

Enhanced Interface: Making Connection of English Language Learning Across Key Stages

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Introduction

Enhancing a smooth transition from various key phases in kindergarten, primary and secondary education is key to ensuring curriculum continuity and progression in student learning. It is also a crucial factor in school improvement. When entering a new stage of learning, students may encounter difficulties in adaptation at the beginning. The lack of appropriate cross-phase links between various key stages in English language learning including curriculum planning, learning and teaching strategies may lead to demotivation and negative impact on student performance. To ensure smooth transition, the *Basic Education Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2014) recommends that mutual visits, lesson observations and induction programmes should be used to facilitate teachers' understanding of how students are learning at primary one as well as help students make better adjustments between different key stages. English language can sometimes be a difficult area for students at the start of primary education. The learning gap widens as they make progress across different key stages.

Facilitating the interface from kindergartens to primary schools

Young children's preschool exposure to English affects their confidence and interest in learning English in primary schools. These experiences may accumulate from the time they begin learning in kindergartens, at home or in other environments. These experiences will have an impact on students' attitude towards learning English.

When children in the kindergarten first join the primary school, they have to cope with various changes and challenges in the new stage of learning. These challenges in the transition period, if handled appropriately, can be regarded as precious opportunities to help students of different backgrounds and learning needs to build up positive self-image and learn more confidently and proactively in the learning path that follows.

To help the primary one students adapt to their new learning life, the *Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) recommends that primary one teachers need to know the pre-primary curriculum in order to help students adapt better in the new stage of learning.

To ease the transition process, the *English Language Education KLA Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2002) specifies that children at pre-primary stage should be exposed to English through interesting activities (e.g. games, songs, action rhymes and stories) rather than teach it formally. Similar learning experiences including group settings and stimulating language-rich learning environment are expected to be continued in primary one from the beginning.

The English language learning of primary one students should be facilitated by real-life experience, interesting activities and meaningful authentic situations. Also, there should be balanced emphasis on the development of phonics, listening, speaking and reading skills. For example, when planning the reading curriculum, interest and habits are essential to developing preliminary reading strategies. Reading aloud and using big books for story telling are basic to the teaching of reading at primary one. The story plot should be simple with repetitive sentence structures. The story should have colourful and attractive illustrations as well as vivid characterization to help students understand the story, stimulate their imagination and satisfy their curiosity.

What has the school done to help primary one students adapt better to learn English?

Teachers from St. Eugene de Mazenod Oblate Primary School believe that students need to have a strong foundation at the early stage to help them learn better as they progress to upper levels.

To support transition from kindergartens to primary one, the English Panel Heads and English teachers have been involved in formulating programme plans to address the learning needs of the pre-primary one children.

During the Induction Programme in August, apart from familiarizing students with school environment, English teachers have been keen to get a better understanding of their primary one students' needs in English language learning. Appropriate curriculum practices and supporting strategies are implemented as follows:

- ❖ contact students' kindergartens to let primary teachers know what and how students are learning at kindergarten
- ❖ create a warm learning atmosphere for primary one students
- ❖ nurture students' sense of belonging and enable them to stay secured
- ❖ appoint English Panel Head to teach primary one students as well as experienced English teachers to be their class teachers to ensure students could lay a better foundation at the early stage
- ❖ make effective use of peer support to help primary one students in learning English
- ❖ plan and implement the English language curriculum in view of the pre-requisite learning experiences at pre-primary level
- ❖ focus on reading for the purposes of developing students' understanding of the basic conventions of written English and constructing meaning from text e.g. basic letter-sound relationships to read aloud simple words and short simple texts

Teachers will share the teaching strategies and learning materials they have used with primary one students and inform us of the impact on learning as students go up to primary two.

Using assessment data to narrow the English Language learning gap from Key Stage 1 (KS1) to Key Stage 2 (KS2)

When students finish KS1, it is essential that the teachers know what they have or have not learnt, and how they should be prepared for the next step. There are different expectations on students' English Language learning at KS1 and KS2.

In reading, for example, we hope that students have enjoyed reading, have established concepts about prints, and have developed phonics skills and vocabulary-building skills at KS1. When they make progress in KS2, they need to recognize the presentation of ideas in a text through headings, paragraphing, spacing and punctuation etc. They need to skim a text to obtain a general impression of the main ideas, intentions, attitudes and feelings conveyed in the choice of words and use of language.

In writing, KS1 students are expected to have learned the basic conventions of written English and present information, ideas and feelings in logical order meaningfully. But when they get to

KS2, they have to present the main and supporting ideas with elaboration as well as use appropriate formats, conventions and language features to present their writing.

As recommended in the *English Language Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2004), the use of grammar rules and terms should be kept to a minimum for KS1 learners while simple language forms could be introduced to learners in genuine communicative contexts. Young learners do not respond well to language as a formal system but as a means of fun, enjoyment and communication. Exclusive teaching of grammatical rules and use of verbal explanations in teaching English are too difficult, abstract and irrelevant to young learners. They may experience difficulties and lose interest in learning English when too much focus is put on the acquisition of the language form during the learning process and in tests and examinations. This may affect students' confidence and reduce their motivation towards making further progress.

At the end of KS1, teachers should have a good grasp of how students have learnt, including their strengths and weaknesses. Assessment data from summative assessments, and from public assessments such as TSA can be used for reviewing the attained standards of students in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Schools could make good use of the data to draw subsequent follow-up plans for intervention programmes, if necessary. It further helps the school to work out a holistic school-based curriculum to enhance the learning and teaching of English Language across the key stages.

Irrespective of what levels teachers are teaching, it is important for them to know the key emphases and expectation of both key stages and ways to help students if they have not acquired the required performance. Apart from the results from territory-wide assessment, data could also be gathered from teachers' casual observation of how students are learning in class, internal test and examination results, discussion of student work, and peer lesson observation.

What has the school done to narrow the gap?

The Curriculum Coordinator, Panel Chairpersons and English teachers in SKH Mung Yan Primary School have been tracking on students' performance in writing at the end of KS1 and KS2 for some years to identify the learning problems of students so as to inform the overall curriculum planning. While some students find learning English easy and interesting at both key stages, some of them begin to feel that the English subject is becoming difficult and demanding when they enter KS2. In some cases, some students lose their interests to learn English. If the problems are not properly attended to, they accumulate and soon could become insurmountable

difficulties, leading to a sense of failure in learning English and eventually give up. This is reflected in the way they have attempted their writing tasks.

Apart from collecting data from student performance in TSA, teachers also analysed the P3 students' performance in tests and examinations. The data obtained from the reading and writing were used to identify students for intervention programmes to help them make improvement. Language enhancement programmes have been set up with the following objectives:

- ❖ To enhance students' interest in learning English
- ❖ To equip students with some basic skills in learning English
- ❖ To raise teachers' awareness of the needs and interest of students who need to move forward from KS1 to KS2 in learning English

Teachers will share how they use the data to identify the students that need more support. They will also illustrate how they stream the students into groups for differentiated instruction.

Preparing students to transfer from primary to secondary schools for English Language learning needs

Different secondary schools may be using English as the medium of instruction at varying degrees under the Whole-school Language Policy. Teachers in primary schools understand that there is a need for them to work together to bridge the gap and help their students adapt better in English Language learning and using English to learn in secondary schools. When students transfer from primary to secondary schools, they need to be prepared for the following:

- ❖ get ready a repertoire of vocabulary power to help them understand and use English to communicate
- ❖ cope with the different learning and teaching strategies as required in secondary schools

Teachers in Hong Kong Southern District Government Primary School have interviewed the Secondary 1 students from their schools to know more about how they are learning in secondary schools, with specific focus on how some of them use English to learn some of their subjects. With the data collected, the school is in a better position to inform their curriculum planning of the English subject.

The English panel has come up with some ideas to help students to have a smooth transition to secondary schools. They are as follows:

- ❖ Students need to acquire and sustain the classroom language and language development strategies in KS2
- ❖ Students need to secure the basic vocabulary and grammatical knowledge which might probably be frequently used in English-medium subjects through participation in reading across the curriculum and cross-curricular projects
- ❖ The more able students need to be prepared deliberately to learn or carry out activities in English other than those in the subject of English Language if they are to be prepared for secondary education with subjects taught in the English medium

Concluding remarks

The concerted effort of teachers to retain students' learning motivation, and to provide optimal success for all students in secondary schools is important to address the dips in academic achievement which could lead to dips in self-esteem. The transition is sometimes a 'stumbling point' for some students, and at times has been developed into 'students at risk' at early schooling. Teachers from the three schools have worked hard to identify students that need support at early stage to help them make better improvement in English language learning.

References:

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