

Revisiting a Vertical Framework for the Writing Curriculum: A Closer Look at What Makes or Breaks Its Implementation

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Introduction

Developing an effective writing curriculum that promotes continuity of experience and ensures a smooth transition for students to move from one grade to another has always been considered a worthy but challenging endeavour by English teachers as they are interested in knowing what writing skills and strategies students should develop at different levels and how they can help students build on what they have previously learned and develop essential writing skills progressively. In the sharing sessions conducted last year, the English panel chairpersons from Lui Cheung Kwong Lutheran Primary School shared their journey of revamping and implementing their school-based writing curriculum. The sharing sessions were well-received and the participants obtained some concrete ideas about how to develop a vertical framework for the writing curriculum. However, as far as facilitating students' writing development is concerned, our experience has told us that using the framework alone is not sufficient. Teachers from Fanling Public School, Fung Kai Liu Yun Sum Memorial School and Aldrich Bay Government Primary School have been implementing a vertical writing framework in their schools these years and they have found a number of classroom practices, which though not new, yet were very crucial in making the framework work. In the sharing session this year, the whats and hows of developing students' writing skills with the use of a vertical writing framework will be revisited. But in order to facilitate schools in implementing the framework, emphasis will also be placed on effective strategies and practices that teachers should adopt to help maximize the use of the framework.

A vertical framework for the writing curriculum

More and more schools have realized the importance of developing a vertical framework for the writing curriculum and they follow the suggestions made in the English Language Curriculum Guide when developing their own framework. First, the notion of progression of knowledge and skills (Curriculum Development Council, 2004) is incorporated to make certain that teaching is purposefully structured and logically sequenced across P.1 to P.6. Teachers make reference to the curriculum documents as well as their course books to examine what students are suggested to learn across different grade levels to outline the learning focuses to be covered for each level. The writing framework includes information

about what and when writing skills and strategies should be taught in the writing process, such as *when and how* students learn to generate ideas, *when and how* they learn to put words in a logical order to make meaningful phrases, sentences and paragraphs, *when and how* they learn to elaborate ideas, connect ideas and show cohesion in different ways and *when and how* they learn to use various techniques to plan, enrich the story development and end a story. The framework also outlines what vocabulary such as adjectives and sentence patterns can be used in writing at different grade levels. Teachers try to establish a close linkage between inputs and outputs by developing the writing tasks on the basis of the framework and the textbook units. The learning focuses derived from the framework are heightened in various writing tasks across different levels so that these focuses will be covered as students learn how to accomplish the tasks.

The principles of scaffolding and recycling are also applied in the planning process and backward planning is the first step to scaffolding. Prior to attempting the writing tasks on their own, students are led through reading, speaking, listening, class writing or group writing in a connected and sequenced manner so that they can learn and practise using the target vocabulary items and sentence structures with support. To build students' confidence and allow them to recycle what they learn, one mini-writing task is designed for each unit for students to use the target grammar items and sentence patterns in a relatively more controlled manner before they are asked to apply their previous learning to the writing assignment.

Bruner's notion of spiral curriculum (Burner, 1966) is also adopted and the framework is planned in a way that allows students to build on their foundation through revisiting the target skills and strategies taught previously before applying them in new and meaningful contexts. Last but not least, teachers take into consideration a balanced coverage of text types through discussing what writing genres would be suitable for various themes in the course books across the six levels.

Common practices verses research-based practices

Teachers from Fanling Public School, Fung Kai Liu Yun Sum Memorial School and Aldrich Bay Government Primary School have the experience developing the vertical writing framework. They found the framework very useful as it could serve as a roadmap for guiding students' writing development. While they agreed that the principles adopted in the planning process could help students learn progressively and effectively, they realized that they needed to pay heed to the teaching of the writing process as well because writing involves complex cognitive processes. Upon reflection, they came to realize that ineffective strategies would defeat the purpose of bringing in change through the introduction of a new writing framework. Therefore, when implementing the framework, teachers from the three schools did not continue their old classroom practices but tried out a range of evidence-informed practices in order to maximize student learning.

Common practices concerning the teaching of writing among English teachers include explaining to students how to attempt a writing task verbally, giving students an outline and going through the outline with students and answering the guiding questions of a writing task through brainstorming or discussion. However, these practices are often considered inadequate to prepare students to write independently. False assumptions about what teaching practices or activities work for students may lead to frustrations for both teachers and students. Any writing programmes are bound to fail if teachers only employ the above practices and assume students will be able to develop writing skills as they keep on writing. For young learners, being able to write independently is more complicated than what we think as they do not learn well from mere explanations. Instead, they need to understand the planning, composing and revising process and they need to be taught relevant strategies to become successful in each of these stages. Research over the past two decades has shown that these strategies need to be explicitly taught and explicit teaching of writing strategies has strong effects on students' learning (Graham, 2010).

To teach students, especially young learners, writing strategies explicitly, teachers should share the process of writing with students through modelling and shared writing. Modelling writing involves constructing a composition in front of students, showing them the process of transforming ideas into text, thinking out loud to demonstrate the many kinds of choices and steps involved in composition (Dombey, 2013). As the process of construction is unfolded and linguistic examples are provided as models, students are like getting into the mind of the experts, i.e. their teachers (Fisher, Grant & Frey, 2009). Through modelling "the teacher can draw attention to writing as a process of orchestrating knowledge and skills, and show how to maintain a focus on the subject matter, and a sense of the purpose and audience for the text, while also dealing with necessary technical matters" (Dombey, 2013, p.28). In other words, the process of planning, drafting, revising and proof-reading is demonstrated to students explicitly (Fisher, 2002).

In shared writing, the teacher models the writing process and makes it concrete and visible to students through eliciting students' ideas and thoughts, co-constructing text with students during collaborative, rich discussion and scribing the entire text in front of students (Gibson, 2008). No matter whether modelling or shared writing is employed, re-reading the text is a must as it helps students internalize the skills demonstrated.

Apart from the writing process, research has shown that explicit instruction in word-, sentence-, paragraph-level skills, and sentence construction skills can benefit students, especially writers with learning difficulties (Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009). Teacher modeling can be used to teach students how to construct sentences, combine two or more related sentences to create a more complex one, followed by students' practice and application of sentence construction skills (Graham, 2010).

While scaffolding is an important element in the process of helping students to write, the effective use of scaffolding is critical to the development of students' independent writing skills. It should be noted that an important aspect of scaffolding instruction is that the scaffolds provided by teachers should be temporary. A successful instructional framework should be based on the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). According to this model, "cognitive work should shift slowly and intentionally from teacher modeling, to joint responsibility between teachers and students, to independent practice and application by the learner" (Frey & Fisher, 2011, p.122). Teachers should provide the right amount of scaffolding for students at different stages of the writing process in order to develop students into independent writers. For instance, students should be required to move from observing to co-constructing, from co-constructing to imitating, from imitating to practising, and from practising to creating at different stages, depending on students' readiness. As students' readiness levels increase, teachers' support in terms of ideas, language, organization or processing should be progressively withdrawn, or students will not be able to write on their own in the long run. Last but not least, re-teaching or revisiting skills previously taught to determine if students have mastered them well or to enable students' retention is necessary (Westwood, 1995). Opportunities should be built in across levels to ensure that some essential writing skills will be reviewed before more advanced skills are introduced in order to build on students' foundation of knowledge and skills.

Experience gained and to be shared

In the sharing session, the presenting teachers will share how modelling and shared writing are used to teach KS1 students to learn the process involved in writing. Video clips will be used to show how teachers first explained the task requirements, followed by showing students what to fill in the blanks in the frames with the help of wh- words, how to add more information, how to use the target vocabulary and sentence structures to describe people or events and finally how to round off the composition. Teachers basically demonstrated the act of writing through modelling and thinking aloud as they composed the text in front of students and showed them how the ideas in the frame were put into sentences and paragraphs. Examples of how students were helped to build their sentence construction skills in writing from the sentence level to the paragraph level and text level to cater for learner diversity will also be included.

The presenters will also share how scaffolding can be withdrawn progressively at different stages throughout the year. Teachers will explain how they first enabled students to understand what they were expected to write with a write frame by engaging students in a guided writing task that was more controlled at the beginning stage, with modelling or joint construction to illustrate the writing process, followed by opportunities for meaningful repetitions to practise the skills demonstrated. When students got a better understanding of what they were expected to write, teachers engaged them in a new writing

task with a similar write frame to let them apply what they had learned in a less controlled manner.

Apart from examples from Key Stage One, the presenters will share how essential skills can be revisited in Key Stage Two by illustrating how time was spent at the beginning of the term in P.4 on revisiting the skills that students had learned before they attempted the main writing task. For example, before students were asked to use a more complicated mind map to plan their writing and write in several paragraphs, they were given a short writing task to revisit the skills learned in Key Stage One. In this reviewing process, students were guided to revisit the necessary skills involved in using a mind map such as sequencing ideas, turning key words into sentences and combining a few ideas to form a coherent paragraph. After students were more ready to use a mind map to plan their writing, they were given a more challenging task where they were asked to write something similar to the scaffolding task but the difficulty level of the task was increased. In the new task, students were required to sequence a number of ideas, group them into different paragraphs and present the ideas in different paragraphs coherently with cohesive devices.

The sharing session will consist of two parts. In this first part, the vertical writing framework will be illustrated with writing tasks as examples to enable participants to gain a better understanding of the importance of having focuses across different grade levels. In the second part, the teacher presenters will share with participants their experience in implementing the vertical framework with an emphasis on the evidence-informed practices they have tried out through videos, student work and school-based teaching and learning materials.

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