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## Assessing Graphic Stories as Indicators of Creative Thinking and Literacy Level among Malaysian Secondary School Students

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### Abstract

With the current uncertainties of future employment and Malaysian poor literacy rates, effective reading activities, which embed creative thinking, must be reconsidered in teaching and learning. While studies on creative thinking and assessment are available, none considered graphic stories as an assessment of creativity. Based on two short stories, graphic stories produced by secondary school students are assessed for creativity using a rubric of creativity. The assessment consists of four – Novelty, Utility, Aesthetic and Authentic. Findings revealed that Novelty was indicated in the interpretation of the texts to show understanding based on the given resources. Aesthetic was also indicated through the form of graphic stories presented through careful planning. The creative assessment on the participants' graphic stories provided a glimpse of literacy level among the rural high school students in Malaysia. This paper contributes perspective on creativity among ESL students and guides for further research on literacy in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Creative Assessment, Graphic Stories, Innovation, Literacy, Malaysian Secondary Students' Creative Thinking

### Introduction

Prior March 2021, Malaysian students were required to sit for three public examinations (UPSR during the primary education and PMR and SPM during secondary education) throughout their schooling years, labelling the national education system as exam-oriented, if not "high-stakes" (Ong, 2010), "teaching for test syndrome" (Lim, 2010) and "finishing syllabi syndrome" (Sam & Yong, 2006). All these question the quality of students' thinking, especially on their creative thinking. This is because thinking 'outside-the-box' remains a distant concept,

especially among students from the rural areas. With their reputation of depending on their teachers as the “purveyor of information” (Lim & Nordin, 2007), habits such as remaining passive in classroom and being spoon-fed are often common practices in the Malaysian classrooms (Peen & Arshad, 2014; Khan, 2015) impede the development of creative thinking. This is further aggravated, especially with the advent of technology where students have high dependency rate of the Internet. While students are indirectly affected by national issues on assessment and intervening aspects like the influence of the Internet, they struggle internally. An evident of this type of struggle is seen in the rate of literacy among Malaysian students which was recently reported to be relatively low as compared to other Asian countries. This was observed in several PISA results (Table 1).

Table 1

*Malaysian students’ performance in PISA 2009-2018*

PISA Cycle	Reading Literacy
PISA 2009	414
PISA 2012	398
PISA 2015	432
PISA 2018	438

Source: OECD

While the Malaysian Education Blueprint and Common European Framework (CEFR) standards place emphasis on heutagogy where students are encouraged to take up active roles, there is a need to include pedagogy in order to develop students’ creative elements during teaching and learning sessions. Creativity is the use of imagination or original ideas to create something new through efforts of inventiveness (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). Creative thinking also calls upon the ability to free one’s mind in order to create, interpret and visualize possibilities and to use his imagination in generating new ideas. At present, there is an obvious demand for skilful and creative students in the job market as creative thinking is regarded as a crucial skill needed in the future. The World Economic Forum’s The Future of Jobs Report (2020) identified creative thinking as one of the top three skills required in order to thrive in 2020.

Since literacy covers both writing and reading, writing activities continue to be perceived as intimidating (Sabti et al., 2019) by Malaysian school students to a point needing to inculcate self-efficacy in writing (Shah et al., 2011). Some studies even suggest the use of graphic stories as a means of inculcating writing interest (Singh et al., 2019; Krishnan & Hui, 2019). As the Malaysian educational policy emphasizes on promoting creative thinking, graphic stories is also considered as a means of developing students’ creativity. Graphic stories combine written text and visual literacy in its representation of the physical world (Derrick, 2008) where it sharpens and deepens visual literacy (Schwarz, 2006). Unlike graphic novels, graphic stories are relatively shorter in length with restricted storyline and narrative. Both are stories that are told in “sequential illustration” (Rajendra, 2018), which do not only offer effective medium of narrative that combine two primary elements – words and pictures but are also capable of sustaining similar effects, as those observed in the conventional types of literary texts, e.g. novels and short stories (Prosperi, 1998). Similar to novels, graphic stories are also categorized into different genres, i.e. horror, comedy, romantic and fantasy with different subject matters (ranging from fictional and non-fictional). Researchers’ motivation for this study was based on the declining interest of literature among Malaysian secondary school students and in effort to enhance literature pedagogical ways to attract students’ attention and interest.

To date, graphic stories are used as effective language learning and reading engagement activities, which echo the Media Richness theory that suggests individuals will have enhanced recall when visual elements are integrated into communication (Simpson 2007). In fact, it is found that visually-assisted materials such as comic book and graphic stories reduce gender gap in terms of literacy (Hammond, 2012; Huseyin & Efecioglu, 2015; Honig, 2018). To enhance creativity in English class, graphic stories is one of the ways of igniting students' interest.

### **Research Objectives and Questions**

While mainly measuring the level of creativity among the secondary school students based on graphic stories as their final products, this study also observed the students' level of literacy. As such, this study specifically asked two questions:

- (1) How does the rubric of creativity for graphic stories assess creativity through the produced graphic stories?
- (2) What is the level of literacy as indicated in the graphic stories?

Partaking of these research objectives would highlight an insight on the current reading culture among Malaysian secondary school students as a feedback to efforts taken by the ministry.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Issues on literacy in Malaysia and ways to improve literacy rate**

When PISA 2018 announced that Malaysian mid-secondary school students obtain a score of 415 as compared to other similar age students from other OECD countries with a specific indicator that boys as the lazier gender when it comes to reading (Chin, 2019), this shocked the nation. Yet, there were earlier studies on the level of literacy in Malaysia, yielding for improvement (Puteh et al., 2016; Asraf et al., 2016; Asraf & Abdullah, 2017). This stirred numerous directions in research, particularly discussing issues on national literacy. National literacy issues among Malaysian school students are indirectly associable to the type of materials offered to them. In one direction, there are studies on the cultural setting that implicate readability (Mohideen et al., 2020) while another look at the general setting that are featured in the text (Abdullah & Hashim, 2007). Past studies also looked into efforts to improve literacy through different approaches, Rajendra (2011), for example, indicated that the use of multimodality is an option that would encourage high literacy. Similarly, there are studies suggested on maximizing visualization. Both, Singh et al (2019); Krishnan & Hui (2019) suggested that reading comprehension is improved through the use of graphic novels and graphic organizers which indirectly improves issues regarding literacy in Malaysia.

#### **Creative Assessment in Malaysian ESL classrooms**

Creativity is defined differently. On one hand, its pursuit results integrating existing knowledge into new perspectives. In general, it involves a process of creating new ideas or recombining familiar elements into something new for best solutions through the use of ordinary mental abilities such as perception, memory, etc. (Pearce, 2010). In fact, creativity is observed to be the most complex human behaviours, influenced by a wide range of social, developmental and educational experiences that lead to different types of creativity (Cropley, 1999; Sternberg, 1999). A creative process is at the heart of innovation where often both terms are used interchangeably. While "creative thinking is the thinking that enables students to apply their imagination to generating ideas, questions and hypotheses, experimenting with alternatives and to evaluating their own and their peers' ideas, final products and processes" (Kampylis &

Berki, 2014) p. 6), innovation as a subset of creativity is one of the outcomes which come through the processes of creativity, creative techniques and may result the development in an individual's creativity skills. In fact, genuine creativity must be relevant to the issue at hand and able to offer genuine solutions, (i.e. effective).

On another hand, new research on creativity also look into identifying assessment tools, which is regarded as challenging and ambiguous (Treffinger et al., 2002; Kaufman et al., 2008; Baer & McKool, 2009; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Batey et al., 2010). Because of the lack of agreement in definition (Batey, 2012; Piffer, 2012), researchers and scholars have developed different instruments for assessing creativity (Batey, 2012), which reflect the conception and nature of creativity (Treffinger et al., 1971). When it comes to assessing creative writing, the assessment of its creativity is problematic where Mozaffari (2013) questioned the need to assess creativity to begin with. At Malaysian level, there are studies on assessing the level of creativity among Malaysian school students (Alghafri & Ismail, 2014; Jamal et al., 2020). Panadero and Jonsson (2013) stated that rubrics may not only have the potential to influence students learning positively, but also offers different ways to mediate improved performance and self-regulation.

There are two main functions of rubrics of creativity as defined by the researchers in this study. Interestingly, a possible creative assessment can also be based on identifying aspects that would allow accurate assessment. Kharkhurin (2014) identifies a four criteria of creativity where he explained that:

Novelty attribute stipulates that a creative work brings something new into being, which presents a new conceptual framework and/or modifies or violates an existing one. Utility attribute stipulates that a creative work is what a producer or a recipient considers creative, what represents an important landmark in spiritual, cultural, social, and/or political environment, and what addresses moral issues. The aesthetics attribute stipulates that a creative work presents the fundamental truth of nature, which is reflected in a perfect order, efficiently presents the essence of the phenomenal reality, and is satisfactorily complex, expressing both tension and intrinsic contradiction. Authenticity attribute stipulates that a creative work expresses an individual's inner self and relates one's own values and beliefs to the world.  
(p.338)

Any teaching and learning activity should consider including creativity and innovativeness in order to develop learners' higher levels of risk-taking because separating these activities would not guarantee the development of both elements (Ismail et al., 2019). The combination of these two – high creativity skills and high levels of risk-taking, would prepare them to be better learners. Creativity and innovation would encourage exploratory perception onto trying new activities, where self-doubt is eliminated and learning is now reorganized because learners are challenging themselves. Inside and outside classrooms, the creation of learning communities and its discourse ought to be considered which enables the development of criteria for relevance and value in passing evaluation. Harrington (2018), for instance, called for the usefulness of values in novel solutions. Yet, there are disagreements on the value of a solution.

## Method

This qualitative study served as a pilot study for a larger scale research in order to test different aspects of the intended research (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Arain et al., 2010). During the process of the pilot study, the researchers have the opportunity to try different assessments on the intended research before selecting for a specific assessment. In the case of this study, graphic stories as final products were used to assess Malaysian secondary school students' level of creativity and level of literacy.

In this pilot study, instructions were given to the participants to produce graphic stories based on two chosen short stories as guidelines for adaptation in their graphic stories. The short stories are: Maupassant's *The Necklace* (1884) and Brennan's *The Fruitcake Special* (2000). Both short stories were chosen for their feature of good moral values and lessons (i.e. gratitude, appreciating others, carpe diem, empathy, chasing one's dream in life), which are categorical within the criteria of Utility in Kharkhurin's (2014) four criterion of creativity which are novelty, utility, authentic and aesthetic. The outcome was expected to cover four aspects: (1) the participants' ability to present a storyline, (2) their inclusion of moral values, (3) their individualized interpretation of the short stories, and (4) their ability to present uniqueness in rewriting the story in the form of graphics. Both short stories scored between Fairly easy reading (Brennan's *The Fruitcake Special* with 87.8) and Easily understood for 13-15 year-old students (Maupassant's *The Necklace* with 77.6) in the Flesch Reading Ease Score (FRES) test to assess both readability level.

The participants were given the instructions for this task before the initiation of the 3rd Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. After a year of enduring Covid19 which swept worldwide by storm, face-to-face (f2f) learning sessions in the school are now halted and replaced by online teaching and learning (Murad et al., 2020; Lukas & Yunus, 2021), introducing Home-based Learning. They were then given three weeks to complete the task. There were also a series of follow-ups conducted during the teaching and learning sessions from home through online meetings in order to ensure comprehension as well as to provide guidance to the participants.

## Participants

A total of 15 students from a rural background secondary school in Tanjong Karang, Selangor, Malaysia, were chosen as participants. Tanjong Karang, which is a rural area in Kuala Selangor district, is populated by a community who mainly run paddy fields as a source of income. The community use Malay language or Javanese language. Most of the students are classified as B2 and below as according to CEFR level. These participants were from different classes (namely Anggun, Bestari and Cekal) among the two upper secondary levels (Form 4 and 5; 16-17 years of age). Three of these classes are students with intermediate proficiency and fluency and they are rated based on their examination marks as the merit.

The participants were selected based on convenience sampling. Three aspects of consideration were identified: (1) great interest in creating graphic stories, (2) obtained substantially good marks in their formative assessments, and (3) have the ability to come up with a good storyline. In general, convenience sampling is administered when the chosen participants are those who are "convenient" to the researcher. The process of identifying these participants was not complicated for the researchers since the participants were conveniently available and were readily approachable to be a part of the sample.

Table 2

*Demographics*

Class / Proficiency	Male (Form 4)	Female (Form 5)
Anggun (Intermediate)	3	3
Bestari (Intermediate-Low)	2	3
Cekal (Intermediate-Low)	2	2

These 15 participants are mostly from B1 below according to CEFR standard level. There are 7 male and 8 female students involved in this task. All seven male students are from Form 4 while the eight are from Form 5. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the participants according to language proficiency and level of study.

**Analysis Procedures**

For the purpose of this study, all four criteria were used since the criteria enabled the assessment of the Malaysian secondary school students' level of creativity through the use of the produced graphic stories. Initial assessments also indicated that Kharkhurin's (2014) four criteria would also allow an assessment of the participants' capacity to produce a creative product. At the same time, these four criteria fit with the construct of the Rubric of Creativity as adapted from PISA (2019), which suited the objective of this research. PISA rubric standard (2020) was designed to assess school students from different parts of the world in terms of their level of creative thinking, which is accurately aligned with the CEFR-based level. Based on Kharkhurin's (2014) four criteria of creativity, the graphic stories were assessed to provide a list of carefully distribution of marks as according to the criteria.

In order to trace their level of literacy, a pre- and post-reading tests were administered before the participants read and discussed the short stories. Upon finishing the post-reading test, the participants created graphic stories. Both pre- and post-reading tests were conducted by using a Google Form. This enabled the assessment of their literacy level, which contained two sets of questions. Both sets contain 10 multiple choice questions on each short story, which are related to the characters, theme, plot, setting and moral values or lesson. These questions sets were the same for both pre- and post-reading tests in order to measure participants' literacy level and understanding before they create the graphic story and after they complete the graphic story task. Participants only answered the set of questions based on the short story they have chosen.

Table 3

*Participants' Score on Pre- and Post-Reading Tests*

Participant	Figures	Short Story		Level Of Proficiency	Pre-Reading Test Score	Post-Reading Test Score
1	1	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate	5/10	9/10
2	2	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate-Low	4/10	7/10
3	3	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate-Low	5/10	7/10
4	4	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate	6/10	9/10
5	4	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate	6/10	8/10
6	6	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate-Low	5/10	7/10
7	7	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate-Low	4/10	6/10
8	8	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate-Low	4/10	7/10
9	n/a	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate	4/10	8/10
10	n/a	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate	4/10	7/10
11	n/a	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate-Low	3/10	7/10
12	n/a	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate	4/10	8/10
13	n/a	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate-Low	4/10	7/10
14	n/a	Maupassant's Necklace	The	Intermediate-Low	3/10	7/10
15	n/a	Brennan's Fruitcake Special	The	Intermediate-Low	4/10	6/10

Based on Table 3, every participant showed better understanding after reading the short story and created graphic story based on it, compared to before they start reading the story given carefully. This is because by reading more than once, students gain understanding and spark their interest to convert the short stories into graphic stories. After they created the graphic stories, they began to understand the storyline better and interpret them according to their understanding.

Intermediate proficiency students are proven to score better than intermediate to low proficiency students in both pre- and post-reading task. Their literacy levels are also different, which make individual perception on the short stories different. The tests were created by researchers to determine if students' literacy before and after creating their own graphic



stories is different and improved, besides the graphic stories, which is also used as an indicator of literacy. Intermediate proficiency participants understood what they read, extracted from the short stories given and had clear instruction of what they needed to do. They also derived their own understanding to create the graphic stories. In contrast with intermediate to low proficiency participants, it is quite a struggle for them to understand thoroughly what they read from the short stories. Hence, their graphic story shows their own interpretation of the text as gist and not fully comprehends the stories meaning.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

From 15 graphic stories that showed a combination of written texts and visual literacy (Derrick, 2008), 10 produced graphic stories, which were out of the given context and dissociated from the task assigned. Despite not abiding to the instruction to maintain originality of storyline by employing adaptation method, these 10 exhibited the use of all four criteria of creativity as stated in the Rubrics of Creativity for Graphic Stories, thus making the product as acceptable. The participants maintained elements of moral values, which were also implicitly stated in either of the short stories. The graphic stories indicated clear inclusion of values and lessons (e.g. gratitude and appreciation of others in life), which was presumably driven from their complicated family background and difficulties at home. These participants might also find that the difficulty of the assigned short stories, despite both short stories are with high readability level as indicated in FRES test. As such, they chose to construct their own versions based on their understanding and gist of the story. Failing to retain both of the short stories' original storylines might also suggest an existing problem with reading comprehension, thus providing a glimpse of the reality on the level of literacy among these participants, answering the second Research Question in this study.

The remaining 5 participants however, illustrated based on the short stories and created graphic stories. Despite that, there were indications of scattered alteration from the short stories, which led to the building of a new storyline. They also used their creativity and imagination as a platform to extend or adjust the story to individualize the products as their own. There are only two drawings from the 15 that were hand-drawn while the rest are a collection of animated pictures, photos – taken from Google Images. However, these participants did not copy any text: they only outsourced the images, possibly finding difficulty to draw exact expressions. The originality or novelties of these new graphic stories are not in doubt since the text in caption are fully written by these participants. The following subsections directly addressed the first Research Question on the participants' level of creative thinking via their production of graphic stories.

### **Novelty**

Novelty as defined by Kharkhurin (2014) is identified when the creative work indicated something new (either offering a new perspective or modifying the existing one). Based on this definition, this criterion was observable based on the content of the sample, the context, the development of the storyline and ideas portrayed in the graphic stories. When Runco and Sakamoto (1999) explained that creativity is a result of human beings' complex behaviour which is influenced by different aspects of social and educational backgrounds, the researchers observed that ten participants chose to individually interpret the short stories and produce graphic stories, instead of adapting parts from the given short stories. These participants indicated the use of creativity as an active process which involves innovation. There is clearly an indication of engagement with imagination during the process of generating

individually unique ideas to produce new storylines while experimenting with alternatives to evaluate their own ideas, their peer's ideas or suggestion, the feedback from consultation to come up with their final product (Kampylis & Berki, 2014). To support Amabile (1997), findings show that novelty was shown as part of creativity, especially with the participants' exploration of appropriate ideas.

Based on the Rubrics of Creativity for Graphic Stories, the researchers identified the participants' effort to fulfil the criteria and use the expected guideline for grading purposes. In terms of Novelty, 8 participants achieved Level 4 (Outstanding) with the score of 16-18. The researchers evaluated these graphic stories based on the level of newness offered in the products by conveying refreshing ideas to the readers. In general, the participants produced graphic stories based on their own ideas, instead of reading from the short stories assigned. In fact, these produced graphic stories were not adaptations but instead, entirely on their own interpretations. These participants used their creativity to develop their graphic stories based from initial ideas in their mind which were then completed the story with organized storylines. Figure 1 illustrates this discussion. Sample 1 who is a Form 5 female student (as indicated in Figure 1) employed the criteria of Novelty since the ideas is not an adaptation from Maupassant's The Necklace. In fact, the storyline is based on the participants own ideas and perception on the moral values highlighted in the short story (i.e. being appreciative). Maupassant's The Necklace brings forth a discussion on appreciating others such as family, co-worker and people around us. As such, the sample chose to develop a story that features family because the graphic story included characters such as adults and children and criticizes on adults' treatment towards children. The graphic story suggested for an appropriate treatment and dynamics between the two group of people (adult-children relationship), reminding the readers to consider amicability and pleasantry. To date, there are numerous headlines in mainstream newspapers on child abuse and child mishandling (Balasegaram, 2020), which reiterate the sample's focused moral values. Based on a discussion with the sample, she intended on The appreciative element is there and the owner is enlightening the concept through what she had in mind while drawing this story. This sample deserve to achieved Level 4 with the highest score since the story belong entirely to the owner and not an adaptation. This finding is aligned with Hocevar (1981) which mentioned that the most prominent characteristic of rubrics that assess graphic stories as a creative product is they act as instruments in their diversity, indicating the complexity of defining and measuring creativity.

Figure 1: Sample 1's Graphic stories



Participants with intermediate level of proficiency produced a final product with higher score compared to participants with intermediate to low proficiency. These participants have been given a set of question to answer after they read the short stories given and determine their choice of short story. There are 10 questions on each set of question and this is where the understanding of the short stories was evaluated. There are 4 participants with a score of 11-15 in Level 3, indicating Excellent. Their graphic stories offer a new idea where despite an

inclusion of an invented storyline, there are efforts to maintain to some extent, similarities of original written ideas from the Maupassant's short story. In Level 2 (Emergent), there are 3 participants with a score of 6-10 for their graphic stories that suggested an exhibition of partially new ideas yet including heavy indications of original written ideas from the text. They did not adopt the story in total since they only adapted the plot.

## Utility

Utility as defined by Kharkhurin (2014) is indicated in the creative product which it addresses moral values and features elements of life experience e.g. spiritual, cultural, social and political aspects. Findings revealed that utility is indicated from the participants' schemata of their own life events and experiences (Emmott & Alexander, 2014) where the participants included moral values in the graphic stories which suggests familiarity. The choice over selecting these values indicated an intimate and personal approach after reading the short stories. 10 out of 15 participants obtained the score of 16-18, which is Level 4 (Outstanding), indicating some amount of Utility were included in the graphic stories. These graphic stories indicated the participants' level of sensitivity towards their current context. Figure 2 and 3 are several of the best employment of Utility in the submitted graphic stories.

Figure 2: Sample 2's Graphic stories



Figure 3: Sample 3's Graphic stories



Because the participants took the initiative to consider a shared moral values, the researchers were able to resonate with the choice, as explained by Emmott and Alexander (2014) when readers use schemata to make sense of events and descriptions. The participants provided default background information for comprehension, as it is rare and often unnecessary for texts to contain all the detail required for them to be fully understood.

Usually, many or even most of the details are omitted, and readers' schemata compensate for any gaps in the text. As schemata represent the knowledge base of individuals, they are often culturally and temporally specific, and are ordinarily discussed as collective stores of knowledge. Both of the stories in Figure 2 and 3 were not related to the assigned short stories but the owners of both graphic stories maintained the focus on the moral values as incorporated in the short stories (such as appreciative and kindness). Maupassant's *The Necklace* features values such as appreciative of others while Brennan's *The Fruitcake Special* includes appreciative of memories and others while work smart to achieve something in life. These participants included at least 5 moral values such as appreciative, kindness, compassionate, wisdom and adaptability. The stories from these figures were also produce by female students from form 5 classes.

The researchers derived and motivation in highlighting the moral values and the participants' level of sensitivity on the current situation is based on the first discussion and the day the task was given. To suit the current situation of teaching and learning session which emphasizes moral education in building manner, moral values element is a must in this graphic stories. The discussions about these elements are also being monitor during every consultation. This is to make sure the core moral values element is there and the cross curriculum lesson happened.

There were 2 participants who obtained Level 3 (Excellent) with the score of 11-15 where their graphic stories included many moral values and were sensitive to current context. However, the participants from this level only include 3-4 moral values from the short stories or created their own storylines. These participants were evaluated based on the number or moral values they have inserted in their graphic stories. To be evaluated, the participants are being referred to rubric and also compared with the participants from Level 4 graphic stories. 3 participants received the score of 6-10 which is in Level 2 (Emergent) because their graphic stories included around 2 elements of moral values and below while indicated some level of sensitivity towards current context. The graphic stories they have done has less moral values inserted compared to graphic stories that are within Level 3 and 4.

### **Aesthetic**

In terms of Aesthetics, Kharkhurin (2014) explains that the creative work is a presentation of an organized outcome where details are considered e.g. the graphic stories were presented perfectly neat, containing readable handwriting (if any), pleasant to the eyes besides associating closely to the original storyline in order to achieve Level 4 (Outstanding). Findings on the criteria of Aesthetic revealed a level of consideration was employed in order to create an impact as explained by Media Richness Theory where individuals will have enhanced recall when visual elements are integrated into communications (Simpson 2007). In fact, the choice of colour and use of format also play a role in enhancing readers' interest to associate meaning. The findings support that because 10 participants obtained score 16-18 marks (Outstanding) because their graphic stories were perfectly neat, nice handwriting (if any), clean and clear to read, pleasant to see and relate well to the story line. Following is the best illustration of the employment of Aesthetic among the graphic stories.

Figure 4: Sample 4's Graphic Stories



Figure 5: Sample 4's Graphic stories



Figure 4 and 5, which are horror-based, were produced by a singled-author, a female Form 5 student. The sample focused on creating eerie feelings where she included dark and strong colours such as red and black as well as spooky images (e.g. the dark castle-like silhouette, which sets the mood). These images were then appropriately placed in strategic places to allow easy reading. The sample achieved a high score for the criteria of Aesthetic mainly because of her choice to use images from Google Images, Pinterest and Getty Images. This is an effort to make sure the visuals are clean and clear while capturing readers' interest to continue reading.

The sample's choice of theme, images, colours and background are considerably suitable and related to the intended mood of the story. In fact, these combined aspects create accuracy to the context and content that was delivered. Both figures indicated an observable combination of high level of creative skills and risk-taking attitude when determining the selection of theme. Since creativity is needed in developing new teaching materials which would attract young pupils to learn the English, it is crucial that ESL learners to have both high creativity skills and high levels of risk-taking (Ismail et al., 2019). This sample illustrates a combination of both creativity and risk-taking attitude where she was bold to present an adaptation based on horror while enhancing her creativity (despite the storyline in the graphic story was not related to neither of the short stories given). This graphic story shows an organized storyline, organized plot in sequencing the images, the clean and clear images and writing, the suitable images according to the storyline and the placing of everything with symbolism such as the images of spooky castle as an eeriness, holding hands images as the symbol of love and unity bonding and the emphasize of the trip as a journey for two people to resolve their issues. Meanwhile the other 5 participants scored 11-15 (Excellent) since their graphic stories are averagely neat, clean and clear to read, pleasant to see and relate well to

the story line. These 5 participants are showing a little less of organization in the storyline as well as lack of neatness. The sequence and organization in the sample of this score level are showing lack of plan beforehand and lack of relation to the story they are trying to convey as their own ideas or from the short stories given.

**Authentic**

Kharkhurin’s (2014) definition of Authentic as creative works expresses an individual’s inner self, indicating a relation between his values and beliefs of the world. The criteria of Authenticity as part of the Rubric of Creativity for Graphic Stories clearly specifies that works ought to be produced by the participants themselves without copying or getting inspiration from the Internet or other resources, yet retaining similarity of the short stories. To be able to fulfil this criterion, the participants were required to first read and fully understand the assigned short stories given. This was assumed to be doable for any upper secondary school student, even if they had not understood the short stories (e.g. meaning, theme). Thus, careful reading of the short stories was required to understand the texts and to explore its content and context before expanding the idea into graphic stories. Findings indicated that despite some dissociation from the original texts in producing the graphic stories, which suggests students’ low level of literacy and lack of reading interest, the task was one way of tackling these problems by using different approaches. Rajendra (2011) suggests for the use of graphic stories to deal with problems with reading comprehension at schools. This is reiterated by others who promote for the use of (Singh et al., 2019; Krishnan & Hui, 2019). The findings also echoed the fact that graphic novels are able to sharpen and deepen visual literacy (Schwarz, 2006).

Figure 6: Sample 6’s Graphic stories



Figure 7: Sample 7’s Graphic stories



10 participants obtained the score of 16-18 which is Level 4 (Outstanding) where their graphic stories were 100% done by the sample himself be it whether it is based on the story adaptation or their own ideas. Figure 6 and 7 show the highest score of Authentic which is Level 4 (Outstanding) for abiding to some of the aspects in the short stories, despite altering the original plots in the texts. The participants showed understanding of the given short stories and innovated with their interpretation. The participants, who drawn Figure 6 and Figure 7, chose Brennan's *The Fruitcake Special* as a guideline and chose appropriate images from Google Images, Pinterest and Getty Images in order to form the envisioned characters based on their visualization of the characters. Despite following the arrangement of the storyline in the texts, they were able to produce one graphic story which was created based on their interpretations of the plots, character and storyline. They chose to follow the story while inserting separate pieces as her own.

Figure 8: Sample 8's Graphic stories



Next, 3 participants, who scored 11-15 which qualified as Level 3 (Excellent), produced graphic stories that retained most of the storyline from the short stories. At the same time, there were evidence where these 3 participants included pieces within the graphic stories that followed the elements from the short stories which was then adapted using Internet sources. Changes of ideas which were observed in the development of these graphic stories were inspired by others, instead of depending entirely on the participants' own idea. Figure 8 is an example of graphic stories that scored Level 3.

## Conclusion

Findings from this study indicated that the content produced by the participants were aligned with their imagination. This study also indicated that creativity can be assessed with a specifically-designed rubric that assessed the produced graphic stories. The use of graphic stories has proven to be a fun learning activity (either as a homework or task), where the participants were committed to the given task, especially during the pandemic Covid-19. This project provided an outlet for the participants to express their creativity while learning language, particular as part of a reading engagement activity. Pre- and post-tests

This study has provided insights into secondary school students' ability to formulate their own perspectives and interpretations of a situation while expressing their own opinions in creative ways. These students might use the opportunity of a project like this to express their inner thought and reveal what they have in mind. The implications and problems encountered in this study only involved the shortage of time and the online class learning as this makes the observation quite complicated along the way. The contribution of this study is to assist Malaysian educators, specifically those who specialize in literature in applying variations of pedagogical ways to teach and strengthen students' attention and interest in learning literature. Graphic stories in this study can be used as one of the ways to enhance students' motivation in being creative while learning language through literature. This study hopefully will be helpful for researchers who are also interested in furthering study in the same field and derive future research in measuring creativity and other related aspects and

act as a guidance to form rubrics as a suitable method in assessing to assess creativity for further related study.

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