

# English Language Education Key Learning Area

## Towards a more genre-specific and interactive reading lesson

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In 2009, the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority and the University of Hong Kong conducted an analysis of Hong Kong students' reading problems by studying the Territory-wide System Assessment reading papers. Data about students' reading difficulties was collected through diagnostic tests, student interviews, teacher interviews and classroom observation. Report of this research study entitled the 'Study of Using Assessment Data to Enhance Learning and Teaching (English Language Education)' (Tong, 2009) shows that **students' small vocabulary size** and their **text type knowledge** are two major causes of Hong Kong students' reading difficulties in the reading process.

The report points out although Hong Kong primary students have been exposed to different text types such as stories, poems and emails in their curriculum, 'the text type knowledge in many testees was not always stable' (Tong, 2009, p.9) and 'many of them were not aware of specific functions of the various structural elements in a text'. The problem is not only found among Key Stage 1 students but also those in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

The teaching of genres or text types has been in Hong Kong for many years. The Curriculum Development Council (CDC) Curriculum Guide 2004 has indicated: 'It is important to introduce a variety of text types to learners at primary level. Conscious learning and explicit teaching of different text types enable learners to become more effective readers and proficient language users' (CDC, 2004, p.15). Over the last 10 years, many schools and teachers have made deliberate efforts to provide students with exposure and experience to a broad array of text types. Findings of this University of Hong Kong research study feedback to schools that providing exposure and experience might not be enough for Hong Kong students.



The reading problems identified above are common in many Hong Kong schools and SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School teachers have responded to those problems with actions. They have started a School-based curriculum with more attention on vocabulary and text type knowledge. They have adopted a more text-type specific teaching practice in their reading lessons and the principles they have been upholding are as follows:

- Deliberate efforts on vocabulary specific to particular genres
- Explicit teaching of genre-specific reading strategies
- Increasing students' interaction with text
- Catering for learner diversity using homogeneous grouping and heterogeneous grouping

### **Deliberate efforts on vocabulary specific to particular genre**

One of the reading difficulties is the students' fear of facing overwhelming number of vocabulary. Teachers noticed that one possible way to tackle the issue is creating a link between vocabulary and text types. Heightening students' awareness of this connection lowers students' anxiety of facing a large number of vocabulary each time they read a new text. A sense of security can be created if students can predict the vocabulary they will see in the coming literary texts and this experience makes them understand that their vocabulary knowledge is transferrable from one piece of reading to another under similar text type category. For instance, for the text type of **posters**, teachers include vocabulary items and collocations like *activities, competition, information, application form, winners, date, come and join us*. In **emails**, words and expressions like *subject, from, to, I want to, I don't want to, subject, How about you*, are commonly found. In reading information text like **world records**, students have to be familiar with phrases like *'hold a world record', 'the world's biggest', 'the world's lightest', 'the heaviest in the world', 'It is about... metres high/long', 'the heaviest... weigh... kg'*.

Additionally, in selecting the genre-specific vocabulary, the school has also given **collocation** a prominent place in the school-based curriculum. 'Collocation is the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency' (Lewis, 1998, p.8). Lewis pointed to two important pedagogical values of collocation. First, students would learn that English words are not normally used alone for real communication purposes. English words often form meaning with their partner-words. Second, it is more efficient for second language learners to learn the whole typical language pattern and break it into parts, than to learn the parts and sequentially have to learn the whole. Therefore, in the process of school-based curriculum development, teachers do not restrict themselves to single words, they would pick language chunks



like *the night before*, *not in the mood*, *surf the Net*, *makes me laugh*, *a sense of humour*, *world record* from students' reading. The selection reflects teachers' deep understanding of how language is used in the real world communication.

Apart from genre-specific vocabulary approach, teachers in SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School agreed that their students' weakness in vocabulary could also be explained by students' minimal exposure to English in their daily life and their lack of motivation and knowledge to develop self-regulating habits to learn new words and phrases by themselves. Therefore in the new school-based curriculum, teachers make vocabulary learning an important component of their English language curriculum. Deployment of self study tools like dictionaries, establishing a strong connection between reading and vocabulary learning and putting vocabulary in assessments are other curriculum initiatives to consolidate students' understanding of the meaning, the part of speech and the context of using a new vocabulary item.

### **Explicit teaching of forms and features of different genres**

A text type or a genre is defined as 'a recurring and recognizable communication with particular communicative purposes and particular features to accomplish those purposes' (Duke, Caughian, Juzwik, & Matin, 2012, p.6). Yet, in a second language learning context like Hong Kong, students' exposure to different text types in English is far from adequate. The low-level of exposure is certainly not 'recurring' and thus teachers do not expect students to regard them as a 'recognizable' form of communication. While some publishers have tried to incorporate many text types into their textbooks, the sporadic arrangement and the limited curriculum time do not allow students to recognize the patterns and regularities of language in different text types. SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School teachers realized that their students, who have grown up with minimal experience of reading different text types in English, need **systematic, explicit and recurring exposure** to a manageable size of text types. In other words, teachers would select particular text types and their corresponding forms and features are taught very clearly to students. For instance, in the teaching of **a play**, its specific format features like stage direction, its division of different parts into scenes, and the special way of content arrangement are focuses of the reading lessons. For the text type of **emails**, the basic features, such as sender, recipient and subject, and format of organization in the order of greeting, beginning, body, ending and closing are taught explicitly to students. In teaching the genre of **posters**, teachers pay special attention to genre-specific features including purposes, venue, date, time, dress code and fee. Additionally, teachers have arranged the school-based curriculum in a way that their students have more than one chance of reading a similar text type.



With a special school-based text type booklet, ***students can read one kind of text type for many times until the features of a text type can retain a longer imprint on their mind.***

### **Explicit teaching of genre-specific reading strategies**

Recent research of reading suggests that readers generally engage in specific reading processes when reading different kinds of texts (Duke & Roberts, 2010). When reading academic essays, people tend to use sentence by sentence reading skills such that they can integrate the current sentence with the previous information they read in text. However, this reading skill is seldom applied in daily information text which requires readers to get information quickly and scanning and nonlinear reading skills would help to fulfill the purpose. Also, when reading narratives, readers need to read with plenty knowledge of the world, do prediction, and are eager to look ahead for the endings. If teachers can identify the different reading skills needed for different text types, students would benefit more in terms of reading efficiency and effectiveness.

In SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School, teachers have attempted to integrate the different text types and the related reading skills with a view to equipping students with the necessary reading strategies to tackle each text type. In the teaching of a ***narrative poem***, teachers guided students to visualize the meaningful story in the poem by engaging students in different roles of the poem using props, pictures, gestures, facial expressions and sound effects. Teachers observed that the practice helped performing students to develop thorough understanding of the poem because they could use different media to represent their understanding and at the same time audience students could see the development of the story through witnessing the content of poem being brought to live stanza by stanza. In teaching a ***biography***, teachers noted that the teaching of main ideas and supporting details helped students to see the organization of the writing in which the achievement of a person is often followed by details of the hard work or difficulties the successful person has experienced. Also, teachers have found that mind-maps differentiating topic sentences and supporting details would support students to see clearly how a writer deploys various levels of information to substantiate a main idea. In the teaching of a ***poster***, scanning reading skills would fit in because in the real world people scan a non-linear text to get the most important and useful information in the shortest period of time, rather than using linear reading skill. Teachers would use competitions to create time pressure for students such that they would have no choice but use the scanning technique to read the messages in posters. The thinking process and the time limit would mirror real world reading demand. In the process, teachers have concluded that simply teaching the differing features of different text types is not enough to create impact on students' reading



comprehension proficiency. Students must have enough exposure of the same kind of text type, real interaction with text and strong motivation to read if students' improvements on reading have to sustain.

### **Increasing students' interaction with text**

The genre-based approach of reading instruction has been in practice in Australia for some years. One criticism against the highly genre-specific approach of reading instruction has been the possibility of an over-focus on text forms and features (Duke & Roberts, 2010, p.81). To make sure that there is deep understanding of the reading text alongside with explicit teaching of genre forms and features, teachers in SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School tried to incorporate different kinds of interactive reading activities in reading classrooms. While reading a narrative poem, students were guided to **enliven their visual images** by using props, gestures, sounds, facial expressions and pictures. Through the activity of explicitizing the content of a poem, teachers noticed that students showed deep understanding of some complicated ideas. In reading information text of world records, students' reading motivation got fuelled up after teachers **created a link between students' life with the remote text** by compiling a class record and comparing it to the world record they have read. In addition, in **discussing** the main idea of paragraphs in various biographies, students themselves found out that all great people underwent some hardship before they succeeded. After reading a poster, students had to present information they read with a view to increasing students' understanding of text through **activating their different senses, including speaking and listening**.

A small-scale action research was conducted to see students' response to the new pedagogy which has encouraged more student interaction with texts. The findings suggest that students displayed preference for this kind of teaching practice, had greater confidence of their understanding of the text and most importantly students showed better retention of the vocabulary and content knowledge which they have learned from the reading text. It is hoped that the skills obtained in each of the text-type can be transferred to another reading experience as reading comprehension is best seen as a collection of processes.



## Cater for learner diversity using homogeneous grouping and heterogeneous grouping

Also, it is not uncommon to find that less able students make very little progress in the reading lesson. Struggling readers usually hide behind stronger students or other students and they often leave reading lessons without much understanding of a text. Facing this challenge, teachers in SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School tried both homogeneous grouping and heterogeneous grouping to facilitate weak students' understanding of different texts. In reading posters, teachers put students into different ability groups after identifying core skills and vocabulary items to be taught. In small groups, teachers found that homogeneous grouping would allow their efficient intervention to weaker students and increase their understanding of individual students' reading needs. Heterogeneous grouping activities would help to boost students' motivation to read for both weak and strong students if they are designed carefully.

In this sharing session, teachers from SKH Tin Shui Wai Ling Oi Primary School will share with audience their experience of using the above mentioned strategies in their reading classes. Classroom videos, student work, research analysis and assessment findings will be shared. It is hoped that their experience could give audience some new thoughts on how reading lessons could be planned and implemented using a more genre-specific and interactive approach.

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