

Developing a School-based Speaking Curriculum: Conceptions and Practices

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English speaking skills are often given a rather low priority in Hong Kong primary school classrooms compared with reading and writing skills. This priority setting could boil down to the limited classroom time, conventional focus on written discourse and the lack of a genuine context of language use outside the classroom. Yet in this globalized and competitive world, mastery of speaking skills could render students a better head start on academic success and workplace achievement. The tests of speaking skills in IELTS (International English Language Testing Systems) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), two important international English language assessments for academic or work advancement, affirm the importance of spoken discourse. Over the last few years, Hong Kong Baptist Convention Primary School has been rethinking and revamping their school-based curriculum of speaking skills. Witnessing students' enhanced motivation, confidence and performance in speaking English, teachers have attributed the success to the following curriculum development conceptions and practices.

Developing a Holistic Speaking Skill Framework Responding to Student Interests and Needs

There is a tendency that Hong Kong students play a withdrawal role in speaking classrooms due to a lack of genuine speaking experiences. A holistic speaking-skill development framework which is age-appropriate, children-centred and authentic should help students make progress from making minimal responses to scripted presentations and interactive discussions. After some years of curriculum development experience, teachers of the School have mapped out a good range of speaking initiatives for Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) students.

Key Stage 1: Singing Songs, Chanting, Show-and-tell, Picture Description Tasks, Story-telling

Key Stage 2: Discussions, Debates, Presentations, Interviews

Key Stage 1 students usually have strong interest in collecting things (Department of Social Services, Australian Government, 2017). They collect stickers, shells, magnets, post-cards, pencils, erasers, and toys. They naturally jump at the chances of talking about their collectibles. With regard to this feature of the children, the School has integrated a good range of **show-and-tell** sessions allowing students to show and tell their toy cars, stuffed animals and games. In these sessions, teachers facilitated the learning of speaking skills among KS1 students through the process of teacher modeling, writing the show-and-tell scripts and observing classmates and group members' sharing. Also, research (Department of Social Services, Australian Government, 2017) has shown that children at this age range are drawn to imaginative stories and narratives. They can become very passionate and engaged when telling stories. **Story-telling tasks** would give P2 and P3 students the experience of changing tones and pitches to represent different roles in stories, integrating gestures and facial expression to help listeners to imagine details and using interesting and simple props to get attention from audience. **Picture description tasks have been incorporated into the curriculum to** entice students to talk about what they have found stimulating using simple and impromptu language.

In Hong Kong Baptist Convention Primary School, KS2 students, who are ready to think with reasons, have been encouraged to take risks with their speaking skills and to use the language to think. Purposeful collaborative tasks, such as discussions, group presentations and debates, have provided great chances for students to use their own words to put forward their ideas and views. In the process of working together in **discussions and debates**, students had to express ideas in a comprehensible way, question their group members, clarify their understanding and negotiate meaning. Teachers also noted apart from discussion language, in a discussion task, students needed phrases for giving reasons, language for showing preferences, strategies to respond to suggestions and the right attitudes towards divided opinions. Additionally, **presentations and interviews have become part of the speaking curriculum to help students** to organize ideas into logical parts and think about ideas from different perspectives, including the views of listeners and interviewers.

Integrating Deliberate and Ample Practices

In the course of developing the school-based curriculum, teachers noted that a vertical and horizontal skill-building framework has been helpful. However, similar to the learning of other skills, the attitude of perseverance and high level of practices (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993) are the keys to success in learning a language. As Hall (1997) puts forward, conveying meaning through speaking involves the mastery of segmental features (pronunciation of consonants and vowels), supra-segmental features (rhythm, intonation, and stress) and non-verbals of communication (head movement, gestures and facial expressions). This suggests mastering the speaking skills of a second language means deliberate efforts to work on a different set of muscles physiologically and linguistic rules cognitively which are different from the mother tongue. To this end, Hong Kong Baptist Convention School's long-term efforts in integrating phonics into the curriculum have effectively built the fundamentals for students. Through constant and deliberate practices on enunciating different English sounds, including vowels and consonants, over a period of three years, by and large, students in the School can work out independently pronunciation of most words. Additionally, with the advance of information technology, students have been given chances to practice repeatedly and review their speaking performance instantly. Using i-pads and some video-editing apps, students could make video records of their speaking tasks. This has allowed deliberate practice among students to take place. In fact, teachers have seen

students making the recording on their tablets again and again to self-correct their spoken errors and modify speaking skills until they were satisfied with their performance. To conclude, within the formal curriculum, students have been given support in terms of the different aspects of speaking and concurrently students have taken the ownership of their learning through their own deliberate practices to make sure that their speeches are functionally intelligible and communicable.

The time-pressed curriculum does not always provide students with ample chances to practice the supra-segmentals and non-verbals. The English teachers in the School have resorted to providing speaking opportunities outside classrooms. Students' participation in various kinds of English speaking tasks during the monthly English assemblies, English speaking days, campus TV activities and talent shows have been strong reasons for students to have deliberate practices to improve their speaking skills.

The deliberate and continuous oral practices inside and outside the classrooms have attempted to address the second language learning needs both for communicative purposes and language accuracy which is form-focused and articulation-based. The practices of providing ample chances for students to practice the 'what' and the 'how' of making a speech echo what Hinkel (2006) has maintained: when learning to speak a language, rehearsing the language or task repetition, gives learners an opportunity to accommodate the cognitive demands of fluency, accuracy and linguistic complexity.

Incorporating Feedback for Improvement

In these few years, seminal research studies have evidenced the importance of feedback in teaching and learning. Hattie puts it, 'Feedback is among the most common features of successful teaching and learning' (2012, p.115). In the School, communicating with the students the success criteria at the beginning of speaking tasks has been the teachers' first pedagogical action to allow for subsequent targeted feedback. The transparency of these success criteria has helped students at two levels. First, they get to know where they are meant to be at the early stage of their various speaking tasks. Second, the criteria have provided students with the language to talk about their speaking skills, helping students to reflect on their learning. With years of experience, teachers have conceptualized that different speaking tasks require different sets of criteria. They should be progressive in nature with a view to helping students to develop over the two key stages and are task-specific, allowing students to see the different skills needed for different communicative purposes. They are summarized below:

Success Criteria for Various Speaking Tasks

Key Stage 1			Key Stage 2		
Show-and-Tell Sessions	Picture Description Tasks	Story-telling Tasks	Presentations	Discussions	Debates
Speak loudly	Speak loudly	Speak loudly	Loudness of voice and clarity of speech	Clear expression of relevant and adequate content	Information organization, adequacy and relevancy
Speak clearly	Speak clearly	Speak clearly	Speak with variation in pause, pace, intonation and body language to convey meaning	Show communicative strategies such as explaining, disagreeing, agreeing, turn-taking, suggesting, making conclusion etc	Speak with variation in pause, pace and intonation to convey meaning
Speak with pauses	Speak with pauses	Speak with variation in pause, pace and intonation to convey feelings	Information organization, adequacy and relevancy	Demonstrate collective work attitudes such as interest in discussion, respect for others	Speak confidently
Speak with eye contact	Speak with eye contact	Use of facial expressions, gestures and eye contact	Pronunciation	Pronunciation	Pronunciation
	Show communicative strategies such as explaining, sustaining speech	Speak in different characters' voices	Language accuracy (grammar, sentence patterns, connectives)	Language accuracy (grammar, sentence patterns, connectives)	Language accuracy (grammar, sentence patterns, connectives)

When giving feedback to students, teachers have been well aware of the difference between praise, the essential affective support to make students feel welcomed and supported, and feedback, the specific goal-oriented assistance to help students make progress in learning. Apart from giving students praises such as 'Excellent', 'Well done' and 'Good Work', teachers have learned that real learning among students occurs when feedback is task-related and process-oriented. In other words, teachers have tried to narrow students' learning gap between their current level and the desired level of performance. Building on the trust with students and a growing mind-set towards errors, teachers have been guiding students to learn to speak effectively.

For instance, to help KS1 students to be impactful story-tellers, teachers commented on students' use of voice (pause, pace and intonation), use of body language (use of facial expressions, gestures and eye contact) and even the use of props. In lesson visits, students were seen making gradual but significant strides in telling their stories with teachers' specific feedback. KS2 students did 'Fishbowl Observation' of their classmates' discussion performance in classes with support from their teachers. The activity has allowed students to observe how various discussion stages unfold by using different discussion phrases and how ideas were supported with explanation and elaboration of details. Students were also given chances to comment

on the speakers' performance in the discussion tasks and from there, students, both the speakers and the listeners, gained feedback in the process of attaining their goal.

Another consideration about giving feedback on speaking performance is the dichotomy of language accuracy and communicative competence. While most Hong Kong teachers have been in struggles between meaning and linguistic accuracy when giving students feedback on learning, teachers in Hong Kong Baptist Primary School have come to a consensus that communicative competence is the most important motive for language learning, especially for speaking skills. Teachers agree that they should not prioritize structural accuracy or grammatical correctness over holistic communication. A more balanced and developmental view on students' speaking skill advancement, with KS1 focuses more on using key words, phrases and organization frames as support and KS2 more on communicating main ideas, has been deemed more appropriate.

Integrating the Four Language Skills

While developing the speaking curriculum, the teachers of Hong Kong Baptist Convention Primary School have been fully aware that language skills should not be taught in isolation. Students should be prepared to employ the multiple skills needed to achieve meaningful real-life communication. The idea has been thoroughly researched. For example, in reviewing the teaching of various English language skills from the 1990s to the 2000s, Hinkel has reiterated that "to make language learning as realistic as possible, integrated instruction has to address a range of L2 skills simultaneously, all of which are requisite in communication" (2006, p.113). Premised on this, teachers in the School have developed speaking tasks as pragmatic as possible and as such speaking skills have been tied to writing, listening, pronunciation or questioning skills.

Throughout the KS1 curriculum, there has been on-going emphasis on genuine communication between speakers and listeners as part of the integrative use of language. KS1 students became more confident to speak in the show-and-tell sessions after they had had the experience of writing the scripts. They were motivated in the speaking tasks when they realized their speech would have real listeners as time and space were allocated to allow student audience to ask questions in areas they were interested in or gave suggestions or feedback on improving the proficiency of the speech. The teacher's positive attitude towards the questions, the listener's genuine enquiries and the speaker's timely responses created a communicative context inside the KS1 English language classrooms.

For the KS2 students, reading extensively or searching information on the Internet would give them the upper hand in discussions and debates. These speaking tasks were then often followed by writing tasks, requiring students to summarize or provide details of some central ideas being talked about. KS2 students reflected that in the course of negotiation in debates and discussions, they could be inspired by listening to other students' ideas and views which could turn into useful content of their persuasive writing. Teachers reported that the results of this integrative use of language were effective to complement the development of the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Enhanced Motivation, Confidence and Performance in Using English

Research has shown learning to speak another language is a highly complex task as McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2004) have indicated that speaking in L2 is a cognitively demanding undertaking requiring fluency, accuracy and a sufficient lexical and grammatical repertoire for meaningful communication to take place. On the journey of rethinking and revamping the speaking curriculum, teachers in Hong Kong Baptist Convention Primary School took a lot of twists and turns. Yet teachers' enthusiasm won back when they saw their students were so motivated to sacrifice their recess time to practice their show-and-tell, to design interesting props to tell their stories and to wait earnestly for the debate lessons. With careful vertical curriculum planning which stresses the importance of deliberate practices, feedback from teachers and integrative language use, students' heightened learning motivation has been followed by significant improvement in the proficiency of their speaking skills.

In this sharing session, teachers from Hong Kong Baptist Convention Primary School will share with audience the conceptions and practices of developing their school-based speaking curriculum. Videos of various KS1 and KS2 speaking tasks, ranging from show-and-tell, story-telling, discussion, presentations, and related teaching and learning materials will be shown.

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