Providing students with a performing stage for knowledge application: Mini-research and oral presentation as the modes of assessment

Background

Motivating students to learn English and providing ample and authentic opportunities for students to display the process and outcome of their learning are some of the perennial problems faced by English teachers. To address these issues, the panel head of Tsz Wan Shan Catholic Primary School has chosen the improvement of internal assessments as this year's development focus. Particular attention has been given to:

➢ aligning assessment with learning and teaching objectives to help students see the purpose and requirement

➢ adopting various modes of assessment to enable students to display learning
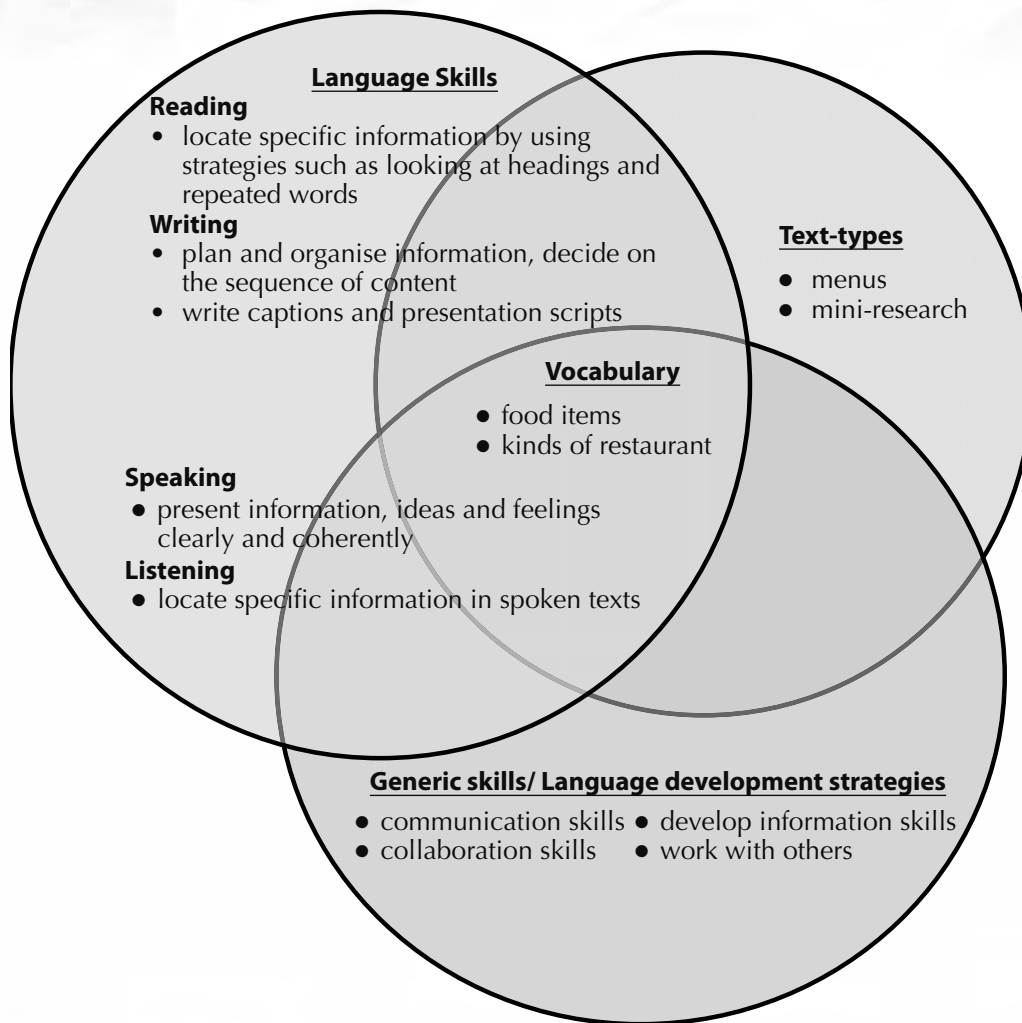
➢ using feedback to help students improve

Level

P6

Strategies used

Concern/ need identified	Strategy employed	Action taken
To assure a close alignment between learning, teaching and assessment in daily teaching	Integrating teaching and learning with assessment during the planning stage	➢ The work team decided to start small by identifying the learning objectives of a unit and to design a suitable assessment task for it.
	Promoting assessment of learning: Choosing assessment modes that foster maximum participation and enable students to display their learning in the target language skills	➢ Mini-research booklets and oral presentations were chosen to be the assessment modes.
	Promoting assessment for learning: The concept of assessment for learning needs to be mastered by both teachers and students in order to improve learning and teaching	➢ Both students and teachers involved in the process of assessment: • Assessment criteria and expected outcomes were made clear to both parties. • Assessment checklist was designed and used. • Peer assessment was done to encourage peer learning and support.

What happened

The team of teachers sat together and worked collaboratively to design the assessment task of the unit following the steps below.

1. Identifying meaningful learning objectives

Language Skills

Reading
- locate specific information by using strategies such as looking at headings and repeated words

Writing
- plan and organise information, decide on the sequence of content
- write captions and presentation scripts

Speaking
- present information, ideas and feelings clearly and coherently

Listening
- locate specific information in spoken texts

Text-types
- menus
- mini-research

Vocabulary
- food items
- kinds of restaurant

Generic skills/ Language development strategies
- communication skills
- collaboration skills
- develop information skills
- work with others

2. Identifying the assessment focuses

Vocabulary	Skill and strategy
• food items • kinds of restaurant	**Writing** • plan and organise information, decide on the sequence of content of the mini-research booklets • write captions for pictures or photos **Speaking** • present information, ideas and feelings clearly and coherently in a group in front of the class

3. Selecting the mode of assessment: mini-research and group presentation

Students needed to work in groups to produce mini-research booklets and present their research results in class by making oral presentations.

A task-based assessment with meaningful content

Peer assessment was done as groups were assigned in turn to judge which group performed the best using an assessment checklist. In addition, every student audience needed to complete a worksheet while listening to the presentations to choose his/ her favourite restaurant from those introduced in the presentations. The presentation was a speaking activity for the presenters as well as a listening practice for the audience. In this way, teachers could engage all students and make sure they were all on task.

4. Designing the assessment task

Students were required to include in the booklet pictures and names of the food items that the restaurant offered. They also needed to talk about the services and environment there. The content structures were similar and yet students were given free choice on what kinds of restaurants they would like to work on. The presentations of different kinds of restaurants allowed both the presenters and student audience to revisit and revise a wider range of vocabulary. The design of the assessment task provided opportunities for all students to apply and demonstrate their learning through collaboration with their group members. Students of different abilities and interests could contribute through taking up different roles in the group.

Students applied the vocabulary learned in the research booklets

Students also **made a presentation** in class. Different groups could be assigned different kinds of restaurants.

5. Establishing success criteria

The assessment criteria were introduced and explained to students in the form of a peer assessment checklist. They needed to comment on their classmates' performance by marking on the checklist while listening to the presentations.

Clarity

Eye contact

Presentation skills

Content

The peer assessment checklist

(i) Peer support and feedback

Students worked in groups for the mini-research and presentations. The task allowed students to exchange ideas and communicate with each other to reach consensus. As students were given more opportunities to present on different topics in front of the class, their grammar awareness, speaking skills, presentation skills and learning motivation increased through frequent practice and they became more aware of their speech. During presentations, the audience could ask the presenters some follow-up questions. Sometimes these questions were quite challenging. The atmosphere in the classroom was lively as the discussion among all students was spontaneous.

(ii) Formative assessment

Teachers did progress checks to assist students in completing the research booklets. Assessment of student's vocabulary and language use was carried out throughout the learning process. Suggestions for corrections were also provided. Teachers also gave instant feedback after each group's presentation on the presentation day.

Impact

➢ Students were clear about what they were expected to produce and could comment on what they had gained through the preparation for the mini research and oral presentations.

> Quote from students:
> • "This time I feel very happy because I know more about our Chinese food."

➢ Students' learning motivation increased.

> Quote from teachers:
> • "Weak students can achieve something and so they were more confident."

➢ Teachers were more aware of the information that the assessment could provide about student learning.

> Quotes from teachers:
> - "This unit was rich in learning content; there were more chances for the weaker classes to perform what they had learned."
> - "The pre-tasks for writing and the training for the four skills help the integration of the skills in a unit."
> - "The mini-research provided good writing input; it helped in brainstorming ideas and collecting materials for writing. Students learned by looking at others' work."

➢ At first, some teachers were worried about whether students could do the pre-tasks set, but students were able to complete them in the end. With this reflection, in the evaluation meeting, teachers thought that they could have set higher expectations on students.

> Quotes from teachers:
> - "All parts were worth teaching."
> - "The mini-research was good for weaker students."
> - "It was a challenging task for students but they learned a lot from doing it."

➢ A collaborative planning culture was nurtured and strengthened among team members. A teacher expressed that they needed to work with collective wisdom. He said that they learned from each other by working together and appreciating each others' efforts.

Facilitating factors

➢ Collaboration among teachers during the planning stage was a determining factor for the success of this project.
➢ The team started small by thinking what vocabulary items and necessary knowledge and skills were needed to equip students in the unit. Meaningful learning objectives were identified and task-based assessment tasks were designed.
➢ Students were clear about how they should assess their peers and how they would be assessed.
➢ Teachers' support throughout the learning process, as students prepared for the mini-research booklets and the oral presentations, was essential.
➢ Peer lesson observation gave teachers further insight when observing students' performance in other classes.   One teacher said that through lesson observation, he realised that "the world outside is different."

Difficulties and suggestions

➢ The time spent on teaching unit 4 was longer than estimated, but student learning was better than expected and students learned in a more relaxed way. Planning the scheme of work, e.g. how many units to teach in the term and what learning objectives to cover would be best done at an earlier stage.
➢ More support throughout the research process could be provided.
➢ Follow-up work could be done at the end of the unit to help students recognise and correct common grammatical mistakes.

Tsz Wan Shan Catholic Primary School
Joanne NG (Language Support Officer)

Use of Territory-wide System Assessment data to inform teaching of reading and writing in Key Stage 2

Background

Since the launch of the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA), English teachers of CUHK Federation of Alumni Association Thomas Cheung Primary School noticed that reading and writing tasks of the textbooks could not equip students with the linguistic skills to perform well in the assessment. Teachers of the school used to rely heavily on the textbooks but were not satisfied with the learning outcomes of students. By making reference to the Basic Competency Descriptors (BCs) for English Language and the English Language Curriculum Guide (2004), the P4 teachers collaborated with the Language Support Officer to conduct an in-depth study on their school-based curriculum and teaching, and diagnose students' weaknesses in reading and writing. The major findings included:

Curriculum and teaching
➢ limited text-types covered
➢ inadequate use of authentic tasks to provide students with meaningful application
➢ no explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills and reading strategies

Learning
➢ students' writing demonstrated a very limited range of vocabulary and sentence patterns
➢ ample repetitive grammatical and spelling mistakes

Level

P4

Strategies used

1. Holistic and strategic planning of the curriculum for P4 to P6 to ensure a balanced coverage of text-types, language forms and functions and progressive development of vocabulary building and reading skills

2. Use of BC descriptors and BCA tasks to help teachers master the skills of setting reading and writing tasks

3. Explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills and reading strategies to help students improve reading and writing

4. Explicit teaching of phonics skills to help students improve spelling

5. Use of self-editing tools to help students revise their writing

Excerpts of holistic curriculum plan for P4 to P6

Self-editing checklist for a writing task

What happened

1. Extending students' exposure to a variety of text types

Based on the themes of the coursebook, a variety of text types were introduced to students. Teachers explicitly taught the intended purpose, structure, style and linguistic features of different text types. Students could also consolidate the language forms and functions through grasping the genre. In Units 2 and 3 of the coursebook, the language focuses were comparatives and superlatives. A short story, "The Gingerbread Man" was adapted to illustrate the language form.
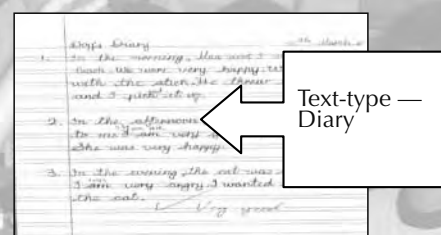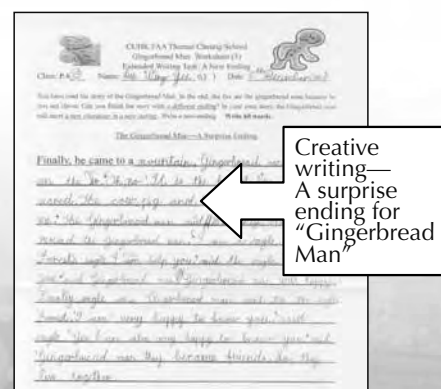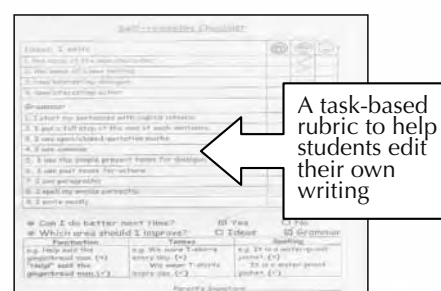
Other text types such as poems, e-mails, recipes, posters, web pages, journals and advertisements were developed to help students familiarise with different text types and their structures.

Gingerbread Man

Short Story: Gingerbread Man

Comparatives & Superlatives

Fast
Faster than
the Fastest

Comparatives and Superlatives
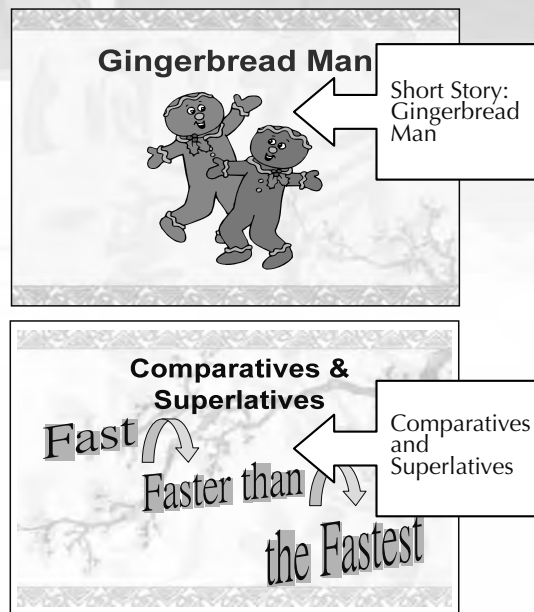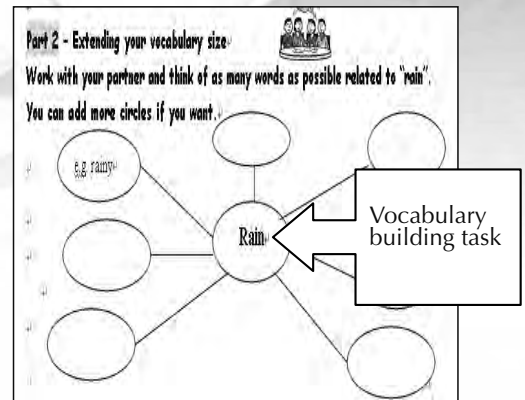
2. Enhancing students' ability in writing

P4 teachers all noticed that students had a limited repertoire of words and expressions, which hindered their performance in open-ended writing tasks. To improve students' writing skills, different actions were taken.

(i) For every writing task, teachers provided students with a list of writing rubrics and marked writing according to the rubrics. The rubrics were based on the BC descriptors for writing. Students used the rubrics for self-editing and peer-editing. Common and repetitive errors, to a large extent, were avoided.

(ii) With sufficient language input from reading, students had to accomplish open-ended writing tasks instead of guided writing. Assistance was given to students to help them produce coherent paragraphs, depicting main ideas and supporting ideas in an organised way. Creative writing was also included in the design of writing tasks. Students were asked to go beyond the instructions and prompts and think creatively.

(iii) For every text type, students were required to produce a piece of writing of that specific genre. A great variety of teaching resources such as readers of reading workshops, Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) papers and websites were used and integrated into the teaching of writing.

A task-based rubric to help students edit their own writing

Creative writing— A surprise ending for "Gingerbread Man"

Text-type — Diary

3. Teaching phonics and vocabulary building skills in contexts

P4 teachers enabled students to identify the number of syllables of vocabulary items so they could pronounce the words and phrases in the coursebook. Teachers also increased students' word power by integrating vocabulary building skills into the extended reading tasks. Knowledge of word formation such as affixation and compounding and knowledge of lexical relations like synonymys and antonyms were embedded in reading tasks.

Part 2 – Extending your vocabulary size

Work with your partner and think of as many words as possible related to "rain". You can add more circles if you want.

e.g. rainy

Rain

Vocabulary building task

Impact on students

1. Displaying a higher level of competence in writing

Students had acquired language knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary in appropriate contexts prior to producing their own writing. Given sufficient input, they were able to produce simple descriptions and narrations in paragraph form and provide many relevant ideas with supporting details instead of writing incoherent sentences. Students were able to communicate their ideas effectively, creatively and coherently when writing the ending of "Gingerbread Man". Original and interesting ideas were generated by students and the flow of ideas was logical and organised. Many made good use of dialogue to add more richness to the text. Some students were able to add new characters and created another climax in the ending. Teachers stated that students no longer found writing boring because they were given room to create their own ideas and formulate their own opinions. They enjoyed the satisfaction of being able to construct a piece of decent writing.

2. Learning from mistakes

As students were required to conduct self-editing with a task-based checklist, they have become more aware of the correct use of language forms and functions in different text types. Teachers tailor made appropriate criteria to suit each writing task and the needs of the learners. Even though the criteria used were simple and straightforward, they have helped students develop a habit of editing their own writing and correcting their own mistakes.

Impact on teachers

1. Adopting a holistic approach to curriculum design

Teachers have become more familiar with adopting a holistic approach to curriculum design. In the planning stage, all the P4 teachers studied the Learning Targets of the Curriculum Guide and BC descriptors of Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) together and reached a consensus on the coverage of text types, language forms and communicative functions in P4, P5 and P6 respectively. Teachers have also become more aware of the importance of planning the language curriculum in a holistic approach so as to avoid having gaps in learning, teaching and assessment.

2. Exploring and experimenting with new teaching approaches

Explicit teaching of reading strategies and using an integrative approach in lessons and task design are new to the teachers involved. They have realised that these new approaches can satisfy students' needs and strengthen their reading and writing skills to a large extent. In the second term, teachers are eager to develop teaching materials from different resources and try them out in their lessons.

3. Aligning learning, teaching and assessment

Teachers understand that assessments do not stand alone and there should be close alignment of learning, teaching and assessment with daily teaching. Assessments such as Territory-wide System Assessment can inform learning and teaching but are not solely used as a tool for selection purposes. Given sufficient information and data, teachers can develop more effective teaching strategies.

Facilitating factors

1. Support from school management

The school has deployed the Vice-principal to oversee the support program and she elicits encouragement and support from time to time. The school has also made special timetabling arrangement for the teachers to conduct collaborative lesson planning with the Language Support Officer. The English panel head, who has a thorough understanding of the students' capability and needs, has been deeply involved in the programme.

2. Collaborative and open culture in the English panel

The P4 English teachers of the school have worked collaboratively and are eager to work as a team. They are receptive to new ideas and innovative teaching approaches. The NET who is responsible for the Reading Workshops is also willing to change his schedule to accommodate the integrated reading and writing tasks. Teachers' enthusiasm and willingness to cooperate pave the way for the success of the project.

Difficulties and suggestions

Difficulties	Suggestions
Core teachers did not have time to conduct peer lesson observation and could not find out how the other teachers used the materials and feedback from students.	The school management may consider making special timetabling arrangement for the core teachers to observe lessons of the others.
Only three English teachers of the school were involved in the project. Apart from the P4 teachers, panel members teaching other levels were teaching reading and writing in their own ways.	To enhance a smooth interface between levels, the English panel heads and core teachers should ensure a balanced and coherent curriculum plan at both Key Stages 1 and 2. The school may organise internal sharing to extend the impact from the P4 level to other levels.

Reference

The Curriculum Development Council. (2004). English Language Education KLA: English Language Curriculum Guide (P1-P6). HKSAR: The Education and Manpower Bureau.

CUHK Federation of Alumni Association Thomas Cheung School
Lita CHAU (Language Support Officer)

Enhancing student learning through adoption of assessment for learning

This is a dialogue between two English teachers.

Teacher A : I work every day from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sometimes, I even have to sacrifice my weekend to prepare for the lessons or correct students' compositions. Yet, there does not seem to be much improvement in my students' learning. *What has gone wrong?*

Teacher B : Can't agree more. On top of that, I have a feeling that I am more concerned about their learning progress than some of them are. *How can we raise their ownership over their own learning?*

Does it sound familiar to you? If so, you may be interested in two school cases of how primary and secondary English teachers adopted assessment for learning to ease the situation.

Case 1 – Using criterion-referenced assessment and formative feedback to help students improve writing (CCC Kei Yuen College)

Background

Standards-referenced reporting was formally adopted in 2007 Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. Teachers at the school were well aware of the change and also the trend of criterion-referenced assessment in the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum. They thought they needed to do something at the junior levels to prepare themselves and their students for the change. At the same time, a survey of S1 students revealed that quite a number of the S1 new-comers ranked writing as the most difficult area in English learning. This probably was due to the common misconception that the marking of writing is something subjective because it was common in their primary schooling that they received only a grade (A,B, etc.) or some arbitrary numbers for their writing, without gaining any concrete information about what led to those results. Teachers also saw a couple of misconceptions that needed correction, such as (i) writing is a one-off task and (ii) teachers are the only providers of feedback.

Levels

S1-3

Strategies used

Rationale	Strategy	Key point to note
Helping teachers form new mindsets toward the assessment of writing	• Officer held professional development activity for English teachers • Officer discussed with teachers how constructive written feedback should be given during collaborative lesson planning time	Constructive feedback should be: • relevant to the focus of assessment • informative to learners on how well they have performed and how they can do better.

Correcting students' misconception that the marking of writing is subjective	Introduced criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) to students through the use of an assessment rubric which listed different assessment criteria and performance indicators	When introducing CRA, it is important to: • make the assessment criteria transparent to all students • inform students on the assessment criteria before they do the task.
Correcting students' misconception that: • writing is a one-off task • teachers are the only providers of feedback	• Introduced self and peer-assessment in the process of writing • Encouraged students to make use of ideas from self, peer or even teacher assessment to improve their writing whenever chances were available	To make the process easier for students at the beginning, teachers may use checklist which carries the same assessment criteria as the rubric for self and peer assessment.
Helping students see their strengths and weaknesses in writing	In addition to circling appropriate performance indicators on the assessment rubric, teachers also marked constructive feedback by highlighting one point of appreciation and making one suggestion for further improvement	It is important to make the whole feedback process encouraging and positive to students. Teachers should avoid a negative tone even when pointing out an area for further improvement. Focussing on only one point at a time makes the feedback concise and specific.
Helping students to see their growth in writing over time and learn from previous mistakes	Asked students to keep all their writing plans, writing drafts, self and peer assessment records, teacher assessment records and fair copies of writing in a writing file	Teachers can ask students to review their writing files every time they are about to start a new piece of writing when the practice was first introduced.

What happened

An example of a short story about what happened in a theme park (S1) :

Step	Detail
1. Teachers jointly planned the writing task during common lesson preparation time	Teachers set expected learning outcomes for the writing task in different areas, e.g. | Area / criteria	Students will be able to
Content	• recycle vocabulary learned about theme parks • include key elements in short stories, e.g. setting, characters, plot • give details of the story
Language	• use simple past and past continuous tense
Organisation	• organise ideas into paragraphs with topic sentences used	

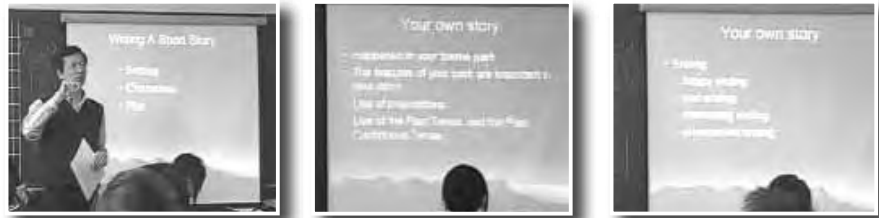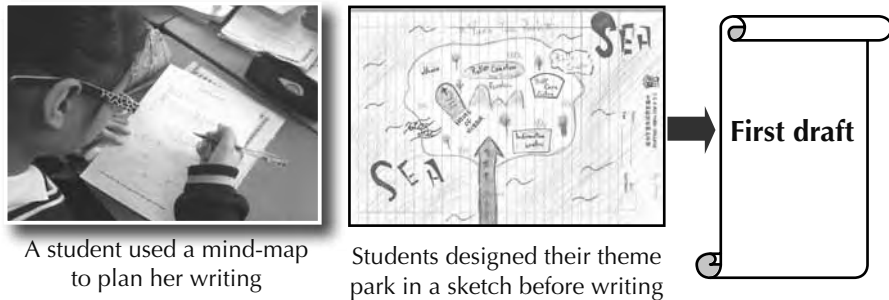| 2. Teachers translated expected learning outcomes into descriptors for different performance under different assessment criteria in the form of a rubric	Marks Different bands of performance A writing assessment rubric

Marks → Different bands of performance

Assessment criteria:

	Weak	Average	Good
Content	☐ Ideas rather irrelevant to the theme (story in a theme-park) ☐ Very few details are given *(1-4 marks)*	☐ Some content relevant to the theme (story in a theme-park) ☐ Some ideas supported with details *(5-8 marks)*	☐ Most of all content relevant to the theme (story in a theme-park) ☐ Ideas well-supported with details *(9-12 marks)*
Language	☐ Very few related vocabulary e.g. vocabulary related to theme-park, and language patterns used ☐ Past continuous tense used rarely and inappropriately ☐ Many errors in grammar and spelling that may affect meaning ☐ A lot of errors in punctuation *(1-3 marks)*	☐ Familiar vocabulary, e.g. vocabulary related to theme-park, and simple language patterns used ☐ Past continuous tense used ☐ Some errors in grammar and spelling that does not affect meaning ☐ Punctuation generally correct *(4-6 marks)*	☐ A good range of vocabulary related to theme-park and language patterns used ☐ Past continuous tense used appropriately and correctly ☐ Very few errors in grammar and spelling ☐ Most punctuation correct *(7-9 marks)*
Organization	☐ Ideas run around ☐ Different ideas put in the same paragraph ☐ Few / no topic sentences used *(1-2 marks)*	☐ Paragraphs generally used with few supporting details ☐ Simple connectives are used to link the sentences in the same paragraph ☐ Some topic sentences used *(3-4marks)*	☐ Paragraphs used with supporting details ☐ Different paragraphs well-linked ☐ Topic sentences used well *(5-6 marks)*
Features	☐ Only basic features found *(1 mark)*	☐ Some basic features used *(2 marks)*	☐ Features generally used correctly *(3 marks)*

3. Teacher explained to students the assessment criteria and expected learning outcomes *when* assigning the writing task	

4. Students planned their writing and wrote the first draft	 A student used a mind-map to plan her writing Students designed their theme park in a sketch before writing **First draft**

5. Students conducted self and peer assessment using checklists which carried the same assessment criteria as stated in the rubric "For example, how Tom saved Sally and in the park what happened to them. *You can describe some interesting things or funny things there!*"	 A part of a student's self-assessment checklist Excerpts of sample student peer-assessment Students' use of constructive feedback in peer-assessment

6. Teacher guided students to further reflect on their work by sharing initial observation and feedback with them	**Ending**
	(a) Did you use ONE paragraph for the ending? (Y/N)
	(b) Did you write a complete story? (Y/N)
	(c) Was it a story or just something that happens everyday? (Y/N)
	(d) Did you tell what happened after the case in the theme park? (Y/N)
	    e.g. "After that, John and Mary became very good friends."
	    e.g. "Then, the alien went back to his planet. John missed his friend very much and the alien never came back again."
	
	← Questions to guide deeper reflection
	
	Drawing students' attention to common mistakes →
	
	1.5 Common Mistakes
	(a) Past Tense : Many of you did not proofread your article. There are many simple mistakes in P.T.

7. Students revised their writing	Ideas from self-assessment → Feedback from peers → Teachers' "tips" → **Revised draft**
8. Teacher marked student writing and shared constructive written feedback on assessment rubric "You have thought of a **good story** and *used vocab. from the unit*. Your subject-verb agreement has **improved** and also *use of paragraphs*. **Well done**!"	CCC Kei Yuen College Assessment Sheet (Writing) Checked against the performance indicators that best described the student's performance 1 compliment 1 suggestion Use of a positive tone to let student know how to do better "**Try to use more of** the *past continuous tense*."

Impact

In the post project survey, students reflected they had **positive gains in writing**, especially in paragraphing, use of target vocabulary, fewer grammatical mistakes and writing in the correct format. In addition, writing was **no longer as difficult and as intimidating** as they had thought at the beginning of the year. During student interviews, students shared that **teachers' feedback better informed them of their strengths and weaknesses** and that helped them to make continuous improvement. They also showed appreciation of teachers' use of a positive tone in giving them feedback for that experience was encouraging to them. According to the teachers, use of **more complex sentences** was noticed among the strong ability students while average ability students demonstrated **better creativity** in their work. In addition, teachers were most pleased to see the **increase in ownership of learning** and **a more serious learning attitude**, which was particularly true for average and high ability students. Teachers shared that more students gradually formed the habit of improving their writing when they had a chance to revise their work.

Facilitating factors

Teachers' efforts and dedication are definitely crucial factors for success in the project as they need to spend considerable time in giving constructive feedback to students. Moreover, the **open atmosphere** of having assessment criteria **transparent** to all is another favourable factor contributing to the success of the project.

Difficulties and solutions

Though positive impact as mentioned above was noticed, it was a pity that improvements in writing ability and learner ownership were only noticeable among some, but not all of the weak students when the project was implemented. It is possible that the weaker students need more time to gradually form the habit of deep reflection during formative assessment practices and to learn from others' feedback and their own past mistakes.

Case 2 – Changing for the better: from assessment to learning and teaching; from teachers to students   (King's College Old Boys' Association Primary School)
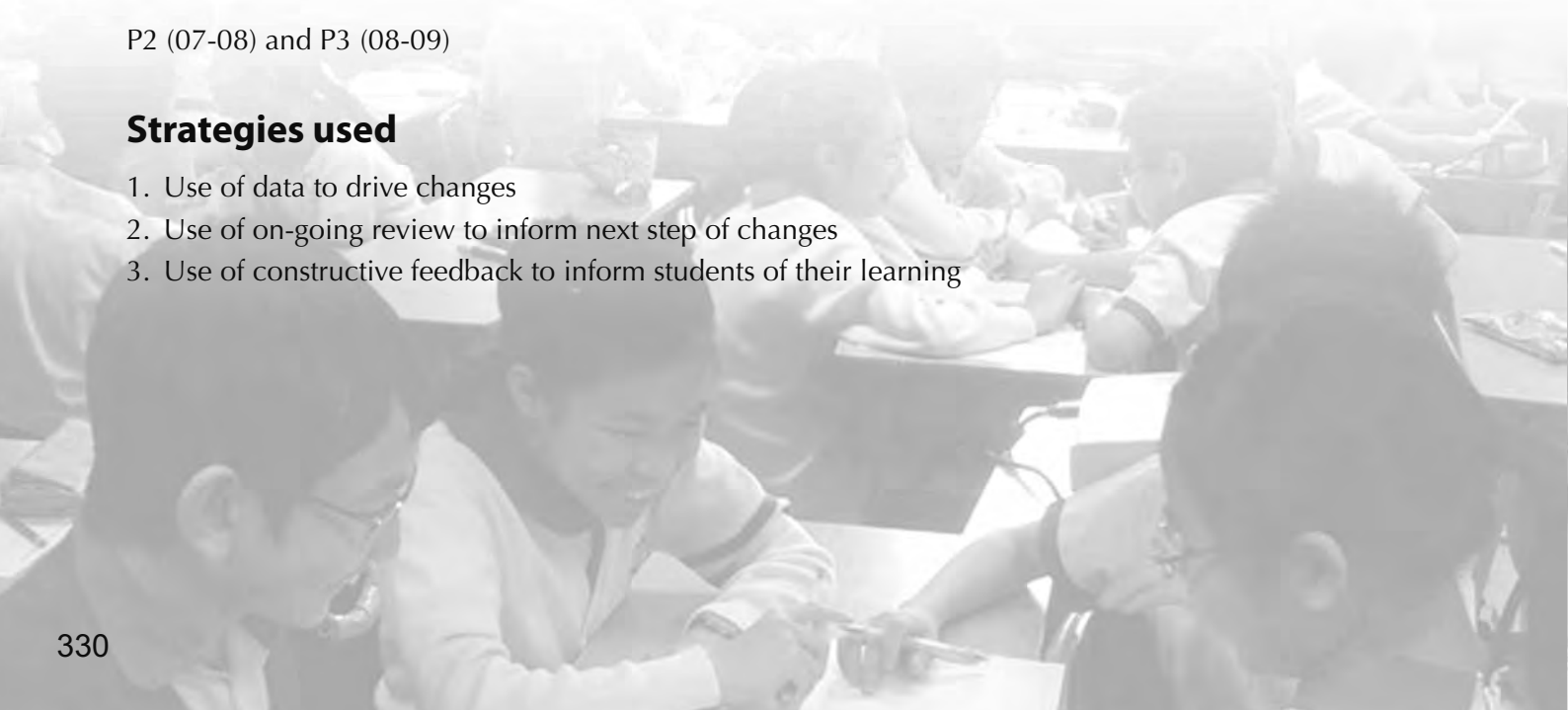
Background

The school initially sought support from the Language Learning Support Section on improving quality of internal assessment papers in 07-08. But, in the process of implementing changes in assessment, teachers realised that assessment is not a standalone component in teaching and learning, but an integral part of it. So, taking further their original plan, they took steps to review the lower primary English curriculum, improve internal assessment practices and daily learning and teaching. With on-going review, teachers further realised it was not enough only to introduce changes at school and teacher level. In 08-09, they used constructive feedback and "task booklets" to help them get across their key messages more effectively to their students. They hoped these measures could help their students learn better, increase their ownership of learning and eventually lead to better learning outcomes.

Levels

P2 (07-08) and P3 (08-09)

Strategies used

1. Use of data to drive changes
2. Use of on-going review to inform next step of changes
3. Use of constructive feedback to inform students of their learning

What happened

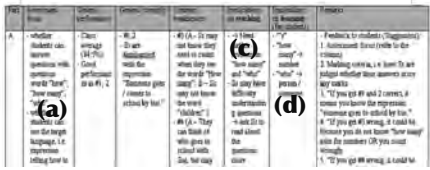| Data used	Step taken	Observation and reflection	Immediate action taken and change introduced	Further food for thought
Past assessment papers	Reviewed past assessment papers and compared their features and design with direction provided in the Curriculum Guide and sample questions from popular benchmarks, e.g. Territory-wide System Assessment to see if there are major discrepancies	• Assessment papers should be task-based and skill-based, not grammar-based • Not only do language skills need to be assessed, generic skills, e.g. critical-thinking, problem-solving skills should also be assessed • Questions set need to have clear assessment focuses and clear assessment criteria • Questions set should help differentiate students of different abilities. Students of different abilities should all be suitably challenged	• Task-based and skill-based questions were set. Marks in General English assessment papers were re-allocated to reflect heavier weighting in the assessment of language skills. |	Before	After
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Reading	~15%	~30%
Reader	~10%	~10%
Language forms and functions	~50%	~30%
Writing	~25%	~30%	 Allocation of marks in General English paper • Higher-order thinking skills were infused in questions set, e.g. Do you think Susan and Tony are good citizens? (1%) Why? (1%) An evaluative question in assessment paper • Assessment criteria were set, e.g. **Content (4 marks)** 4 ● Provide relevant ideas with many supporting details. ● The description is very clear and coherent. Descriptors for writing • Questions of diverse assessment focus were set to better differentiate students of different abilities.	How to decide on what to assess the students? Insight gained: Assessment (A) should closely align with learning (L) and teaching(T). Is it good enough only to make changes to assessment papers at one particular level? Insight gained: All panel members should be informed of necessary changes and the rationale behind them.
Student assessment data	Analysed students' internal and external assessment data	• Students performed poorly in the new paper set, esp. in reading and questions that require critical-thinking and problem-solving skills • The cohort of students received less training in reading skills after the reading exercise book was discarded in the previous year • Teaching of reading skills was not explicit in lessons Assessment focuses Bands of performance ☺☺☹ A sample assessment coversheet	• Cross-checked students' performance in Territory-Wide System Assessment. Weaknesses in reading and higher-order thinking were further confirmed. • Gave constructive feedback to students when reviewing assessment paper to make it a learning opportunity for all students again. Constructive feedback should consist of four elements: (a) assessment focus (b) assessment criteria (c) implications of different performance (d) how students can do better. A plan showing teacher's assessment feedback • In order to let students know better how they have performed in assessment, in addition to the total score, a coversheet is added on top to allow teachers indicate general student performance with regard to different assessment focuses.	What should be done in the teaching process in order to help students do better in assessment? Insight gained: • The curriculum should be reviewed to cover essential reading skills. • Reading skills should be taught explicitly in lessons. • Students should be given opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills in class.

Schemes of work and curriculum plans	Reviewed schemes of work and curriculum plans to see if the reading skills and text-types are adequately covered, and if higher order thinking skills are infused in the curriculum	• Different teaching focuses, e.g. language skills, forms and functions should be clearly listed • Teaching should not be text-book bound • More text-types should be added to those covered in the text-book • Generic skills, esp. the higher order thinking skills are not adequately covered	• Reviewed and revised the schemes of work and curriculum plans to state explicitly students' expected learning outcomes which included various language skills, vocabulary covered, text-type coverage, generic skills and communicative functions. Expected learning outcomes · Evidence of learning · Target vocabulary Communicative functions Reading skills Writing skills · Text-types Speaking skills A sample curriculum plan	Will good plans lead to quality learning? Insight gained: Effective classroom teaching is also crucial. Schemes of work are for teachers' reference. Is it good enough only for teachers to know what is going on? Insight gained: Students should also know expectations on them.
Lesson plans, lesson observation and teacher reflection for the teaching process	Reviewed daily teaching practices to see if teaching is in line with the requirements imposed on students in assessments	• More questions that promote thinking should be raised in class • Students should be informed of what they are expected to learn and they should be taught to form a habit of evaluating their own learning performance Task books produced 7. Self assessment form How well did you do? Colour the pictures 1. Can I talk about past action using past tense? (Refer to: Part 3 and Part 4B) 2. Can I get information from timetable? (Refer to: Part 4) 3. Can I use vocabulary about camping in my writing? (Refer to: Part 3) 4. Do I read /oi/ and /oy/ correctly? (Refer to: Part 5) A self-assessment checklist in a task book	Evaluation · Synthesis · Analysis · Application · Comprehension · Understanding • Bloom's Taxonomy was introduced to help teachers ask more thought-provoking questions. • Tasks books which clearly listed student expected learning outcomes as those in the curriculum plans were produced to let both students and parents know the key teaching and assessment focuses for each unit. Task books also contain exercises that help students evaluate their own learning in the focus areas. Students were encouraged to use the task books to help them revise when preparing for the assessments. 1. Expected learning outcomes Students are able to... Reading skills Writing skills Speaking skills Communicative functions Generic skills Expected learning outcomes of a particular unit listed in the task book	Is it good enough to only inform young learners of their expected learning outcomes and learning progress? Insight gained: When learners are young, perhaps home-school cooperation should be fostered, so parents can also give a helping hand to the students when needed. Tasks books can be used to bridge the communication gap between school and home.
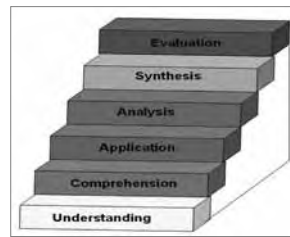
Impact

Teachers shared that **improvement in students' reading skills** were noticed after they had revised the curriculum plans and explicitly taught reading skills in lessons. They shared that students gradually became **more confident** in picking up hints from keywords, guessing the meaning of unknown words and using contextual and/or pictorial cues. They were also **less reluctant to read lengthy and wordy texts**. A decreasing number of blank scripts was also noticed which indicated students were **more willing to make attempts to answer questions**.

Two parent representatives interviewed reflected that the **task books are useful** when they help their children do revision for assessments because the key focuses of each chapter are clearly spelt out. Having learned about the expected learning outcomes on their children, one parent said she was able to help her child **better relate English learning to his daily life**. The parent representatives interviewed also welcomed the use of the additional cover feedback sheet which **better reflects students' strengths and weaknesses** as opposed to the old practice of giving only a mark which might not be very meaningful. With the new practice, parents can also further help students in areas where they are weak. For the students, the whole idea of assessment feedback became **more encouraging** as teachers' feedback in different symbols is **less judgemental**. That helps to make English learning more enjoyable and thus lead to increased ownership of learning and better motivation for English learning.

Facilitating factors

An open and reflective mindset among teachers is definitely an indispensable success factor in this project. Otherwise, it would not have developed from one small-scale and specific task to a series of changes in such a holistic manner. Besides, the school was also wise to **build on its strengths** as the task books and cover feedback sheet could not have been produced in 08-09 if the ground work, e.g. assessment data analysis, curriculum review, etc. had not taken place in 07-08.

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CCC Kei Yuen College
King's College Old Boys' Association Primary School
Janet AU YEUNG (Language Support Officer)

Background

Teachers of SKH Chan Young Secondary School were concerned about how to prepare junior form students for school-based assessment. Teachers understood that besides preparing students to use different types of print and non-print materials, students need to get used to an open culture for discussion and presentation. To encourage students to express their feelings and opinions, teachers' questioning and feedback techniques are very important to stimulate students' probing investigation and reasoned interpretation. "Engaging learners in this inquiry mode of learning will enable them to explore their own feelings, develop their own responses and make their own judgements – crucial skills which they can apply to the understanding and appreciation of a wider range of imaginative texts." (English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide S4-6, 2007, p.99). The S2 English teachers therefore collaborated with the Language Support Officer to investigate how to use good questioning and feedback techniques in developing students' thinking and speaking skills, and preparing students for school-based assessment. Questions can be used to stimulate thinking, assess student progress, check on teacher clarity, motivate students and emphasise key points, etc. With the same importance, feedback is the most effective way to help students improve their performance.

Level

S2

Strategies used

It is suggested that teachers use different levels of questions in lessons to develop students' thinking skills. Bloom's Taxonomy is used to categorise levels of abstraction of questions that commonly occur in educational settings. Questions can be categorised into: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Open-ended questions are used to help teachers understand students' thinking processes and promote discussion or student interaction. Higher level questions like questions requiring students to apply, analyse, synthesise or evaluate can stimulate students to think more deeply and critically.

Besides well-planned questions, how the teacher handles student responses is crucial to motivating students to develop, elaborate, clarify or justify their answers. The teacher can use a number of recommended questioning techniques:
- ➢ Wait time: giving more time for thought or discussion before students answer
- ➢ Probing: getting students to think about a question in greater depth
- ➢ Redirecting: involving other students to comment on or correct the first student's answer to encourage participation and peer learning
- ➢ Rephrasing: providing some information to help students come up with an answer or breaking the question down into more manageable parts

Formative assessment with quality feedback can enhance learning and teaching. It is important that teachers provide students with timely and constructive feedback on how to improve and work towards the learning objectives. Students can also be involved in self and peer assessment. Students feel responsible for their own learning and actively engage in the learning process.

What happened

A unit "At the movies" was co-planned and implemented.

Activity / Task	Objective
Introduction (Lessons 1-2) Show trailers and help students identify the types of films and the role of people who work in films.	To prepare students' vocabulary for the new topic
Reading a film review (Lessons 3-4) Read a film review. Students analyse the structure of the film review and identify facts and opinions in it.	To enable students to read and write a film review
Language focuses (Lessons 5-6) Ask students to make sentences about some films using adjectives, adverbs and connectives that they learned in the unit. Students share the sentences in class.	To enable students to use the vocabulary and language learned in context
Identifying good and bad film reviews (lesson 7) Students read some film reviews and discuss whether the reviews are good or bad and give reasons. Students suggest what a film review should include and produce a checklist.	To enable students to make their own assessment criteria for a film review
Discussing the film "The incredibles" (Lessons 8-12) Students watch the film in parts. They discuss questions in groups and share their ideas in class. Sample questions: • If you were Mr Incredible, how would you feel about the change in people's attitudes towards a superhero? Why? • Why did Syndrome want to kill Mr Incredible? • Do you think that Syndrome was really a bad person? Why or why not? • In "The Incredibles", Syndrome uses his superpower to hurt the others while Mr and Mrs Incredible use their superpower to save the Earth. Would you like to have a superpower, why or why not?	To develop students' thinking skills and speaking: • Apply personal feelings in context • Analyse cause and effect • Evaluate based on reasoned argument • Synthesise and draw conclusions
Writing a film review (Lessons 13-16) Students write their own film review. Students exchange feedback and revise their drafts.	To develop students' writing and revising skills
Presentation (Lessons 17-20) Students present their film review in class. Students and teacher give feedback based on the assessment criteria for presentation skills.	To develop students' presentation skills

Impact

1. Teachers' awareness of effective questioning and feedback in classroom learning and teaching was raised and their techniques improved.

The school promoted questioning and feedback techniques as a development focus and organised workshops to enrich teachers' knowledge. Besides knowledge building, they focussed on the application of questioning and feedback techniques in teaching through co-planning, lesson observation and discussion with the Language Support Officer. During lesson preparation periods, the officer and teachers discussed Bloom's Taxonomy and the techniques for using questions and giving feedback. Teachers were eager to raise their concerns and share their experience. In the evaluation meeting, teachers also viewed video clips taken from their lessons and evaluated the effectiveness of the use of questions and feedback in learning and teaching. Teachers could identify the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons and give feedback to one another. This kind of sharing can certainly benefit teacher development.

2. Students were able to express their feelings and opinions in their film review.

Students could review the film from different perspectives. Students not only gave a clear account of the plot, they also talked about the theme like family concepts and self-esteem or whether having a superpower is good, the characters, the sound effects and their likes or dislikes. The discussions helped students gather more ideas from peers and the teacher. The extensive use of open questions to invite students to express their thoughts and feelings motivated students to participate in the learning process. The thoughtful use of questions and feedback also provided a challenge for students to exercise critical thinking skills in working out ideas.

Teacher-student interaction	Annotation
T: What do you think about the film?	The teacher asks open questions, inviting students' opinions.
S: I think this film is quite funny and touching.	
T: Yes, but why do you say this film is funny and touching?	The teacher probes to encourage the student to elaborate on the answer.
S: …	The teacher gives the student time to think.
T: You may support your views with evidence. Which scenes do you find funny? Which scenes do you find touching?	The teacher rephrases her question to help the student.
S: Some scenes made me laugh, for example, … When Mrs Incredible went to save Mr Incredible, she hugged Mr Incredible. This scene was very touching.	The student can make more concrete answers. The student presents the ideas in his film review.

3. Assessment for learning was achieved through students' good understanding of the assessment criteria and constructive feedback from peers and the teacher.

The assessment criteria were made well-known to students to help them prepare for the writing task and the speaking task. Instead of being given the assessment criteria by the teacher, students were asked to produce a checklist for their film review. Students thought about what a good film review is and decided what should be included in the review. This can promote students' ownership of learning.

The clear assessment criteria also enabled students to assess themselves and their peers. Students were invited to give their comments in class. Though students were not very familiar with giving feedback, they were able to identify some good points or room for improvement in their peers. Peer assessment and teacher's feedback can heighten students' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Students suggested items for the checklist, e.g. an interesting title, category of the film, setting, characters, facts, opinions and feelings.	The student commented on a classmate's presentation. "He spoke loudly and at the right speed. But he should look at the audience more often and the presentation was too short."	Besides giving feedback on students' presentation skills, the teacher appreciated the use of questions in students' film review which can arouse readers' interest.

Facilitating factors

1. Open culture

Teachers are open and willing to receive comments and suggestions on their questioning and feedback techniques. The methods for assessing questioning and feedback techniques include self-review, colleague or peer review, and student evaluations. Teachers can view the videotape of their lessons and consider whether the "questioning outcomes" are consistent with the intent and whether the feedback given is concrete and constructive. Teachers can share their observations and analysis of the lesson in groups. They should support their observations with data taken from the lesson, for example, quotes and critical incidents. Students' opinions are also crucial. They are the ones who can see the change in teachers. A student survey can provide teachers with information concerning students' perceptions of the questioning and interaction atmosphere in classroom.

2. Clear learning objectives

It is essential that English teachers recognise the need for developing students' thinking skills and lifelong learning skills. "English plays a crucial role in empowering learners with the capabilities necessary for lifelong learning, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation and for adapting to the rapid changes and demands of society." (English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide S4-6, 2007, p.2) Teachers should allow sufficient time to carry out class dialogues, discussions or presentations in lessons. Sometimes teachers tend to deliver ideas or suggestions themselves to save time for more teaching content or practice. But the adverse effects are that students may become very dependent on teachers' input or ideas, or students might feel reluctant to express their own ideas in class as their opinions may differ from teachers' "model answers". That will certainly affect students' long-term development in thinking skills and hinder their overall language performance.

Implications for teaching and learning

1. Questioning and feedback should be part of effective planning of teaching and learning. Well-planned and effective use of questions and feedback can enhance student learning by developing critical thinking skills, reinforcing student understanding, correcting student misunderstanding, and enlivening class discussion.

2. School-based assessment should be treated as formative assessment which emphasises helping students improve themselves. Teachers should promote assessment for learning through good questioning and feedback, which means using questions to prompt students to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills, and giving timely and constructive feedback to help students improve their work.

3. Students need to understand what they are trying to achieve in the school-based assessment and know how to improve their performance based on feedback. With more awareness of the success criteria and their own performance, students can develop the necessary skills and attitudes to assess and monitor their progress so that they develop ownership of and responsibility for their own learning.

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SKH Chan Young Secondary School
Pearl KOAH (Language Support Officer)

Language learning through use of questions and feedback

Background

The following scenario, as extracted from an average P5 class, may be found rather disturbing by many English teachers.

> Teacher: By now, we have already read about Jennifer's diary entry for her first day spent in Macau. What about her second day there? Now, you have to write up the diary entry for her second day there. Make use of the information given in the table on p.36 of the textbook. Is that okay?
>
> Class: *(Silence – giving no response)*
>
> Teacher: Make the diary entry interesting. Also remember that you have to write in simple past tense. Write the diary in about 80 words.
>
> Class: *(Silence) [Most of them looked dull or troubled, with only a few students taking actions to write.]*
>
> Teacher: Is that all right? Okay, you may begin the diary in this way. Look … *[writing on the board the first few sentences of Jennifer's diary]* Pay attention to the use of simple past tense …
>
> Class: *[copying the first few lines written by the teacher]*

A language classroom with students actively exercising their creative and critical minds to interact with or express ideas through the use of spoken or written language is what most teachers of English would desire. The phenomenon of students lacking the initiative to respond to the teachers or get involved in the process of learning or practising the use of English, as depicted in the scenario above, however, is just not uncommonly found in reality. Based on Bloom's taxonomy, Brown pointed out,

> *"… in second language acquisition the learner needs to be receptive both to those with whom he or she is communicating and to the language itself, responsive to persons and to the context of communication, and to place a certain value on the communicative act of interpersonal exchange (1987, p.101)."*

The teachers of Sau Ming Primary School have been most interested in looking into how the use of questions and feedback can help provide an interactive, student-centred learning environment with ample opportunities conducive for the learning of the target language and the development of students' thinking skills.

Levels

P3 (07-08) – P4 (08-09)

Strategies used

The teachers aim to develop strategies in how the use of questions and feedback can help reduce the inhibitions or ego barriers that prevent students from communicating in a foreign language so that they can take risks in language learning (English Language Curriculum Guide, 2004). It is hoped that students can become "good language learners", characterised with a "strong drive to communicate, attention to meaning, constant search for meaning, active approach to the learning task, the willingness to practise and the willingness to use the language in real communication (Brown, 1987, p.92; see also Rubin, 1975 and Stern, 1975)."
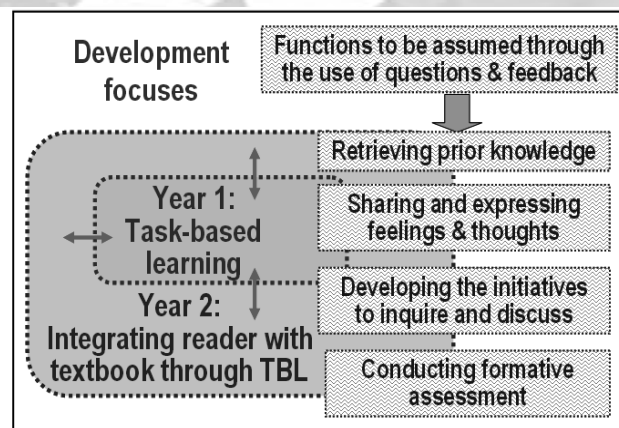
In the past two years, the teachers looked into how questions and feedback could be used to create an interactive teaching environment.

What happened

Among the various teaching modules and units developed in the past two years, the following example is used to illustrate how the teachers applied questioning and feedback techniques in lessons.

Module: Festivals and holidays	*Level:* P3

Major task: Design a leaflet on introducing the Chinese festivals to visitors who are not familiar with our festive traditions and customs.

1. Interacting with the texts actively

Questions of various cognitive levels were set on the basis of the textbook passage, with three main purposes.

| Purpose	Examples of questions & feedback
• retrieve students' prior knowledge in festivals to generate new knowledge through the context given in textbook	What special character do we find in the cartoon strips? In what kind of weather does this charater usually live and work? Do any of his friends come to Hong Kong with him? Who are they and why do they come together?
• urge students to respond to the textbook scene that contradicts with the usual norms and express feelings about the various textbook characters for developing critical thinking skills	Is it the right time for Santa Claus to come? Why? What clothes does Santa Claus wear? Name and/or draw at least 3 items. Can you tell how he feels in Hong Kong at Dragon Boat Festival? Imagine you are Santa in your thick coat when it is summer here. How will you feel? What is Santa Claus doing in Hong Kong's summer? What do you think about him? Do you like him?
• build up context & purpose for the learning of leaflets and the situation for the writing task	Do you think that Santa Claus knows our Dragon Boat Festival before he comes to Hong Kong? What can help Santa Claus know about this festial so that he will not come at the wrong time of the year?

2. Exploring features of unfamiliar text types

Pre-planned questions were set to help students explore the specific textual and linguistic features and purposes of writing about the target type of texts.

Characteristics of leaflets	I think ...
How do leaflets look?	☐ in many colours ☐ in black and white only ☐ interesting ☐ dull and boring ☐ heavy
Can you tell quickly what a leaflet wants to show us?	☐ yes ☐ no ☐ simply read the bigger words ☐ must read all the words carefully ☐ read the pictures
How do we usually receive leaflets?	☐ People hand in the leaflets to us in the street. ☐ We spend money buying leaflets. ☐ We get them from our mail boxes. ☐ We borrow them from the library.

Who will get leaflets?	☐ parents only ☐ anyone ☐ students only ☐ rich people only ☐ all of us
What are leaflets for?	☐ tell a story ☐ give us news reports ☐ give information about something we may not know ☐ tell jokes to make other laugh ☐ let others know something clearly
Give examples on what leaflets show us about. (You may collect leaflets to show your examples.)	1. Different Chinese festivals (- written by the Hong Kong Government - for visitors to know and come to Hong Kong) 2. _____

3. Creating ideas or collecting data for language production

The mind map was designed to illustrate how the questions could be presented graphically to students at junior levels for the ease of understanding. Students were asked to look for information about the particular festival they wrote on through interviewing the elderly in their families or browsing at some recommended websites, aiming to enhance their skills and experience in making inquiries as well.
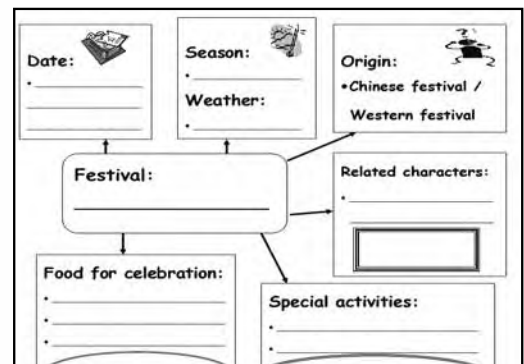
4. Introducing formative assessment

On writing up drafts for written work or making oral presentations, students were given the opportunities to participate in the process of reviewing their learning. It was done through the design of assessment forms with questions to help students make comments and suggestions on one's or others' work. The examples cited show how the use of these questions may help students evaluate the leaflets produced, in terms of content, language and layout.

| Content:	Well-done	Agree	Disagree	Questions for thoughts:
1a We know clearly what the leaflet is about.				What is the leaflet about?
1b The leaflet gives us helpful, interesting information about the festival.				What kinds of ideas do you learn from the leaflet?
1c The pictures and/or drawings help us understand the leaflet.				How can they be even more interesting?
1d What else do you want to add on the leaflet?				Give examples:
1e What do you want to leave out from the leaflet?				Give examples:

Language:	Well-done	Agree	Disagree	Questions for thoughts:
2a We find the title and/or sub-titles on the leaflet.				How many titles and sub-titles are there on the leaflet? Any examples?
2b The title and/or sub-titles are short and simple.				Can you make the title and some sub-titles even more interesting? Any examples?
2c The sentences on the leaflet are mostly short and easy to follow.				Can you make the title and some sub-titles even shorter? Any examples?

Layout:	Well-done	Agree	Disagree	Remarks
3a The title and/or sub-titles are big, eye-catching and in sharp colours.				How can they be even more eye-catching? Any examples?
3b The leaflet is folded into parts. It is also easy to carry.				

Findings and impact

1. Creativity and quality of thoughts

Teachers' frequent use of open questions in designing a module and their encouraging students to develop free thoughts through the use of pre-planned and spontaneous questions were found helpful for activating their thoughts and motivating them to produce work with original, interesting ideas. For instance, in a module aiming to develop students' perception of leadership and unity, the experiences and endings invented by different students for the group of sea animals set in the writing task were rather diverse and unique. Different student-writers developed and applied different criteria on choosing the sea leader. The condemned shark was also treated rather differently in their work, being forgiven and corrected, caught but rescued, killed and tinned or else. Extra characters like a fairy, a magic sea horse or fishermen were at times added to develop their plots. Another unprecedented action taken was that some students even invented a new title for the story they were asked to re-develop.
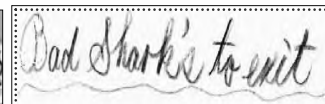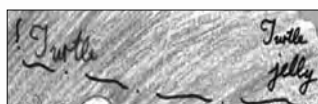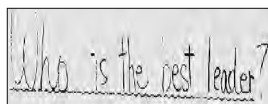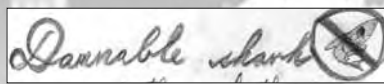
2. Autonomy of learning

The extensive use of pre-planned or spontaneous questions to elicit students' responses was found effective in enhancing their self-initiative and commitment to the search for new knowledge on the basis of the prior or constructed knowledge obtained through interaction with peers and the teacher in the process of learning. This impact was particularly profound for helping students develop their vocabulary knowledge and skills in making discretionary use of reading inputs.

3. Assessment for learning

The learning activities of asking students to reflect upon their written ideas and make comments and suggestions on their peers' work, through the use of some guiding questions, made the intended learning objectives more prominent to the students. For example, it was clearly demonstrated in their written work that they had a good command of the linguistic and textual knowledge developed about the target text types. The qualitative feedback given by the teachers also facilitated students' further actions to revise or re-edit their writing.

Facilitating factors

Ample time and effort have been spared on the design of the units/modules of teaching, with the teaching and learning objectives clearly defined, for the planned, purposeful use of questions in helping students scaffold knowledge and skills needed in working out their responses with interest and confidence. It has also been helpful to anticipate the difficulties students would possibly meet in responding to questions requiring higher cognitive thinking, preparing the supporting materials for use when giving students feedback. Other facilitating factors include the teachers' willingness to reflect continuously upon students' learning difficulties and needs, their open minds for reforming their curriculum and teaching practices and readiness to conduct co-teaching with the Language Support Officer. Moreover, the school administrators have also empowered curriculum leaders with authority and flexibility to organise peer lesson observations, video-taping of lessons and school-based workshops for the development of the English panel.

Difficulties and suggestions

The biggest challenge facing the teachers has been the unpredictable nature of students' responses to the questions asked in a lesson, with some muttering almost inaudible utterances, stuttering or just remaining silent. While some teachers may take these as indicators of their ineffective teaching, most are also concerned about the time constraint of a tight teaching schedule. A firm belief in the formative use of assessment means and the pursuit of quality teaching has been proven fundamental to improving the effective use of questions and feedback in teaching English Language.

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