Staging the textbook: Interweaving applied drama and ELT syllabus

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the Malaysian context, the syllabus is taught in an upward spiral progression in textbooks, with each unit reinforcing previous units, each year reinforcing previous years. Teachers are obligated to teach the syllabus by closely following the textbook, adapting other teaching materials, or even designing their own materials (Fig.1). However, if additional material excessively replaces textbook sections, there is a possibility that the learning experience can become disjointed when compared to the planned progression of the textbook. Additionally, teachers may become more strained under an already stressful workload. However, solely adhering to the textbook may result in a mechanical, bland teaching and learning experience for both teacher and student (Cheng & Winston, 2011). To bridge the gap between the textbook, syllabus, and engaging learning experience, this study explored the use of a methodology called *staging the textbook* (Nawi, 2014; Nawi, 2013; Nawi & Greenwood, 2012). This methodology applies drama principles drawn from such authorities as Heathcote and Bolton (1995), Maley and Duff (2005), and Kao and O'Neill (1998), in the form of a layer of rich context and personalisation that is placed on top of the existing layer of the textbook (Fig. 2).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How much of the prescribed syllabus could be taught in the applied drama sessions?
2. How can teacher planning time of drama lessons be reduced by utilising the textbook?
3. How can the mismatch between teaching using drama pedagogies and students' learning styles be overcome?

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

The staging the textbook methodology encompasses two major stages:

i) The textbook section to be used for the teaching programme is distilled, and the key focuses of the language, skills, vocabulary, and themes to be learnt are identified and extracted.

ii) A layer of drama is matched with these distilled elements and then 'staged' on top of the textbook unit, incorporating context-setting opportunities, potential for a story, potential for tension or complication, and the target language elements.

For example, Unit 14 from *English Form 4* (Raghavan, Cheah, & Krishnan, 2002) deals with the uses and abuses of the Internet, and includes many articles for the students to read. These articles are interesting, but do not have a central context that connects them apart from the theme. In the study, a process drama was applied to the class, where the teacher took on the role of Editor of a newspaper, and the students became the reporters. A story was created that centred around a boy who went missing after meeting some people on social media. The drama techniques applied included Teacher in Role, Students in Role, process drama, hot-seating and freeze frames. Throughout the process students engaged with the textbook in a context-rich interactive process, and produced output that was required of them by the syllabus. A detailed description of the methodology can be found in Nawi (2013).
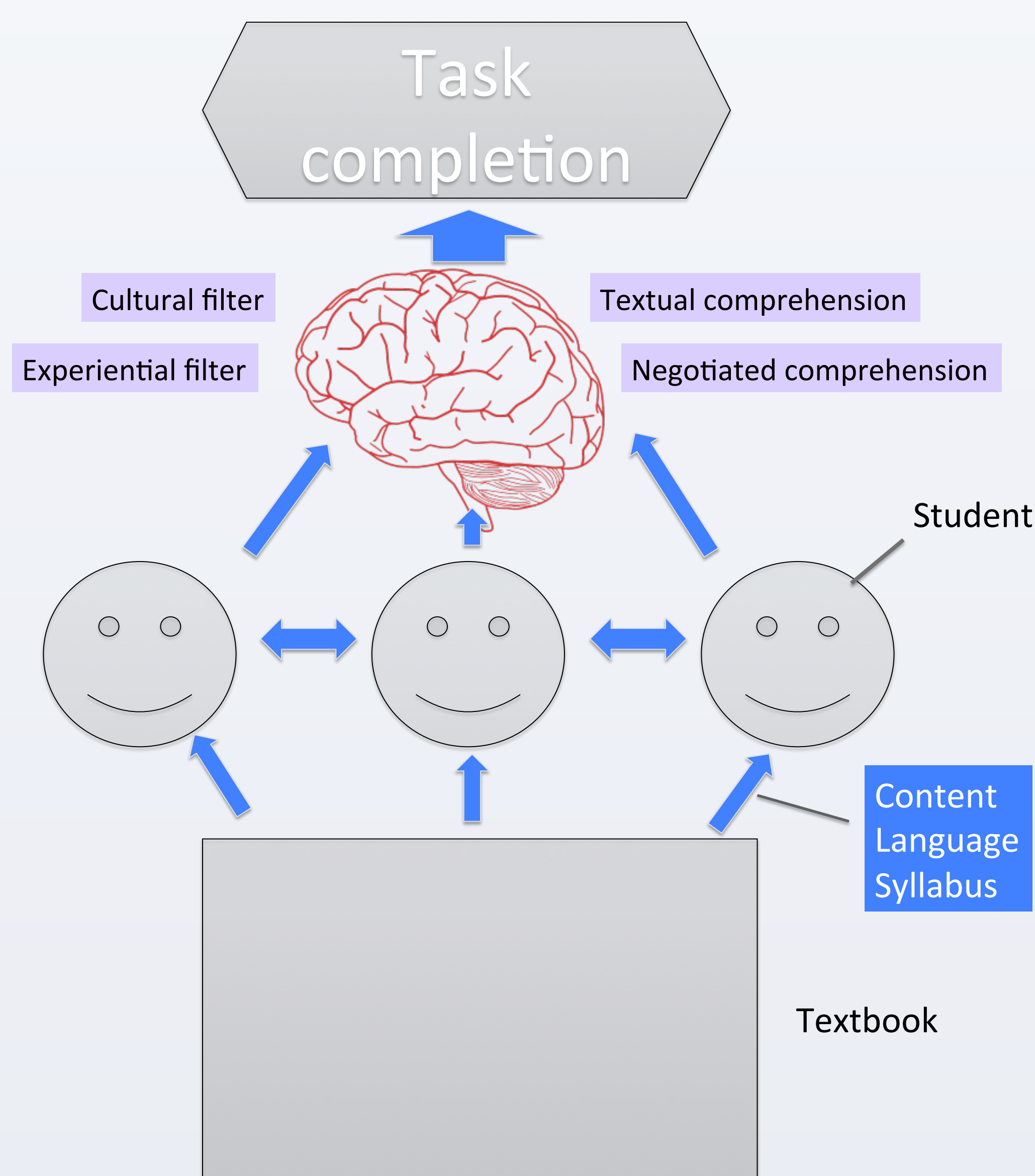
PROCESSES IN LEARNING

Fig.1: Conventional textbook to task completion in CLT lesson

Fig.2: Textbook to task completion in *staging the textbook* lesson

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data in the study were obtained from two case studies, one in Malaysia, and the other in New Zealand, in the form of reflective journals of the researchers, video and interviews, and analysed using critical reflection in a reflective practice framework (e.g. in Cunningham, 2001; Zwozdiak-Myers (2011) (Fig.3). This was also supplemented by the Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist taken from Jones (2009, p. 31), which enabled the researcher to holistically gauge the level of engagement the students displayed when carrying out a teaching and learning activity. Additionally, students' written output was assessed using a Jacobs Scale (Jacobs et al., 1981) that had been modified to include three arts-based criteria: aesthetics, creativity, and relation to drama.
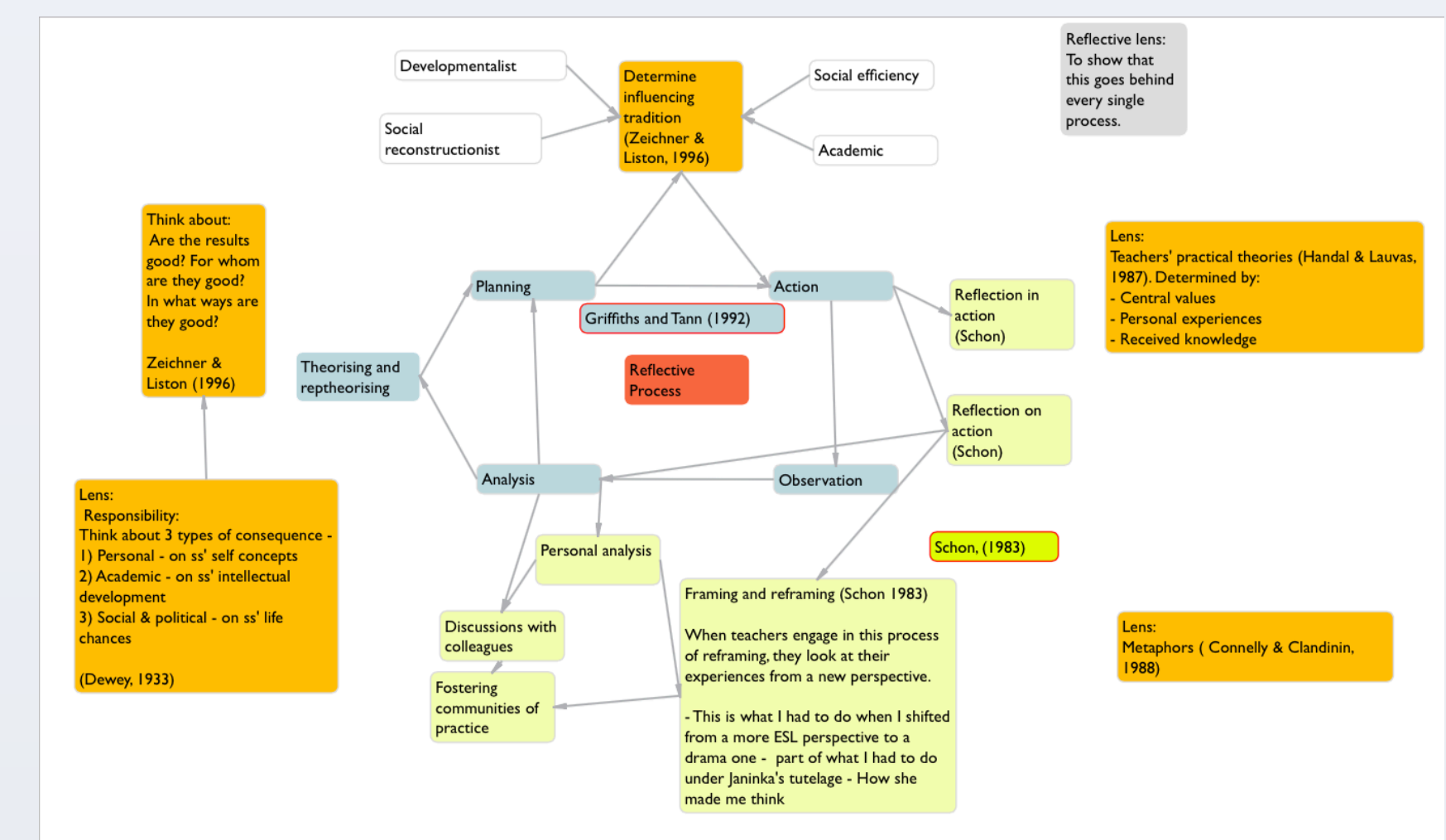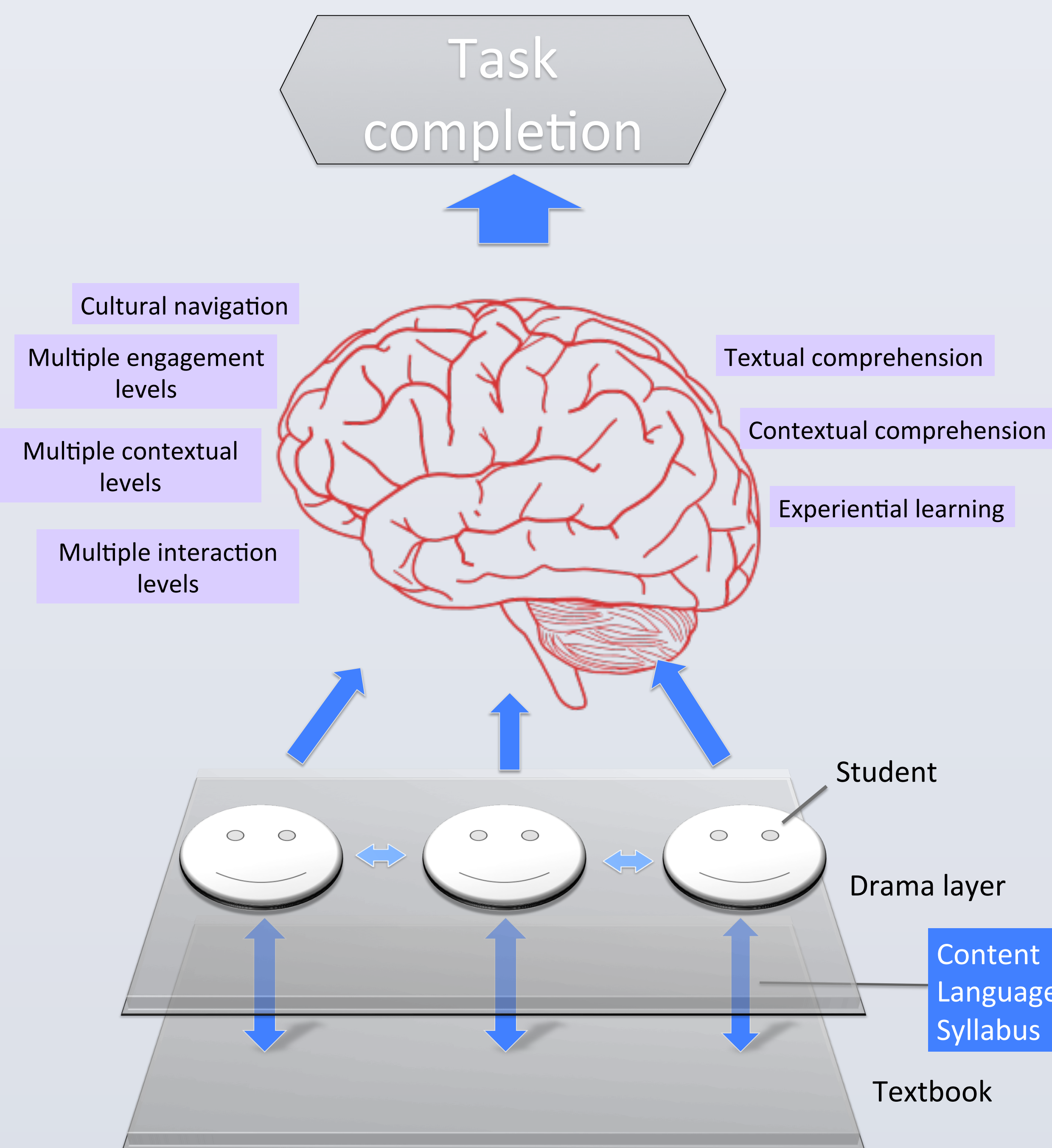

Fig.3: Reflective practice framework

FINDINGS

The findings indicated that the prescribed syllabus was able to be taught by staging the textbook, and that after two lessons, the students were able to adapt and thrive in their learning. Moreover, teacher planning time fell within an acceptable range, comparative to a well-planned CLT lesson.

SIGNIFICANCE/IMPLICATIONS

The study is relevant to the Malaysian context, as it provides teachers with an alternative research-based teaching methodology that weaves together the textbook and drama. This is achieved without the need to sacrifice cohesion of planned syllabus, while supplementing the learning unit with rich context. Furthermore, the study illustrates the application of a reflective practice model, as part of ongoing teacher development and lifelong learning.

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