



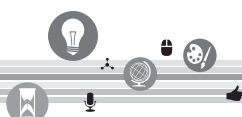
Developing skills and strategies for long term and immediate impact on Writing: raising the writing standards of KS1 students

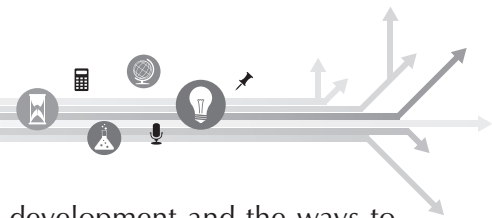
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Today, the concern for raising English standards is getting more and more attention from Hong Kong primary school teachers. The introduction of Territory-wide System Assessments (TSA) for P. 3 and P. 6; the scaling tool of Pre-Secondary One Hong Kong Attainment Test (Pre-S1 HKAT) for the new Form One entrants; the Medium of Instruction Policy (MOI) of secondary schools and Small Class Teaching policy (SCT), are current contextual forces that are shaping most schools' daily classroom learning, teaching and assessment. To maintain a good standard of English is crucial to our economic competitiveness for English is the language of business worldwide. Learning of the English language in schools is therefore a Government priority. Teachers feel the need to think about what they can do to help different groups of primary students to raise their standards of English especially on writing, which was identified as the most underdeveloped skill among all.

Adding TSA and Pre-S1 focused writing practice exercises has thus become a 'standard' practice among primary schools since 2004 to help different learners' achieve the basic competencies. However, over the years, some teachers have been questioning its effectiveness as it was observed from some school results that there had not been a significant increase in students' standards in writing. Though so much time and effort had been spent on increasing the frequency of writing, in particular for story writing, teachers did not see the impact on students' learning. Similar scenario happened to Bishop Walsh Primary School two years ago.

After a series of needs analysis of different batches of students at P.2 and P.3 conducted by the English Panel and the Support Officer, a detailed study about the existing English curriculum and the time allocated for the writing skills over the years, we found that writing was an area that we could develop further since reading had been the focus quite some years ago. Teachers also found that the writing performance of students was not satisfactory based on the evidence shown in TSAs and internal tests and examinations. Having shared with them some concrete examples from schools which have raised their reading and writing abilities of students after developing their school-based curriculum, the Panel began to have more confidence and faith that raising the writing standards of students was not an unattainable task if they knew there were strategies when using those TSA and Pre-S1 resources in the classroom and if they could focus on the batch of academically high and low achievers both inside and outside the classroom. Even the performance of very able pupils can plateau if they think they have reached the limits of their ability. Teachers have a role in stretching these students' ability. Therefore, our support plan also included these groups of learners. The first





step teachers took was to take a deeper look at students' writing skills development and the ways to support students who had difficulty in learning how to write.

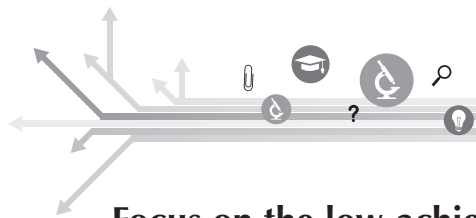
The Core Writing Curriculum

The planning, implementation and evaluation of writing strategies has been initiated in the school for P. 2 and 3 students since August 2010.

Teachers in Bishop Walsh noticed that students' writing content was very slim, not only that they totally lack ideas but they did not have enough vocabulary to express their thoughts. Students certainly needed more vocabulary and language input before they could write lengthier pieces with richer ideas. Teachers had a role to play here and they needed to draw on both students' previously learned language and those currently learned so that students could apply both in their writings instead of just using the currently learned structures in the current module which did not help them spiral learn the language. Learning was not connected in this way. Because of this, the design of **the writing task had to be school-based and initiated by front-line teachers who have first-hand information about their students' needs** instead of adopting tasks from the textbook. This posed a little adaptation problem at the beginning but teachers soon got over with this and found the outcomes fruitful as most students began to write more in terms of quantity and quality. Since teachers had identified earlier that students were not very good at writing narrative text types, the focus during these two years were on developing the languages and skills of writing more quality narratives like stories, fables and fairy tales.

Teachers **spent more time at the pre-writing stage on scaffolding students** with lists of **words, phrases and sentence starters and sentence patterns**. It is important that writing skills, such as **elaboration skills of growing or expanding a sentence by adding adjectives, adverbs and the Wh-elements (time, place etc.) in a sentence**; understanding of the basic structures e.g. Subject-verb-object; **giving reasons** using 'because'; **using dialogues with interjections** in story writing and expressing feelings whenever appropriate, had to be taught explicitly. It did not matter if these language structures and skills were repeated for a couple of times or even more since our students need time to consolidate those structures and skills in their minds before they can produce them in writing.

Teachers also **taught language structures through models**, including, a variety of reading texts, teachers' own writing and students' own writing. Teachers discussed clear objectives with pupils and provided meaningful feedback that helped them to achieve these goals. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) put it, 'Assessment is an ongoing process that occurs before, during, and after instruction is delivered. Effective teachers monitor student learning through the use of a variety of informal and formal assessments and offer meaningful feedback to students.'. **Feedback on content and ideas development, mini-lessons on sentence pattern building, and peer editing** were used to help students learn how to apply the learned structures and skills in their informal weekly writing tasks. Teachers also followed up closely on the writing performance of students in formal tests and examinations. It was found that students had raised their awareness in using different vocabulary and target language appropriately and had improved their writing skills.



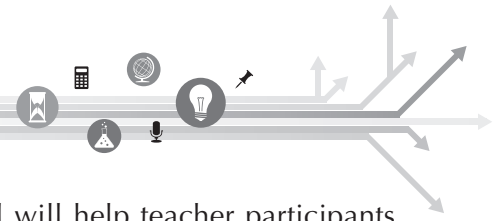
Focus on the low-achievers – helping them with extra attention and resources

As mentioned above, teachers and the support officer had already identified the batch of low achievers especially at P. 3 earlier on when we began to collaborate. This was very clear to us that they were still struggling with writing simple sentences accurately when they were asked to write simple stories. This missing block had to be dealt with before the overall standards in writing could be raised. From previous TSA analysis and school's internal assessment results, we well understood the percentage of students and who they were we needed to provide more support to. Teachers put forward a step and took initiatives to address the need of this less able group of students **both during class time and after-class remedial in small group contexts on a weekly basis.**

The whole school-based writing curriculum development process was challenging yet rewarding. It took teachers some time to make sure the writing curriculum fit in with the tight and packed teaching schedule. Teachers also found that catering for the needs of weak students was difficult at the beginning, especially when it came to **giving feedback to individual students even on an one-on-one basis in small groups and re-teach them the basic concepts of grammar.** However, all teachers agreed that the process had been very valuable and meaningful to their students' learning when they saw great improvements in students' writing performance in both internal and external assessments.

This experience has provided teachers with another view of supporting the low-achievers and pushing them forward. Teachers should strive to have a deep understanding of where their students are and **be focused and strategic in curriculum content design.** Neither adding writing tasks randomly to the curriculum content nor trimming down the textbooks is considered effective when it came to helping the less able students. Teachers in the school noticed that **reserving time to check students' learning progress in the whole-class and small group writing sessions are vital assessment-for-learning strategies** which are meaningful in the long run. The **pre-writing task of brainstorming ideas in groups was an indispensable strategy** as well to help cater for learner diversity in the writing classroom. **Peer conversation** facilitated the idea generation during the pre-writing stage. Less able students had a higher participation than just listening to teacher talk in the lesson. Teachers could do **timely small group feedback** when students were still engaged in their writing with their group members. This was the moment teachers could identify less able students and **give them personalized comments and encouragement.** Teachers also did **quality instant whole-class feedback** when they **compared and contrasted students' work.** As Black and William (1998) put it, *'Where pupils are given better quality support and feedback, and are encouraged and empowered to take more responsibility, they learn more effectively.'* Students took more responsibility to re-read their own pieces of writing, revised and edited their own work before they passed them on to their teachers for further comments. Teachers complimented on the points students had done well and feedback on areas for improvement so that they knew where they were and what the next step was. Nevertheless, giving students timely feedback in Hong Kong classroom context is a strategy that we all need to explore and develop further.





In this sharing session, teachers from Bishop Walsh Primary School will help teacher participants to gain an understanding of how students develop their writing skills; identify effective strategies to promote writing; explore techniques and materials to stimulate students' thinking; and learn that becoming a competent writer involves knowing and understanding the forms, functions and features of writing. A number of other school cases of how teachers attempt to improve students' writing will also be shared with teacher participants. Of course, teachers' efforts and dedication are definitely crucial factors for success in this attempt as they need to spend considerable time in giving constructive feedback to students. It is hoped that teacher participants could equip themselves with some strategies and adapt them to meet the learning needs of their students.

References

1. Black P., & William D. (1998). *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*. King's College London.
2. Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.