

Developing critical thinking skills through cross-curricular planning

Background

In learning Integrated Humanities (IH), students are expected to use English and critical thinking skills to discuss social issues in groups. However, students have been found to be quite weak in identifying different perspectives and giving valid reasons for supporting their arguments during group discussions. Students also lack confidence in articulating their own views. To develop students' critical thinking skills and confidence in expressing ideas in English, an IH teacher and an English teacher see much room for collaboration and cross-curricular planning.

Level

S5

Strategies used

The two teachers have decided that IH module-related newspaper articles can be chosen for extensive and intensive reading in English lessons. Group discussion tasks have been designed to nurture students' critical thinking skills to support the learning of IH modules. The two teachers carry out cross-curricular planning of curriculum time and content. They foster "reading to learn" and "reading across the curriculum" among students (*Basic Education Curriculum Guide – Building on Strengths 3B, pg.4*). Such inter-disciplinary collaboration can help students construct meaning, develop generic skills, "explore knowledge and gain experience in a more comprehensive and coherent manner" (*English Language Education – Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide, Primary 1 - Secondary 3, pg.81*). Students can also transfer generic skills such as critical thinking skills for use in other disciplines. (Cox, 1997; Reimann & Schult, 1996; Ross, 1988)

Implementation

1. Collaboration process

The two teachers have played different roles during the process of collaboration.

Stage of development	Role of English teacher	Role of IH teacher
Planning	To design group discussion tasks in collaboration with a CDI officer with emphasis on some critical thinking skills	To discuss the choice of IH topics, articles and critical thinking skills to be developed and to match curriculum time and content with the English teacher
Implementation	To raise students' awareness of some critical thinking skills and conduct group discussion activities To arrange lesson observation for the Principal and other IH teachers for cross-fertilisation of teaching experiences	To ensure a good match of curriculum time for covering IH modules in both KLAs

Stage of development	Role of English teacher	Role of IH teacher
Evaluation	To conduct post-lesson self-reflection in the interview arranged by the CDI officer and explore other possible modes of collaboration with the IH teacher in future	To give feedback on the lessons observed and the existing collaboration mode to the English teacher

2. Critical thinking skills to be developed

The two teachers have identified some critical thinking skills (refer to the table below) to be developed through English group discussion tasks. The discussion tasks aim to raise students' awareness of those skills and give them more practice in using them to discuss current /social issues.

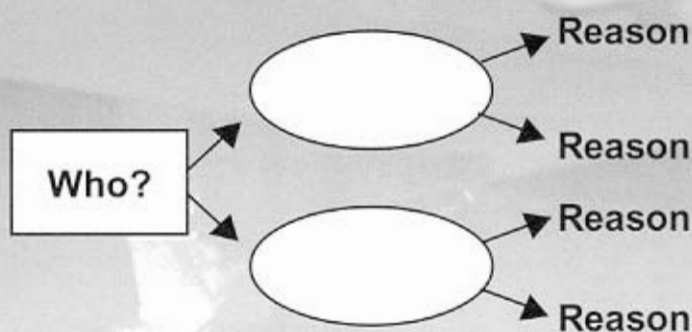
Higher order thinking skills	Examples
1. To be able to identify and classify different perspectives, aspects, etc. involved in arguments	<p>Points of view/Perspectives - social, political, economic, historical, etc.</p> <p>Levels/Aspects - macro, micro, human resources, financial resources, time, etc.</p> <p>People/Parties – different political parties, stakeholders, age groups, gender, etc.</p>
2. To be able to identify positive and negative aspects of given situations / practices / approaches	Positive and negative aspects - pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, facilitating and hindering factors, etc.
3. To be able to explain different opinions / points of view with evidence and logical explanation	<p>Evidence – facts and figures</p> <p>Logical explanations – valid reasons that are sufficient, non-contradictory and relevant</p>

3. How to develop critical thinking skills through group discussion activities

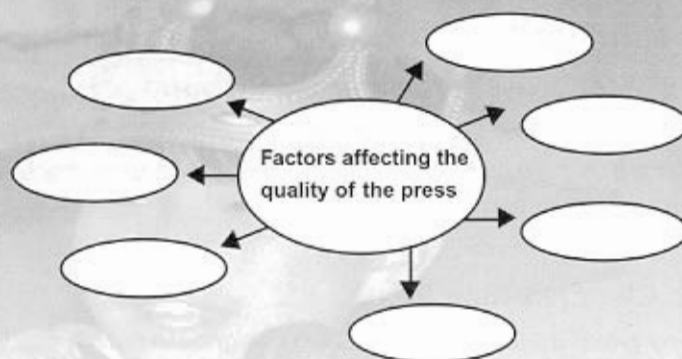
In the group discussions, students were given ample opportunities to express their own views and challenge their peers' answers if they found them invalid, contradictory or irrelevant.

Students had to read English newspaper articles related to the IH modules such as "Mass Media" and "Development of Modern China" for discussion. In the group discussion tasks, they had to apply specific critical thinking skills such as identifying and categorising different criteria, factors, parties involved, impacts, viewpoints and explain their categorisations by giving supporting reasons and evidence. All discussion questions were open-ended with no model answers given.

Students made use of different graphic organisers to present thoughts and help them use divergent / convergent thinking. Students were asked to reflect on the critical thinking skills they were using.



A graphic organiser for students to categorise parties and reasons



A mindmap to classify different factors

The English teacher debriefed students after each activity with a focus on specific critical thinking skills and asked open-ended questions to challenge students' answers (e.g. asking students to explain their points of view with facts / evidence and categorisation of items).



Students challenge their peers' answers




The English teacher debriefs students after each group discussion activity

What students learn

From the lesson observation, students participated very actively in the group discussions. Students showed marked improvement in taking an active role to voice out opinions and were able to use relevant critical thinking skills to analyse multiple perspectives embedded in social issues. They challenged their peers' points of view and gave support for their own views (e.g. why they thought the political stand of the newspaper could affect its quality). While discussing, they defended their views by giving valid reasons / evidence to support their answers when challenged by the English teacher or peers (e.g. such a political stand might affect the objective reporting of the news). Students have improved English oral skills and developed critical thinking skills that can be transferred to other KLAS.

What the teachers think

The English teacher reflected in the post-lesson interview that there was improvement in students' confidence in articulating their personal views in English and students were able to apply relevant critical thinking skills to analyse social issues. He thought that such a collaboration mode could support students' learning in different aspects and also broaden his professional knowledge. The IH teacher found the experience very rewarding since different parties contributed to the project.



Facilitating factors

1. Close inter-disciplinary collaboration

The English and IH teacher have worked very closely at different stages of development, each possessing very distinctive roles. They communicate with each other frequently in the matching of curriculum time and content. This is crucial for achieving collaboration.

2. Clear learning focus

The group discussion activities are designed in such a way that they can fulfill the intended learning objectives set. The English teacher has given high-quality debriefing to students, linking the discussion tasks and debriefing with the learning objectives and asking very good open-ended questions to help students think critically.

3. Lesson observation for professional development

Different parties including the CDI officer, the Principal and the IH teachers have been invited to observe the group discussion activities and give feedback. Arranging peer lesson observation for other teachers can facilitate closer collaboration between English teachers and other KLA teachers. Teachers also have professional development through joint planning and lesson observation.

Learning / teaching implications

1. The school case can illustrate how English teachers can collaborate with other KLA teachers in the development of generic skills. Generic skills such as critical thinking skills are transferable to different KLAs. Different KLA teachers can explore room for collaborating with each other in the development of students' generic skills.
2. Since Liberal Studies in the new senior secondary curriculum will adopt a similar enquiry approach to that of IH, the school case may offer one feasible collaboration mode. English teachers can also collaborate with IH teachers or Liberal Studies (LS) teachers in the future by developing IH-related /LS-related modules in the English curriculum.
3. There is much room for English teachers and other KLA teachers to find cross-curricular links. This is especially so if English is the medium of instruction in other disciplines.

Acknowledgements: Personal, Social & Humanities Education Section of CDI

Pui Ching Middle School

Promoting character development and developing creativity and critical thinking skills through movie-making

Background

English teachers have observed that many students including very weak students show a keen interest in watching movies. In recent years, English teachers have tried to integrate language arts into the formal and informal curriculum. As there was not enough attention given to developing students' creativity and critical thinking skills in the past, English teachers think that movies, as useful language arts resources, can be a very good entry point for helping students nurture those generic skills and motivating them to learn English.

Levels

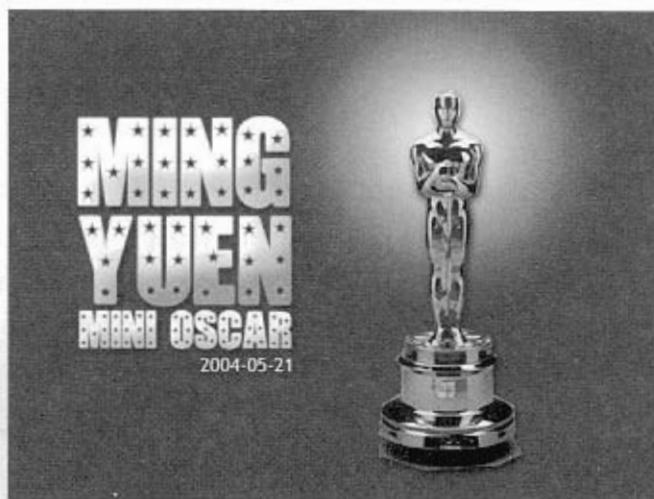
S1 - S7

Strategies used

Language arts has been infused into the informal curriculum with the use of movies. In 2003-2005, English teachers organised Mini-Oscar events as co-curricular activities for both junior forms (S1-S3) and senior forms (S4-S7) to promote the greater use of language arts for developing students' creativity and critical thinking skills. Each class had to produce one movie in line with the yearly school theme of instilling positive values among students. English teachers think that movies are very creative and imaginative resources that help students think critically and promote character development if effectively used (Rafferty, 1999). Movies can be an adjunct to the formal English curriculum (Lovell, 1987). Students' motivation is enhanced since they can easily relate their personal experiences to the movies (Aiex, 1999). Teachers can also make use of the movies produced by students as learning and teaching resources in class.

Implementation

1. Based on the yearly school themes ("A Touching Moment" in 2003-2004 and "Showing Love and Care for People" in 2004-2005), students from each class were expected to produce a movie for the Mini-Oscar Competition and all levels were involved. Two Mini-Oscar Competitions were held each year for both senior and junior forms.
2. To prepare students for the Mini-Oscar Competition, English teachers included movies in the task-based modules for doing brainstorming activities before asking them to produce their own movies. English teachers encouraged students to discuss dilemmas and social issues portrayed in the movies. After watching the movies, students had to express feelings, thoughts and even moral judgement.
3. A movie committee was formed in each class to do co-ordination work. Students made different contributions to the production of the movies, for example, writing scripts, providing technical support, preparing props and being actors. Each class had to produce one movie and students were given much autonomy in the planning and production of the movies.



A poster designed by students for the Mini-Oscar Competition

4. Students were encouraged to contribute creative ideas to the production of the movies and discuss how to depict different characters, write the scripts and produce the movies. They could express personal experiences, dilemmas, social / current issues in the movies and had to align them with the yearly school theme. In the whole process, they were free to make decisions about the types of movies to be produced. English teachers played the role of facilitators.
5. All classes took part in the Mini-Oscar Competitions. Different prizes were awarded to students such as the best actor, the best actress, the best movie, the best production in recognition of their achievements.
6. Movies produced by students were also used as learning and teaching resources in the classroom for students' group discussions. Teachers also used them for brainstorming activities in class.

Mini-Oscar - A Touching Moment

A play from F.2B

Scene 1

Venue: Sitting Room

Characters: Helen and her mother



(Helen is watching TV and her mother is doing the housework. The house is very quiet.)

Mum: (angrily) Helen, do you have any homework to do?

Helen: (annoyed) No! I am watching TV now. Don't interrupt me.

Mum: Why don't you have any homework to do every day?

Helen: There is no homework indeed.

(Helen leaves the sitting room angrily.).....

An example of students' movie script

Facilitating factors

1. Much student autonomy given

In producing the movies, students could freely express their original ideas in the movie scripts and use different camera angles to show their thoughts and feelings about different issues and people. They also made different decisions, solved problems and offered support to peers when necessary. Such autonomy given to students enables them to have many opportunities to collaborate with each other and learn from their peers.

2. Ample opportunities for convergent and divergent thinking

Students had many opportunities to brainstorm ideas when discussing the theme of the movie, the type of movie to be produced, issues / characters to be portrayed in it. They suggested different ideas in the production of their movies, thus using much divergent thinking for developing creativity. In the process, they also had to make decisions and show ethical judgement when showing social issues or themes in the movies, which would involve convergent thinking. With ample opportunities for convergent and divergent thinking, they are able to nurture creativity and critical thinking skills.

3. Technical support

IT co-ordinators were appointed in each class to solve technical problems encountered during the shooting of movies. As teachers have a lot of time and manpower constraints, such technical support is very crucial for the successful running of the Mini-Oscar Competitions.

Student learning and teachers' reflections

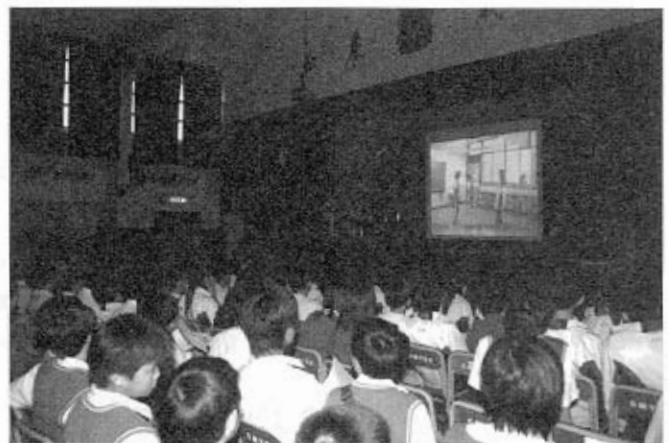
Students were able to produce different types of movies portraying a great variety of issues and themes. Some movies produced show social issues explored by students such as racial discrimination, violence and bullying at school, poverty and SARS. Other movies produced show students' effort to explore different themes such as friendship, love, growing up and honesty. Many of the ideas included are interesting and very original, showing their creativity.

In many of the movies, students made use of personal dilemmas and explored choices in life. They expressed personal views on social or current issues. Students have displayed raised awareness of social issues and ability to view issues from different perspectives, which is an important critical thinking skill to be developed among students. Some movies had open endings, leaving much room for the audience to think. Through this learning experience, students have whole-person and values development. Weaker students also feel a great sense of achievement and ownership since they can contribute to the production of the movies in different ways.

English teachers involved in planning the Mini-Oscar Competitions have successfully nurtured a good collaborative culture. They are able to make use of the movies produced by students for classroom activities such as class discussion, pre-writing activities and doing film reviews. They have realised that students can learn more when teachers work as facilitators and students have to do more thinking and doing.

Difficulties and solutions

The Mini-Oscar Competitions involved much use of IT. Due to limited manpower and resources, English teachers tried to solve the problem by identifying students with good IT skills and appointing them as IT co-ordinators supporting their peers technically. As a result, the production of movies in different classes was smooth and English teachers could have more time for planning the Mini-Oscar and setting clear objectives to be achieved.



Students enjoy the movies which they have produced

References

- Aiex, N.K. (1999). Mass media use in the classroom. Education Resources Information Centre Digest, ED436016
- Rafferty, C.D. (1999). Literacy in the information age. Education Leadership, 57(2), 22-26

In search of a balance between exam-based and task-based teaching

Background

English is boring and difficult.

Whenever I have to discuss or write in English, my mind is blank.

I always make a lot of grammar mistakes.

I have done a lot of past paper drills, but my English is still weak --- Why???

We were depressed by these comments that students put down on their evaluation of the senior form English programme, but they do tell us a lot about our students' learning as well as our teaching. As senior form teachers, our main concern is to prepare students for the public examination and it is a standard practice for students to work on lots of exam drills because they give a sense of security to students and teachers alike. These comments, however, have pointed out two issues that we may have neglected in our teaching of English at the senior secondary level:

- The learning motivation and engagement of the students
- The importance of making lessons interesting for richer learning

With an attempt to move forward from the standard exam-based teaching to a more holistic approach, we worked out a theme-based curriculum that incorporated exam preparation with task-based learning.

Level

S4

The new school-based curriculum: rationale and design

The design of our new curriculum is based on the following principles:

Students' learning motivation and participation in class will be maximised if English learning is interesting and meaningful

An English curriculum is good if the lessons are full of variety and able to satisfy students' sense of enquiry. We want our curriculum to be based on students' interests, needs and experience. So we have involved students in curriculum decision making by getting them to prioritise their theme preferences before confirming the content.

Students will build up a genuine interest in learning English if they see it not as a subject, but as a living language used for communication

When choosing materials and designing the tasks, primary focus is set on purposeful use of the target language and skills. We also make sure that in addition to providing students with a chance to practise English in authentic contexts, their understanding of the world and other cultures is promoted.

Students' language output is proportionate to the amount of input they receive

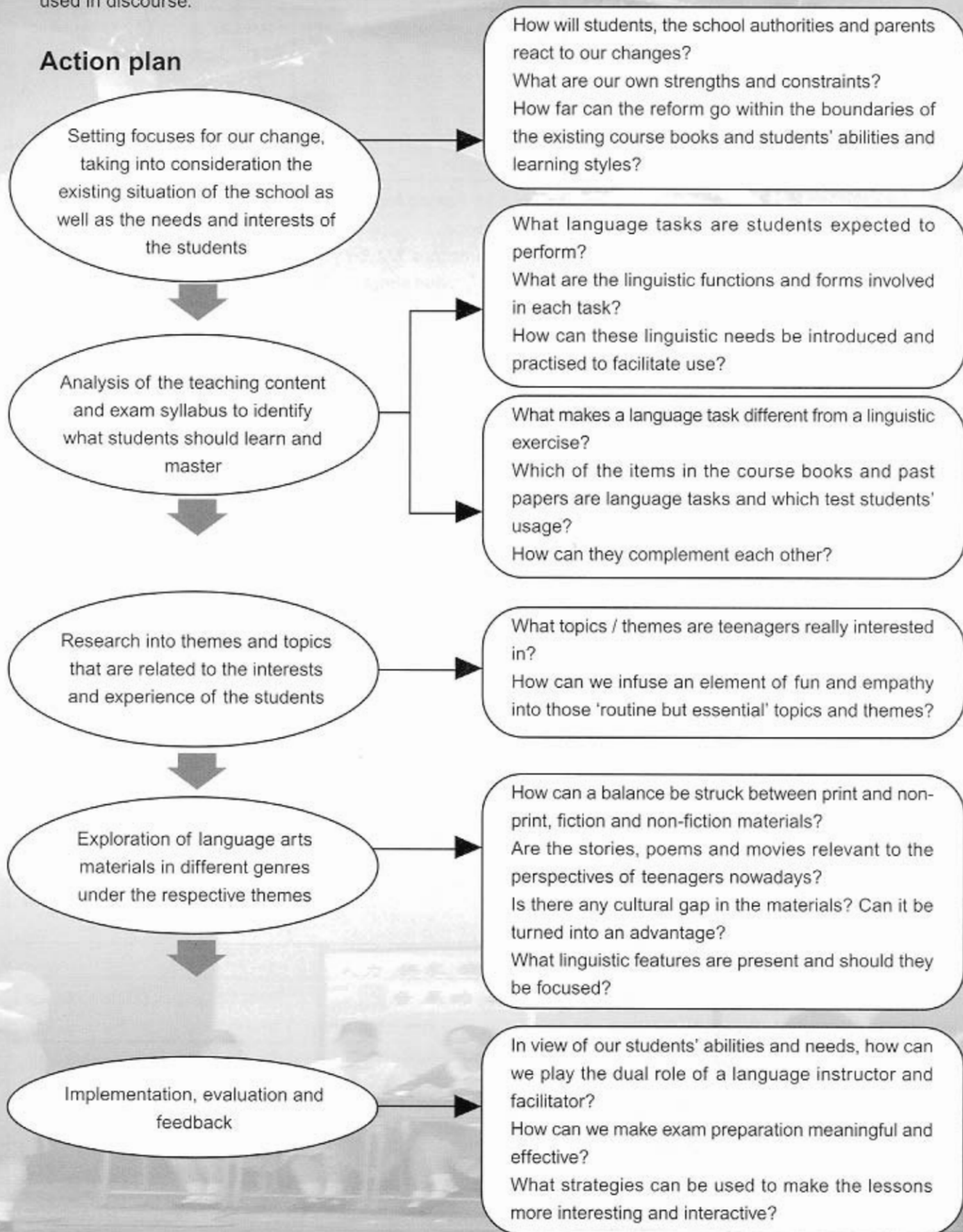
We provide plenty of input in the form of fiction (short stories, rhymes) and non-fiction (letters, autobiography, journalistic and expository writing), as well as print and non-print materials (songs, TV programmes, movies). We believe that through an extensive exposure to a wide variety of input, students' understanding and production will increase.

Grammar will be learnt more effectively if language functions and linguistic features are taught in context

We acknowledge the importance of grammar learning in a holistic language curriculum. So 50% of the lessons are

retained for exam-type exercises which are categorised according to themes and arranged to be conducted alongside the task-based units. Furthermore, we also make sure that language forms are practised in the context of the language tasks, and reading texts are often studied in class to illustrate or reinforce how grammar and vocabulary are used in discourse.

Action plan



A framework incorporating task-based teaching and exam-based teaching

Unit 1: Overview of issues concerning teenagers *			
Task(s)	Skills & strategies	Thematic/Linguistic focus	Resources & Genres
Write a letter about their personal concerns to an Agony Aunt Column	Speaking: Group Discussion on teen problems and concerns Concept-mapping	Different concerns of young people	Past CE paper (2000 syllabus B) Discussion topic # 3.1
	Reading	Function: Asking for and giving advice Target sentences 'Maybe you could.....', 'What about.....?', 'I'd suggest (+ gerund)'	Letters Source: Student Standard magazine Students' authentic writing
Conduct a phone-in programme talking about and giving advice on teen problems	Speaking		Past CE paper (2000 syllabus A) writing topic #1
	Writing		
Unit 2: My friends and me			
Write a short statement / rhyme to define good / true friends	Viewing non-print materials Defining & illustrating the meaning of true friends	The meaning and characteristics of true friendship	TV programme: Excerpt about Carly and her Friends Source: "The Teen Files" (S1 ETV programme)
	Reading Vocabulary building	Vocabulary relating to inter-personal relationship	Short rhymes about friends Source: CU publication
			Expository article: "The Fabrics of Friendship" Source: Resource book from a foreign publisher
Unit 3: My family and me			
Reflect on and talk about their relationship with parents	Reading skill: inferencing	Parental expectation	Autobiography excerpt: "Living with Mum"
	Viewing non-print materials	Communicating with parents	ETV programme: Excerpt about Jackey and his mother (S1 ETV)
	Song appreciation & discussion		Song: She is leaving home (Beatles)
Unit 4: What is love?			
Express their views about dating	Role-play interview Group discussion	First love Qualities they look for in a boy/girl-friend & future spouse	Past CE paper (2000 syllabus B) # 6.1
Write the missing part of a story: Why Hannah ends up not marrying her first love	Jigsaw listening		Song: Tell Laura I Love Her (Ray Peterson)
	Intensive reading Creative writing	Vocabulary relating to personality Narrative writing techniques	Short story: <i>Hannah</i> (by Malachi Whitaker) Source: Short Stories from a foreign publisher

Unit 5: Self-perception and aspiration

Write a short personality profile	Completing some personality quizzes Discussion	Understanding yourself: Personality and aspiration	Are you a perfectionist? Are you a lazy person? Are you as easy to read as a book? Source: Student Standard
Write a short verse comparing themselves to a place, person or thing when they have no dreams or aspirations	Poetry appreciation Creative writing	Imagery Rhyming words	Newspaper feature article: "Her Dreams Took Flight" Source: Young Post Poetry: <i>Dreams</i> (by Langston Hughes)

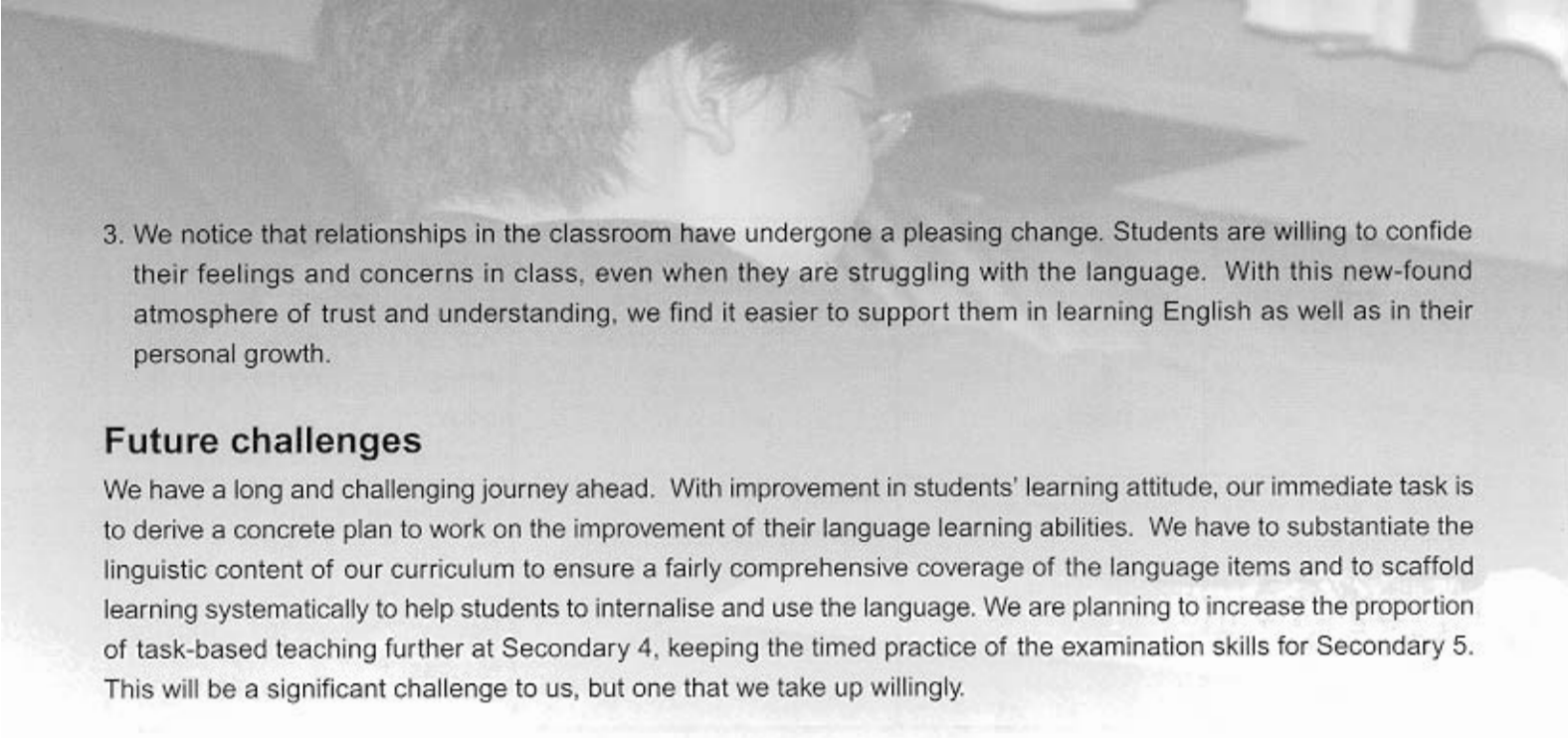
*Note :

1. Unit 1 is a core unit to be covered by all classes.
2. The teaching sequence and number of tasks/ activities to be covered in the other units may vary from class to class. Teachers are free to base their selection on students' preferences, progress and abilities.

Progress

Despite being at the initial stage of the design and implementation, we are pleased to see a positive impact both on ourselves and on the students.

1. We have undergone some significant changes in our perspectives on teaching and learning.
 - (a) In the past, the focus of our lesson planning and teaching was exam skill-based, emphasising accuracy and techniques, focusing little on content. Now, by focusing on ideas and meaning, extra effort has to be made to introduce the topic, in order to help students to imagine themselves as part of the context so that they can perform the tasks effectively. Our knowledge of the task-based approach has grown and we have become more resourceful, creative and dynamic.
 - (b) The intensive planning, regular discussions and close collaboration have helped us grow professionally. As we know more about curriculum planning and materials design, we have a stronger belief in the feasibility of this 'parallel' system of infusing exam preparation with a more holistic and task-based approach to curriculum planning.
 - (c) The incorporation of the different genres of language arts into the curriculum has enriched our understanding and appreciation of the language, showing us how language can be used both functionally and aesthetically. It has actually helped to build up our confidence in teaching the language arts electives proposed in the new senior English curriculum!
2. We have also witnessed some noticeable improvement in students' attitude and motivation in learning English.
 - (a) There is now more student-talk in the classroom. Students are more involved in the lessons and it is obvious that they have a greater desire to share their ideas and communicate in English.
 - (b) They show greater willingness and patience to learn in class, even when they are instructed to read and listen to something repeatedly for different purposes. They approach tasks with a greater keenness than before. They write more confidently and there is also significant growth in the length of their writing and quality of the content. Many students are able to use the language that they have learned in their writing and speaking.

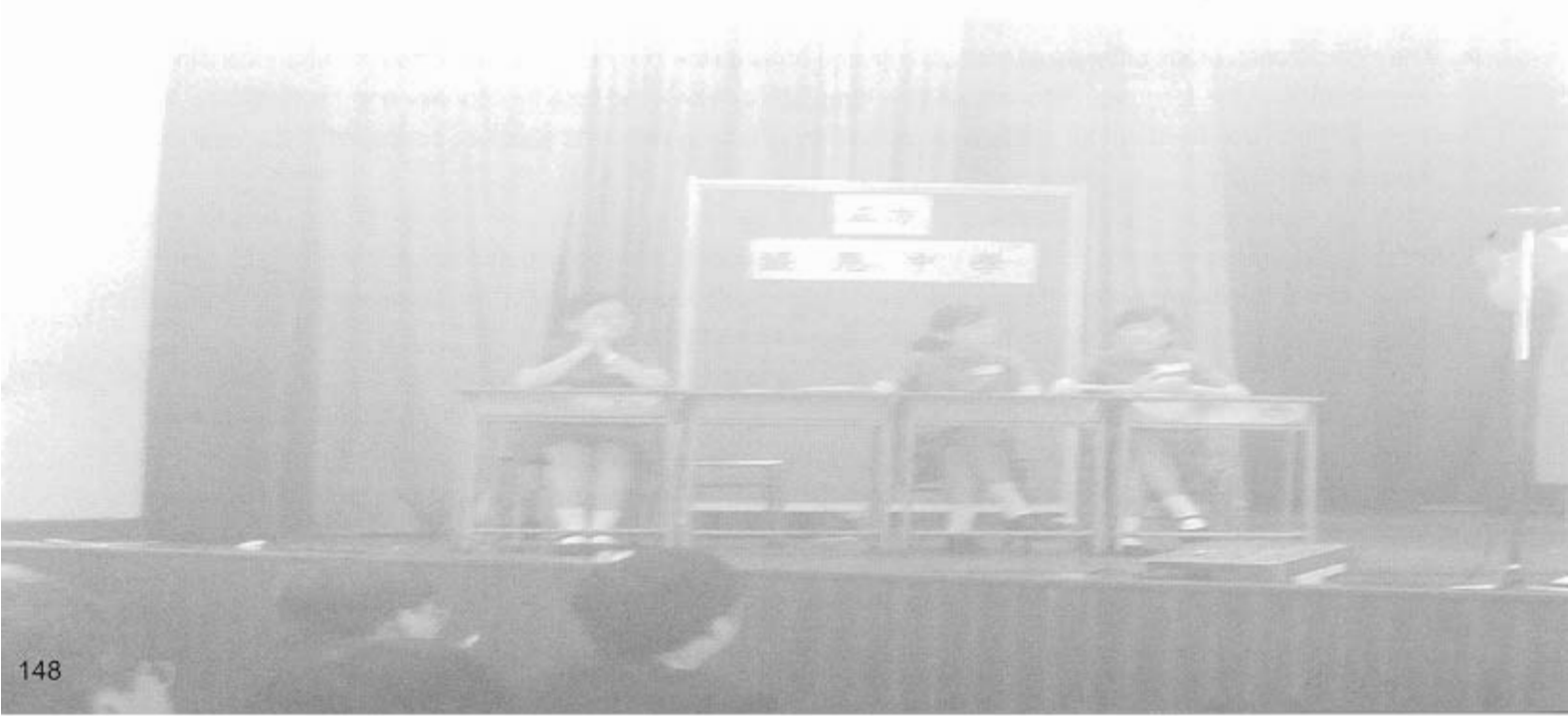


3. We notice that relationships in the classroom have undergone a pleasing change. Students are willing to confide their feelings and concerns in class, even when they are struggling with the language. With this new-found atmosphere of trust and understanding, we find it easier to support them in learning English as well as in their personal growth.

Future challenges

We have a long and challenging journey ahead. With improvement in students' learning attitude, our immediate task is to derive a concrete plan to work on the improvement of their language learning abilities. We have to substantiate the linguistic content of our curriculum to ensure a fairly comprehensive coverage of the language items and to scaffold learning systematically to help students to internalise and use the language. We are planning to increase the proportion of task-based teaching further at Secondary 4, keeping the timed practice of the examination skills for Secondary 5. This will be a significant challenge to us, but one that we take up willingly.

Contributed by SPHRC Kung Yik She Secondary School



Using pre-tasks to improve organisation of ideas in writing

Background

Teachers find that in the writing process, helping students to organise ideas logically is as important as helping them to elicit ideas. Writing tasks for KS3 are relatively more taxing, requiring more effort to arrange the ideas generated, and students usually have problems with this. When implementing the writing process in the classroom, teachers should therefore give thought to effective strategies to develop students' ability in organising ideas.

Levels

S2 and S3

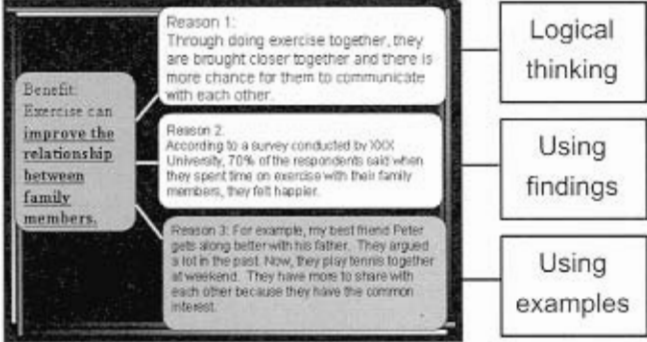
Strategies used

To enable teachers to tackle the organisation problems students have in writing, a process approach to writing has been adopted in two schools. As pointed out by Cheung (1994), the pre-writing stage addresses both the concerns of 'content' and 'organisation'. It is very likely that the ideas generated at the initial stage are unstructured and it is only with the criteria defined and the goals set according to the constraints of the task environment that the ideas are organised.


Since the structuring of ideas entails various organisational processes like categorising and grouping ideas and deciding upon how to sequence them, it is important for teachers to explicitly teach the planning and organising strategies for framing writing content. According to White and Arndt (1991), three strategies can be used to help students approach the structuring of a text — "ordering information", "relating structure to theme or focal idea" and "experimenting with arrangements". On top of these, "mapping" and "reading" can be other effective planning and organising techniques. Cramer (2001) describes "mapping" as "an outline in graphic form" showing how ideas are related in a "concrete, pictorial way" and regards "reading" to be "a model" providing information to make writing accurate and interesting.

With all these planning and organising tools in mind, the two schools tried out different teaching techniques and learning activities to enable students to make the best choices in content and organisational pattern in their writing.

Instructional Strategies	Possible Teaching & Learning Activities	Classroom Practices
1. Grouping ideas to indicate the linkage of ideas and text structure	Use sequencing activities to rearrange sentences from the same paragraph, different paragraphs or a text in logical order	Sentence level - Jumble sentences from an essay - Rearrange the sentences in logical order - Identify the topic sentences and supporting statements, and study the linkage between them Text structure - Group ideas into framework by showing a 3-part structure of an essay to introduce the essential parts –

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices
<p>Possible Teaching & Learning Activities</p> <p>Use classifying tasks to group similar ideas together</p>		<p><i>introduction, body and conclusion</i> as a follow-up to the first sequencing activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Match paper strips from the essay with the three parts <p>- Introduce three strategies of elaborating ideas – logical thinking, using findings and using examples</p>  <p>A PowerPoint slide showing three strategies of elaborating ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Put down a topic sentence and have students write supporting statements using one of the strategies - Get students to report their work and classify the supporting statements into three groups – logical thinking, using findings and using examples
<p>2. Relating structure to a theme to show how ideas can be structured around a theme</p>	<p>Use brainstorming to list out the sub-sets of a main theme</p> <p>Use listing / sorting to group ideas under elements' headings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce what the theme is, e.g. Festival - Brainstorm in class what it is composed of and analyse with students some sample descriptions of festivals to set students thinking about what the elements of a festival are (e.g. background information such as date & origin, meaning such as family reunion and celebration activities such as food to eat) - Discuss with the class how they can arrange these elements in their own descriptions (e.g. deal with the background information first before the celebration activities) - Explain how information can be organised around the focal idea to form a coherent text (e.g. the background information and the celebration activities should link up with the meaning)

Instructional Strategies	Possible Teaching & Learning Activities	Classroom Practices
<p>3. Giving opportunities for students to experiment with different ways of organising information</p>	<p>Use sequencing to re-order jumbled sentences / paragraphs</p> <p>Use comparison and discussions to explore different ways of organising information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop the concept of paragraph content using mentor texts and intensive reading - Get students to explore ways of sequencing the jumbled parts using their knowledge about the paragraph content acquired - Compare different ways of sequencing in class - Discuss and explain alternative ways of organising the same basic information <div data-bbox="854 750 1340 1142" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="780 1160 1411 1191">Students experimenting with paragraph arrangements</p>
<p>4. Using graphic organisers to display the features of different organisational patterns visually</p>	<p>Use mapping to enable the generating and the grouping of ideas to take place simultaneously</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce the use of a cluster/ star diagram to condense and organise data about multiple details, facts or attributes associated with a single topic - Create a cluster to enable the listing of all the major details related to the main theme (e.g. Festival) for the writing of descriptions <div data-bbox="807 1545 1387 1982" data-label="Diagram"> </div> <p data-bbox="831 2004 1364 2038">A cluster showing multiple facts about a topic</p>

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices
Possible Teaching & Learning Activities	Use colour-coding to organise paragraphs	<p>- Outline the clusters with similar ideas in the same colours to show the grouping of ideas and get the paragraphs formed according to colours</p>  <p>Students' colour-coded cluster</p>
5. Using reading to scaffold structure of a text	Use intensive reading to highlight the organisation of ideas at the sentence, paragraph or text level	<p>- Show a mentor text</p> <p>- Read the text intensively and locate semantic markers (e.g. Firstly, Secondly) and identify the main parts of an essay (e.g. introduction)</p>

Reflections

Students' perspectives

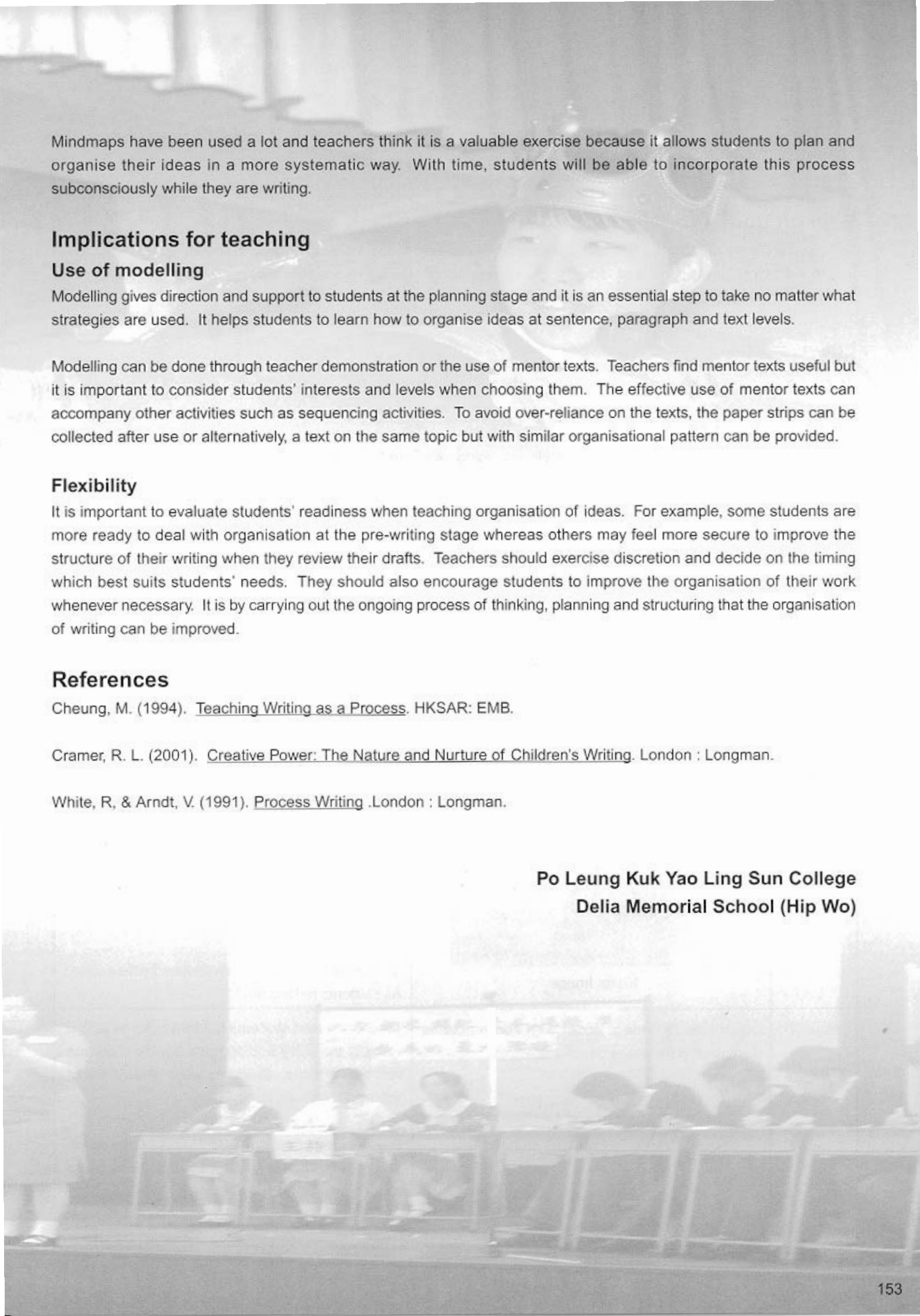
During the interviews with the students in PLK Yao Ling Sun College, students responded that mindmapping and colour-coding skills were particularly useful in helping them organise ideas for their writing. In the interviews, one student shared that he had had no idea of when and how to paragraph a text before he was introduced to these skills in class, 'In the past, I'd start a separate paragraph when I felt that I'd written enough words in one paragraph. Now, with the introduction of mindmapping and colour-coding skills in class, I realise that I should put similar ideas together in the same paragraph and start a new paragraph for a different group of ideas.'

Students' views on the effectiveness of mindmapping could also be seen in the questionnaires given to all participants in the writing workshop. There was a significant change in students' confidence and skills in paragraphing (Pre-task questionnaire: Mean=2.1; Post-task questionnaire: Mean=2.8; $t=-3.135$, Sig =0.005).

Teachers' perspectives

Teachers from Delia Memorial School (Hip Wo) think that the strategies can raise students' awareness of the various ways of elaborating ideas and make them write in a more organised way. Classification activities, use of topic sentences and supporting statements can be used to nurture students' critical thinking skills.

The sequencing activities which students do not find too difficult in also help students to warm up and get involved in the pre-tasks before writing. When it comes to the use of mentor texts, they regard it as an appropriate way to build students' knowledge and experience in the text structure of different genres. They think students' performance will improve at discourse level, as they are more aware of cohesive devices and discourse conventions in the texts.



Mindmaps have been used a lot and teachers think it is a valuable exercise because it allows students to plan and organise their ideas in a more systematic way. With time, students will be able to incorporate this process subconsciously while they are writing.

Implications for teaching

Use of modelling

Modelling gives direction and support to students at the planning stage and it is an essential step to take no matter what strategies are used. It helps students to learn how to organise ideas at sentence, paragraph and text levels.

Modelling can be done through teacher demonstration or the use of mentor texts. Teachers find mentor texts useful but it is important to consider students' interests and levels when choosing them. The effective use of mentor texts can accompany other activities such as sequencing activities. To avoid over-reliance on the texts, the paper strips can be collected after use or alternatively, a text on the same topic but with similar organisational pattern can be provided.

Flexibility

It is important to evaluate students' readiness when teaching organisation of ideas. For example, some students are more ready to deal with organisation at the pre-writing stage whereas others may feel more secure to improve the structure of their writing when they review their drafts. Teachers should exercise discretion and decide on the timing which best suits students' needs. They should also encourage students to improve the organisation of their work whenever necessary. It is by carrying out the ongoing process of thinking, planning and structuring that the organisation of writing can be improved.

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Cramer, R. L. (2001). *Creative Power: The Nature and Nurture of Children's Writing*. London : Longman.

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**Po Leung Kuk Yao Ling Sun College
Delia Memorial School (Hip Wo)**

Enhancing students' confidence and skills in speaking through drama

Background

The teachers were particularly interested in working out strategies to help develop their students' speaking skills. It was found that students in general lacked confidence in speaking English and they also had little chance to practise using the target language in authentic contexts.


Level

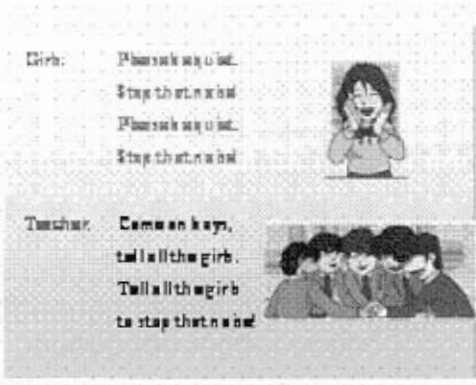

S2




Strategies used

Wessels (1987) comments that "students benefit psychologically from their involvement in a drama project. Rehearsing and performing a play in a target language improves the students' sense of confidence and self-esteem as learners". Dougill (1991) also mentions that "the rehearsal stage requires considerable input as regards pronunciation. This is an ideal occasion for mastering intonation patterns, concentrating on those features such as rhythm, stress, phonological or intonational peculiarities likely to cause difficulty." Drama was considered a good strategy to meet students' needs in this school. After consulting the literature and considering the expertise of teachers, it was decided that a drama project would be carried out based on the reader *King Arthur and his Knights*.

Action plan

Weeks	Teaching objectives	Procedures
<u>October</u> Week 2	Learn some basic drama techniques.  Mirror Image	a. Entrances & exits: Teachers demonstrated how servants should serve the king, e.g. bow, kneel and kowtow. Teachers invited different groups of students to go on and off the stage to do these actions. b. Space & slow motion: In pairs, students did the Mirror Image exercise. Teachers introduced the terms like "slow motion", "freeze-frame" and "relax". c. Students enacted a slow motion battle scene. All students participated.
Week 3	Learn how to write a script with some actions described in the stage directions.	Teachers asked students to identify some action verbs in the story and suggest how to show the verbs as actions. Students were given a list of action verbs to act out in pairs. Teachers went through the key features of a script. Students learned to write stage directions using some action verbs.

Weeks	Teaching objectives	Procedures
	<p>Narrator: King Arthur did not die. He woke up. He saw his wife Guinevere, Merlin and Knights (King Arthur is lying down. He wakes up. Guinevere walks in and kneels beside him.)</p> <p>Guinevere: Oh My God! You have slept a long time. Are you alright?</p> <p>Guinevere: Arthur, what are you saying?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Students' script</p>	<p>Students in groups of four to five rewrote one scene (ch.6) as scripts using some action verbs.</p>
Week 4	<p>Learn to speak with appropriate rhythm and pausing.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>The image shows a script for a poem. On the left, it says 'Girl: Please sit up, / Stop that noise, / Please sit up, / Stop that noise.' To the right is a drawing of a girl with her hands to her face. Below that, it says 'Teacher: Come on boys, / Tell all the girls, / Tell all the girls / to stop that noise.' To the right is a drawing of three boys.</p> </div> <p style="text-align: center;">A poem</p>	<p>Students read a poem and learned the pattern of rhythm in that poem.</p> <p>Teachers asked students to identify the key words to be stressed in paragraph one of ch.7. The CD of the book was played and students heard how the narrator read with appropriate rhythm and pausing. Students practised reading the lines in pairs.</p>
Week 5	<p>Learn the criteria for a good performance.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>The image shows a teacher standing at a desk in a classroom, talking to a student. A chalkboard is visible in the background.</p> </div> <p style="text-align: center;">A good performance means.....</p>	<p>Some "Halloween" rap songs were played to consolidate students' learning of rhythm in English.</p> <p>Teachers explored the good qualities of spoken performance with students, e.g. loudness, clarity, pronunciation and right rhythm.</p> <p>Students read a script adapted from ch.7 of the book aloud in groups.</p>
November Week 2	<p>Learn to show their emotions through facial expression.</p>	<p>Teachers conducted a warm-up game: Fruit Salad.</p> <p>Teachers went through some adjectives on emotions with students. Teachers demonstrated how to use the appropriate facial expression to show the emotions on the word cards. Students</p>

Weeks	Teaching objectives	Procedures
	 <p data-bbox="456 622 686 656">Courageous!!!</p>	<p data-bbox="879 282 1376 315">practised doing facial expressions in pairs.</p> <p data-bbox="879 360 1455 472">Students read a script and filled in the appropriate adjectives describing characters' emotions in the stage directions in pairs.</p>
Week 3	Learn to convey their feelings using different tone.	<p data-bbox="879 680 1459 752">Students learned to vary tone to convey different feelings.</p> <p data-bbox="879 797 1444 831">Teachers demonstrated how to act out a scene.</p> <p data-bbox="879 875 1459 947">Students practised and performed the scene in groups.</p>
Week 4	Learn how to write a new ending for the story in the form of a play script.	<p data-bbox="879 985 1459 1178">Students created a new ending of the story by filling in a "spider web" containing some guiding questions. Teachers brainstormed ideas with students and students created a new ending in groups.</p>
<p data-bbox="122 1205 247 1238"><u>December</u></p> <p data-bbox="137 1245 232 1279">Week 3</p> <p data-bbox="137 1285 232 1319"><u>January</u></p> <p data-bbox="137 1326 232 1359">Week 1</p> <p data-bbox="137 1366 232 1400">Week 2</p>	<p data-bbox="268 1205 852 1276">Practise reading their scripts with appropriate rhythm, tone and facial expression.</p>  <p data-bbox="467 1585 655 1619">I will kill you!!!</p> 	<p data-bbox="879 1205 1459 1276">Teachers revised rhythm and the use of tone to express feelings with students.</p> <p data-bbox="879 1321 1459 1393">Students practised reading their own scripts aloud in groups.</p> <p data-bbox="879 1438 1459 1509">Teachers briefed students on preparation for the performance (e.g. stage props and rehearsals).</p> <p data-bbox="879 1554 1459 1666">Students acted out the created scenes in class. They assessed classmates' performance using a peer assessment form.</p> <p data-bbox="879 1711 1459 1783">Teachers gave feedback on students' speaking skills and performance skills.</p> <p data-bbox="879 1827 1459 1899">Extended Task: Students performed in the English Week.</p>

Comments from teachers

The major achievements about student learning in the process were:

More confidence in speaking English

More active participation in class

More fun and enjoyment in learning

Comments from students

I learned to speak loudly and clearly.

I feel so proud because I can perform in front of many people.

In these lessons, I listen. I speak. I act. I understand... Time flies.

Facilitating factors

Opportunity to perform

A drama performance in class and in English Week gave students a goal to aim at. Numerous rehearsals helped improve students' pronunciation and fluency in speaking. An opportunity to perform in front of a real audience gave students lots of satisfaction, which in turn built students' confidence in speaking.

Strong leadership and a collaborative culture

Miss Tina, the NET in this school, is an experienced drama teacher. To cope with great diversity among different classes, she collaborated with teachers and adapted the teaching plan for each class. Mrs. Li, the Vice-principal, also helped coordinate the whole project. With the concerted effort of all the teachers, the attempt proved to be a success.

Good choice of the story

The reader *King Arthur and his Knights* was selected to suit students' interest because boys could be involved in lots of battle scenes in the performance. Many students expressed that they understood the story more after the performance.

Room for further improvement

- Students should be taught how to cooperate with others.
- More warm-up activities should be used to motivate very shy students.
- More teacher demonstrations were needed to teach both drama skills and speaking skills.

References

Dougill, J. (1991). *Drama Activities for Language Learning*. London and Basingstoke : Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

Wessels, C. (1987). *Drama: Resource Books for Teachers*. New York :Oxford University Press.

Adopting Brain-based strategies to enhance students' motivation in language learning

Background

The following is a list of commonly identified challenges faced by English teachers whose students have a comparatively weak foundation or little exposure to English:

- little emotional or behavioural self-control;
- low motivation in learning, little confidence in mastering English and lack of strategies for learning;
- limited vocabulary, with great difficulty in pronouncing and spelling even very simple English words;
- great difficulty in understanding instructions, inadequate reading skills; and
- great difficulty in comprehending grammar rules and concepts, and especially applying the knowledge in new contexts.

Another major area of concern raised by teachers in adopting any kind of intervention programme is whether it is possible to conduct any pre- and post-tests to examine the effectiveness of the approaches and trace students' progress during the contact time in the lessons.

Levels

S1 – S3

Strategies used

Learning has a lot to do with what is happening in the brain. In the last 20 years, advancement in scientific technology has accelerated and made it possible for neuroscientists to gain a more accurate understanding of how our brains are structured and how information is processed, stored and retrieved.

Hence, it has given educators another perspective in understanding the following issues:

- How can most healthy learners' brains attain higher achievements when exposed to a positive learning environment?
- Why is there diversity in learning; how physiologically or chemically different are the brains of learners with learning difficulties?
- What are the guiding principles of Brain-based Learning which can allow teachers to reflect critically on their teaching strategies?
- How can teachers enable every child to learn through structuring and designing activities to include novelty in strategies which cater for diverse learners?

In our collaboration with different schools, focused strategies integrated into the planning, structuring and delivery of lesson activities include the following areas:

1. Creating a stress- and threat-free classroom learning environment by introducing positive affirmation to engage learners emotionally. (Parallel Memories: Putting emotions back into the Brain – A talk with Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux)
2. Including more visual, auditory and kinesthetic activities to capture students' attention and engage students with

diverse learning styles. (Jensen, 1995)

3. Introducing strategies that activate the four memory pathways (semantic, episodic, procedural and reflexive) to help students memorise and retrieve vocabulary or grammar rules and usage. (Jensen, 1998)
4. Incorporating strategies to help students decode the sounds and spelling of English vocabulary items and help them acquire the skills to attempt reading aloud independently, make guesses in spelling and have the confidence to tackle unfamiliar and difficult words.

What happened

1. Teacher capacity building

Workshops introducing Brain-based Learning principles and strategies and collaborative lesson planning enabled English panel heads and teachers to gain hands-on experience of the approach.



Standing and exchanging ideas with other team members. (More oxygen to the Brain!)



Focusing attention and responding to signal words in a story.



Using graphics to summarise and organise ideas. Enjoying collaboration work!

2. Pre-intervention

Data related to students' attitude, learning behaviour and standard of English were collected through lesson observation and questionnaires. It was found that many students encountered difficulties in learning English and they did not enjoy learning English.

3. Implementation of Brain-based strategies in teaching

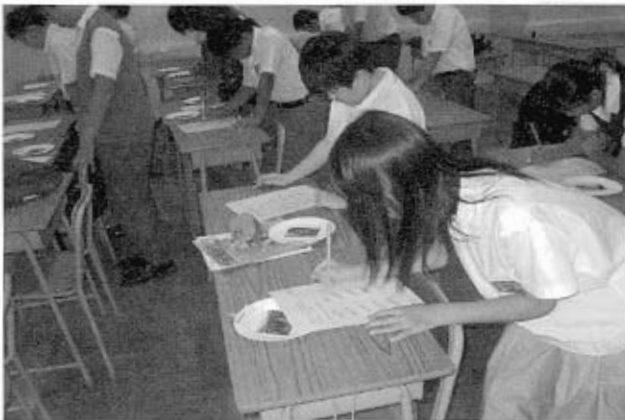
Lessons are conducted with more movement, pair-interaction and strategies for decoding sounds and spelling. Officers co-teach with the teachers to facilitate a transfer of the Brain-based approach.



Using movements to gain students' attention and interest in learning.



Rotating a coloured pen to gain students' attention. Students listen to English instructions and learn the names of the fingers incidentally.



Using realia and also moments of standing up to give more stimulus (and oxygen) to brain.



Creating more opportunities for students to interact and exchange ideas or information.

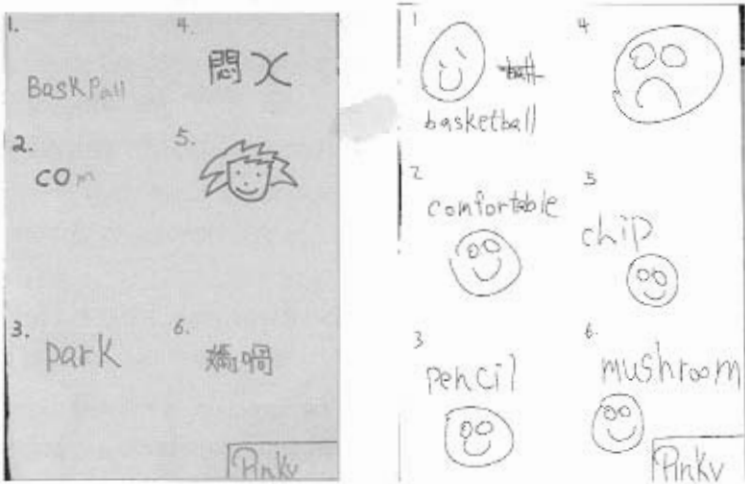
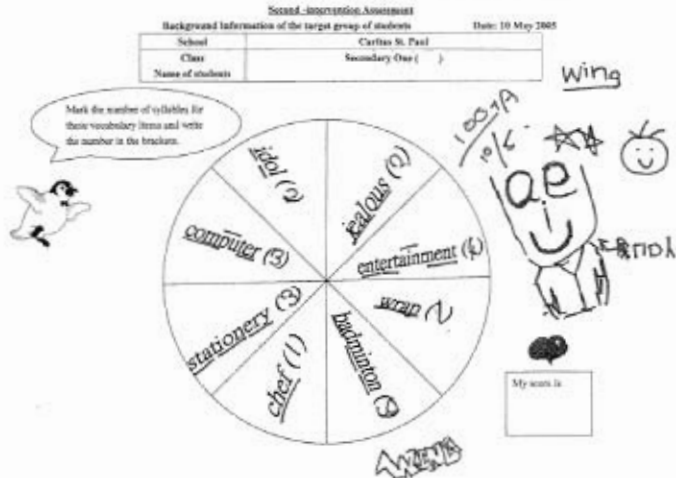
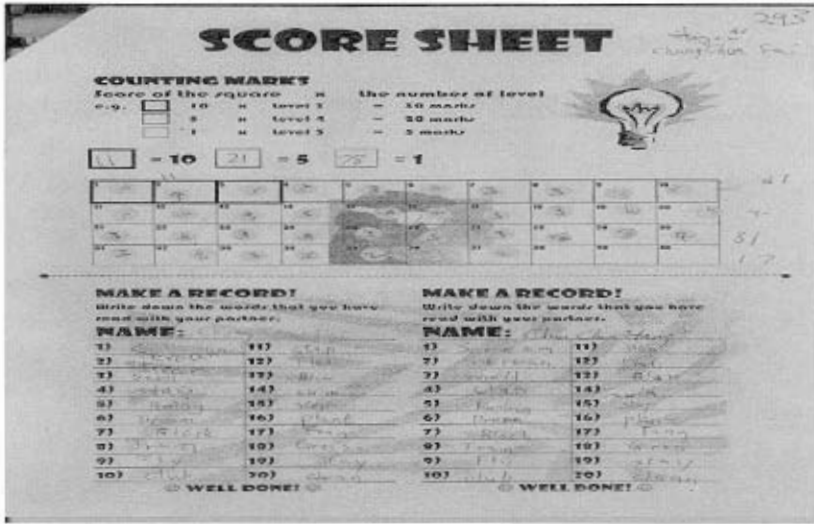


Co-teaching enables teachers to observe and acquire the delivery skills.



With Brain-based learning approaches, teachers are able to maximise interactive learning in the classroom.

4. Findings and Observations

Findings	Samples of students' performance
<p>1. Within the same lesson, students do pre- and post-dictation tasks. By comparing their work, it was found that:</p> <p>a. students could master the spelling better; and</p> <p>b. students showed greater confidence in attempting the task by using the smiling faces in a stress- and threat-free environment.</p>	
<p>2. Students marked the number of syllables by recognising the vowels between the consonants. Phonics and decoding strategies were employed to assist them.</p>	
<p>3. During the collaborative pair work activity, students needed to read aloud words of different levels and enter the correct spelling on the record sheet to get as many stickers as possible within the time limit. Most students attempted words of level 3 to get the highest scores in the first three attempts, showing their confidence in tackling unfamiliar words and their positive attitude towards speaking English.</p>	 <p>Words are categorized into three levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level 1: words with short vowels Level 2: words with long vowels Level 3: words with consonant clusters (2 initial consonants) Level 4: words with consonant clusters (3 initial consonants)

Facilitating factors

Building on teachers' positive perceptions in facing challenges

Teachers care about their students' learning and take the initiative by adopting a positive attitude in exploring approaches to enhance their students' learning and help them overcome difficulties. They are open-minded and make responsible decisions in implementing changes in planning and structuring their delivery approaches.

Positive responses and feedback from students reinvigorate teachers

The progress made by students reinforces teachers' belief that they can successfully engage their students in the learning process, thus boosting teachers' morale in continuing to explore and try out more strategies in their classroom.

Building in more opportunities for success and catering for learners' emotional needs during the learning process

Motivation, as viewed from the Brain-based perspective, is related to the internal reward system of the brain and also to the social brain. In a learning environment where students are encouraged, every effort is recognised and where more opportunities for social interaction are provided, students' confidence and positive attitude to learning are boosted.

Helping students acquire learning strategies to foster long-term independent study skills

Through the use of phonics as a decoding method for spelling and pronunciation and the introduction of different movements or changes of position in the classroom to aid memorisation, students' capacity for retaining and retrieving information learnt can be enhanced. Students can learn strategies for increasing and enriching their knowledge of vocabulary, and can progress to the level of tackling longer and more complex texts.

Challenges ahead and the way forward

Empowering teachers with the understanding of the similarities and differences in how human brains are structured, both physiologically and chemically, will open another perspective in handling learner diversity in the classroom. Continued research and reflection can provide evidence for generating more strategies to sustain the impact of a Brain-based approach to teaching and learning.

References

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LST Yu Kan Hing School
TWGHs Kwok Yat Wai College
Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College
Lung Cheung Government Secondary School
Caritas St. Paul Secondary School
Buddhist Ho Nam Kam College

Using differentiated tasks and collaborative learning to cater for student diversity

Background

The school has a student intake of a wide range of abilities, needs and interests. Students have different starting levels of English. They learn at different speeds, have different learning interests and styles. On top of all this, students' learning motivation is generally lacking. Teachers are struggling with how they can design the curriculum to cater for student diversity and arouse students' learning interest.

Level

S1

Strategies used

To meet the needs of a class of diverse students, it was decided to use differentiated tasks. With differentiated tasks, students can work according to their own choice of product and content, i.e. decide how to reflect their learning. Student ownership in learning is high, as students are required to decide what to do, how to do and how to assess their own learning in the process. Products with differing levels of complexity and difficulty are also accepted.

Facilitating diverse students to work collaboratively is also important. Good collaboration means dealing with people with respect and highlighting individual group members' abilities and contributions. More able students are encouraged to help less able ones when working in groups. Students' collaboration and learning attitude will be observed and assessed by themselves, their group members and teacher. Rubrics are developed and discussed at the beginning of the unit.

What happened

A unit on "Food" has been chosen to:

1. Develop students' basic survey techniques
2. Enhance students' writing skills to present information and ideas clearly
3. Enhance students' speaking skills to use correct pronunciation, intonation and tone for different purposes
4. Develop students' collaboration skills to work cooperatively with others

Procedures	Expected learning outcome
Introduction Divide students into groups of 4-5. Choose a leader for each group. Give students details on the task requirements, schedule and student rubrics (writing a report, giving an oral presentation and working in groups).	Students will have a clear idea of what they are required to do and how they are going to be assessed.
Get to know about food and drinks Students search for names of food and drinks from their surroundings and bring them to class for classification. Students categorise the words in groups. Students learn more about food from around the world and their flavours. Students study the food pyramid and sort food and drinks into it.	Students will learn vocabulary on food and drinks. Students will learn how to talk about tastes, balanced diets and create slogans for healthy eating.

Procedures	Expected learning outcome
<p>Students suggest menus of balanced diets and share their ideas.</p> <p>Show students some posters about eating habits and ask them to create slogans for healthy eating.</p>	
<p>Conduct a survey on a food product students would like to promote Students decide what food product they would like to promote in groups.</p> <p>Students brainstorm how to set questionnaires in class to collect information about youngsters' tastes and preferences. Students design a questionnaire for their product.</p> <p>Students interview other schoolmates and then write a simple report with the data collected. More able students present their report orally.</p>	<p>Students will learn how to design questionnaires, analyse data and write simple reports.</p>
<p>Explore means of promotion Students collect advertisements, posters, leaflets, TV commercials, etc. and discuss whether they like the ideas.</p> <p>Teacher presents some examples of TV commercials and posters. Students create the storyline for TV commercials and slogans in groups and share their ideas in class.</p> <p>Students discuss in groups what promotion programme they would like to design for their product.</p>	<p>Students will learn different ways to promote a product and the language used.</p>
<p>Design and present a promotion programme for the product Students act out the TV commercials, or present how they promote their product orally in class.</p> <p>Students assess each other during the presentation. Students vote for the best presenter, the most creative idea and/or the most appealing product.</p>	<p>Students will practise their pronunciation, intonation and tone to present their product orally.</p>

The presentation



I like sweet. I don't like fruit.



Fruit Chips, so yummy! I love it!



Different shapes, different flavours!



Panda Candies can give you energy.



You look so healthy and so young. Why?



Panda Candies are the best candies!



Col Col Ice-cream is good for all seasons with different reasons!

What students and teachers think

Students' feedback was collected using a questionnaire and a group interview.

From the questionnaire results, 79% of students liked creating and presenting a promotion programme in English and 74% of students liked making their decision when doing English work. Significant change was also found in students' perception of whether English lessons could enhance their collaboration skills and cater for individual differences. ($p < 0.05$)

During the group interview, students expressed that they enjoyed the learning unit. They also learned more about their strengths and weaknesses, especially in speaking skills. They were much more confident to speak loudly and they could identify their pronunciation problems with the help of teacher and classmates. They also learned how to collaborate with others and help one another through group work.

From teacher's observation, better student-student and student-teacher relationships had been established as they had much more interaction and collaboration. Some students showed positive change in learning attitude.

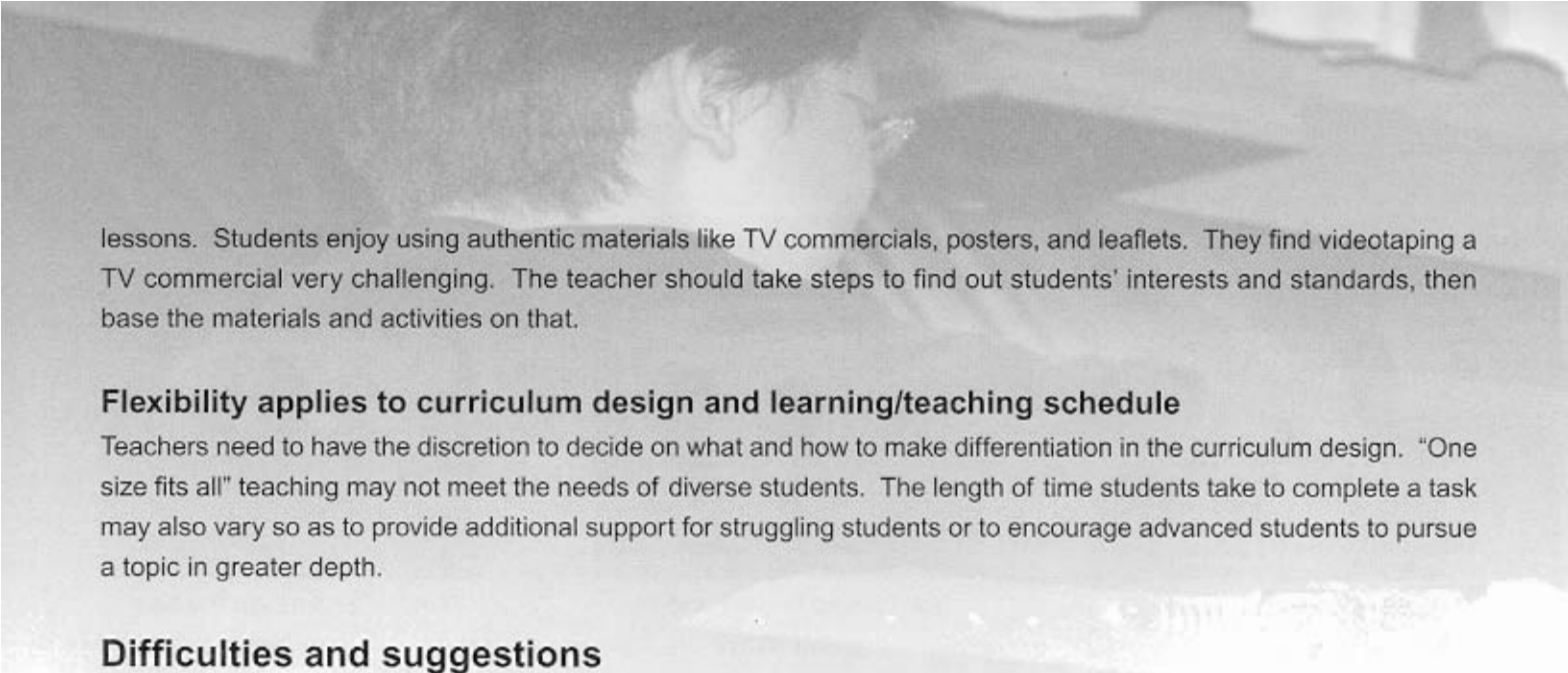
Facilitating factors

Students are kinesthetic learners and they enjoy hands-on learning experience

Students find textbook-bound lessons boring and they enjoy learning by doing. Students are highly motivated when they are given choices in their activities and products. They feel much more engaged and gain a sense of ownership when they have the authority to decide on what to do.

The teacher is sensitive to students' interests and strengths

When activities match the interests and cognitive levels of students, they are willing to take an active part in the

A student with glasses is looking at a screen, likely a video or presentation. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a classroom or computer lab setting.

lessons. Students enjoy using authentic materials like TV commercials, posters, and leaflets. They find videotaping a TV commercial very challenging. The teacher should take steps to find out students' interests and standards, then base the materials and activities on that.

Flexibility applies to curriculum design and learning/teaching schedule

Teachers need to have the discretion to decide on what and how to make differentiation in the curriculum design. "One size fits all" teaching may not meet the needs of diverse students. The length of time students take to complete a task may also vary so as to provide additional support for struggling students or to encourage advanced students to pursue a topic in greater depth.

Difficulties and suggestions

It was the first time the students have ever worked in groups to produce their own products. Most of them did not have experience in collaborating with others. Students showed some emotional or discipline problems in the process. However, self-reflections, peer assessments and teacher's guidance helped students to reflect on their communication and behavioural problems. Though problems existed, most students could learn from the experience how to collaborate and learn from others.

Nam Wah Catholic Secondary School



Using differentiated instruction to cater for learner diversity

Background

Class allocation in the junior forms is basically done on mixed-ability grouping. In the English KLA, the schools adjust the instructional grouping in the English lessons by running remedial teaching classes or split classes for the weaker English learners. Yet, teachers find it difficult to cope with the wide range of learner diversity existing between the two instructional groupings (i.e. the remedial / split classes and the non-remedial/ non-split classes) using the same English textbook. And with students of diverse English language abilities mixed in the non-remedial or the non-split classes, teachers find it hard to focus students' attention in the English lessons and to motivate students to learn English. It is therefore important to develop strategies which can be used among classes of different language abilities and within the mixed-ability language classrooms to increase students' engagement in the English lessons and to enhance their motivation to learn English.

Levels

S1 & S2

Strategies used

To enable teachers to create the best learning experience possible among students, differentiated instructions are used in both schools. As pointed out by Tomlinson (1999), the differentiation of instruction is essential for increasing students' access to learning, enhancing students' motivation to learn as well as improving students' efficiency of learning.

According to Tomlinson, the learning content, process, product and learning environment can be differentiated to create appropriately different learning experiences for students with different readiness, interests and learning preferences. This strategy is useful in both differentiating learning among students in classes of different language abilities and that within the mixed-ability language classrooms.


A range of instructional strategies and teaching practices are employed by the two schools to differentiate the content, process and product.



1. In differentiating the classroom element content, a number of strategies have been tried out:

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices
What to Vary	How to Vary	
Vary what students need to learn to match students' readiness	Adapt the central curriculum by changing the content to be covered	Set core and extended grammar items to pace teaching and learning according to students' abilities Instead of covering all the grammar items listed in the unit "Mystery" — 'reported speech', 'past tenses', 'action verbs' and 'question tags', only the first two items were made compulsory for all classes and the other two were optional items for the classes which were progressing really well.

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices		
What to Vary	How to Vary			
		<p>Set a core and extended word list to vary the range of topic vocabulary that students at different readiness level need to learn</p> <p>In the unit "Festivals", the more able classes targeted words covering Christmas, Dragon Boat Festival, Halloween, Mid-autumn, Chinese New Year and Easter whereas the less able classes concentrated on the first four festivals only.</p>		
Vary the instructional materials to match students' interests and readiness	Simplify or enrich the content to be covered	<p>Prepare multiple reading materials at varying readability levels to suit students' needs</p> <p>Instead of using the standard reading passage given in the textbook or the simplified versions provided in the textbook resource package, graded reading passages in the units "Charity" and "Mystery" were tailored to fit the specific language needs of the more able and the less able classes at school.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p style="text-align: center;">(More challenging)</p> <p>Part A</p> <p>The dogs were in extremely bad condition when the staff at the headquarters finally saw them. The old mongrel was so fatally ill that there was nothing anyone could do for it. The only thing that was left to do was to put it to sleep to end its misery. The other two dogs were luckier. After being in the care of the staff for some time, they finally recovered. They were able to put on some weight and their fur grew back at last.</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p style="text-align: center;">(Easier)</p> <p>Part A</p> <p>The dogs were in extremely bad condition when the staff at the SPCA saw them. An old dog was so ill that there was nothing anyone could do for it. The only thing that was left to do was to put it to sleep. The other two dogs were luckier. The staff of the SPCA took good care of the dogs and they finally recovered.</p> </td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">An excerpt from the graded materials used</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">(More challenging)</p> <p>Part A</p> <p>The dogs were in extremely bad condition when the staff at the headquarters finally saw them. The old mongrel was so fatally ill that there was nothing anyone could do for it. The only thing that was left to do was to put it to sleep to end its misery. The other two dogs were luckier. After being in the care of the staff for some time, they finally recovered. They were able to put on some weight and their fur grew back at last.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">(Easier)</p> <p>Part A</p> <p>The dogs were in extremely bad condition when the staff at the SPCA saw them. An old dog was so ill that there was nothing anyone could do for it. The only thing that was left to do was to put it to sleep. The other two dogs were luckier. The staff of the SPCA took good care of the dogs and they finally recovered.</p>
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Differentiate how students will get access to the information to match and expand students' repertoire of learning styles	Use a variety of resources, multi-sensory experiences and multiple intelligences strategies	<p>Present ideas through visual and auditory means to match and to stretch students' preferred input channels</p> <p>In addition to the written text of the poem "Hong Kong Calendar", students were played the poem which the NET had recorded as a motivational activity in the unit "Festivals".</p> <hr/> <p>Incorporate the school co-curricular activities into the classroom to give students multi-sensory experiences</p> <p>The school Pumpkin Carving Halloween celebration activity was filmed and was used as classroom resources in teaching the pumpkin carving procedures in the unit "Festivals".</p>		

2. In differentiating the classroom element process, three techniques have been used:

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices
What to Vary	How to Vary	
Modify the style of instruction to match students' interests, readiness and learning preferences	Emphasise student-centered learning and active learning through activities	<p>Use various activity types -- mapping, listing, sequencing, sorting, games, acting out etc. to encourage greater class participation and group work</p> <p>A word-sorting group game was used to teach the topic vocabulary in the unit "Festivals" and to introduce the concept of a 'spider map'.</p>  <p>Teaching aids used in the word-sorting card game</p>
Vary the learning / working tools to match students' interests, readiness and learning preferences	Use tiered activities	<p>Use graded learning tasks to let students proceed at different levels of challenge</p> <p>With the same input given in the unit "Festivals", the more able classes were required to produce a riddle in the group oral presentation while the less able classes were asked to do a factual reporting.</p> <p>Provide students with the same tasks but vary the amount of teacher input to allow students to proceed at different levels of support</p> <p>In doing the interviewing task in the unit "Mystery", wh-words were given to the less confident students in class as prompts whereas the more confident students were not provided with any clues.</p> <p>Provide students with the same tasks but vary the expected output to let students perform at their level</p> <p>In performing the group internet-searching and oral presentation task on the theme "Charity", students in the more able classes were required to work on four charity organisations while the less able classes were supposed to do one only.</p>

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices
What to Vary	How to Vary	
Vary the instructional arrangement to match students' readiness, interests and learning preferences	Use cooperative learning	<p>Try different cooperative learning strategies in mixed-ability groups to increase personal engagement and foster positive interdependence among students</p> <p>Jigsaw was used to stimulate students' thinking and to improve their speaking skills in doing reading. Roundtable was used to stretch students' thinking before doing the creative writing.</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Students engaged in a follow-up sequencing activity for jigsaw</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Students contributed ideas actively in the Roundtable activity</p> </div> </div>

3. In differentiating the classroom element product, the following actions have been taken:

Instructional Strategies		Classroom Practices
What to Vary	How to Vary	
Differentiate the language and confidence demands of the product to match students' interests, readiness and learning preferences	Allow students to work alone or in small groups on their products	<p>Let the less confident students work in groups; encourage the more able students to work individually to stretch each student's potential</p> <p>In the unit "Believe It or Not", all students were required to write a new ending for the "Playground Ghost" story individually but they were allowed to work alone, in pairs or in groups, in doing the pre-writing activity i.e. drawing the comic strips.</p>

What teachers and students think

Teachers in both schools reflected in the evaluation meetings that the use of differentiated instruction in the classrooms was effective in catering for learner diversity. They thought the learning tasks were now made more manageable and motivating to students in classes of different language abilities and within the mixed-ability classrooms. From their observation, students' engagement and involvement increased in the lessons. Teachers also shared in the meetings that the differentiation in content i.e. the core and extended curriculum could allow them more flexibility in teaching and more room for doing consolidation with students in class.

During the class visits paid to the two schools, it was observed that students showed interest and engagement in the games and the cooperative learning activities in the lessons. Some students revealed that they liked the word-sorting games. When asked about the reasons, one S1 student said, 'It's funny. It's better than sitting here, doing nothing but

listening to the teacher all the time'. Even the weakest class contributed ideas actively in the Roundtable activity in the Teenagers' Festival writing task. Students also responded positively towards the jigsaw reading activity: 'The atmosphere in the classroom is better.', 'It's more interesting.', 'Pay more attention in class.', 'Make students more active.', 'Make students understand the story and remember the story more clearly.'

Facilitating factors

Teachers' enthusiasm

The teachers involved are enthusiastic about their teaching and are concerned about students' learning. They spent extra time on and put a lot of effort into doing collaborative lesson planning, trying out new teaching strategies, designing teaching materials as well as preparing teaching aids.

Teachers' professionalism

It is significant for teachers to understand that catering for learner diversity does not aim at evening out students' abilities and performances but enabling all students to learn and perform to the best of their abilities. It is only with this basic understanding that teachers will be motivated to differentiate their instruction to support the less able students and to stretch the more able ones.

It is also important for the subject teachers in the same form to gain a better understanding of students' learning across classes in order to do more practical co-planning of the lessons and the curriculum. It is encouraging that all teachers in both project schools are willing to open up their language classrooms for lesson observation. Their professionalism is reflected in the sharing and discussion of learning and teaching related issues. Those classroom observation activities have increased teachers' understanding of their students' readiness, interests and learning preferences which in turn, better inform the strategies needed to create the conditions and expectations that are most likely to lead to successful learning among students in the language classrooms.

Suggestions

Collaborative lesson planning periods

Not all schools involved in this attempt offered collaborative lesson planning periods to teachers in the current school year. In order to sustain and build on the initiatives developed to cater for learner diversity, it is helpful if the school can create more space for teachers by accommodating the collaborative lesson planning periods in the school timetable.

Differentiating instruction

The two schools are at an emergent stage in differentiating instruction in the classrooms, so not all the classroom elements — content, process, product and learning environment are being differentiated at the same time. Besides, most of the differentiation takes place in the learning among students between the remedial/split and the non-remedial/non-split classes. But as the teachers become more proficient using the strategies, differentiation is more likely to occur at all stages and within the mixed-ability classrooms.

Reference

Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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Increasing learner motivation through cooperative learning strategies and life-wide learning activities

Background

It is a challenge to teach a class of students with different abilities. It is even more challenging to engage students in meaningful and fun learning activities so that they will enjoy learning English. Teachers tried to plan a shopping tour to provide students with opportunities to use English in different situations so that they can put into practice what they have learned.

Level

S1

Strategies used

It was decided that Cooperative Learning (CL) strategies and life-wide learning activities would be incorporated into the lessons so as to increase students' participation inside and outside the classroom. "Learning is by no means limited to the classroom. It can take place in any place and in any form", as suggested in the *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide P.1-S.3*. Engaging students in life-wide learning activities can create opportunities for students to learn and use English in natural and realistic settings.

Cooperative Learning strategies such as "Rally Robin", "Round Robin", "Numbered Heads Together" and "Three-step Interview" were chosen to be used in line with life-wide learning activities because Jacobs, Lee and Ball (1997) mentioned that "Cooperative Learning strategies generally allow students to be more active, giving them scope to use and develop different talents." Cooperative Learning strategies promote student-student interaction. Students can play a wider range of roles when Cooperative Learning strategies are used.

What happened

A series of lessons were planned for the unit. What followed was an out-of-class activity.

No. of lessons	Objectives	Language skills	Learning / Teaching Process	CL strategies
1	Introduce special features and different types of shops in shopping centres	Vocabulary building & Speaking	Teacher introduces the popular shopping centres in HK and explains the difference between shopping centres and department stores. Teacher asks students to work in pairs and name different types of shops which can be found in shopping centres. (e.g. CD shop, shoes shop, clothes shop) Teacher names one or two features of shopping centres and asks students to think of more.	Rally Robin Round Robin

No. of lessons	Objectives	Language skills	Learning / Teaching Process	CL strategies
1	<p>Revise the vocabulary learned in the previous lessons</p> <p>Students learn to listen for specific information about people's preferences</p>	Speaking & Listening	<p>Students work in groups of four. They will be given two minutes to name features and types of shops found in shopping centres.</p> <p>Students discuss the criteria for choosing a shopping centre to go to.</p> <p>Students listen to the tape with different people talking about their reasons for liking the shopping centres and complete a checklist.</p>	<p>Round Robin</p> <p>Numbered Heads Together</p>
2	<p>Teach students to do short writing</p> <p>Students learn to collect information through interview and practise reporting orally in class</p>	Writing & Speaking	<p>Students name their own criteria for visiting a shopping centre.</p> <p>Students have to do a short piece of writing to note down their reasons why they like a particular shopping centre.</p> <p>Teacher asks students to interview their friends to find out their favourite shopping centres and give reasons. They have to record their friends' answers on the interview sheet.</p> <p>Students report their findings to the class.</p>	Round Robin
2	<p>Teacher familiarises students with the target vocabulary</p> <p>Teacher uses a card game to motivate students to use the target vocabulary items for answering comprehension questions after reading a text</p>	Reading & Speaking	<p>Teacher asks students what tourists like to do in Hong Kong .</p> <p>Teacher pre-teaches some of the vocabulary items in the reading text (an E-mail) and students read the text quietly.</p> <p>Students work in groups of four. Each student gets four vocabulary cards. Students take turns to read the words to their groupmates. Then teacher asks comprehension questions about the E-mail. Students respond to the questions by holding up relevant cards.</p>	<p>Round Robin</p> <p>Talking Cards</p>
2	Students practise writing a recount of a shopping trip and give recommendations to others	Writing	<p>Students are asked to write about their shopping trip using some guiding questions.</p> <p>Students have to type up their writing and send it to the teacher in the form of an email. They have to give recommendations to the teacher on whether it is worth going to that shopping centre.</p>	

No. of lessons	Objectives	Language skills	Learning / Teaching Process	CL strategies
1	Students practise the use of question words for interviewing others	Speaking	<p>Students work in pairs and they interview their partner using questions like:</p> <p>Where did you go shopping? What did you buy? How much did you spend ? etc.</p> <p>When students finish the pair work, they have to report their partner's answers to another pair.</p>	Three-step Interview

* Out-of-class activity : Students go to Yuen Long Plaza to conduct a survey. A survey sheet is given to the students and they have to work in groups to find information for the survey. Students have to speak in English all the time in this activity. Apart from the survey, students are allowed to use their own money to buy something they like. Students are given 45 minutes to complete the tasks in the shopping centre. When they get back to school, they are given some guiding questions to interview their groupmates to find out how they feel and their favourites in the shopping trip.

Snapshots of the out-of-class learning activities



During the shopping trip, students had to look for different information and record it on the worksheet.

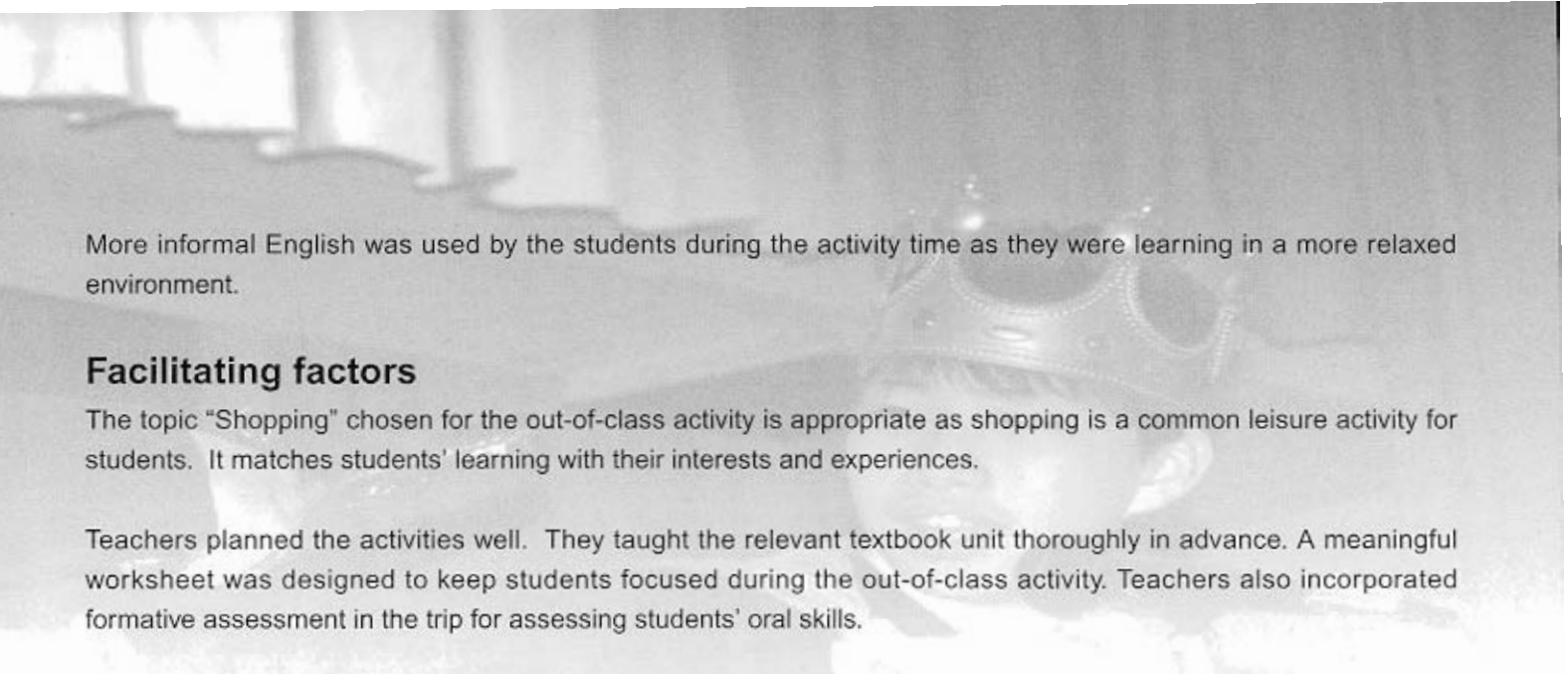


Students tried to compile information they got in the shopping trip and interviewed one another using "Three-step interview" to find out others' shopping experiences.

What students think

Through observation and reviewing students' worksheets, students were able to apply the vocabulary learned to complete the worksheet. They were also able to use the target language items to conduct interviews so as to get information about others' shopping experiences.

With teachers' encouragement, students tried their best to use English to discuss with their peers during the out-of-class activity time.



More informal English was used by the students during the activity time as they were learning in a more relaxed environment.

Facilitating factors

The topic "Shopping" chosen for the out-of-class activity is appropriate as shopping is a common leisure activity for students. It matches students' learning with their interests and experiences.

Teachers planned the activities well. They taught the relevant textbook unit thoroughly in advance. A meaningful worksheet was designed to keep students focused during the out-of-class activity. Teachers also incorporated formative assessment in the trip for assessing students' oral skills.

Meaningful speaking and writing activities were designed for students after the trip so as to help them consolidate what they had learned in the shopping tour. Students' out-of-class experiences together with the language learnt in the unit were required to complete the tasks.

Difficulties and suggestions

Some students relied on using Cantonese to communicate with others though teachers formatively assessed their oral skills during the trip. The situation could be improved if teachers appointed some students to be the "English Prefects" to monitor the use of language in the trip. A reward system could be set up to encourage the use of English.

Reference

Jacobs, G.M., Lee, G.S. and Ball, J. (1997). Cooperative Learning – A sourcebook of lesson plans for teacher education. Singapore : SEAMEO Regional Language Centre

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