

From segregated to integrated language skills: weaving speaking and writing to improve productive output

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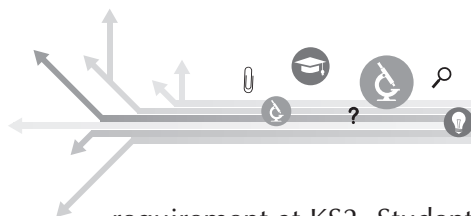
Despite spending a lot of efforts to design tasks and develop students' writing skills, a number of students were still at below-average attainment. In order to examine critically the problems, teachers of Hong Kong South District Government Primary School (HKSDGPS) analysed the writing part in the assessment papers of primary 5. Apart from the common identified writing errors such as subject-verb agreement, parts of speech, countable and uncountable nouns, modals, easily confused words and running sentences, some important findings were identified as follows:

- Students could generally produce the required length of the writing tasks but there were problems of grammar, spelling and sentence patterns.
- The incorrect use of language patterns was traceable to L1 interference. Literal translation from Chinese was generally found e.g. She is like to eat chocolates. I very like to go to Ocean Park.
- Limited repertoire of vocabulary and sentence patterns hindered students' understanding and performance in writing tasks
- The lack of confidence and motivation to write and elaborate ideas might be attributed to the limited proficiency of English

The problems identified triggered the teachers to reflect on their current practices in curriculum planning, learning and teaching strategies. To translate reflections into actions, support officer worked with P5 teachers to find out the problems. It was found that students had been too used to answering the guiding questions given to complete the writing tasks. They seldom had opportunities to try and construct their own sentence patterns. The pre-writing brainstorming was usually brief as students were expected to use the guiding questions. Some of them found it difficult to write with only picture cues. Besides, there was a lack of using pictorial cues and imaginations to elaborate ideas.

In view of this, attempts are made to improve students' language output by merging speaking with writing. Speaking and writing are both productive skills and it is commonly believed that students with good speaking skills usually have good writing skills and vice versa. Florenz and Hadaway (1987) state that oral language development can have an effect on writing behavior, though the oral language proficiency scores may not indicate what to expect from students in writing tasks. The vocabulary and language patterns learned in speaking can be transferred to writing and so vice versa. By and large, research suggests that the transference between spoken and written skills is in place.

Students with good writing skills could write simple descriptions and narrations coherently with supporting details. They should also demonstrate good language skills by using a range of vocabulary, sentence patterns and cohesive devices. This is similar to the Level 3 of Basic Competency speaking



requirement at KS2. Students can provide and/or exchange simple information and ideas, and attempt to provide some elaboration (L3-S-3-P6BC). They can use a small range of vocabulary, sentence patterns and cohesive devices to convey simple information and ideas fairly appropriately (L3-S-4-P6BC). This includes associated skills including knowledge of vocabulary and grammar which are interwoven in the speaking and writing tasks.

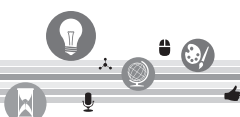
Planning of speaking and writing tasks

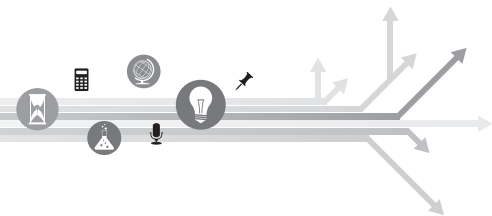
Narrative texts such as stories, recounts and descriptions were identified from textbooks and web materials. Pictures were usually used as learning materials. Instead of giving guiding questions to support students, the features and structures of the spoken/written texts were briefly introduced. In the pre-writing stage, word web was constructed to build vocabulary. Sentence patterns might be introduced as well. Students discussed the pictures with partners or groups. They would present their ideas to the whole class before individual writing. The other students were expected to listen and take notes where appropriate.

In the while-writing stage, students would focus and organize ideas from the discussion in class before attempting the writing. Students should be encouraged to take notes of the vocabulary items and sentence patterns discussed or contributed by classmates in the speaking task. They should make good use of them in their writing task.

In the post-writing stage, students were expected to peer-correct or self-edit their own writing piece. The appreciation part was most important. Teachers might choose some writing text or parts of them to discuss with the class so that students would know what is required for a good piece of writing. The following table displays the different stages and process of the speaking and writing task.

| Stages | Process | Data collection methods |
|---------------|---|---|
| Pre-writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce the features and structures of the text Build up the vocabulary and sentence patterns with word-web Generate ideas and discuss in pair or groups Present the generated ideas to the class (speaking) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diagnostic data collected from internal and external assessment Student interviews conducted and questionnaires collected to understand students' attitude to English learning and writing Classroom observation conducted to know what goes on in the speaking/writing lessons Looking at student work to engage teachers in pedagogical exchanges for the enhancement of English language learning with specific reference to develop students' writing skills |
| While-writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus and organise ideas before attempting the writing Use the vocabulary items and sentence patterns discussed and contributed in the pre-writing process (note-taking of the necessary content in the speaking process should be encouraged to develop their independent learning) | |
| Post-writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer-correcting or self-editing Review and correct the individual writing Appreciate the good writing components | |





Reflection on curriculum development

During the pre-writing stage, instead of giving a lot of guiding questions as support to writing, students have to choose from a variety of information and construct their own writing. From an interview of students, it was found that students answered the guiding questions in writing like attempting comprehension questions. Thorough guidance to tackle the guiding questions prior to writing task may hamper students' motivation to construct their own ideas. Besides students need to organize ideas and apply what they have learnt.

The speaking component in the pre-writing activities in terms of constructing vocabulary word-web, pair/group discussion and the presentation of ideas in class provide sufficient language input to support students' writing. To help students become familiar with the vocabulary and sentence pattern needed for the writing tasks, opportunities are created for them to apply the knowledge in presenting and writing the script. As students are required to take notes in the process of the pre-writing activities, this encourages students to develop study skills. Since the process of discussion followed by note-taking has given students ideas and input for the writing tasks, they have become more active and confident in writing. Self-editing and peer corrections are conducted as post-writing activities. In the process, students are required to proof-read their own writing as well as their peers' writing. They have seldom done that in the past but the self/peer editing is important to help students revise their work.

As motivation and ability are twins and each reinforces the other, the support given to help students write can raise their motivation. It is hoped that the learning and teaching materials designed will lead to an improvement in students' writing skills. When they see their improvement, their motivation to write more will be boosted.

Merging of speaking and writing task would take up more time than the regular writing lesson. The major constraints of limited time for preparing the learning and teaching materials as well as lesson time would imply that there might be a revamp in the tight teaching schedule.

References

1. The Curriculum Development Council. (2004). *English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-6)*. HKSAR.
2. Florez, V., & Hadaway, N. L. (1987). *Relationship of oral language proficiency and writing behaviours of secondary second language learners*. Paper presented at the Southwest Regional Conference of the International Reading Association. (15th, Phoenix, AZ, January 22-24, 1987)