I'm not going to spend time telling them what to expect of course I give them hints like if they're going to have their first Wilfred Owen essay because I know the weaknesses that occur with Owen as they tend to write a paragraph about one poem and so on with no linking before I give them some advice before but I limit that is not the most important thing but the most important is what they have written

I: what type of feedback do you give them – is it oral or written?
T: a mixture of both I need to comment on the essays of course but I comment also more at length because you cannot write everything so I comment more at length depending on how important the comment needs to be it depends if it's a spelling mistake it's one thing if it's something about the whole structure you talk more at length it's a very amorphous thing there's no limit there

I: what's the normal procedure of the tutorials?
T: normally what we do is if they have a poem or a prose passage I read it first of course they have read it but I read it to refresh after they have written the essay I make a few comments if I think they are quite important and then we start reading the essays and commenting about each one of them if it's something that is a small mistake which applies to a particular person I emphasize it lightly if it's something that is important overall then I take more time

I: do you provide the students with support before writing?
T: no I don't believe that because they have to get used to the idea of facing it on their own

I: then how else do you correct the essays?
T: I correct them in more depth and then the following I give them feedback individually but I don't spend too much time on that because they would already been told (during the reading session) I give them a few comments

Ts have difficult/confusing approaches i.e students are exposed to different methods Equally good

Which is both an advantage and a drawback when it comes to...
Appendix 40 – Interview Transcript (Coded): Sophie (S1)

Interview with Sophie (S1)

I: thank you for agreeing to this interview – the first set of questions relate to your experience and understanding of literature so why have you chosen English at Advanced level?
S: well from a very young age I’ve always enjoyed stories and at secondary I did enjoy Shakespeare and we read Pride and Prejudice and Wuthering Heights I did enjoy them a lot so ehm when I did my O level and got a good mark I decided to carry on on English because I do like the subject and I was pretty good at it

I: all right so talk about your experience with literature from Form 3 that is preparing for you O level up to now
S: well obviously secondary was much easier than sixth form obviously ehm as I said we did Wuthering Heights and Pride and Prejudice and we didn’t have Macbeth which is pretty hard for a Shakespeare book we had Twelfth Night so ehm as far as Shakespeare was concerned I wasn’t that prepared for sixth form ehm but well sixth form I found it to be very hard and sometimes I think maybe I did the wrong choice because unseen I’m just not good at though because I panic

I: what about the other areas:
S: ehm in secondary I was good I always got 85 and upwards so that did help in boosting my self-esteem regarding English but as I said sixth form I do like English I do love it it’s quite hard which really makes me dislike it a bit at times

I: what do you mean by ‘hard’/difficult:
S: by hard I mean ehm just I don’t understand the poem or there’s a concept which I don’t really understand or I’m shaky about so that’s really just yeah

I: how do you study literature:
S: well first I make sure that I for example when it’s a novel or there’s a plot I make sure that I understand it first and know it like at the tip of my fingertips (means hand) (laughs at language mistakes) and then I just study the characters and the imagery and the style the writer uses and that’s basically it with unseen I just study like various imagery like anaphora alliteration what do they mean? so if I see one I’ll know what it is

I: what methods do teachers use when teaching literature:
S: what do you mean I didn’t understand the question

I: so what methods here (referring to the school) do your teachers use or have your teachers used last year as well when teaching literature:
S: well last year there was a teacher that used to teach me Owen that read the poem and then gave us a summary and then we wrote it and then I further analysed the poem for studying I find that quite easy because I know that his summary is good and if I took it down myself there might be things that I left out or things that I’m not really sure about so I found that method encouraging but for example the crit I also had the same teacher I didn’t really like his method because he used to just show us a poem he used to like ‘that is an anaphora that is that, the poem is trying to do that’ so as far as that’s concerned I really didn’t get quite I didn’t always understand the lesson because I was always writing down what he tells us not our interpretation for example this year’s criticism teacher is very very good I found her to be she’s very good because she teaches in a way she gives us a poem we read it we analyse it first

[Student’s approach to be just right with plot, chart, diagram, etc.]

Teacher’s method:

Relax on Teacher

Critic’s method:

Different methods.

Comparing / Is it a different method.

Student’s use of A comparison (explain what this method is)

Explain / What something is.

Teacher’s method:

Same but:

Same but did not work as well for me.

[Explanation of what happened with the teacher’s method in comparison to the student’s method]
I all right so what kind of methods you prefer this interaction where you're given the space to analyze something on your own first and then

S. yes and then the teacher gives you her interpretation and how she tackled it but it's important for me that I have my time with the piece of literature first and then I read for reading or reading for pleasure.

S. well to be honest the only time I've not for reading for pleasure is mainly in the summer because in winter I don't know why I just stop because I'm always too busy and the little free time I have I'd rather not choose the books ehm so in summer I did in summer I read a lot I also read quite a lot I prefer classics mainly ehm I just stop in winter I don't know why

I. do you read poetry at all?

S. I don't read poetry when I encounter a poem and when I'm surfing on the web I read it but it's not something I look for

I. and why is that?

S. because I find I associate poetry with school I think that's it so the little free time I have I rather not choose to do something related to school

S. I think I associate poetry more with school. I don't want to associate anything with school that I don't want to do

I. is poetry more difficult than prose?

S. yes yes poetry is much more difficult than prose ehm prose because mainly I think prose is just a story you don't have any hidden meanings usually so it's clear I find it much clearer than poetry.

I. can you mention some activities you do in a class when reading an unseen text during the literary criticism seminars?

S. well first she gives us the poem and allows us like 15 maybe generally like half the lesson trying to analyze it ourselves and then she makes us do the essay plan a very detailed essay plan at times then it's like we route our own essay in like half the lesson and then she gives us additional points throughout this time so it's always better because even if you're at a loss about what you're going to write she's there giving you these little hints so I think that's very effective

I. and it's always the same kind of pattern than you follow?

S. usually it's always the same pattern she gives us the poem and gives us time
I: do you work on your own or as a group?
S: no generally we work on our own not very rarely she pairs us up or in a group
I: what do you think about that?
S: well I don’t really think that – when there’s a pair well I can’t – and she’s my friend
and she suggests something and I find it to be rather (grasps teeth to indicate suggestion that might not be appropriate) I don’t want to say No it’s wrong so I generally just go along with it and even if I think it’s completely wrong I just don’t say It’s wrong eh so I think it’s better to work individually because you know that at least what you think is right you’re going to include that not what others think is (wrong)
I: what types of texts (types of poems for example) do you read during the literary criticism seminars?
S: * we read by Emily Dickinson ehm it depends sometimes they’re very long or very short ehm we read all kinds of poems
I: are they set for example according to era to period?
S: no really she gave us a book full of poems and there’s all types of poets from modern to like a hundred years ago
I: so a poem is read in isolation not according to a theme or according to a strand?
S: no she just picks out a poem and we do it
I: can you give some examples of unseen texts that you remember that were challenging to read? That you find challenging?
S: like examples of poems
I: yes that in the last two years were they difficult for you to read?
S: Vernon Scannell ehm Schoolroom on a Wet Afternoon we did it in the test ehm I think I never encountered a poem where I was at a loss that much because I didn’t understand the concept I just started writing what I thought not – it doesn’t mean I had any backup – nothing but usually I’m not that lost when it comes to poetry but this one yes
I: so generally the ones that you do during the criticism…
S: no when she gives us her interpretation usually I’ve got most of the points she mentions I’ve written them myself but this one
I: how do you feel when you get the points she highlights how does it make you feel about writing about unseen texts?
S: it gives me a self-esteem boost because I think all right I’m doing something right then the next poem we tackle I tackle it with that kind of mentality that what I’m saying might be right it’s not just something in here (points to her head as in up in her mind) so I think it gives me a self-esteem boost
I: are there any texts you find more comfortable reading? S like prose/
I: are there any poems or texts you thought were memorable or enjoyable?
S: hm I don’t really * it’s not something we tackled in criticism but Owen (set text) I really like his poetry because it’s not that elaborate English language it’s simple and yet there’s always a

485
profound meaning to it so the element of poetry is there but it's much more comfortable to tackle in my opinion

I. ok so we move on to reading unseen texts the processes and appreciation now learning to appreciate literary texts is central to the literary criticism as an exercise and in the syllabus there is the word 'appreciation' so what do understand by this/ what do you think this 'appreciation' is?

S. ehm I think in order to appreciate an unseen text you just have to relate to that piece of text if there's like in the exam a poem talking about fish I'm not going to relate to it because I don't like fish I don't know anything about it so in order to appreciate a poem or prose I think, you have to relate to the poem I don't think you can appreciate all the poems in the world

I. but what do you think the syllabus means by 'appreciation'? what do you think they are expecting of students?

S. I think they are expecting us to be like very understanding of the poem that in our free time we read poetry and that we understand it ehm I think that's what they mean a genuine/general love for poetry

I. how are you guided to appreciate poetry or prose in your literary criticism seminars?

S. I think we are guided to analyze the poem doesn't give us like reasons for why the poet does that she does but doesn't go in it in much detail so we only analyze we don't really learn to appreciate I think I never learnt to appreciate not even in secondary I don't think there's a method to appreciate I don't think so

I. ehm I'm not sure because as I said before in order to appreciate something you have to like -- it's mostly a characteristic that you love poetry and personally I don't think that loving poetry and just genuine appreciation of poetry is anywhere close to being one of my characteristics so choosing English A level I knew what I was getting into I had to analyze a poem but I didn't I never looked at it in a way that would appreciate poetry I never looked at it that way

I. what strategies do you use when reading and appreciating an unseen poem / prose text? how do you process it? how do you analyze it? where do you start from?

S. first I try to understand what the poet or writer is saying I read it and then after a general idea I reread it again and look for imagery or rhythm style everything and then on the third I don't read it three times I never read the poem three times and then I just from the data I gathered I prepare a plan usually it does take me a long time to prepare a plan and then I just start writing an essay

I. in these two years what do you think about your experience with the poems and prose texts for the tutorial writing tasks/ were they very different in level and difficulty and in topic from the seminars/ was there a gap between the tutorial and the seminar?

S. I think there was quite a gap not in everything sometimes I found the tutorial to be rather easy than what we do in class for example there were poems and prose that were really difficult for example prose I find them to be very difficult than the ones we do in class but the ones we had in the tutorial (refers to the latest one) I found that to be quite easy compared to what we do in class but that's not always the case

I. so prose is easier in tutorials and poetry more difficult/
S: yes poetry (in tutorials) is more difficult than the ones we do in class eh I think that’s the general pattern I noticed poetry (unseen text) in tutorials more difficult than the seminar one — discrepancy levels

I: do you think there are any reasons for this?
S: I’m not sure I think just that whoever prepares the tutorial and our criticism miss just have different ideas of what is expected from us I think that

I: and how does that make you feel?
S: well it scares me it definitely scares me because I’m the one who is going to sit for the exam and the teacher so what they choose and what they interpret to be an unseen poem that might come out in the exam will directly affect me and you — what I’ll do in the exam so it definitely scares me

I: ok now we’re going to discuss the writing process what is your attitude towards writing about unseen texts how do you feel about it
S: well I find it to be much more difficult to write about unseen texts than literature that I have studied before mainly because I have to interpret the unseen text no one is there to guide me so I definitely find that to be much harder but sometimes I think that I’m more free because I am my own like I know what I’m doing so I then find it easier to write about unseen because with literature (it set texts) you’re expected to have a much higher level of tackling an essay than an unseen

I: what kind of difficulties do you face on the language level or the conceptual level what are the challenges when writing about unseen texts
S: stylistic there is definitely I find it quite difficult to tackle style because I don’t know why because even the form of a poem eh I can’t say for example the poet uses this form because he’s trying to convey that or even when it comes to punctuation or rhythm so stylistic I find it to be very hard conceptual it depends on the poem if I understood it then I won’t find it that hard but if not then I would definitely be affected

I: how do you resolve these challenges
S: well I try to best to interpret them but sometimes when I’m at a loss I avoid them like style I rarely mention it if I don’t have a clear example

I: how are you guided or taught to write about an unseen text
S: in the first lesson she gave us a plan what an unseen poem or prose essay should look like so that’s generally the idea I follow because I found it to be very guided when actually writing the essay I can always go back to that and it makes me feel like I have a structure in my hand

I: is it a plan or a model
S: well it can consider itself as a model an introduction a second introduction and then just tackling the things you mentioned in the second introduction that’s the way she taught us how to tackle it and I found it very useful and helpful in exams

I: so how does it make you feel that you have that kind of plan in your mind
S: eh at ease obviously because there is — I’m not just going in tackling an unseen with no idea of how I’m going to do it

I: how often are you provided with this kind or preparation for writing

S: well we generally do one every week so as far as preparation I'd say we're very prepared when it comes to the exam.

I: for writing you're preparing always for writing?
S: yes always writing in mind she gives us to do an analysis and to do our own plan so generally that's the pattern so I think that writing is always in mind

I: so when you plan your written response to an unseen text do you follow that strategy?
S: yes a first introduction to paraphrase what's going on in the poem the second introduction to mention the themes the form the style things that you will tackle later on in the poem in the main body and then in the main body you just open up everything you mentioned in the second section in detail

I: is it similar to the plan of last year?
S: no not at all he didn't exactly show us how to tackle an essay he just gave us how to interpret it's definitely different so last year I didn't have any model in mind I just went along with what I learnt in secondary but this year I have a more clear idea of what they want from me.

I: ok so the last section is on feedback so think about your tutorial last year and of course your experiences of this year's it helps to know so before you write your essay before you hand in an essay does the teacher inform you what the focus of the feedback is going to be?
S: ehm well last year she didn't she just collected our essays and then nothing generally she would explain next week's tutorial what we have to do so we do fifteen minutes on the lesson on that but this year I would find it very helpful that I would just focus on one area for example in the first lesson we said we would tackle the introduction so I focused I didn't only just do an elaborate introduction but ehm yes I did focus more on it and I think that eventually helped but because the following week when we got the essay back I had a more clear idea of what an introduction should look like that's definitely helpful.

I: so how does this help you organize an essay if you had a focus of feedback in mind?
S: well I plan the essay normally and then I just focus more on that focus area I just try to make it more detailed like introduce minor factors that just hit me.

I: do you feel that that helps you achieve a better mark?
S: yes because eventually up to the final exam we would have gone through all these focused points of an essay and well then in the exam you can focus on each particular area and then recall the feedback given and not just in the exam even in other essays ehm for example if my life if I had to choose like a thing that really teaches any essays in the structure and I try my best to vary the structure and make it more make it better but for the exam it does definitely help me because the focus areas are there and I can focus on each and every one of them

I: what type of feedback does your tutorial teacher provide you with was it written is it oral is it both?
S: last year when she was handing out the essay she used to just maybe one minute explaining what we did wrong why she gave us that mark that is the only type of feedback she'd usually give feedback based on student's last exam what she did wrong or type of feedback model

I: so how do you compare it to this year?
S: it's definitely a much more detailed feedback last year there were weeks when she didn't give me feedback just the essay and carry on with the others so it's much more detailed this year

I: how does that help?

S: definitely helps ehm because when I have that feedback I keep that feedback in mind for next essay for the next tests I do so keeping that feedback in mind I usually try to improve on things I do so it does help than not having feedback at all

I: so when you said that your teacher last year did not use to give you feedback on certain essays what were the essays do you remember if they were literature essays or unseen essays?

S: generally literature she always had a thing to say about unseen if I remember correctly because unseen most teachers know that the difficult part of an essay (corrects to - of the exam) is generally the unseen so she did dedicate more time to that

I: all right so was the focus there on how you tackled the text or also on language?

S: both I think well ehm I think she focused more on language rather than how we tackled the essay because language there's more difficult - eh wrong and right things to do than how to tackle a poem

I: what type of feedback do you prefer/ written one or both?

S: I prefer written because when I'm rereading my essays when I'm preparing for the exam generally I don't remember the oral but if I had written down I can recall what she said to me and that generally helps in exams

I: how well do you understand the teacher's feedback especially the written?

S: well I usually understand it but it's not always the case sometimes I think I've done it right but the teacher says otherwise when I see this I always ask why she said that but I admit that sometimes I just leave it

I: when you are given feedback for instance to improve your structure what do understand by that? do you understand what that means?

S: I think it's a little too vague because structure for me it could be like how I structure an essay it could also mean how I structure a sentence so improving the structure can have a lot of things I can improve upon so I think that giving a more detailed like you did this or didn't quite get this I think that's the method I prefer

I: so then does oral feedback help?

S: yes it does help to explain - written is a good method but it can be insufficient if it's going to be alone I think oral explaining the written feedback is always helpful

I: so how useful has the feedback provided been these two years? do you feel it has helped you improve?

S: yes it did help me improve because my vocabulary increased so like last year's teacher used to tell me 'improve your vocabulary' so I think that feedback helps me to acquire a much larger vocabulary than what I had in secondary

I: so what do you do to improve your vocabulary what have you done to achieve that?

S: well read different books as I said I enjoy comics so in the transition from normal books like I don't know vampire books which I was a fan of I still read those but I tend to look for
Interview with Ellie (S4)

I: thank you for agreeing to this interview - the first set of questions relate to your experience with literature – why have you chosen English at Advanced level?
S: ehm * cause in my O levels I really did well both English language and English literature I got a 2 (equivalent to a B+) so and one of my favourite subjects was always English

I: why was it your favourite?
S: the teacher was very let’s just say friendly but I always loved Shakespeare and the way he spoke about love or it was something personal

I: were you influenced by the way the teachers approached literature?
S: not really I was only influenced by the language teacher because she was really outgoing and I really loved her lessons

I: so you had two different teachers right?
S: we had different teachers in secondary school yes one for language and one for literature poems another teacher

I: so this wasn’t in a state school
S: no it was a church school St Dorothy’s we had three different teachers for English for prose and * for poetry different teachers and for language we had a different teacher and then for poetry crit – the same one as poetry

I: talk about your experience in literature from Form 3 up to now – how has that experience developed/ did you grow to love and appreciate it?
S: in a way yes however there were poems like A Small Dragon – those I used to love them but now it’s more like ehm war poems and you like * how am I going to say it/ you appreciate it more because it’s more of a realistic version of literature so some of the poems I really loved them like ehm that one Greater Love? I really loved

I: which are the poems you say you love?
S: their theme and their realism in them like I forget them there was something relating to blood how a soldier shows love more to war rather than between two persons

I: was this in secondary school?
S: no this was here I guess I appreciate it more now since we go in deeper detail and all

I: so reading for pleasure – have you done much reading for pleasure in the last two to three years?
S: I don’t have time to read anymore I mean I try to read a chapter every night but it never really works out

I: but if you have the time are there any types of text that you like reading?
S: mostly romance and fiction and science fiction

I: do you read poetry in your spare time?
S: depending on which poetry

I: would you seek it?
Does not read poetry for pleasure but for studying does not mind it.

S. not really I'm not such a fan of poetry I'm like if I have to study it I will and I won't be bothered by studying it but looking up for it online and just reading it I wouldn't

I. do you associate poetry with studying?
S. yes cause then once I read a poem I feel I have to study it or analyse it.

I. your experience with unseen texts during the seminars - what are the methods your teachers use when teaching literary texts?
S. then in prose she tells us how to divide the essay she tells us to do 2 introductions a body which is divided into 3 paragraphs and then a conclusion at the end and sometimes she tells us to write the conclusion before and then she tells us how to plan it to bring out points about it and underline some adjectives and nouns which help us to understand prose better that's the way I think and poetry she tells us to look for literary devices like similes metaphor and those and she tells us to pick the theme from different words he chose for example if he used many war vocabulary like that's the theme most of the time.

I. so what do you do during a typical crit seminar?
S. basically first she tells us something in general about what we're gonna do then she tells us to read it alone then we read it together and then she gives us like 30 minutes to analyse it on our own and then she tells us how we're gonna divide it and then she tells us what we could write in both introductions different points in the body she tells us in the introduction we write a general analysis of what it is and then in the second introduction we mention some of the themes and some literary devices that are used and in the body we analyse it in depth.

I. and do you do any writing in class?
S. yes for example we have this pack we have different prose and poems in it and we write basically points and the points she gives us on the board

I. when you discuss together do you have a chance to give your views?
S. she comes around and sees what we're doing if we're on the wrong track she tells us to focus a bit more on that point so that's actually the one that we give in the lesson

I. all right
S. and sometimes if we have valid points she tells us to read them in front of the class so that we can express ourselves better and help others to improve

I. do you do a poem per class or a text per lesson?
S. yes we do one lesson prose and another lesson poetry we alternate.

I. what about last year's method - was it similar?
S. "since we have different teachers I find it quite different as in last year's sir was (facial expression seems to brown) this year's is better for me I mean the method because last year he used to put us off a lot whenever we did something wrong he used to like give us judgemental looks and so on he never really helped me because most of the lesson we talked and we read the texts and scribbled some notes I always used to talk about"

I. are there any other activities you do in class when reading unseen texts?
S. mostly that pattern mostly we work on our own in the first three lessons we worked with other people just to interact more with different people I guess to make us feel more at ease

Group work for more introverted Further practice for writing in class.
I. Which do you prefer?
S. I think I prefer working with other people seeing other people's point of view of how they look at it - it helps me see it from a wider perspective.

I. What type of text do you read during the seminars - do you remember any specific poems?
S. The Shortness of Life eh * there were ta' but * Mr Bleaney that was really nice eh.

I. What makes a poem memorable?
S. Describing in a very detailed way cause I love descriptions and maybe it would have a sense of mystery or end in a mysterious way for a person to keep thinking about it and have his own way of conclusion associating it with love (laughs).

I. So areas of interest?
S. Realise yes yes but then like * like the one I mentioned before that A Small Dragon I loved that one as well so.

I. So what are the poems that you feel comfortable reading/ how would you categorise them?
S. The ones that are not associated to poetry for sure I mean they don’t write about poetry. I mean realism like about children for example a child that now has grown up and his family is for example Jen naf his mother is dead and he writes about his mother and their memories they shared together mostly realism I guess.

I. And the ones that are difficult to read?
S. Difficult reading * ehm when I guess those poems that have different ** that first give you an impression that they’re writing about something and then they change completely so you’re totally lost so I would find that really difficult.

I. How does that make you feel about the exam?
S. Eh really ** I mean I’m scared for the poetry and prose bit for the exam cause I don’t know what’s coming out and if I interpret it badly I’m like on the wrong track and can lose a lot of marks I’m really scared.

S. In fact in the syllabus, learning to appreciate literary texts is considered central to the exercise - what do you understand by 'appreciation'? what do you think it means?
S. Analyzing a poem or prose in a very detailed manner (almost rising intonation and smiling out of uncertainty) that’s how I’ve learnt it cause at school we always used to say a critical appreciation so whenever the teacher used to say an appreciation I would normally associate it with criticizing a poem or prose.

I. So that’s what you think is expected of you?
S. I think so cause in a way if you’re analyzing a poem you’re appreciating it because you’re giving importance to it.

I. So in what way do you give importance to a poem?
S. By reading it over and over again and trying to figure out what the poet was thinking when writing the poem and what ideas he had in mind what he was writing about the themes he wanted to express.

I. How are you guided to appreciate unseen texts?
S. the structure you mean!
I: I mean have you been guided to achieve this?
S: * I think it was done indirectly like writing it in this way first reading the poem then picking out different words and then saying what the theme is and then saying for example if there was a caesura alliteration personification oxymoron hypothesis and those and then writing a conclusion so I guess that's the basic structure

I: so do you think it's like a formula then?
S: in a way I'm guessing that you have to stick to the same process

I: how does that make you feel about the exam?
S: better I guess but I'm mostly scared regarding the themes and if I'm on the wrong track of what it is about that scares me

I: and how do you feel about this whole process?
S: I think it's essential because it guides you on what to write but for example if there aren't any literary devices basically you're in a bit of trouble cause then you wouldn't know what to write about

I: are there other strategies that you use when you read an unseen poem or prose text?
S: ehm I was once taught that after reading the poem you ask basic questions for example why did he write that certain word do I like it for example I give my own point of view on it and then compare it to what he was thinking so that would help me understand it better and for example if he was talking about himself so why was he talking about himself in that manner you ask basic questions to yourself associate it with the poem in one's opinion

I: ok and when you compare the texts chosen for tutorial tasks - do you think they're more difficult than the ones you do in criticism?
S: * in the seminars they're quite easy tutorials I find them a bit hard

I: so what's your attitude towards writing about unseen texts?
S: I mean I say if I like it or not

I: how do you feel about it?
S: ehm * I prefer writing about a set text rather than an unseen one cause you would know what you're going to expect therefore you're like unsettled about what's going to come out

I: what are the challenges that you face when writing about an unseen text?
S: content wise mostly cause I am really preoccupied by the fact that if I get the wrong impression of the poem the whole essay is going to be bad so except for a couple of metaphors but then you'll be completely on the wrong track if you don't grasp the themes well

I: how do you resolve these challenges?
S: (laughs) I don't really

I: is there anything specific that you have improved upon in unseen texts?
S: ehm I've improved in my vocabulary because I've grown in English with different vocabulary because of the way we speak more in English we hear other people speak in English so it helps with the vocabulary and the way they speak says yes I've feel I've grown in
I: what have you done to improve your vocabulary?
S: I don’t know sometimes I try to read different books which are like – what’s the word – they suggest books which are good for and which help us in English therefore I try to borrow them or buy them and I try to read them

I: are there any areas that you think you’ve ‘fixed’ errors that you think you’ve seen to over the two years?
S: * I’ve arranged in the general essays like descriptive I feel more comfortable writing them now ehm Shakespeare I guess was always my favourite and also the poems so

I: what do you think are the areas that are more difficult to sort out?
S: unseen poems and prose difficulty with unseen texts

I: and in unseen poems and prose what are the type of errors that are more difficult to resolve?
S: the style you write in for example if the examiner wouldn’t like the style you’re writing in and the way you express yourself about the poem I guess it’s a bit hard to change that

I: when writing about unseen texts did you have lessons in the seminars which guided you specifically to write about unseen texts?
S: where she told us what to write in an essay you mean?

I: yes the process of writing and the structure of the essay
S: yes in the first two lessons she gave us a guideline and then we started reading poems and associated them with the way she taught us and therefore she gave us an example on how to write [transcribe guideline from one to another]

I: did she give you any models to follow?
S: yes but not a model essay she gave us points

I: so when you plan your response to an unseen text what model do you follow you mentioned one where you write two introductions
S: yes I find it quite easy to work with but sometimes I don’t do two introductions I just add them merge them together

I: what does your teacher advise you to avoid when writing?
S: ehm she tells us not to narrate the poem and say the meaning of it all the time like you have to analyse it not narrate it because the examiner would know what the poem is about so you don’t have to * you lose a lot of marks if you just narrate it

I: anything else?
S: to not give our opinion about the poem

I: but you said you like doing that
S: I like associating my opinion with his to see what he would be thinking about

I: with regards to the layout does she tell you what to avoid in the layout?
S: she never really told us I guess because she just gave us one structure and to stick to it
I: we'll move on to feedback now – the focus is mostly on the tutorials and the way you receive feedback and the way you adopt or use the feedback given – before you write your essay does the teacher inform you what the focus of feedback will be?
S: yes she tells us what to stick to and she gives us pointers what to write in the essay and yes she helps us figure it out
I: how does this help you organize your essay?
S: because I would know what to write about
I: in relation to what the layout or the content
S: both I guess more associated with the content on what to write cause she gives us different ideas and what we can write about
I: do you think it would help if you’re expected to write the essay on your own without preparation?
S: not really I mean in the exam it has to be that way but before with the teacher helping us it's an easier way because she'll be guiding us and helping us to know what to write about in the exam it helps me
I: so even if in the exam you have to be on your own then
S: yes cause I would like to be prepared with the help she would have given me
I: all right so what kind of feedback does your teacher give you in criticism essays? can you maybe give examples of comments?
S: to link sentences to make it more coherent
I: so if you had to identify your weaknesses in unseen texts what would they be?
S: vocabulary coherence those I guess eh sometimes I don't get the point of the poem I feel more at ease writing a crit on prose rather than on poetry
I: why?
S: because I don't know why – I feel more comfortable doing prose because I think you have more to read therefore it helps you to figure it out what it is more about poem is like a small bit and then you have to stick to it and then if you don't get it
I: what are your strengths when writing about unseen texts?
S: yes we mostly did essays on unseen texts this year and it helped me because before I had no idea what to write about and this year she really helped me
I: so you felt that having had more essays would have helped?
S: yes it helped way more
I: and were they continuous one after the other?
S: no no
I: do you think that would be more effective?
S: if we had more after each other I guess so because you would improve more cause they are more isolated you would forget what she would have told you and if they were after each other you would stick to what she told you and then maybe help improve the essay
I: would the feedback be more applicable?
S: yes to the next essay

I: and immediate?
S: yes

I: is there a disadvantage of having essays on crit continuously?
S: writing a prose crit isn’t always that nice I guess but it would help a student to improve in their techniques

I: so would the feedback be more formative?
S: yes I guess so

I: as it is do you feel it is summative so the feedback is on an essay in isolation or do you think there is a link between essays?
S: depending on what type of poem for example if one is completely different than the other I guess it’s not really associated but if you have poems kind of related to the same topic it would be really informative

I: you said students wouldn’t think it would be so nice
S: because for example for me it’s easier to write about poems I would have studied in class because I would know what to write about and in an exam you have only there and then to write it without any notes without having any knowledge about it just have to give your own views on what you think – not giving your opinion what there is written obviously therefore a student wouldn’t really – for me I wouldn’t really like it but it’s there you still have to do it and if someone helps me by giving me information it would help

I: do you feel you have had enough practice in writing about unseen texts?
S: I never think it’s enough because you don’t know what to expect

I: what type of feedback are you provided with written oral or both?
S: both she gives us both written and oral cause first she writes points on what good things you did and bad things and then in class she calls us next to her and gives us exm advice on how we would improve in our essay

I: which do you prefer?
S: both cause they really help me when I go home and for example I would be doing another tutorial which would be the same I would read the points she would have given me cause maybe since they’re not continuous I would maybe forget what she had told me and then therefore I would remember (implies by reading the written)

I: so does the written feedback help you?
S: yes and even before the exam I always do this I read the points she had given me therefore I wouldn’t do so badly in the exam

I: do you notice a pattern in the feedback?
S: yes sometimes the feedback would be repetitive I try to improve on them but it’s not that easy sometimes

I: so are you aware of the shortcomings to address?
S: mhm (yes)
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