

# Enhancing a smooth interface between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 in the English Language Education

Mr CHIANG Kwun-man, Ken (Senior School Development Officer)

Mr NG Ka-lok (St. Francis Xavier's College)

## Introduction

The transition from primary to secondary schools can pose challenges for students as the teaching environment, the teaching approaches and the curriculum are very different in secondary schools compared to primary schools and students have difficulty adjusting to these changes (Galton & Hargreaves, 2002). To help students cope with the challenges they may face in the new school environment, it is common for secondary schools to organise a bridging programme for their S1 newcomers. In recent years, there has been a strong awareness that early preparation would facilitate a better transition for students and some primary schools have taken the initiative to offer bridging programmes or bridging units for students in the last few weeks or months of the primary schooling. However, it has been argued that the transition from primary to secondary school is a long term process and that planning for transfer needs to start in primary schools and continue through the secondary years (Osborn, McNess, & Pollard, 2006). Apart from making use of a bridging programme to ease students' transition problems from primary to secondary schools, what can primary school teachers do to better prepare students for the changes at an earlier stage?

## Effective strategies to enhance the interface

Various studies suggest discontinuities in the curricula and pedagogical approaches of primary and secondary schools adversely affect students' academic performance (Galton, Gray, & Rudduck, 1999). Therefore, an effective transition should guarantee continuity and progression in students' learning. To smooth the transition process for students, three strategies are suggested:

1. To ensure curriculum continuity to prepare students for the academic requirements in secondary schools
2. To adjust pedagogical practices to enhance pedagogical continuity and prepare students for the change
3. To help students develop learning strategies to promote independent learning

Different schools have tried out these strategies to prepare students for their secondary education and found them effective. In this presentation, the following school-based examples will be shared to illustrate how these effective strategies are put into practice:



## **Infusing language arts and non-language arts components into the curriculum**

One unique feature of the NSS curriculum is the introduction of eight elective modules in which different forms of language arts and non-language arts texts are used as a medium for teaching and learning English. To equip students for the literacy demands of the NSS curriculum, some secondary schools try to lay a solid foundation for their students in their junior years of schooling through the strategic infusion of language arts and non-language arts components into the junior secondary English Language curriculum, and some basic yet essential knowledge and skills required in the elective modules that the schools are likely to offer in their NSS curricula are infused into different textbook units starting from S1.

To ensure curriculum continuity between the primary and secondary curriculum, language arts and non-language arts elements can be strategically infused into the primary English Language curriculum through effective integration of Reading Workshops with the GE Programme. For instance, language arts materials such as poems, songs and short stories can be integrated with suitable textbook units to help students develop basic knowledge and skills in interpreting, appreciating, responding to literary work or fiction while non-language arts texts can be used in relevant units to develop students' simple analytical skills like identifying problems and solutions and causal relationships.

On top of curriculum mapping, a wider variety of post-reading tasks and activities can be designed to facilitate the learning of the above-mentioned knowledge and skills. For example, a story plot structure diagram can be introduced to help students analyse how story elements such as rising action and climax are used to create stories. More thought provoking activities that go beyond the recognition of text features like rhyming words or alliteration can be developed to guide students to interpret and respond to the hidden messages of poems and songs. Graphic organisers can also be employed to develop students' awareness of expository text structures including comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution. In mapping the curriculum more coherently and developing a wider range of reading tasks, schools can secure for their students a smoother transition to the Junior Secondary and NSS English Language curriculum.

## **Fostering vocabulary building skills**

Vocabulary is essential for developing students' English proficiency in terms of the four language skills. The lack of sufficient vocabulary is often one of the greatest obstacles to learning English as students move up to higher grade levels where they need a wide range of vocabulary to express complicated ideas in speaking and writing and understand, infer and interpret complex reading and listening texts. They are also expected to understand different aspects of words and how they are



used in public examinations such as HKDSE, in particular Paper 1(Reading). To help students build a strong working vocabulary to cope with the demands of their studies, teaching vocabulary is more than simply presenting new words on a word list and having students memorise them. Students do need to be more conscious of vocabulary learning and learn more ways to acquire new words by themselves to expand their vocabulary and to retain them in an effective way.

According to the English Language Curriculum Guide (P1-6) (Curriculum Development Council, 2004), helping learners to acquire and consolidate various vocabulary building skills is a particularly productive area for the encouragement of learner autonomy for it can enhance self-learning of vocabulary items. Introducing vocabulary building skills starting from primary school level is thus a worthy endeavour. Primary school teachers can systematically infuse the teaching of a range of vocabulary building skills such as compounding, derivation, affixation and word association including synonyms, antonyms and homonyms into the core English curriculum. Relevant vocabulary building skills can be selected from textbook units where good examples are found and a planning tool can be used to ensure a balanced coverage of different vocabulary skills within and across levels.

Apart from planning what vocabulary building skills should be taught, teachers should look into the design of activities to promote vocabulary learning. Vocabulary-focused activities should go beyond memorising, matching pictures with words or definitions. Instead, they should facilitate students to retrieve, apply and retain vocabulary learned by employing vocabulary building skills learned. Providing students with a meaningful context to apply a range of adjectives to describe their family members and classmates with supporting details using selected adjectives and the concept of prefixes, synonyms and antonyms around the theme 'Relationships' is one example of helping students to retrieve and draw on the vocabulary learned. Reorganising word banks for students to remember meaningful chunks and vocabulary words through semantic elaboration, collocations and lexical phrases (Sokmen, 1997) instead of providing wordlists for them to memorise discrete vocabulary items around the theme is an effective strategy that leads to better retention of vocabulary learned.

### **Explicit teaching of reading strategies**

Other than vocabulary building skills, secondary school students need to be equipped with good reading skills to broaden their learning through reading a broad spectrum of texts in different subjects. However, reading to learn does not always happen effectively due to the fact that students often have problems in understanding what they read, which in turn affects how they interact with what they read.



As National Reading Panel (2000) and Pressley (2000) point out, explicitly teaching students even one strategy for comprehending a text can improve their comprehension. To enable primary students to become more effective readers, they should be taught reading strategies more explicitly starting from their junior years. This not only facilitates learning to read but also reading to learn. With better preparation, reading to learn will happen more effectively among students and they will be better prepared for their journey through senior secondary where they have to engage in reading across the curriculum.

To some, enabling students to read effectively is challenging as reading itself is a thinking process, which can be very complex and being able to think logically during reading does not happen automatically. Think aloud is often considered an effective way for teachers to demonstrate to students how to think when reading. However, some primary students may find it hard just to hear their teacher think through a text. Students' needs can be better catered for if they can see the teacher's thinking and how she makes connections in the text. To model the thinking process for students explicitly, teachers can adopt syntax surgery, which is a way to show learners what good readers do when interacting with the text through lifting text and providing notation during a think-aloud. Through using codes and lifting text, students can see and hear the strategies and skills of reading as the thinking is mapped out on the text (Beers, 2003). With constant practice with the teacher, students can learn how to think as they read and they can continue reading with understanding on their own.

### **Connecting reading and writing through text analysis**

In secondary schools, students are expected to write compositions that are lengthier and richer in content. However, teachers often complain that students' compositions are "rich" in mistakes but deficient in substance, let alone elaboration and organisation of ideas. To address this issue, teachers often train students to make good use of the reading input when attempting their writing tasks so as to promote the transfer and application of knowledge and skills. To help students see that reading and writing are not two separate entities, a pedagogy that primary school teachers could adopt is to establish a closer link between reading and writing.

As there is a strong connectedness between reading and writing, numerous reading to write and writing to read activities can be used to facilitate students to develop literacy skills (Hirvela, 2004). To promote reading to write, teachers can design activities that require students to explore the meaningful connections between what they have read and what they are going to write. Since reading provides a rich source of linguistic and rhetorical input for writing, the connection between reading and writing will enable students to acquire vocabulary, grammatical structures of rhetorical



features of text and then transfer them to writing. One way of going about it is to guide students to unpack information using graphic organizers to facilitate reading (text deconstruction) and repack information using graphic information to facilitate writing (text reconstruction).

To take writing a diary as an example, when teachers plan to ask students to write a diary, they should first let students read a diary before engaging them in writing one. Through reading the diary with students, teachers can guide them to analyse the diary with an organiser to find out its organizing framework and deconstruct it by digging out the resources that they can transfer to their writing such as the overall organization of a diary, vocabulary, grammar items like the simple past tense, time sequencers, and useful sentence patterns. When guiding students to write, teachers can ask students to organise and generate their ideas using the same organizing framework to plan their diaries and encourage them to use the language resources they have dug out to enrich their diaries.

This presentation aims to enhance teachers' understanding of the differences and similarities between learning and teaching in primary and secondary schools and provide suggestions on how to enhance the interface between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 in the English Language education through sharing various strategies adopted in different schools. Participants will be able to gain more ideas about how to support the interface through videos, student work and school-based teaching and learning materials.

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