

English Language E04 / E09

Area: Curriculum, Reading, Writing

Title: Butterfly Metamorphosis: Our Road of Transformation from Planning a Module to Shaping a Vertical Curriculum in KS1

**Speakers: Ms WONG Kit-mei, Gladys (Senior School Development Officer)
Ms CHAN Sai-ling, Carol, Ms SO Man-yee,
Ms MAK Yuen-yee, Candy, Ms LEUNG Kim-mei, Kimmy,
Ms NG Sau-man, Serina
(Conservative Baptist Lui Ming Choi Primary School)**

Metamorphosis – a transformation process

Have you ever witnessed how a caterpillar grows into a colourful butterfly? Have you ever stopped to ponder how amazing the nature is to transform an ordinary, if not ugly, caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly?

The same miraculous transformation occurs not only in the natural world, but also in a local primary school. Conservative Baptist Lui Ming Choi Primary School recruited students from families of low socio-economic status with little support in English learning. With the concerted effort of the team of professional English teachers, something thought as a dream was made to come true. Our little caterpillars grew into beautiful butterflies. They are much more willing to take risks in applying English in various tasks. They are much better prepared to take up challenging tasks to use English for a purpose. They have attained a higher reading level. They are capable of writing with quantity and quality. What makes this so?

Metamorphosis – the caterpillar stage

Everything started three years ago. English was almost a foreign or even an alien language to our students. These two scenes were commonly seen in the school campus.

Scene I: In the English classroom

(In Cantonese)

“I don’t like English lessons. Don’t understand what the teachers are saying!”

“What? Write 80 words? OMG! I’ve just written 26 words..”

“The English lessons are so boring!”

Scene II: In an English co-planning meeting

(In Cantonese mixed with English terms)

“Well, the exam results are as expected. The able students always perform well while the less able ones do poorly every time. They seem unteachable.”

“I’ve told the students everything in lessons but they seem to remember nothing.”

“Yes, even when they remember the stuff this Unit. They will immediately forget what they have been taught when we start a new Unit.”

Both teachers and students were frustrated. Teachers found they ‘had done’ their part while on the other hand, students did not learn what ‘was taught’. The English lessons were a torture to both parties.

Earnestly looking for the way out, teachers were attracted by various initiatives like the PRPL_W Programme and the process writing approach. All these initiatives are effective in one way or another but directly transplanting them into the curriculum and the learning process without any selection and adaptation resulted in a bulky package, yet ineffective in enhancing student learning.

Metamorphosis – the pupa stage

No pain, no gain! The painful lessons learnt three years ago made teachers even more determined to look into the core of the problem. We glanced through literature to refresh and update ourselves on what researchers said about learning and how to help students learn better. Piaget (1972) suggested that knowledge was constructed through a process of problem solving activities. Children learn when they search for solutions through continuous interaction with the environment. Bruner (1996) built on what Piaget had said and pointed out that learning was an active and social process. Students formed new ideas and concepts based on their current or previous knowledge and experiences. The knowledge or schemas then formed a cognitive structure in the learners’ minds, which helped them organize and make sense of these experiences to form new concepts. In the process of knowledge generation, learning peers played an important role. They interacted with each other and inspired each other. New ideas were shared and new knowledge and concepts were formed. Learners benefited in the whole process. Teachers were no longer transmitters or controllers of knowledge. They should play the role of facilitators instead to provide students with support and guidance in the learning process.

What Piaget and Bruner had said is pointing to a learner-centred approach, in which learners are enabled to play an active role in the learning process. Task-based teaching approach, which also encourages active participation, fits well here to realize these concepts into the learning and teaching process. In his book, Nunan (2004, p.4) suggested that pedagogical tasks should be conducted frequently in the English classrooms because they can ‘*involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their knowledge in order to express meaning*’. His ideas echoes well with the principles upheld in the Curriculum Guide for Primary English Education in Hong Kong (The Curriculum Development Council, 2004), which encourages teachers to design tasks to enable students to acquire the language knowledge and skills in context and use English with a purpose. Nunan further elaborated his views on tasks that the tasks designed should take into consideration learners’ prior knowledge and experiences. When learners engage in and reflect on sequences of tasks, intellectual growth occurs. Students are generating new knowledge when they get things done or solve certain problems. Besides, he encouraged teachers to put these learning tasks in good order to form a task-based learning framework. He based his suggestion on the findings that English is not learnt in the way that one item was grasped perfectly before proceeding to the next item, as what people in the old days believed. But rather, second language learners are always in an ‘unstable’ situation (Ellis, 1994), in which learners learn several items ‘imperfectly’ and often ‘simultaneously’ and the whole process involves learning and unlearning certain items at different stages.

Metamorphosis – the radical transformation into a butterfly

The current views on knowledge construction have inspired us to re-think our curriculum design and practice in the classrooms. Learners or students should be placed at the centre of the stage while teachers are at the backstage to work as facilitators to enable and ensure learning to occur.

Putting the theories into practice, we inaugurated our 4As project. *Activating* students' *prior knowledge* is our first 'A' concern as knowing what they have learnt enable design of quality teaching materials. Classroom activities need to be as engaging as possible to involve students' *active participation* and enable them to *apply* the learnt *knowledge* for a purpose. Both the learning and assessment tasks will be challenging enough to build in our students a sense of *achievement* and identify areas for improvement. The 4As were purposefully infused in planning our curriculum, in incorporating learning activities in the English classrooms and shaping our vertical reading and writing curriculum.

Planning our school-based curriculum and shaping the vertical continuity (KS1)

The School has adopted the PLPR_W programme for a number of years and teachers find most of the tasks interesting enough to motivate their students to learn. They also agree to the rationales that small children need to learn from copying before they can create. Yet, teachers also found that students' performance in writing fell short of their expectation. We then discovered that the vocabulary and sentence structures suggested in the textbooks would help students to form grammatical sentences, in which their ideas could be conveyed. A systematic learning of these vocabulary and structures will enable the activation of previous knowledge. Therefore, we decided to revamp the KS1 curriculum with the suggestions in the textbook forming the backbone of the curriculum while the PLPR_W readers and the phonics curriculum were integrated.

In our presentation, we will show the audience how we realize the principles of task-based learning and teaching into the formation of learning modules, comprising thematically or conceptually related units. We will share the strategies we used to organize the tasks in a P.2 module in which two readers, one from the PLPR_W Programme (*At the Beach*) and the other one from a commercial publisher (*The Ants Have a Picnic*) were integrated to facilitate the teaching of grammar in context and provide an interesting ground for the development of reading and higher order thinking skills. Diagnostic tasks were established as formative assessment device to help inform teachers of their students' prior knowledge, which were then activated in the process. The learning tasks were planned and carefully scaffold to gear to the final output task, in which students were enabled to attempt writing a recount, which was certainly a challenge to P.2 students. Student works will be shared too. The same principles and rationales were used in building modules in all the other levels. We will display the modules and wish to gauge your precious opinions for further improvement.

The scaffolding of tasks within a module is important to facilitate effective learning. The coherence built across the modules in a level and the subsequent shaping of a vertical curriculum is equally important as students will be able to accumulate their knowledge systematically. Hence, we will also share with you how we built our vertical writing curriculum. We adopted a bottom-up approach, which involved all the members of the English department.

Engaging students in the English classrooms

Good planning does not necessarily guarantee good harvests. The implementation process is the determining factor. Teachers have long grumbled about the bored faces they met in the reading lessons, in which the flow of the lessons had been somehow normalized to be either teacher or students reading aloud paragraph by paragraph, which was then followed by loads of comprehension questions. Students were requested to check the difficult words at home the night before. The result was a series of smooth yet boring lessons because the more responsible students knew everything beforehand while the less responsible ones could not follow the lessons well. Besides, teachers found that the lessons only focused on getting a very basic understanding of the text, not to mention the gist or hidden messages the writer wished to convey. In this regard, we have worked on integrating the teaching of reading skills like grasping the main idea through identifying the key words and even the higher thinking skills like interpreting the writers' or speakers' intentions. Fun group activities have been designed to enable students to think behind the scene. For instance, we will show you how the P.2 students interpret the morning greetings said by the Big Bad Wolf to the poor Little Red based on the original story. Thinking bubbles have been introduced to help students to think beyond the literal meaning conveyed in the speech bubbles and show their interpretations.

We all agree that teaching of grammar is extremely important in learning English as a second language. The central curriculum suggests that grammar is best learnt in context. But what is a context? Should we teach grammar rules? How can we help our students understand these rules? In our presentation, we will share with you how we taught simple past tense in the P.3 classrooms using the reading text in the textbook as the context. The growth of Le Le from a baby to a grown up panda was portrayed through picking relevant sentences from the text. Students were guided to attend to the different forms of verbs used in these sentences and speculate on what incurs such differences. Here the function of simple past tense was drawn to students' attention. The concept was then extended to cover students' daily life when they were asked to talk about their activities yesterday, last week and last year. An inductive approach was adopted here to enable students to make use of the target structure to make sentences about past activities. Students were then formed into groups to discover the various ways of forming past tense verbs through the study of the sentences made.

Our work in the previous years marked an important phase of our school development. Not only did the students improve in the process, but teachers also grew to be more professional. We will share with you in March our process of learning and the obstacles we met.

References:

1. Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2. Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-Based Language Teaching*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
4. Piaget, J. (1972). *To Understand Is To Invent*. New York: The Viking Press, Inc.
5. The Curriculum Development Council. (2004). *English Language Education Key Learning Area English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-6)*. HKSAR: The Education and Manpower Bureau.