Developing Grade 10 Students' Ability to Use Literary-Technique Terms Across Word Classes in English Literature Writing: A Qualitative Classroom Action Research Study

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Abstract- This qualitative classroom action research study explored how explicit, contextualised, and practice-based instruction could support Grade 10 students in using literary-technique terminology accurately in English literature writing. The study arose from a recurring classroom difficulty: students could often recognise and explain terms such as metaphor, irony, alliteration, personification, and symbolism, but tended to rely on noun forms when writing about literary texts. They were less confident when a sentence required a related adjective, adverb, or verb. Fifty Grade 10 students attending a private English literature class in Sri Lanka participated in the instructional intervention. The intervention was conducted over six instructional hours and organised into four connected stages: revisiting selected literary techniques, exploring related word forms and their grammatical functions, analysing model sentences and short passages, and completing guided language practice. Evidence was drawn from classroom observations, students' written work, informal classroom interactions, and responses to the final practice activity. The evidence was interpreted descriptively, with attention to recurring patterns in students' language use rather than statistical measurement. The classroom evidence suggested that definitions and word-family lists alone were not sufficient to support confident use. Students appeared to benefit more when forms were examined in meaningful sentences and followed by guided opportunities to select and use them. At the same time, some uncertainty remained, particularly when students had to produce their own analytical sentences. The study therefore highlights the value of teaching literary terminology as usable language within literature lessons, while recognising that a short intervention cannot establish long-term retention or independent writing development.

Index Terms- English literature, productive vocabulary, literary terminology, word classes, contextualised instruction

I. Introduction

1. English literature requires learners to understand literary texts and express their interpretations using appropriate analytical language (Deane, 2020). Terms such as metaphor, irony, alliteration, personification, and symbolism provide a shared vocabulary for discussing a text. However, knowing the name of a technique does not automatically mean that a learner can use the term accurately in a written interpretation. The students may identify a metaphor in a poem, for example, yet remain unsure how to describe a metaphorical image or explain that a writer uses language metaphorically. The ability to discuss literature therefore depends partly on learners' control of the vocabulary and grammatical structures needed to express their interpretations (Deane, 2020).

This issue became noticeable in a private English literature class in Sri Lanka involving Grade 10 students who were relatively new to the study of literature. During classroom discussions and the examination of written responses, the students appeared more comfortable naming literary techniques than incorporating related forms into analytical sentences. Their writing often relied on constructions such as "The poet uses metaphor" or "There is irony in the poem." Such sentences are not necessarily grammatically incorrect, but repeated reliance on these patterns limited the range and precision of their literary explanations. The students also asked how terms could be used in other grammatical forms.

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The difficulty suggested a gap between receptive or conceptual knowledge and productive control. The vocabulary knowledge involves more than knowing a word's basic meaning. It also includes knowledge of its form, word parts, grammatical behaviour, collocations, and appropriate use in context (Nation, 2022). Learners may recognise the noun metaphor but be uncertain about the adjective metaphorical or the adverb metaphorically. They may also be unsure whether a related form is natural in a particular sentence. Productive use is demanding because

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learners must select and retrieve an appropriate form while constructing a meaningful utterance or sentence (Schmitt, 2019).

Literary texts can provide meaningful contexts in which learners notice and use language (Schmitt, 2019; Webb, 2020). Nevertheless, literary language may be challenging for learners who have limited experience of literary analysis or whose English proficiency is still developing. Research has noted both the vocabulary-learning opportunities offered by literature and the difficulties learners may experience when engaging with literary texts (Adelina, 2025; Anzeera & Kothalawala, 2025; Claro et al., 2025). Teacher support is therefore important in helping learners move from recognising a term to understanding how it functions in a sentence and using it in their own writing.

The present classroom inquiry focused on this specific teaching problem. Rather than treating literary techniques as an isolated list of definitions, the intervention introduced selected word families, examined their grammatical functions in context, and provided opportunities for guided practice. The purpose was not to establish a universal teaching method but to explore a practical response to a difficulty observed in one particular class.

II. RESEARCH ELABORATION

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary knowledge and productive use

Knowing a word involves several connected dimensions. Nation (2022) explains that word knowledge includes written and spoken form, word parts, meaning, grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use. These dimensions are relevant to literary terminology because students need to know more than what a technique means. They also need to recognise how related forms behave in sentences. For example, metaphor is a noun, metaphorical is an adjective, and metaphorically is an adverb. The forms are related, but they do not perform the same grammatical function.

The distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge is also important. A learner may understand a word when reading it but may not be able to retrieve and use it accurately in writing. Productive vocabulary use requires the learner to make decisions about word choice, grammatical position, and context while constructing a sentence (Schmitt, 2019). This helps explain why students who can identify literary techniques may still struggle to write precise analytical comments.

Instruction that focuses only on definitions may therefore leave important aspects of word knowledge unaddressed. The learners need opportunities to notice word forms, examine their grammatical roles, and use them in meaningful contexts. The aim should not be to teach every possible derivative of a term. Some forms are uncommon or unsuitable for ordinary literary analysis. Teachers need to select forms that are both linguistically accurate and useful for the learners' writing.

2.2 Literature as a context for language development

Literary texts provide rich language input because they contain varied vocabulary, figurative language, complex structures, and meaningful contexts. Students may develop vocabulary, reading, grammar, and writing through engagement with novels, poems, short stories, and drama (Anzeera & Kothalawala, 2025). However, the linguistic richness of literature can also create difficulties for learners who have limited proficiency or inadequate background knowledge. Unfamiliar vocabulary, culturally distant content, and complex sentence structures may prevent learners from benefiting fully from literary texts (Adelina, 2025; Claro et al., 2025).

Teacher mediation is therefore important. Learners need to notice target language, understand its meaning, examine how it functions, and subsequently reuse it. Research on vocabulary instruction emphasises the importance of moving from exposure and recognition towards purposeful production (Wang & Cohen, 2026). This principle is particularly relevant to literary terminology because students must use the terms as part of interpretation, not merely reproduce dictionary definitions.

2.3 Classroom action research in language teaching

Action research enables teachers to investigate practical classroom problems and improve instruction through systematic cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Mertler, 2021; Rabgay & Kidman, 2023). It is especially suitable when the problem emerges from everyday teaching and requires a context-sensitive response. In vocabulary research, classroom action research has been used to introduce

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focused activities, observe learner responses, and modify instruction according to emerging needs (Kruawong & Soontornwipast, 2021).

The present study adopted this reflective orientation. The instructional activities were arranged in four connected stages. Observations during the earlier stages informed the emphasis placed on contextualised examples and guided practice in the later stages. The stages are treated as parts of one short intervention rather than as four separate, complete action research cycles.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study employed a qualitative classroom action research approach. It began with a teaching problem identified through classroom interaction and students' written work: learners could often name literary techniques but had difficulty using related forms accurately in analytical sentences. First, a short instructional response was planned followed by implementing it during regular lessons. Next, students' responses were observed, and reflected on the usefulness and limitations of the activities.

The intervention covered six instructional hours. It was organised into four connected stages, with the sequence adjusted in response to students' developing needs. The study did not treat each instructional stage as a separate action research cycle. Instead, the stages formed a single intervention informed by ongoing observation and reflection.

3.2 Participants and setting

The participants were 50 Grade 10 students attending a private English literature class in Sri Lanka. They came from different geographical areas and were considered as beginner-level learners in the study of English literature. The class was conducted outside the formal school setting. The findings therefore relate to this particular group and teaching context.

3.3 Instructional intervention

The intervention was designed to move from awareness of literary techniques towards more purposeful use of related forms in sentences. The four stages were connected, and were used for observations of students' responses to decide where further explanation or modelling was needed.

Stage 1: Revisiting selected literary techniques

The names, basic meanings, and examples of selected literary techniques were introduced or revisited. Some instances were irony, metaphor, paradox, alliteration, personification, symbolism, juxtaposition, satire, and ambiguity. At this stage, the terms were mainly discussed as nouns because the initial aim was to establish a shared understanding of the concepts. It was observed whether students could recognise the techniques and explain them in simple terms.

Stage 2: Exploring related word forms and grammatical functions

Instruction was extended to selected related forms that students could use in literary analysis. Attention was given to the grammatical role of each form and to the sentence structures in which it could occur. The students were shown that not every literary term has a common or useful form in every word class. The purpose was to develop awareness of appropriate usage rather than encourage the mechanical formation of derivatives.

Table 1 presents selected forms that can be useful in classroom literary analysis. A dash indicates that a form was not included as a recommended teaching item because it is uncommon, awkward, or not necessary for the intended level.

Literary terminology in different word classes

Noun	Adjective	Adverb	Verb / verbal expression
Irony	ironic	ironically	ironise (less common in school analysis)
Metaphor	metaphorical	metaphorically	use a metaphor
Paradox	paradoxical	paradoxically	—
Alliteration	alliterative	—	alliterate
Personification	personified	—	personify
Symbolism	symbolic	symbolically	—
Juxtaposition	juxtaposed	—	juxtapose
Satire	satirical	satirically	satirise
Ambiguity	ambiguous	ambiguously	—

Table 1

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In instructional process, a particular attention was given to the difference between ordinary adjectives and participial adjectives. For example, ironic, symbolic, and metaphorical function as adjectives in expressions such as "an ironic situation" and "symbolic imagery." By contrast, personified and juxtaposed are verb-derived forms that can function adjectivally in phrases such as "the personified wind" and "two juxtaposed images." Students examined these forms in complete sentences so that they could see how grammatical position contributed to meaning.

Stage 3: Analysing model sentences and short passages

The students were given short model sentences and passages containing selected literary terms in context. They identified and underlined the target forms, named their word classes, and discussed how each form functioned in the sentence. The examples were used to draw attention to the words surrounding the target item and to the relationship between grammatical form and intended meaning. This stage was intended to help students move beyond memorising a word-family list.

Stage 4: Guided practice and sentence-level application

The students completed guided activities in which they selected appropriate forms for given sentence contexts. The tasks required them to consider both the meaning of the literary term and the grammatical structure of the sentence. Where appropriate, students were also encouraged to transform a sentence by expressing a related idea through a different grammatical form. For example, "The poet uses a metaphor to describe the sea" could be rephrased as "The poet describes the sea metaphorically." Next, the choices students made and the kinds of support they requested were observed.

The final activity provided evidence of students' immediate responses to the instruction. It was treated as a classroom learning activity rather than a standardised post-test. The study did not use the activity to make claims about long-term retention or general improvement in English proficiency.

3.4 Sources of evidence

Evidence was drawn from several sources available during the lessons:

- Observations of students' oral contributions, questions, and written responses.
- Students' written literature responses produced before and during the intervention.
- Informal questions and comments made by students during classroom activities.
- Students' responses to the final guided practice activity.

These sources were used to build a descriptive account of students' difficulties and responses. The study did not rely on a formal pre-test, a control group, or a delayed post-test. No attempt was made to estimate a statistically significant effect.

3.5 Data interpretation

The evidence was examined descriptively. It was observed the recurring patterns in students' use of literary terminology, particularly their reliance on noun forms, their recognition of related forms, their ability to identify grammatical functions, and their confidence when using the forms in context. Written responses and classroom observations were considered together to identify areas of progress and continuing difficulty. The interpretation focused on changes noticed during the short intervention rather than on numerical comparisons. The final guided activity was considered alongside the other classroom evidence and was not treated as the sole measure of learning.

Because the study was a small-scale classroom inquiry and the interpretation is context-specific. The account is intended to make the teaching process and the observed patterns clear, while avoiding claims that go beyond the available evidence.

3.6 Ethical considerations

The pupils' identities were protected, and individual names were not used in the research report. The findings were used for educational improvement, and the reported percentage refers to performance in the classroom activity rather than to a generalised estimate of the pupils' overall language proficiency.

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III. RESULTS/ FINDINGS

4. The classroom evidence suggested that students had some knowledge of the meanings and names of literary techniques but were less secure in using related forms in their own sentences. **The findings are presented thematically**, focusing on the initial difficulty, students' responses to the instructional stages, and the challenges that remained. The account is qualitative and does not attempt to quantify the degree of improvement.

4.1 Recognition of literary techniques did not ensure productive use

At the beginning of the intervention, students were generally more comfortable identifying or naming techniques than using related terminology flexibly in written analysis. Their responses tended to rely on familiar noun forms such as metaphor, irony, and alliteration. They could often state that a technique was present in a poem, but their explanations did not always show how the writer had used language or what effect the technique created. This pattern suggested that students' knowledge of literary concepts was not yet matched by confident productive control of the vocabulary needed to discuss them.

The examples of what the students wrote such as "The poet uses metaphor" and "There is irony in the poem," illustrate the limited range of sentence patterns used in the class. These examples are not necessarily grammatically incorrect; rather, they show how students repeatedly depended on a narrow set of constructions. The instructional problem was therefore not simply the production of incorrect forms, but the limited ability to select a wider range of appropriate grammatical expressions.

4.2 Word-family explanations raised awareness but did not immediately lead to confident use

The introduction of related forms helped students become aware that literary terms could appear in different grammatical roles. However, the presentation of a word-family chart did not, by itself, ensure that students could use the forms independently. During the early part of the intervention, students continued to depend mainly on familiar noun forms and sometimes needed confirmation before selecting an adjective or adverb. This indicated that knowing a form when it was presented did not necessarily mean that students could retrieve it appropriately while writing.

The distinction between ordinary and participial adjectives also required explanation. The students needed to see how forms such as ironic and symbolic are different from forms such as personified and juxtaposed, and how these forms functioned within phrases and sentences. The observations reinforced the need to teach grammatical function through examples rather than through labels alone.

4.3 Contextualised examples supported noticing and guided selection

More encouraging responses were observed when students worked with model sentences and short passages. Underlining target forms and identifying their grammatical roles helped them connect word form with sentence structure and meaning. Instead of looking at a list of related words in isolation, students could see how a form was used in a complete expression. This appeared to make the purpose of the different forms clearer and gave students a more concrete basis for selecting an appropriate item in a new sentence.

The guided practice activity also appeared to support students' immediate selection of forms. Because the sentence context was provided, students could focus on the grammatical and semantic clues that helped them choose a suitable form. Moreover, purposeful attempts were paid off to distinguish between noun, adjective, and adverb forms. Nevertheless, the activity offered structured support and should not be taken as proof that students had mastered the forms in independent writing.

4.4 Some difficulties remained in independent language use

Although the students showed greater awareness during contextualised and guided activities, some remained hesitant when they had to produce their own sentences. They sometimes sought confirmation before using a less familiar form, and uncertainty was more noticeable when the task required them to construct an analytical sentence without a prompt. This difference between guided selection and independent production was an important feature of the classroom evidence.

The intervention also highlighted that not every literary term has a natural or useful derivative in every word class. Students therefore needed guidance about authentic usage rather than a rule that every noun should be converted into an adjective, adverb, or verb. The remaining difficulties suggest that the

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development of productive control requires continued practice in meaningful literary writing.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the difficulty observed in this class involved more than a lack of knowledge of literary techniques. Students could often recognise the concepts, but they had limited control over the grammatical forms needed to express their understanding in varied analytical sentences. This distinction is consistent with the view that knowing a word involves knowledge of its form, meaning, grammatical behaviour, and use, rather than familiarity with a definition alone (Nation, 2022). It also reflects the demands of productive vocabulary use, where learners must retrieve and apply an appropriate form while constructing language (Schmitt, 2019).

The limited impact of presenting word-family forms in isolation is pedagogically significant. A chart can make relationships between words visible, but it cannot show every condition that governs their use. The students need to see how forms operate in sentences and how grammatical choices contribute to the meaning they wish to express. In this study, model sentences and short passages appeared to make the relationship between form and function more accessible. This supports the value of contextualised vocabulary instruction and purposeful opportunities to notice and reuse language (Schmitt, 2019).

The role of literature as a language-learning context should also be considered. Literary texts contain language that can support vocabulary development, but learners may need explicit guidance to engage with unfamiliar forms and interpretive language (Adelina, 2025; Anzeera & Kothalawala, 2025; Claro et al., 2025). The intervention attempted to provide that guidance without separating terminology entirely from literary meaning. Students were encouraged to consider not only which form fitted a sentence but also how the expression contributed to an interpretation.

The stronger responses during guided practice should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. A gap-filling task reduces the demands of composing a sentence from the beginning. It can show whether students can use contextual and grammatical clues to select a form, but it does not establish that they can transfer the same knowledge to an independent paragraph or

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examination response. The difference observed between supported tasks and independent sentence construction suggests that further teaching should include sentence transformation, short analytical paragraphs, peer discussion, and feedback on students' own writing.

From an action research perspective, the intervention illustrates the value of responding to a specific classroom need through planned instruction and ongoing observation. The four stages were connected, and the observations made during the earlier activities informed the emphasis placed on contextualised modelling and guided practice. This is consistent with the reflective and context-sensitive orientation of classroom action research (Mertler, 2021; Rabgay & Kidman, 2023). However, the short intervention and the absence of formal baseline and follow-up assessments mean that the findings should be understood as evidence of classroom responses, not proof of a lasting causal effect.

5.1 Limitations

This inquiry was conducted in one private English literature class and involved a relatively short instructional intervention. The findings therefore reflect the experiences of this particular group and cannot be generalised to all Grade 10 students or other teaching settings. The study did not include a formal diagnostic test, a standardised pre- and post-assessment, a comparison group, or a delayed retention task. In addition, the final guided activity provided only limited evidence of students' ability to transfer their learning to independent literary writing. The researcher's dual role as instructor and observer may also have influenced the interpretation of classroom responses. These limitations do not remove the practical value of the inquiry, but they define the claims that can reasonably be made from it.

IV. CONCLUSION

6. This classroom action research explored a practical difficulty experienced by Grade 10 students learning English literature: they could often identify literary techniques but were less confident using related terminology across different grammatical forms. The intervention combined explicit attention to word forms, explanation of grammatical functions, model sentences and passages, and guided practice. **The**

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classroom evidence suggested that definitions and word-family charts alone were not sufficient. The students appeared to respond more positively when they could examine forms in context and use sentence-level clues to make grammatical choices. Some uncertainty remained, particularly when students had to construct their own analytical sentences.

The central pedagogical implication is that literary terminology should be taught as language for interpretation rather than as an isolated list of technical nouns. Teachers can support learners by selecting useful and authentic word forms, modelling their use in complete sentences, drawing attention to grammatical function, and providing opportunities to move from guided selection to independent production. It is equally important to explain that not every literary term has a natural derivative in every word class.

Future classroom inquiry could extend the intervention by including an initial diagnostic writing task, a comparable final writing task, and a delayed activity to explore retention. The students could also be asked to write short analytical paragraphs about an unfamiliar poem or extract. Such evidence would help establish whether the forms practised in controlled activities are transferred to independent literary writing. Further research in other classes and school settings could explore how this type of instruction may be adapted for learners with different levels of English proficiency.

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