Enriching textbook learning with authentic experiences

Background

Teachers feel that they would like to go beyond the textbook in terms of teaching grammar in context, task design and using authentic materials and situations.

There is also great diversity in ability among the P4 students. Some students are not motivated by textbook materials and activities.

Since the majority of students have little or no exposure to English outside school, teachers feel that it is important to create a language-rich environment and provide meaningful opportunities for students to use English in school.

Level

P4

Strategies used

Two textbook units were chosen as the starting point for development of a task-based programme.

Differentiated materials were produced for some tasks, in order to support the weaker learners and extend the more able.

An English Day Camp was organised with a local secondary school, in order to provide an authentic situation for using the language learned in class.

Rationale for using these strategies

Task-based learning is recommended because : "Learners learn best through purposeful contextualised learning tasks. Effective tasks enable learners to seek and process information, formulate questions and responses, and make connections. They also provide meaningful and purposeful contexts in which learners learn and apply target grammar items and structures." (*CDC English Language Education KLA Curriculum Guide P1-S3 (2002)*) According to the Guide, "The [TBL] approach encourages the learning and teaching of grammar in context so that learners gain a better understanding of how, why and when to use particular language structures and items."

Task-based learning provides a framework within which learner diversity can be catered for by appropriate adaptation of learning materials to expand the learning experiences of more able students and to help weaker students overcome their difficulties.

The use of life-wide learning programmes to complement classroom study and provide students with authentic situations in which to use new skills and knowledge is recommended in the *Basic Education Curriculum Guide - Building on Strengths* (2002).

Implementation

The topic chosen was "Eating Out", based on two units of the textbook. The target language was chosen from the textbook, with other items essential to completion of the tasks included. Students engaged in a variety of classroom activities which built towards the English Day Camp, when they served real food, from the menus they had designed themselves, to visitors from a nearby secondary school and to their classmates. This added a dimension of real life experience to the programme , whereby students could use the language they had learned in lessons in an authentic situation.

Lesson plans for the activities

Aims	Lesson Activities
lessons 1-2 Introduce the topic of food Teach adjectives for different tastes of the food Develop students' questioning and presentation skills, e.g. - What food do you like? - Why?	**Describing tastes** Introduce to students adjectives for describing food: salty, sweet, spicy, oily. Use the food items to teach these words. Students work in groups and bring their own food. They guess the tastes of the food items of the other groups and record their guesses. They ask their partners questions about what kind of food they like. They write sentences about their partners' preferences. *Students record their opinions* Students do a presentation on their partner's preferences.
lessons 3-4 Listen for specific information Practise giving and responding to suggestions • Let's go to...... • That's a good idea! • No, I don't like......	**Choosing a restaurant** Listen to some people discussing which restaurant to go to for a meal. Make notes about their likes and dislikes, note their final choice. Using the script of the listening as a basis, students do a role-play. Weaker classes can have a scripted dialogue based on the tapescript from the listening exercise. More able students can have more freedom to make up their own role play, using expressions from the tapescript. They report back the choices made by their groups.
lessons 5-6 Use 'How much' questions to find out prices How to give the price of a food item	**Asking about prices** Students look at a large menu on OHP or ppt . They practise the structure "How much is ......?" and say the prices. Information gap activity: Students have A and B versions of the same menu, with some different information missing on each one. They have to ask each other for the missing information.

Aims	Lesson Activities
lessons 7-8 Practise scanning for specific information Make comparisons of food items of different restaurants provided Use connectives to show the time relationship between different actions	**Comparing prices and looking at menus** Students search for information Students read some authentic advertisements for familiar restaurants. They complete a chart of prices and the kinds of food available. They make comparisons of the food items and prices. Teachers introduce the categories of dishes: starter, main course, dessert and drinks.
lessons 9-10 Practise categorising food items into starter, main course and dessert Learn the conventions of a menu and practise creating examples of this text type	**Creating a menu** Students are given the list of items available at a fast food shop. They work in groups to create the menus they would like for lunch, using the items on the list.
lessons 11-12 Practise the language used by the waiter and the customer in a restaurant: "What would you like?" "I'd like ......"	**Restaurant Role-Play** In groups, students listen to a dialogue between a customer and a waiter in a restaurant. They complete a listening exercise and reconstruct the dialogue using sentence strips. Students practise the language they will need for the Day Camp in pairs and groups.
(Day Camp on 31 st January 2005) Provide a real situation in which students use the language they have learned for their role-play Learn about good table manners	**English Day Camp** Select some menus designed by our students and ask the lunch box supplier to prepare the food and the menus. Co-organise an English camp with a local secondary school. The role-play is one of the activities on that day. Some of the students in each class will be trained to be the waiter/ waitress and the other students will be the customers. The customers will read the menus and order the food they like using the language learnt and follow the table manners. The secondary students will be the group leaders to assist our students in speaking English.

Teachers model the role-play

The P4 students serve their
visitors at the English Day Camp

Students' and parents' feelings about the Day Camp activity

Students and their parents completed a questionnaire after the Day Camp activity. 94% of parents said that their children felt happy in the English Day Camp and 82% of students said that they enjoyed learning English in the Day Camp. 73% of students also said that they were more willing to speak English in the Day Camp. The most popular activity for the students was the role-play of waiter and customer. 94% of students said they would like to have another English Day Camp in the future. Parents were enthusiastic about the activity. For example, several parents commented that "These activities are meaningful. I hope we can have more activities of this kind". Some parents had helped their children prepare for the Day Camp, though only 17% did this. A recording of the dialogue for the role-play of waiter and customer had been uploaded onto the school's website, so that children could practise at home, but only 15% of parents said that their children had made use of it.

Teachers' reflections

Teachers felt that the experience of planning and implementing the activities had helped them to know more about the design of task-based activities and increased their confidence in creating a school-based curriculum. Apart from the support of the officer, the factors which helped to increase their confidence were the appreciation of parents and the active participation of the students. Although co-planning was time-consuming, teachers felt that the careful preparation and filing of materials would reduce workload in the long run, as the materials could be used again in subsequent years. Teachers had found that not only the creativity of students, but also their own creativity could be stimulated by this experience. They felt that English could be fun for them as well as for their students.
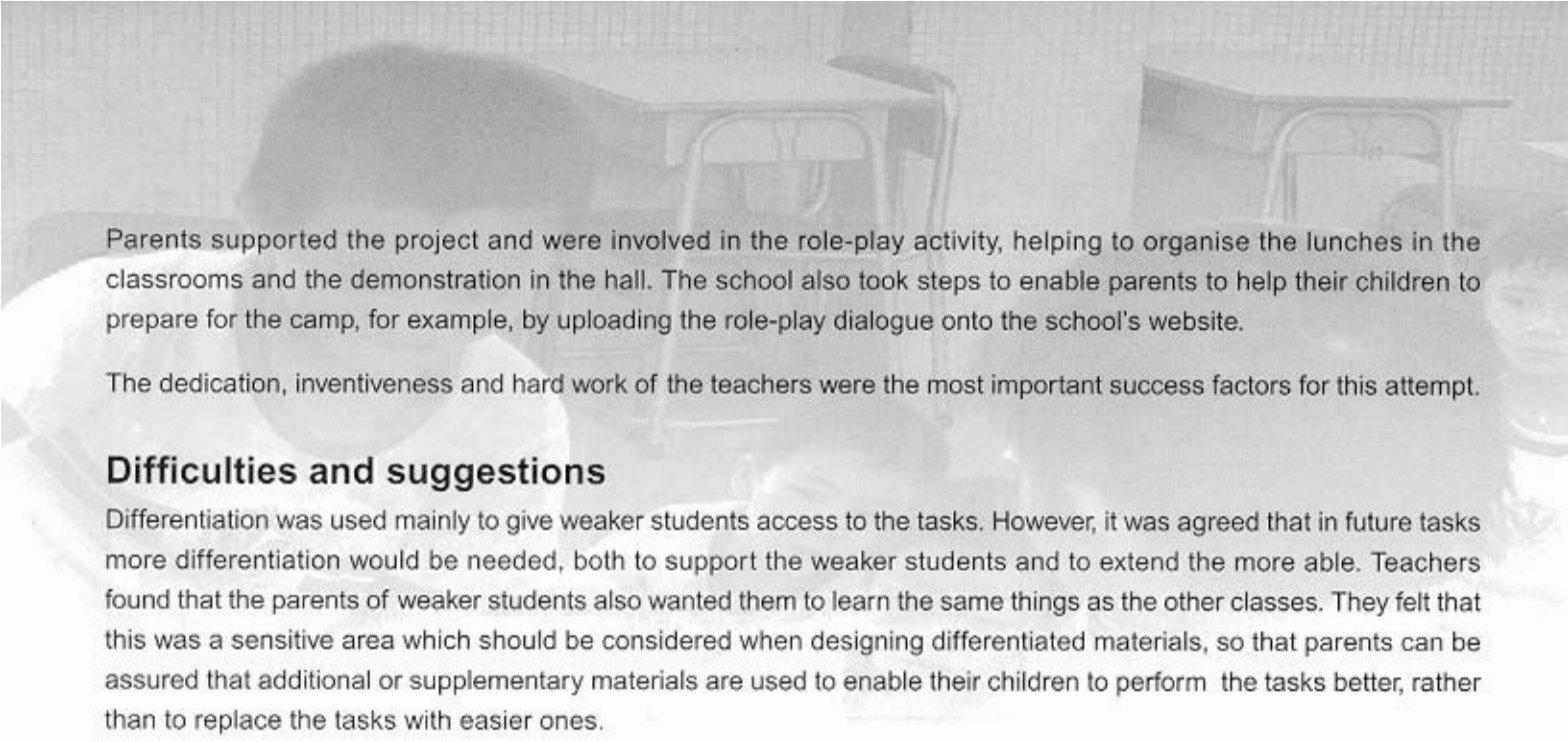
Facilitating factors

The Day Camp enabled students to act out their role-play in a real situation, using menus they had designed themselves and real food. This was an effective link between classroom learning and real life experience. Since most of the students do not have opportunities to use English outside school, it is important that the school provides an environment in which genuine communication in English can take place.

Authentic materials were used for several activities, including restaurant menus and leaflets. This strengthened the connection between English learned inside the classroom and its application in the outside world.

The support of the Principal enabled the teachers to try out new strategies and organise a special activity for students. Partnership with a local secondary school meant that students from both schools could benefit from the Day Camp.

The secondary students read big books they had prepared to the P4 students, and the P4 students were able to serve them their lunch using English to communicate.

Parents supported the project and were involved in the role-play activity, helping to organise the lunches in the classrooms and the demonstration in the hall. The school also took steps to enable parents to help their children to prepare for the camp, for example, by uploading the role-play dialogue onto the school's website.

The dedication, inventiveness and hard work of the teachers were the most important success factors for this attempt.

Difficulties and suggestions

Differentiation was used mainly to give weaker students access to the tasks. However, it was agreed that in future tasks more differentiation would be needed, both to support the weaker students and to extend the more able. Teachers found that the parents of weaker students also wanted them to learn the same things as the other classes. They felt that this was a sensitive area which should be considered when designing differentiated materials, so that parents can be assured that additional or supplementary materials are used to enable their children to perform the tasks better, rather than to replace the tasks with easier ones.

Sham Shui Po Government Primary School

Generating ideas for writing

Background

Generally primary students have the following problems in writing:

- Difficulty in generating ideas
- Over-reliance on teachers' guidance for ideas
- Lack of creativity
- Little interest and limited ability in writing
- Lack of confidence
- Limited exposure to different types of texts

Levels

P4 - P5

Strategies used

In teaching writing, many teachers have faced the challenge of helping students generate ideas. Heller explained that "Composition is impaired if a reader or writer lacks sufficient background knowledge about text structure, topics and ideas "(1999:73). It is perhaps a preliminary task for teachers to work out a variety of effective pre-writing activities facilitating the generation of ideas, if students' writing experience is to be rewarding and able to be built upon.

While the writing practice of providing students with prompts, in the form of questions, picture cues or so on, has been extensively tried out in some classrooms, little improvement has been found in the quality or quantity of ideas in students' work. What students lack, as suggested by Harris & Graham, are in fact "strategies for obtaining new information and accessing current knowledge" (Harris & Graham, 1996: 66).

The following school cases, five in total, are included to share strategies that have been designed and tried out to help students generate ideas for the construction of meaningful texts.

What happened

Process Writing

Task: Writing up the resolution of a birthday-themed story

Students were encouraged to use poems to share their experiences in receiving birthday gifts in class, drawing upon their knowledge of the Experience Strand.

Students were exposed to some topical ideas and the genre of narrative by listening and responding to a story. This actively involved them in constructing meaning and ideas for writing.

The respective use of a circle story and a story organiser, to visualise sequence of events and internalise text structure in narrative writing, helped students sketch plot episodes.

Peer reviews and teacher-student conferencing were conducted to help students revise ideas in successive drafts of text, looking at writing as a cyclical, recursive process.

Findings

82% of the 141 students involved found the sessions on poem reading helpful for their writing.

47% found the use of organisers and circle story very helpful while another 42% found them helpful, facilitating the generation and organisation of ideas, and helping them generate thoughts for writing up the resolution. They also enjoyed reading a poem with theme relevant to their life experience.

92% found the sessions on story reading helpful and interesting, substantially showing them the essential components and language of a story.

44% found the ideas from peers very helpful while 44% found them helpful. 65% of the students found the teachers' feedback very helpful while 24% found it helpful for their writing as well. Students developed a sense of authorship because of the presence of an authentic audience.

The story endings that students wrote reflected that they had made progress in their thinking skills and value judgment. Apart from giving the more common reason that Jojo became happy because she could get what she wanted as her birthday present, some students talked about Jojo learning a lesson from another character. A few even wrote about Jojo's realisation that others' love and concern for her was more important than a present.
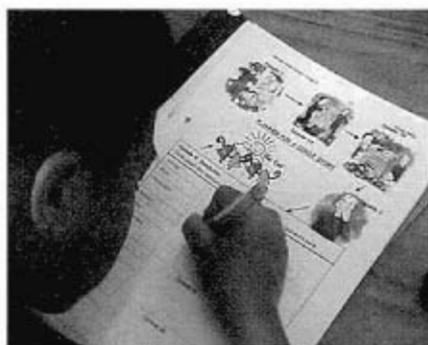
Using organiser to draft a story

Inventing story with illustration

Analysing structure and components of a story

Canossa Primary School

From Reading to Writing

Task: Writing a speech on an invention

Students read the story *Milo's Great Invention* and learnt about the invention processes.

Students had to write about a problem they commonly faced: failure to wake up early in the morning.

Story map, wh-questions, pictures, teacher's model, group discussion and class writing were used to help students generate, develop and organise ideas.

Students not only wrote their speeches to be delivered to fellow classmates but drew pictures of their inventions for display.

Findings

There was increased student participation in the writing lessons and more student-student and student-teacher interaction in the writing process.

Students did not just write an essay, they got the chance to share their writing with their classmates which took the form of a speech delivery.

Students' creativity was being stretched and they were able to relate what they read from books with their personal experience.

Canossa Primary School (San Po Kong)

Creative writing based on a theme

Four creative writing tasks were designed for students based on the language taught in four textbook units.

Task 1: Writing about an ideal teacher

Students interviewed popular teachers. During the lesson, teacher used three-minute fast write to ask students to write down any words related to the teachers that they had interviewed. Based on the good attributes of a good teacher listed and students' own criteria, students wrote a personal description of an ideal teacher.

Task 2: Writing a recipe for a beloved teacher

Teacher put up the main theme "cooking" on the blackboard. Teacher guided students to reflect on the main theme and think of sub-themes. Words related to the sub-themes were listed to form a thematic tree. With the help of the thematic tree, students wrote a procedural text (recipe), imagining that they were going to cook for their favourite teacher.

Task 3: Writing about the activity highlights in the School Open Day Pamphlet

Multi-dimensional writing was adopted in the lessons. Students had to imagine that they were the leader of a certain extra-curricular activity club and write a leaflet to give the guests the details of the programme offered by that club.

Task 4: Writing a poem to express the love for the school

Teacher used brainstorming and mind mapping to elicit and categorise words related to school. Rhyming words were taught through reading some poems. Students then created their own mind map and they made use of it to write a poem called "Loving my school".

Findings

Both teachers and students were asked to complete a questionnaire for reflection and evaluation purposes. A five-point scale was used in the questionnaire for students whereas teachers were requested to provide written feedback in their questionnaire.

Student learning

Before the attempt, the mean scores of students' interest and confidence in writing were 2.8 and 2.9 respectively. After that, the two figures rose to 3.4 and 3.2 because students found that the use of different creative writing strategies could help them generate ideas. Hence, their anxiety about lacking ideas to write could be eased.

Students found that the relevance of the theme to their own experience contributed to the success in their writing as it enabled them to incorporate their own ideas into the writing.

Teacher learning

Teachers acquired some skills in teaching creative writing. They realised that guided questions and pictures were not the only means to give guidance to students in their writing. In the process of developing students' creativity in writing, writing tasks had to be designed in a way which enabled students to activate their own experience and knowledge.

Teachers realised that students could sometimes do better than they expected. In order to enhance students' creativity, excessive guidance had to be avoided.

Using brainstorming to generate ideas

Writing about an ideal teacher
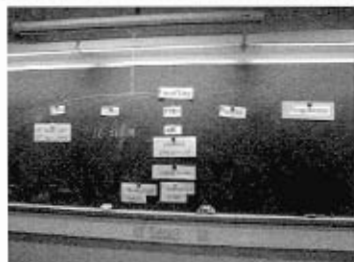
Developing "Thematic Tree" to collate ideas

Holy Family Canossian School (Kowloon Tong)

Writing based on authentic experience

Task: Writing a diary about a visit to a centre for the elderly

Students read an article about world problems, the needs of people and the help we can offer.

A life-wide learning activity (a visit) was organised and students were asked to write the activities and their feelings in reflection logs.

Teachers conducted class writing to familiarise students with the task. Teachers made use of wh-question words to help students brainstorm the ideas and organise them into appropriate paragraphs.

Students made use of ideas in the reflection logs and a spider map to brainstorm ideas for the writing task.

Findings

All students, including the less able ones, had more ideas to write than before. Most of them wrote more than 100 words in the diary without great difficulty.

Some students were able to express some original ideas related to their personal feelings.

Using graphic organiser to organise ideas

Sung Tak Wong Kin Sheung Memorial School (AM/WD)

Stimulating students' thinking through story reading

Task: Writing a letter of reply to a pen friend living in Cambodia

To arouse interest in reading, students were asked to read an e-book *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse* and to conduct Reader's Theatre. They were then led to think about and compare country life and city life based on the story. Students also discussed life in Hong Kong and in some poor countries, and wrote a letter of reply to a pen friend from Cambodia about the living environment and conditions.
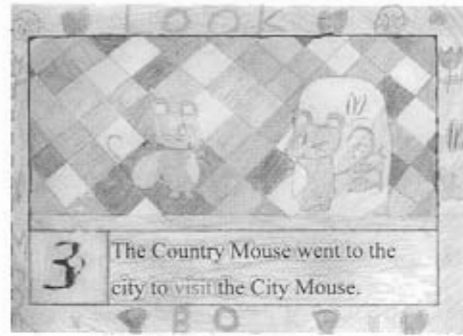
Findings

Students enjoyed reading the story and conducting the Reader's Theatre very much.

Students learned to understand and show respect for different living environment and conditions.

Students showed greater independence when generating their own ideas in the letter-writing task.

Reading e-book before writing

Creating own big book

TWGHs Lee Chi Hung Memorial Primary School (AM)

Facilitating Factors

Guiding students to generate ideas through different means

Graphic organisers such as thematic trees and mindmaps were designed to help students get a clearer picture of the context and purpose of their writing, freeing their minds on brainstorming and constructing ideas. The use of reflection logs trained students' observation skills, helping them retrieve ideas to write about. In addition, the use of authentic reading materials stimulated students to think and create new ideas.

Setting engaging learning activities related to students' life experience

Students' thoughts and ideas were effectively activated as they were given chances to relate their life experience, feelings and world knowledge to the writing activities.

Taking the initiative to innovate pedagogy

Instead of relying on the use of guiding questions to help students generate ideas for writing, teachers welcomed new practices like group discussion, life-wide learning activities, class writing and peer review.
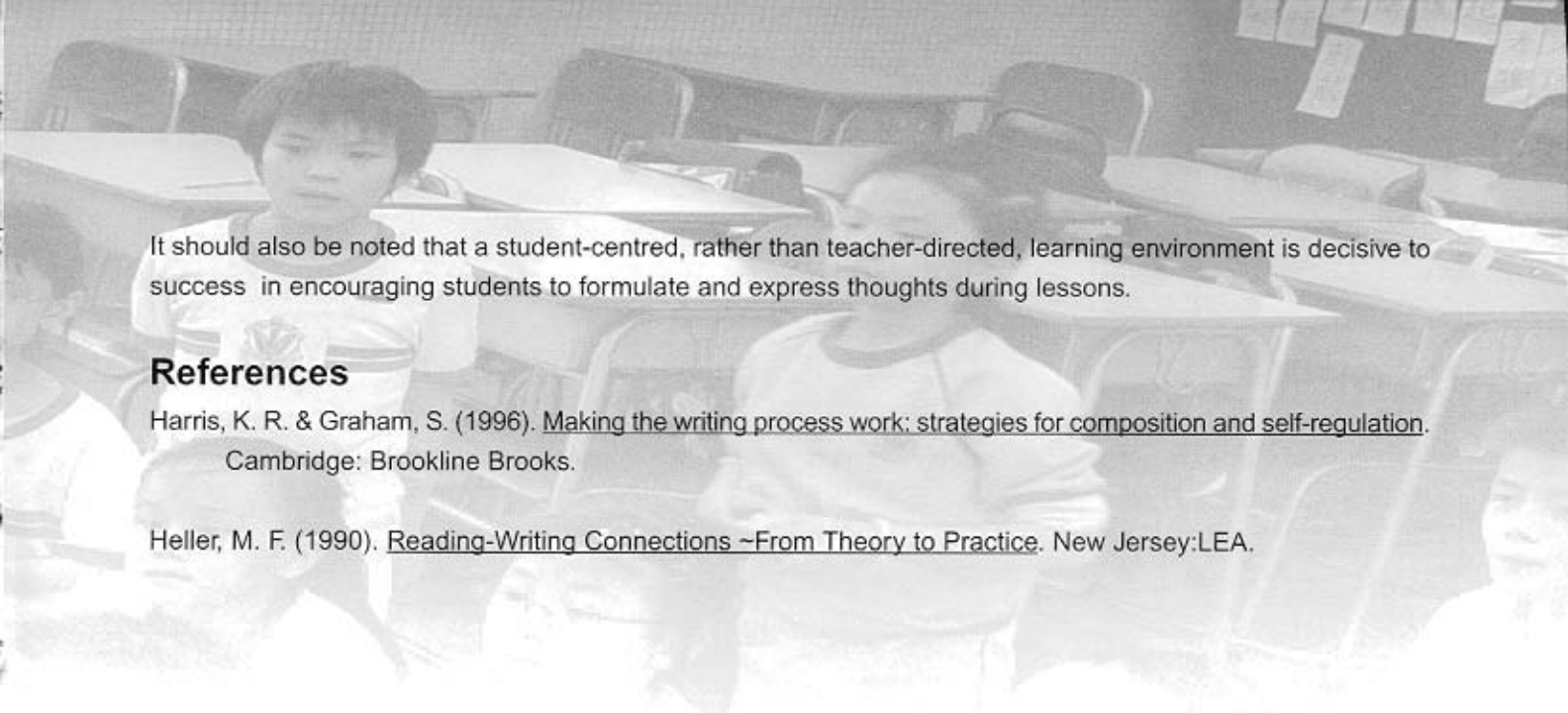
School support

The Principals were supportive and trusted the teachers, empowering the English Panel Heads / PSMCDs to reschedule the curriculum and arrange time for co-planning and trying out the co-planned modules.

IT support

Effective technical support facilitated teachers to incorporate the use of IT in the teaching of writing.

Difficulties and suggestions

It may require some time to conduct experience sharing, post-reading or post-writing activities. Yet these activities help students develop interest and generate ideas. A flexible schedule is very important to enable the smooth implementation of the co-planned module.

It should also be noted that a student-centred, rather than teacher-directed, learning environment is decisive to success in encouraging students to formulate and express thoughts during lessons.

References

Harris, K. R. & Graham, S. (1996). Making the writing process work: strategies for composition and self-regulation. Cambridge: Brookline Brooks.

Heller, M. F. (1990). Reading-Writing Connections ~From Theory to Practice. New Jersey:LEA.

Teaching English through drama

Background

Teachers found that many students were weak in English, particularly in speaking. Many of them were reluctant to speak because they were not motivated or they lacked confidence. It is important to enhance students' motivation and confidence in speaking English.
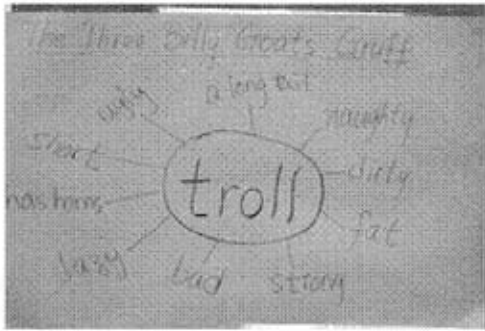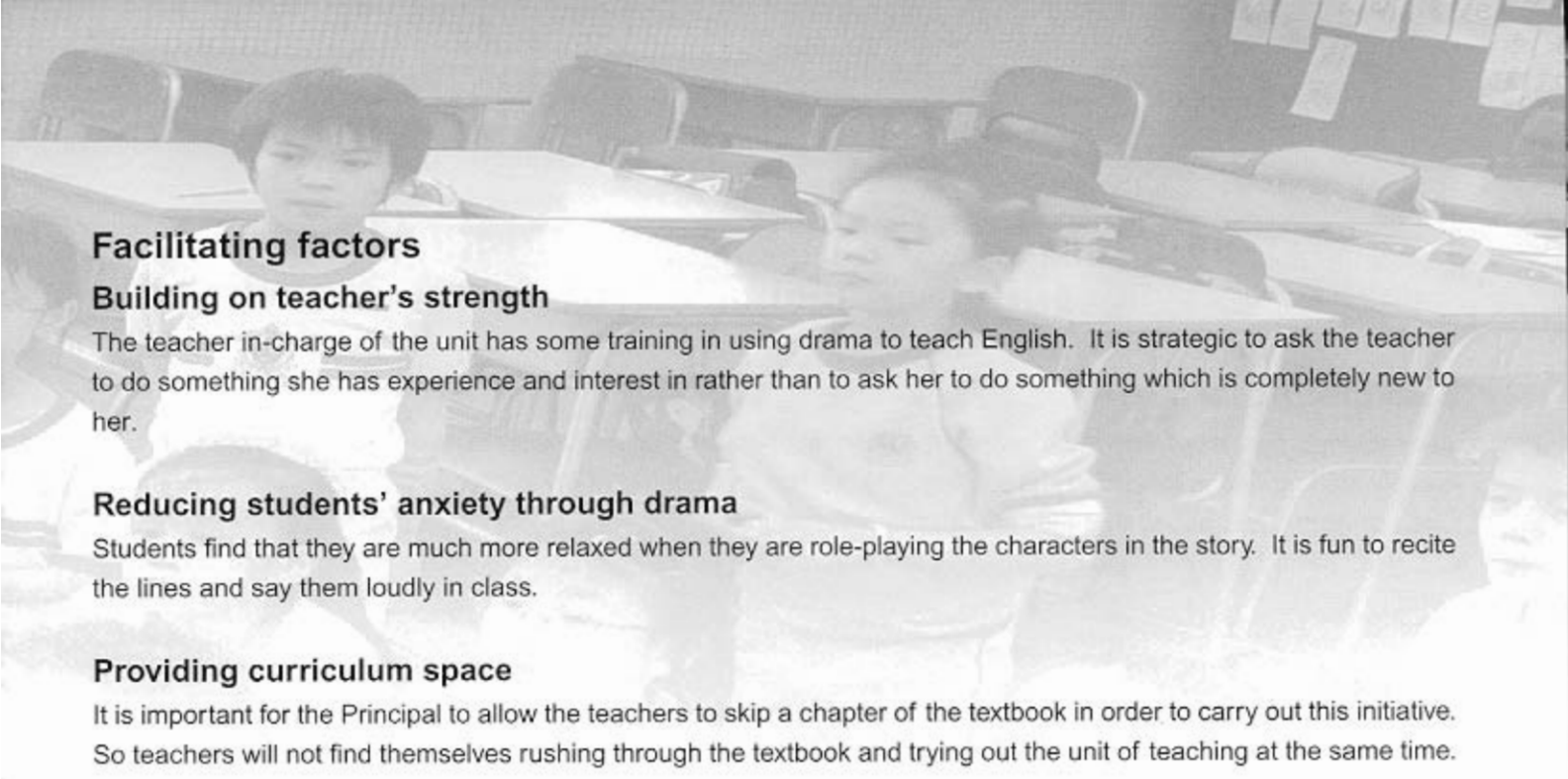
Level

P4

Strategies used

It was decided that drama would be used as a strategy to enhance students' motivation. In Laura Miccoli's article "English through drama for oral skills development", she mentions that drama "brings motivation and fun to the classroom. No matter how threatened students feel with the prospect of presenting a play, everyone will enjoy acting, since we all wish for glory and fame. Being an actor, even if only through a classroom performance, has a difficult-to-resist seductive power that the less proficient students accept as a challenge."

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages to be gained from the use of drama, according to Paul Davies, is that "students become more confident in their use of English by experiencing the language in operation. The student-centredness inherent in all dramatic activities also improves students' maturity and motivation." Bearing this in mind, drama is used as a strategy to enhance students' motivation.

What happened

No. of lessons	Teaching objectives	Language skills	Procedures
2	Students learn how to predict events.	Reading : making predictions	**Pre-reading** Teacher showed students a picture of a troll in the story book and asked them questions about the troll. Teacher wrote predictions on the board and confirmed or modified them after reading the story.
		Reading and Listening	Teacher showed the pictures of the three goats. Teacher then asked students to brainstorm as many ideas as they could think of about goats.

No. of lessons	Teaching objectives	Language skills	Procedures
			Reading the story Teacher stopped at different points in the story and asked students to predict what would happen. e.g. Why can't the goats cross the bridge? What will happen when the troll sees the small goat? What will the small goat say in order to cross the bridge? **Task** Sequencing pictures to show the order of the events.
1	Students learn the story structure by filling out the story map.	Writing	Teacher recapped the story and explained the important elements of a story, e.g. beginning, middle and end; characters, settings, problem and solution. Setting of the story **Task** Filling out the story map using the story frame.
1	Students think of a solution to cross the bridge.	Writing	**Task** Thinking of a solution of how they could cross the bridge safely. A decision tree
1	Students learn how to write a dialogue with the use of speech bubbles.	Writing	**Task** Mixing and matching the speech bubbles.

Facilitating factors

Building on teacher's strength

The teacher in-charge of the unit has some training in using drama to teach English. It is strategic to ask the teacher to do something she has experience and interest in rather than to ask her to do something which is completely new to her.

Reducing students' anxiety through drama

Students find that they are much more relaxed when they are role-playing the characters in the story. It is fun to recite the lines and say them loudly in class.

Providing curriculum space

It is important for the Principal to allow the teachers to skip a chapter of the textbook in order to carry out this initiative. So teachers will not find themselves rushing through the textbook and trying out the unit of teaching at the same time.

Difficulties and suggestions

Not all teachers have received training in drama. Therefore some teachers did not do the voice control exercises. More warm up exercises to teach students how to relax should be done. A workshop on drama is also recommended for all teachers.

References

Davies, P. (1990). The use of drama in English language teaching. TESL Canada Journal, 8(1), 87-99.

Miccoli , L. (2003). English through drama for oral skills development. ELT Journal, 57(2), 122-129.

Catholic Mission School

No. of lessons	Teaching objectives	Language skills	Procedures
2	Students learn how to write a new ending for the story by writing the narration and dialogues.	Speaking and Writing	**Changing the ending of the story and writing simple dialogues** "It is too cruel to kill the troll. Imagine you were the Big Billy Goat, think of another solution so that the troll would let you pass."
1	Students learn what a drama looks like by watching a performance by another school.	Viewing	Teacher pointed out to the students that when preparing for a drama performance, they needed to prepare props, recite lines of dialogues and divide themselves into different roles, using music or songs as background.
6-8	Students practise pronunciation, stress and intonation to act out the play.	Listening and Speaking	**Reading aloud** Students listened to a CD which recorded the whole story in the form of a play to have a feel of how the lines were read. **Acting out the story** Teacher divided students into groups of 5 (narrator, troll, 3 goats). Students chose different roles according to their interests. Teacher helped divide work, e.g. making props and sound effects, among students. Before setting them to rehearse, teachers went through the assessment criteria with the whole class. Students rehearsed the play and acted out in class.

What students think

A short questionnaire was given to the students to find out how they felt about using drama to learn English. Almost 90% of students replied that they liked learning English through drama and around 87% of students thought they were more motivated to use drama to learn English. The majority of students said that they learned how to write a new ending for the story and yet 40% thought they needed more help to learn how to write dialogues for the characters. More importantly, 92% of students reported that they learned how to work with other classmates.

During the interview, one student said using drama to learn English would give her more confidence to speak up and it was fun to act out the drama. Also, they have learned how to act and work with classmates.

Becoming better readers and spellers through developing phonological awareness

Background

Many students do not possess the knowledge of basic letter-sound relationships in English words, not to mention how to apply this knowledge in reading and spelling. By building up students' ability to decode (in reading) and encode (in spelling) words, it is hoped that they can discriminate sounds in listening, master pronunciation in speaking, use accurate spelling in writing and develop an interest in reading as they gain competence and confidence in reading aloud.

Levels

P1 - P3

Strategies used

To help students retain what they learn and transfer the knowledge and skills to new situations, it is better to learn and teach phonics in context as opposed to teaching it out of context where students learn the individual letter sounds by rote (Goodman, 1993).

To this end, teachers are encouraged to incorporate phonics in the school's General English programme or the reading programme . Another alternative is to run a phonics programme which introduces sounds within situations students can make sense of.

What happened

Reading programme

In one school, teachers decided to incorporate phonics learning into the reading programme as this fosters a language rich environment for children to develop phonological awareness and enables students to construct and apply knowledge and skills in authentic contexts.

At the planning stage, teachers started off with the selection of reading texts for P2 students. Factors under consideration were:

• students' interest;
• students' strengths and weaknesses; and
• students' prior knowledge (e.g. the sounds learnt).

Evidence was collected by reviewing the scheme of work, observing students and conducting a diagnostic test. The teachers finally decided on the choice of the reading texts. One story book *Cat and Dog at School* was chosen because:

• it is about school life and is relevant and of interest to students;
• it is the right level for students; and
• it contains structures and vocabulary students have not learnt before.

As phonics learning was to be integrated into the reading programme, it was one of the key learning objectives. Other learning objectives, namely, language items, learning vocabulary, generic skills, and positive values and attitudes, were also set.

The teachers decided to teach initial /l/ blends (e.g. /bl/ and /fl/) because they are the target sounds for P2 and as reflected in the diagnostic test, students generally could not pronounce them accurately. Though initial /l/ blends do not appear frequently in the story, teachers could come up with a handful of words with initial /l/ blends and at the same time are related to the theme (e.g. classroom, playground, and blackboard). In this way, students could have enough exposure to the target sounds.

The next concern was how to make effective use of the story and design contextualised tasks to facilitate phonics learning. It was integrated in three ways:

• The phonics sounds were incorporated into integrated learning activities to provide opportunities for learning and using the target sounds in context.
• The target sounds were learnt and practised in structural tasks.
• The sounds were highlighted, whenever necessary, in the integrated learning activities to reinforce students' learning.

Learning activities tried out

What		How
Shared reading *Cat and Dog at School*		Reading aloud Framing words with target sounds
Song singing Tick-tock tick-tock says the clock : a song sharing the same theme with the story	Sing the song (Tune: London Bridge is Falling Down) Tick-tock tick-tock says the clock. Go to school, don't be slow. Children play in the playground, in the playground.	Singing along Highlighting target sounds
Tongue twisters Tongue twisters about school life	Tongue twisters Clever cat cleans the clock in the classroom. Playground is a place for pupils to play. Sunny sings slowly and sleeps by the sea. Draw a black cat and a blue bird on the big black blackboard. Five funny flies fly with five butterflies on the first floor.	Reading aloud Highlighting target sounds Tongue twisters competition
School tour Take a new student on a tour around the school Introduce and label places in school		Learning by doing Highlighting target sounds Enriching the language environment

What		How
School rules miming games Play a miming game to guess the school rules Help the new student to learn about school rules		Learning by doing Highlighting target sounds
Class/group writing of school rules Write school rules or create new rules Present the rules to help the new student		Providing opportunities to write and speak in context

Phonics programme

Initial attempts were made by teachers in two other schools to incorporate phonics in the school's General English programme but they found it difficult to:

- set time aside to teach letter sounds in the English lessons after attending to grammar points and language structures;
- identify what phonics features to focus on if they did not stand out distinctly in any particular section in the course book; and
- ensure a systematic coverage of phonics knowledge and skills, and a continuity in delivery.

So the two schools decided to run a phonics programme for their students. They designed their school-based materials based on the phonics books they asked students to purchase. They conducted phonics lessons once a week/cycle and most importantly, taught letter sounds in context with adaptations and enrichment.
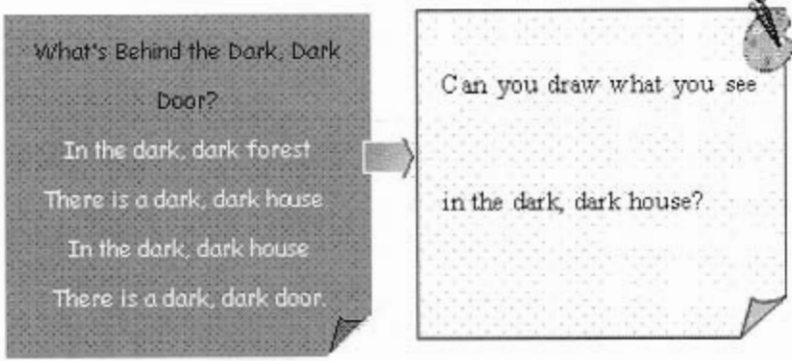
The phonics books generally begin with an introduction of a single target letter sound (e.g. /f/ in fan, fat, fish, fox, ferry and funny), followed by either chanting of a rhyme, singing of a song or playing of a game, an attempt to give a context to what students learnt. However, teachers felt that this approach would not lead to much learning and students would simply learn and forget.

A more effective way was to introduce the target sound in context, then draw students' attention to that particular sound, provide chances for them to experience the sound through different sensory channels (visual, auditory, oral, tactile, kinesthetic) and then give them extended practice to consolidate what they have learnt. Students were expected to keep a phonics exercise book in which they recorded the letter sounds they learnt in each lesson, pasted the related worksheet(s) and entered any new words they came across in other English learning situations.

Excerpts from students' phonics books

A variety of presentation modes like games, songs, stories, poems and PowerPoint presentations were used to make the lessons more interesting and retainable for students. The table below lists some of those used:

Letter sound	Teaching means	Teaching materials
f	story	Finnie the Fox
b	game	What's in the bag?
d	drawing	What's Behind the Dark, Dark Door?

Letter Sound	Teaching means	Teaching materials
i	Power Point presentation	Riddles on "vowel i" objects
a, e, i, o, u	song	Animal Parade song

The Animal Parade Song
(melody: This Old Man)

Come and see
Come with me
Animals for you to see
Who can win the animal parade?
Let's see how the game is played.

/a/
Candy Cat
Very fat
Wears a hat and
Sits on a mat
Can she win the animal parade?
Clap your hands for Candy Cat! |

Teachers found the following procedures effective:
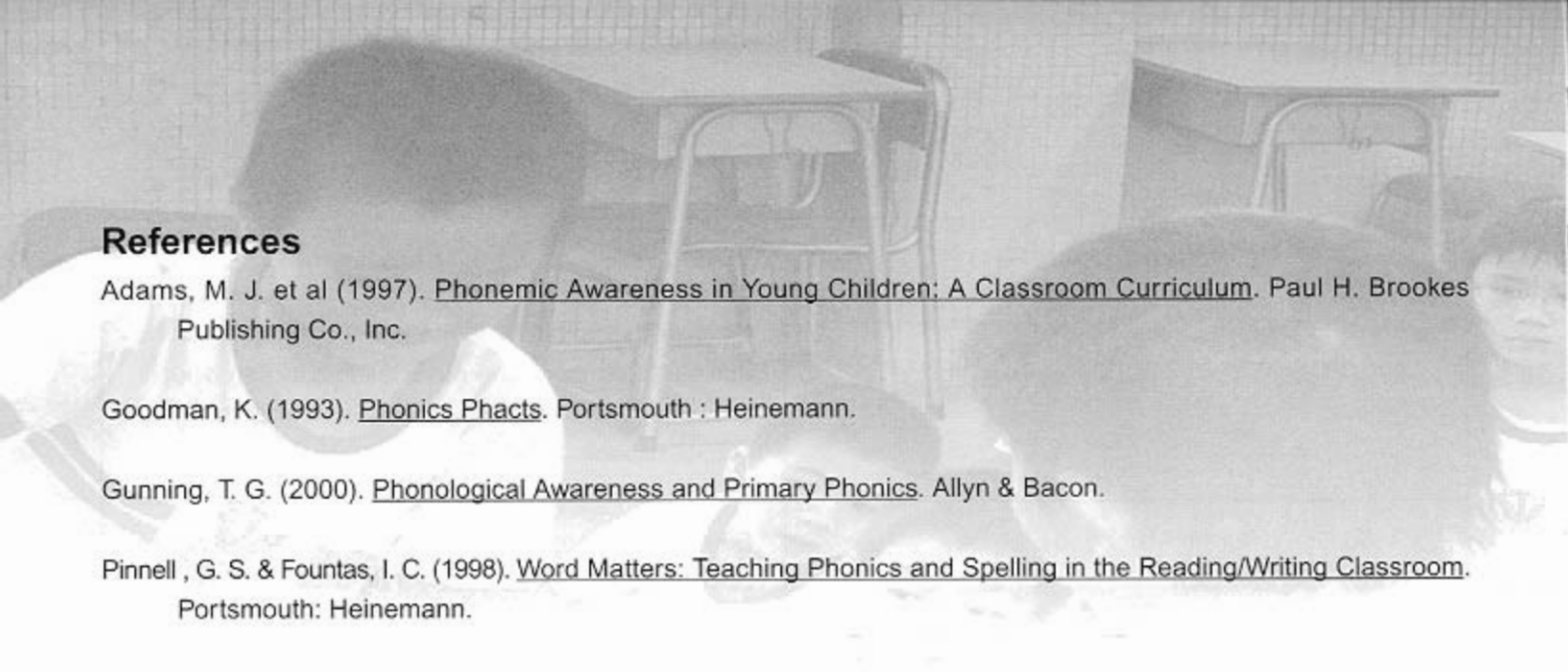
Procedures	Examples
Introducing the target sound in context	Tell the story of *Finnie the Fox* to the Class: • how he looks and what he is like: fat, furry, funny, fierce, fast • his birthday: four turning five • birthday presents he gets: fan, flowers, fish (cooked with a fork over fire)
Identifying the target letter sound	/f/
Teaching the sound through demonstration by teacher and practice by students	/f/ is voiceless (no throat vibration can be felt) press the lower lip against the upper teeth and let the air come out; a noticeable puff of breath or aspiration is heard

Procedures	Examples
Referring to phonics book	Go over the materials found in the phonics book so that students can make association between what is presented in class by the teacher with what they find in the textbook
Consolidation or further/extended practice	Entry of the target letter sound in phonics exercise book which is kept as a record of student learning
Establishing the links	Revise students' knowledge and skills of phonics met in other English learning contexts

Implications for teaching and learning

Since needs of schools vary, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. It is advisable that schools look into the actual needs when deciding what programme to adopt. Below are some considerations when moving from a phonics programme to a reading programme.

1. Time constraint is always one of the problems noted. To incorporate phonics into a reading programme, consideration has to be given to the overall curriculum planning, students' readiness, and learning objectives. Also, thought has to be given to the learning activities to ensure students acquire understanding of the target sounds and can apply them in context. All these take time. Therefore, it is important to set aside more time at the planning and implementation stages.

2. As there are usually no coursebooks to follow, teachers have to customise their own reading programme. More autonomy for teachers to make their professional judgment can facilitate their work. Form coordinators may also collaborate to ensure a balanced coverage of phonics learning over the key stages.

3. No matter which programme teachers opt for, fostering a print-rich environment through display of a word tree, a word wall, a word train, etc. in the classroom can provide references and resources to facilitate phonics learning.

4. The more exposure students have, the easier it is for them to remember the sounds learnt. More opportunities should be created for students to revisit the old sounds, for example, by combining new sounds with old sounds to refresh students' memory.

5. If plenty of opportunities are provided for students to apply their knowledge and skills of phonics to sound out familiar new words in different texts, it is more beneficial to their learning. This can be done by making connections between the letter sounds learnt in phonics lessons with other English lessons and English learning situations in school.

6. It is important that students do not just sit and listen but participate actively in the learning process. Students can be engaged in interesting and purposeful activities or games to practise the target letter sounds in context, such as phonics board games, phonics tic-tac-toe, tongue twisters, word hunt, word pyramid and word search/maze.

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Moving from textbook-based teaching to task-based learning

Background

The design of our school-based English curriculum was largely based on the textbook we adopted. Initially, we found it convenient to use for all classes as the set procedures and exercises in the book would reduce our workload in preparation. Yet, in actual implementation, we spotted two major problems. Students did well in the grammar exercises but failed to apply the grammar structures in the writing tasks. When asked to perform speaking tasks, there was a general lack of motivation and speaking skills. On reviewing the textbook, we found that the grammar part contains mostly discrete practice items which focus on drills of the language form (with application only in a very controlled manner). For the speaking part, students are often asked to "role-play" standard dialogues where there is little room for their own input and the situation given is often uninteresting and unrelated to the students' experience. We needed something else to contribute to the development of students' communication skills.

Level

P3

Strategies used

In view of this, we tried using the task-based approach with our P3 classes to plan and reorganise the learning, teaching and assessment materials and activities. We made discretionary use of the textbook by improving the teaching of grammar and speaking. In our design of **grammar** teaching, we put emphasis on **helping students master both language forms and communicative functions for use in context**. Therefore, the practice of discrete items is always followed by tasks which provide authentic contexts for students to apply the target grammar structures. In our design of **speaking** activities, we add in **pre-tasks** to **build up students' confidence** in applying the target language and we **provide opportunities for students to share** their feelings and ideas on topics closely related to their daily life. After the task, we **consolidate what they have learnt** through some **post-task activities**. We still use the textbook but focus more on how the curriculum and lesson design can cater for the needs of the students.

Lesson flow

No. of lessons	Teaching objectives	Language skills	Procedures
1	Motivate students by revising the names of places in the school which they are familiar with (e.g. library, corridor).	Speaking and Listening	**Motivation** Use photographs to show different places in the school. Ask students to name those places. **Pre-task activity** Show a wall picture of the school with some children visitors doing different things in different places in the school.

No. of lessons	Teaching objectives	Language skills	Procedures
	Elicit the vocabulary and target language patterns through contextualisation (e.g. What is he doing?/He is eating./You mustn't eat in the library.)		Ask students (assuming the role of school prefects) if the visitors are doing the right thing.
1	Familiarise students with the target language through activities.	Reading, Speaking and Listening	**Card game competition** Prepare 3 envelopes with cards containing modals, action verbs and places respectively and ask students to draw the cards randomly to form a sentence. **Role-play (pair work)** Each student will be given a card with a person doing an action in a place in a school. They have to find out the information from their partners by using the target language items.
1	Provide students with opportunities to use the target language items in context and develop their collaboration skills.	Reading, Speaking and Writing	**Writing task (group work)** **Design a school rules poster** Tell the students that the open day is coming. The principal would like them to design some school rules posters to show the visitors. Each group is assigned a task and reports the group's work to the class.
2	Use a range of reading strategies to develop students' reading skills (e.g. Is Beeno naughty?/ How do you know?/What is he doing?/Is he doing the right thing?/Why not?).	Reading and Speaking	**Shared reading** Dramatise the story "School rules" (designed by the teacher) with the class using a big book. While reading, the teacher asks students to predict what will happen next in order to build up their problem-solving and critical thinking skills.
1	Develop students' critical thinking skills and creativity in writing.	Writing	**Writing task** **Create a new ending of a story** At the end of the story, the teacher tells students that Beeno wants to leave the school because he dislikes the school rules. She then asks students to create a new ending of the story by thinking some ways to make Beeno stay. Use a mind map to brainstorm ideas with the whole class. Tell students to write the new ending on a tasksheet.

No. of lessons	Teaching objectives	Language skills	Procedures
2	Develop students' motivation and speaking skills through storytelling.	Reading, Listening and Speaking	**Storytelling** Divide the class into four different groups and each student is assigned a role in the story. Less able students can be assigned roles which have less dialogue. Ask students to refer to the dialogue they need to recite. Support less able students by providing scripts of the dialogue which they have to recite. Teach storytelling performance skills by inviting some students to demonstrate. The group with the best performance will be awarded prizes.
	Develop students' interest in and enjoyment of the story by acting out the characters.		**Post-task activity** Video-tape the performance of the students and use it for classroom teaching and learning in the next lesson.

Findings

79% of students replied that they liked doing group work with their classmates and about 82% enjoyed acting out the characters in the story. 67% of students enjoyed creative writing while 85 % said that they would participate actively in English lessons after learning this unit. 73 % of students found that they were confident in communicating with their classmates in English. Most importantly, 88% of students reported that they liked learning English through activities such as storytelling, group writing and shared reading. Teachers shared that students' confidence in speaking and their speaking skills had developed through storytelling activities.

What we have learnt

1. To use the textbook more effectively, we must understand the purpose of our teaching and the learning needs of our students. We can exercise our discretion as to what and how to use the textbook rather than be guided solely by what is in the textbook.

2. We are more familiar with the use of the task-based approach, especially in creating appropriate contexts for students to use the target language and skills meaningfully. The encouraging feedback from students, their written work and their performance in the storytelling activity provide good evidence that they are able to use the grammar structures in context and tell stories with different endings.

3. It is useful to have more brainstorming ideas activities at the pre-task stage which allow students to expand their imagination and creativity in writing.

What more can be done

To enable more teachers and students to benefit from our experience this year, we recommend teachers of other levels to try using a task-based approach. To create space for teachers to give more guidance to students to complete the tasks, we recommend greater flexibility be given to teachers in the curriculum adaptation process, e.g. in deciding the number of units to be covered.

Contributed by Bishop Paschang Memorial School

A school rules poster

Creating a new ending of a story

"I'm going to tell you a story about..."

Developing a school-based Buddy Reading Programme for English

Background

Teachers have found that students often lack exposure to English outside class and have few opportunities to read storybooks. Young students, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, have limited resources at home to support their reading and to help them practise the reading skills learned in class. Unlike older students who read more regularly and independently under a reading scheme, young students seldom read English storybooks for sustaining reading interest and improving reading skills.

Levels

P2, P3, P5 and P6

Strategies used

To support young students to read, teachers have decided to make use of buddy reading to give them peer support. P5 and P6 students have been trained as Reading Ambassadors to help P2 and P3 students. P1 has not been chosen since teachers want to put more emphasis on the development of students' first language and a Chinese buddy reading programme has been implemented at P1.

In buddy reading, older students help younger ones enhance reading interest and consolidate some basic reading skills. They read with younger students and ask them questions to develop their ability to use contextual and pictorial cues for understanding the text. Much research on buddy reading shows that it can improve students' fluency and comprehension. Poor readers become more willing to take risks while reading aloud to older students (Ruetzel & Cooter, 1996). Young students "tend to find the opportunity to read aloud to an older peer tutor to be quite reinforcing" (Wright, 2004). Buddy reading has also been found to benefit both parties - younger students develop literacy and social skills (Thomas, 1993) while older students gain more self-confidence and have better reading fluency through repeated modelling (Grimm, 1998).

How to implement

The Buddy Reading Programme has been implemented in two phases:

Phase I (Oct 2003 – Jun 2004)	Phase II (Sept 2004 – Jun 2005)
Involved different parties including the school librarian, English teachers and a CDI officer in planning and implementing the English Buddy Reading Programme at P2 for piloting.	Extended the Programme to P3 (2 classes) for creating greater impacts on more students at different levels.
Selected interesting or module-related storybooks to cater for the needs and linguistic levels of young students.	Chose more graded storybooks based on the feedback collected in phase I for meeting the needs of different ability groups in both P2 & P3 .

Phase I (Oct 2003 – Jun 2004)	Phase II (Sept 2004 – Jun 2005)
Designed a training package and conducted a training workshop to equip 19 Reading Ambassadors with essential skills for supporting P2 students (2 classes) to read.	Recruited 30 Reading Ambassadors and modified the content of the training package to help new Reading Ambassadors cope with the tasks assigned.
Conducted running records with more able, average and less able students as a pre-test to track students' progress.	Conducted running records with more able, average and less able students and sent out pre-project questionnaires to all students to track students' progress.
Launched the Programme during lunch time and observed students' performance to identify areas for improvement.	Launched Phase II and organised a lesson observation activity for teachers from different schools in the Reading Network to obtain their feedback on the Programme.
Evaluated the first phase of the Programme and made use of assessment tools (e.g. running records, interviews, questionnaires) to assess the effectiveness of the Programme.	Evaluated the second phase of the Programme and made use of assessment tools (e.g. running records, questionnaires, interviews) to assess the effectiveness of the Programme.
Awarded certificates to Reading Ambassadors and P2 students in recognition of their achievements.	Conceptualised the experiences generated from the Programme for dissemination to other schools.
Invited Reading Ambassadors to visit a kindergarten and read storybooks to small children as a community service.	Awarded certificates to Reading Ambassadors and P2 students in recognition of their achievements.

Reading Ambassadors doing a role-play
in the training workshop

NET demonstrating reading strategies
to Reading Ambassadors

P2 students reading with peer support

Running records used to find out students' progress

What students think

All students were asked to write reflections and students from different ability groups were interviewed. Many indicated that they were more interested in reading and that reading was easier for them. They displayed a wider vocabulary from reading more outside class and enjoyed buddy reading very much. Running records were conducted with more able, average and less able students to find out their improvement in reading accuracy. Less able and average students showed 36% and 26% improvement in reading accuracy respectively while more able students displayed 6% improvement. It was observed that many students were able to make use of such reading skills as using contextual and pictorial cues to understand the text.

Based on the questionnaires given to Reading Ambassadors, 93% believed that their reading skills and fluency showed improvement. 100% indicated that they could learn a lot from the Programme . 83% thought that they could gain self-confidence after the Programme. In the interview, they reflected that they could improve communication and social skills as well as reading fluency.

What teachers think

When interviewed, teachers said that the Programme could nurture a good reading habit among young students. They believed that buddy reading outside class could complement classroom learning quite effectively and overcome resource and time constraints faced by them. They have also acquired professional knowledge and skills to conduct a buddy reading programme.
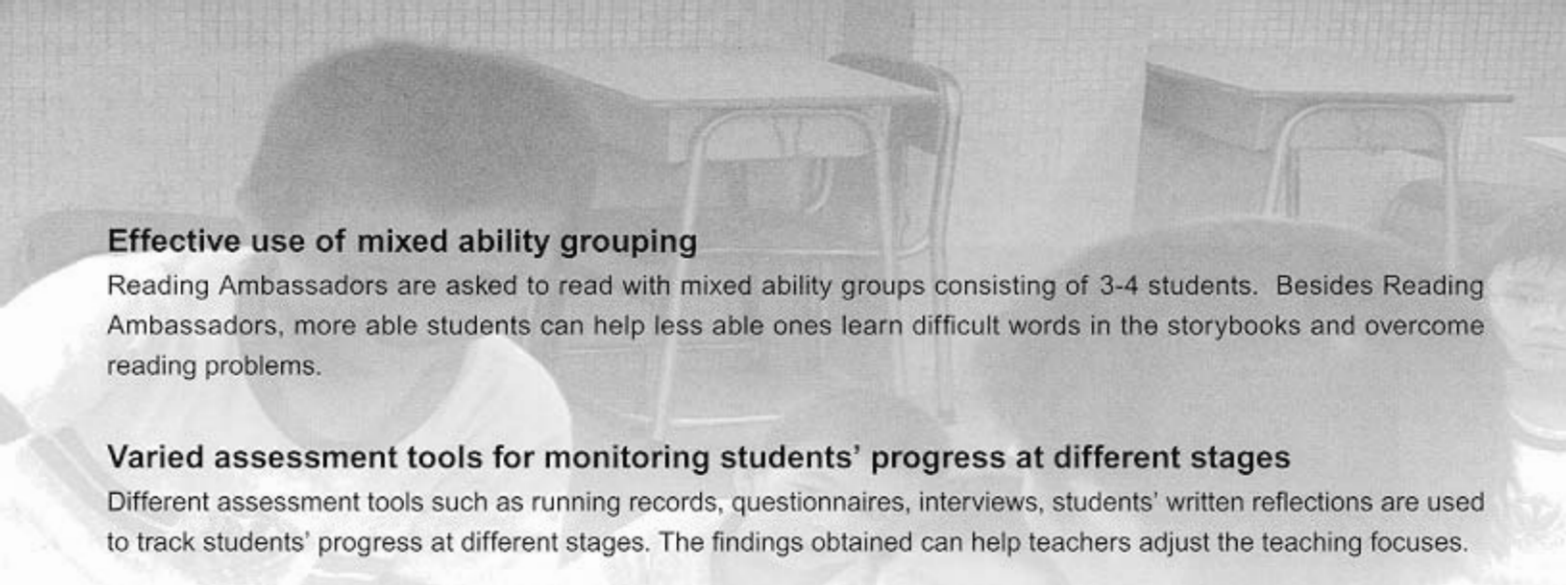
Facilitating factors

Close inter-departmental collaboration

Teachers have collaborated closely and contributed to the planning and implementation of the Programme in different ways. Input from different parties can increase the chance of successfully conducting the Programme.

Comprehensive training provided to facilitate peer support

Besides demonstrating those reading skills to be taught to young students in the training workshop and asking Reading Ambassadors to practise them in role-plays, teachers have also included social and management skills. The NET has recorded storybooks for Reading Ambassadors to practise intonation and pronunciation in a self-access mode. To ensure success, teachers have to make sure that Reading Ambassadors understand the tasks assigned to them. All Reading Ambassadors have been given passports with useful tips and guidelines on how to conduct buddy reading.

Effective use of mixed ability grouping

Reading Ambassadors are asked to read with mixed ability groups consisting of 3-4 students. Besides Reading Ambassadors, more able students can help less able ones learn difficult words in the storybooks and overcome reading problems.

Varied assessment tools for monitoring students' progress at different stages

Different assessment tools such as running records, questionnaires, interviews, students' written reflections are used to track students' progress at different stages. The findings obtained can help teachers adjust the teaching focuses.

Difficulties to be overcome

Teachers see that the success of the Programme greatly depends on the quality of the Reading Ambassadors. Designing a good training programme for them has been considered a very challenging task. To resolve the problem, a lot of time has been spent on planning and setting clear goals for the Programme. Due to good planning and frequent observation by teachers during implementation, the operation of buddy reading has become smooth and the impacts on students' learning have been quite significant.

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Learning how to read

Background

Extensive reading has been advocated and implemented for a long time in English classrooms in Hong Kong, but it has been observed that in the ERS lessons many learners are not using the reading time fruitfully and fewer have successfully developed an English reading habit. Learners have to learn how to read before they can read independently and extensively. Having noted the lack, teachers in three schools ventured to develop and implement a reading instruction project for their Primary 4 classes.

Level

P4

Strategies used

This Reading Instruction Project is two-fold: getting learners ready to read and teaching them how to read.

A. Getting learners ready to read

This part of the instruction aims at motivating learners to read by building up their book concepts and developing their reading readiness. The following teaching unit is one of the attempts to bridge the gap between extensive reading and intensive reading. This unit is based on a chapter in the textbook used by two of the schools and the first task is designed with consideration given to the language items dealt with in that chapter. Each task is preceded and followed by exercises and games for learners to master the target language (not included here).

Tasks	Activities
1. Making suggestions to the librarian about what facilities and books learners want more in the library	Learners visited the school library where they were taught the name and use of the different library facilities and different types of books.
	They made a rough count of the different facilities and books, filled in a survey form and suggested what facilities they wanted more of.
	They classified some book titles according to the book types, predicted what the book is about and confirmed their prediction after looking them up in the school / class library.
2. Writing previews of some books with an explanation why they are chosen /not chosen for independent reading	Learners learned to identify basic book information (names of author, illustrator, publisher, ISBN) by looking at the different parts of a book (book spine and cover, book blurbs, etc).
	They learned how to preview a book by describing the physical features and referring to information that helps them decide if it suits their level (e.g. number of pages and illustrations, font size, information from the book blurb, story types and content). They also had to give the reason for choosing or not choosing the book.
	Learners practised previewing a number of books before they decided on a book for holiday reading.

Learning how to preview a book does not stand in isolation. It has to be connected with class reading and taken as a continuum. Whenever the class was about to read or listen to a story, the learners would preview the book with the support of the teacher.
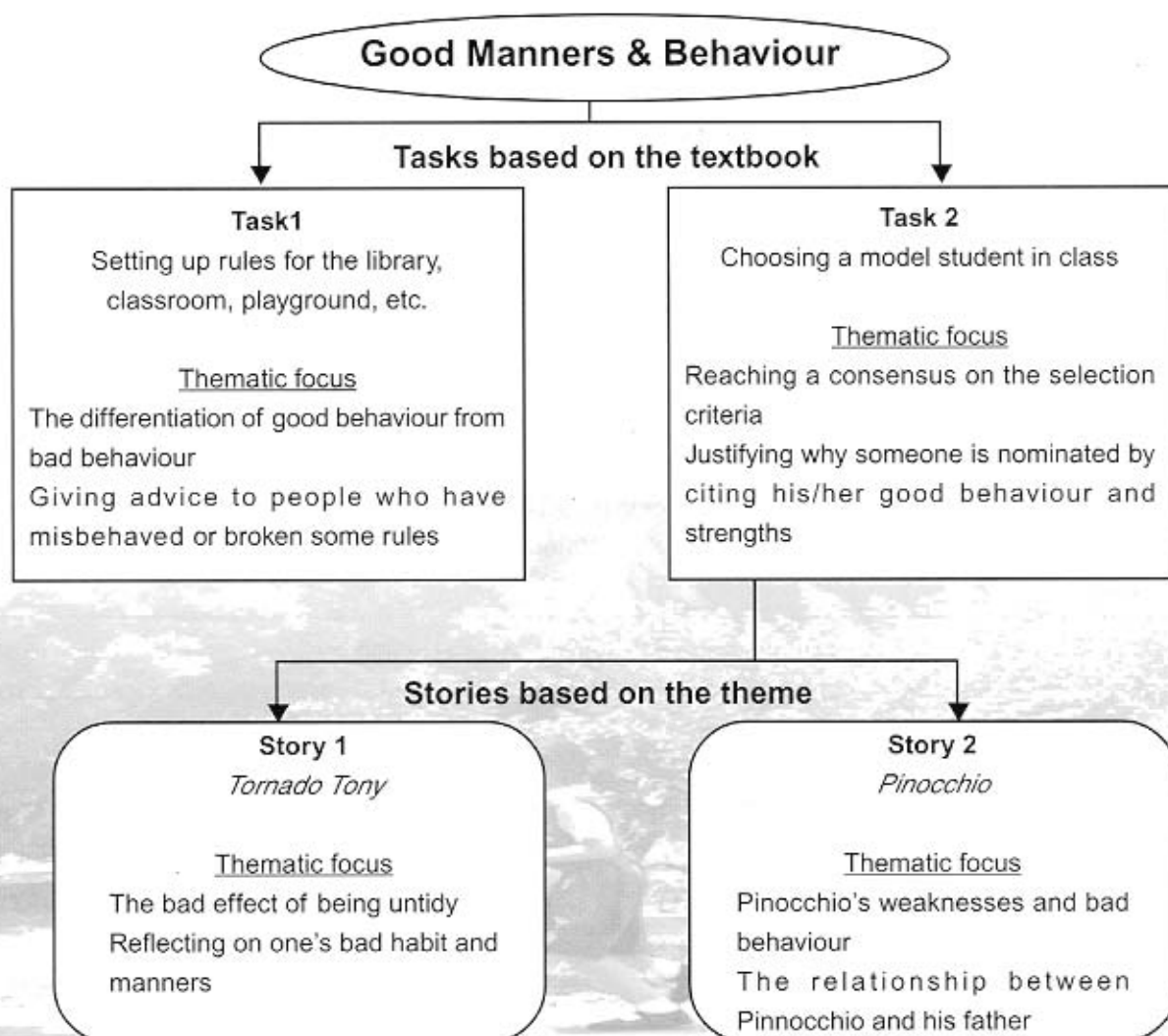
B. Teaching learners how to read

After previewing a book, learners have to be taught the necessary reading skills and strategies. Extensive reading programmes are successful only when they are accompanied by intensive reading activities for the learners to enjoy and respond to the story under their teachers' guidance, to perceive the writers' skills and messages, while practising a range of language tasks.

The approach adopted by the teachers is to teach reading skills mainly through task-based activities that are related to the themes in the textbook, and also to read aloud or tell stories wherever time allowed. Narrative texts are chosen as the text-type to focus on because the primary objective is to cultivate a reading habit, and they believe that stories are more effective in sustaining reading interest when learners are 'hooked' on stories.

1. Using story reading to enrich a thematic module

In the textbooks used there is a common module on Good Manners and Behaviour. A number of tasks were designed for the exploitation of the theme, and teachers adopted all or some to suit individual classes.

Good Manners & Behaviour

Tasks based on the textbook

Task1

Setting up rules for the library, classroom, playground, etc.

Thematic focus

The differentiation of good behaviour from bad behaviour

Giving advice to people who have misbehaved or broken some rules

Task 2

Choosing a model student in class

Thematic focus

Reaching a consensus on the selection criteria

Justifying why someone is nominated by citing his/her good behaviour and strengths

Stories based on the theme

Story 1

Tornado Tony

Thematic focus

The bad effect of being untidy

Reflecting on one's bad habit and manners

Story 2

Pinocchio

Thematic focus

Pinocchio's weaknesses and bad behaviour

The relationship between Pinnocchio and his father

A framework derived from a textbook unit

When a good story does not fit into the thematic module, it will be read simply for enjoyment and the purposes of exposure. It is the interest or fun element that matters in this case.

2. Constructing meaning from text

The teaching strategies tried out for this purpose were mainly storytelling, reading aloud, shared reading, but not supported reading and independent reading as the present cohort of learners are still in need of teacher support in learning how to read.

Some of the strategies for teaching learners how to construct meaning from text have been employed with the use of the story *Tiger is a Scaredy Cat*.

Title of story: *Tiger is a Scaredy Cat*	
Targets / objectives	Activities
Activating background knowledge about the story	**Pre-reading activities** Building a semantic map about cats so as to prepare them for discussing the character of Tiger, the scaredy cat. Cats have... Cats like... **Cats** Cats can... I think cats are...
Making prediction	Focusing learners' attention to the name 'Tiger' and ask them to guess what kind of cat Tiger is likely to be.
Confirming prediction and deducing meaning from contextual clues	After reading the two sentences 'Tiger is big. Tiger is strong', focus on the word 'but' in ' But Tiger is not brave ' to help learners guess the meaning of 'scared of'.
Responding to the story and character	**While-reading activities** Learners expressing what they think of Tiger's behaviour and if they are also scared of dogs, the dark, etc.
Locating specific information from the text	Using questions and cue cards to prompt learners to recount what Tiger was scared of and what he did to help the baby mouse find its parents.
Re-constructing stories to show understanding of story grammar	Identifying the different parts of a story frame: setting, characters, what happened and how it ended. Building up a story map to show the orientation, Tiger's conflicts and resolution.

3. Activating learner's reading experience

Activities of this nature are usually conducted when learners are familiar with the story, when attention can be given to the story details and some significant language features. Learners are then able to discuss with teachers' support what they think of the message, the characters, or to do some role-playing speaking and writing activities.

Title of story: *Tiger is a Scaredy Cat*	
Targets / objectives	Activities
Language acquisition and use Relating the story to one's own experience	<u>Post-reading writing activity with a thematic / linguistic focus</u> Expressing personal feelings using target language from the story: I'm scared of ...; ... is scary; What a scaredy cat I am! <u>Lesson Procedure</u> Ask learners to draw or make a list of their fears in terms of places, animals, people or abstract things (ghost, darkness, etc). Take a quick count to see the number of things each of them is scared of. To those who have got to a certain number, greet them with ' What a scaredy cat you are!' <u>Post-reading speaking activity</u> Learners sharing with one another their fears and how they overcome them.

Title of story: *Itchy, Itchy Chicken Pox*	
Targets / objectives	Activities
Giving an imaginative demonstration of one's understanding and enjoyment of the story	<u>Post-reading oral activity</u> Storytelling <u>Lesson Procedure</u> Learners listen and read aloud with the teacher to acquire the rhythm of the sentences. They dramatise the story by adding miming and gestures to show the meaning.

Title of story: *Pinocchio*	
Targets / objectives	Activities
Using appropriate conventions and language features when writing a drama script	<u>Post-reading writing activity</u> Script writing and dramatised reading -- Rewriting part of a story text as the script of an episode for a Readers' Theatre performance. <u>Thematic / linguistic focuses</u> How Pinocchio and other characters feel in different episodes Textual features of a story text and a drama script

Title of story:	*Pinocchio*
Targets / objectives	Activities
	Lesson Procedure Focusing on feelings Use a picture map to support learners in summarising the story. Then focus on the episode in which Pinocchio meets the cat and the fox. Instruct learners to read aloud that conversation, getting learners to experiment saying the lines in different ways and with different feelings. Give out and read aloud the drama version of the episode. Repeat the reading aloud practice to include the participation of more learners. Focusing on textual features Use questioning to guide learners in identifying the textual features of a drama text. Give clear instruction to learners to work in groups and rewrite a number of episodes. Make arrangements for learners to peer-read the work of one another for revising and editing.

What teachers and students think

An effective story reading session is one when the teacher combines and varies different strategies to suit learners' learning style, abilities and complexity of the story. When shared reading is combined with questioning, learners can be taught systematically how to read interactively.

Story reading has aroused learners' interest in reading and writing. Learners kept asking for more stories and were eager to write stories of their own. It was also rewarding to find that many learners, even some weak ones, were able to transfer what they had learned about previewing a book to the writing of a simple book review.

Other than being effective for improving learning motivation and learner engagement, stories also provide meaningful contexts for the promotion of critical thinking, positive values and attitudes.

Teachers' understanding of the task-based learning approach has improved. The narrative texts have broadened their perspective of grammar from discrete items to the language system as a whole. Through the process of identifying the target language for the reading tasks, teachers' awareness of language function and use is sharpened.

Challenges ahead

Teaching learners to read is a never ending task. It does not stop at class instruction and much is yet to be done to ensure that learners' interest in reading is sustained and interactive reading is practised. The focus of the coming year is multi-fold, introducing other text-types into the reading programme, teaching students how to share their reading using methods other than book reviews / reports, and how to differentiate the reading resources and tasks to cater for learner diversity. It will need the collaboration of the whole school, as well as determination and perseverance throughout the school to extend the project before a reading culture can be successfully developed.

Learners having their book preview lesson in
the school library

Practising for the storytelling competition
Itchy, Itchy Chicken Pox

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