From Crossing the Boundary to Crossing the Hurdles in English Language Learning – our experience in engaging the cross-boundary students in the learning process

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According to figures provided by the Education Bureau in June 2016, the number of students who crossed the boundary from Shenzhen to attend schools on the Hong Kong side soared from 12,865 in 2011-2012 to 28,106 in 2015-2016 (Harbour Times, 2016). It was a huge rise of 118%. About half of them (about 14,507 in the year 2015-16) were primary school students. Though the government enforced the policy of "zero delivery quota" for expectant mainland mothers in 2013, it is expected that the cross-boundary students will still occupy a large number of seats in primary and secondary schools.

The impacts of cross-boundary students on the ecology of primary schools

As early as a decade ago, educationists had noticed the change of ecology of Hong Kong schools in face of the influx of students from Mainland China. They were labelled newly arrived children (NAC), who migrated from the Mainland. About 10 years later, Hong Kong schools are admitting even a bigger cohort of students from the Mainland, some of whom are newly arrived children (NAC) while many of whom are cross-boundary students (CBS), who are homed in Shenzhen but cross the boundary every day to attend classes in Hong Kong. The influx of children means not only more students in classrooms and insufficient school places; but also a test on the effectiveness of traditional approaches in handling students because the diverse student and family backgrounds are adding complexities to the existing curriculum, learning and teaching strategies, assessment and school management.

The NACs and cross-boundary students are often characterized by local teachers as lazy and lacking motivation to learn. They are found very disruptive to lessons and are often caught smoking, gambling, joining gangs and bullying outside schools (2005, Chong). As far as English language learning is concerned, the local teachers in an interview conducted by Chong (2005) expressed their grievances over handling the Mainland children.

> 'most of these children (from the mainland) come without the knowledge of grammar, and not knowing the alphabets … In the beginning, they reject learning; they don't want to speak … They look scared … if you asked them to

speak up, they … speak in a very low voice … even for very simple question, such as, "what's your name?" … they feel embarrassed and are frightened to speak in English. They may feel that they have yet to be able speak Cantonese properly … so why should they be required to learn another new language?' (Chong, 2005, p.122)

It is apparent from the above that there is a big gap between the students' capacity and the regular curriculum and the prevailing learning and teaching practices teachers apply on students born and brought up locally. To cope with these difficulties, different schools take different approaches. Some view the curriculum as given and hence take a rigid approach to force students to 'adapt' themselves to fit in the contexts while some encourage teachers to water down the curriculum by teaching kindergarten-level English regardless of the maturity and interests of the students. The former approach often results in messy classrooms with students who are confused and get little sense of achievement. The approach of watering down the curriculum to a very low level appears to be helping students to master English. Students, nevertheless, are found having tremendous difficulties to catch up with the requirement of the society in the long run.

Teachers of Fung Kai Innovative School were facing the same dilemma several years ago when they found they were admitting more and more cross-boundary students, who occupied more than half of their student population. They found the rigid approach aforementioned would only create failures and further demotivate students to learn. The strategy of watering down curriculum was, however, deemed not ethical as teaching kindergarten-level English did not serve the best interests of their students and predestine them to an unequal future life chance. In this regard, we opted to reorganize the curriculum to optimize student learning and revise the learning and teaching approach to motivate and maximize the engagement of the students in the learning process.

Motivation is the key to success

Education psychologists (Ryan & Deci, 2000) categorize motivation into two types, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation that comes from within the student. For instance, students who love to read have the genuine interest in reading and enjoy the process even without 'any form of reward' for the activity. In contrary, extrinsic motivation comes from sources external to the student. These external sources include praise, recognition, or a system of rewards. For example, students who do not enjoy reading read to get a token in the form of a sticker from teacher.

All teachers hope to promote intrinsic motivation as it is conducive to sustained interest in learning and hence life-long learning. In Ames's words (1992), intrinsic motivation

can be encouraged through adopting 'mastery goals', one of the classroom environment constructs she advocated. She pointed out that quality classroom learning environment is crucial in enhancing learning motivation. Two contrasting constructs are commonly seen in classroom environment, namely mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals entail quality of involvement and a continuing commitment to learning while performance goals focus on one's ability and the ability is 'evidenced by doing better than others'. Public recognition such as attaining high standard in normative-based assessments is one of the key features to show that the students are doing better than others. Research (Ames, 1992) shows that mastery goals lead to positive achievement activities and students believe that the quantity and quality of their effort determine success. Hence, students are seen more willing to spend time on learning and searching strategies to solve problems. The heavy student commitment leads to a natural integration of self with tasks and this will develop a sense of belongingness, which is essential to motivating students to learn and sustain learning.

Motivate the cross-boundary children to learn through fun learning activities

To motivate students, especially those who need to wake up very early to cross the boundary to schools, to learn, the classroom construct suggested by Ames (1992) is to help students form mastery goals. In other words, the task design has to be able to arouse students' genuine interest in completing the task. Therefore, teachers of Fung Kai Innovative School add meaningful contexts in the task design, which are closely related to their life experience and hence they need to use English for a purpose. We began by adapting our textbook materials, which are often localized and seldom take into consideration the needs of the cross-boundary children. For instance, we found that the textbook introduced job titles like astronauts and animators. The reading text contained only 5 jokes about jobs, which we deemed not related to the needs and interests of P6 students. Therefore, we replaced it by a page of job advertisements, which were about more realistic jobs our students might consider in their future. Besides, students were guided to discover the details included in a job advertisement such as qualification/education, skills and personality while at the same time learning a lot of vocabulary about jobs like university graduates and working experiences. We then drew students' attention to the different personalities required by different jobs. The adjectives of personalities and the language structures using 'need to', 'if' and 'unless' were introduced. With the knowledge about jobs and vocabulary and structures learnt to talk about jobs, students were asked to think and then express their ideas in writing about their dream jobs. The scaffolding of tasks continued in another chapter. The topic was about youth groups, which we deemed very useful in enriching students' portfolio when they need to apply for a job in future. Nevertheless, the groups covered in the textbook were not those students had contact with in the school. Therefore, we integrated a mini project on the clubs and groups provided in the school. Several pairs of more able students did the research work on the School's youth groups. Then the rest of the students had the freedom to pick the group they

were interested in and attended the 'briefing session' in a classroom, where the pair of 'representatives' were there to answer their questions, which fell into four major areas, (1) membership, (2) objectives, (3) activities/duties and (4) learning from the group. Such design enables active pupil-pupil interaction in a simulated context. As far as language learning is concerned, students learn to listen, ask and answer questions and take notes of the information received.

Lacking motivation in English learning has long been one of the headaches teachers faced across the years. Two of the reasons could be that the cross-boundary students are too tired after a long journey travelling to school and they are not used to the traditional approach adopted in local classrooms. In this regard, we devoted a lot of time in the past three years to making the English classrooms fun and effective. A lot of interesting and fun learning strategies were generated in the meetings and many of them were tried out. For instance, we had integrated a lot of simulated and improvisation games like guessing meaning of unknown vocabulary by identifying the known parts, interviewing teachers and tourists, learning to give and follow directions to hunt for treasure, playing old games and video-taping and replaying the clips of the improvised speaking activity ('seeing the doctors') to facilitate timely feedback on students' speech quality and the use of conversational strategies. The rationales behind these activities are on one hand providing more hands-on experience for students while on the other informing teachers of students' progress. Teachers of Fung Kai Innovative School would like to share many of these games in our presentation and show how their students' interest in learning is enhanced.

A leap forward to boost cross-border children's confidence in writing

The fun games and activities are found effective in enhancing students' motivation in learning. As reflected by teachers, even the less able students enjoyed the treasure hunt game and had a role to play in the process. To further boost the cross-boundary students' confidence in learning, we opted to have more intense work on developing students' writing capacity. We walked on two legs in the past three years of development. The prime focus in KS1 is the development of the descriptive writing genre. The use of mind maps to help students form write frames on some common topics was found useful in boosting students' confidence as well as improving their performance. Even the P1 students were required to form sentences from the capital letter to the full stop on their own, which we regarded as the very basic writing skill. This had laid a good foundation for the work in the first year of work. The use of mind maps continued in the subsequent years and branching of bubbles in the mind maps was witnessed when students wanted to add supporting details to elaborate the main ideas. Another prominent feature was the re-visiting of ideas, learnt vocabulary and structures. Such practice facilitated the building of vertical linkage of the writing curriculum. The development in KS2 began with a pre-test conducted with the P4

students. *Myself* was made the topic for the formative assessment as we wished to be informed of students' capacity in descriptive writing. The test was conducted in early September and students were given 15 minutes to finish the task. It was very surprising to find that many students, including those in the elite class, could write very little. Even the elite class was not used to writing on their own. The pre-test informed us of how few ideas, vocabulary and structures learnt on descriptive writing students could retain and they seemed having problems in understanding the writing rubrics. Intervention strategies came into play by letting students audit their writing against a checklist, which contained the knowledge they should have learnt in KS1, and then compile their second draft. The development continued to P5 and P6. We will share with you in our presentation how students progressed from P.4 to P.5 and P.6, who could compile a rich portfolio about themselves with the newly learnt vocabulary and structures while re-visiting those learnt previously.

The development of narrative writing skills commenced towards the end of P.2 when students had sufficient practice on descriptive writing. The knowledge and skills in describing a person was used to build characters in picture description. Students were given higher autonomy to pick what to write in personal description while teacher guidance focused mainly on helping students to describe the picture. In later writing tasks, similar approach was adopted. This time, the focus on narrating an incident was made even more prominent. Personal description formed an integral part of a bigger framework - the setting of a recount. The narrative writing genre received more attention in KS2 and occupied a greater share in the writing curriculum. The same setting-development-problem-solution/ending story frame was adopted in P.4, 5 and 6 to help students narrate an event. Compared with their KS1 counterparts, students in this Key Stage enjoyed greater autonomy to pick the details to write on. Attention shifted to focus more on (1) enriching the content through elaborating the ideas and inserting dialogues at the right place; (2) the accurate use of verb forms, diction and variety of sentence structures used; and (3) good use of cohesive device to connect the ideas and enhance the text coherence.

When the P4 and P5 student works were compared, P5 students were apparently managed to write more in quantity, which meant students could come up with more ideas and were more able to write a story with a balanced development following the story frame while they still needed support on the frame of the setting in P4. Students could elaborate the ideas well too. When the students promoted to P6, they could even write more following the same framework. Their stories were much coherent through the use of adverbs like 'immediately' and the 'when' structure helped better link two actions. Their choice of words was seen much more sophisticated. For instance, students could use a variety of speech word when they inserted dialogues into the stories.

Whatever the future immigration policy of the HKSAR will be, one thing we are very certain is that we will continue admitting children with mainland background. We hope our sharing here and our presentation in April could be a starting point for our further reflection on what we could do to help our children learn and prepare them for future challenges.

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