Overview

Building a firm foundation in English at basic education level prepares students to pursue lifelong learning. To realise this goal, effective learning and teaching in every classroom is the core business of all schools. The school experiences reported in this section illustrate how different schools have reviewed their current practices and so optimised student achievement in the classroom. Each case reflects in turn how through careful and informed reflection the schools involved operationalised the principles set out below:
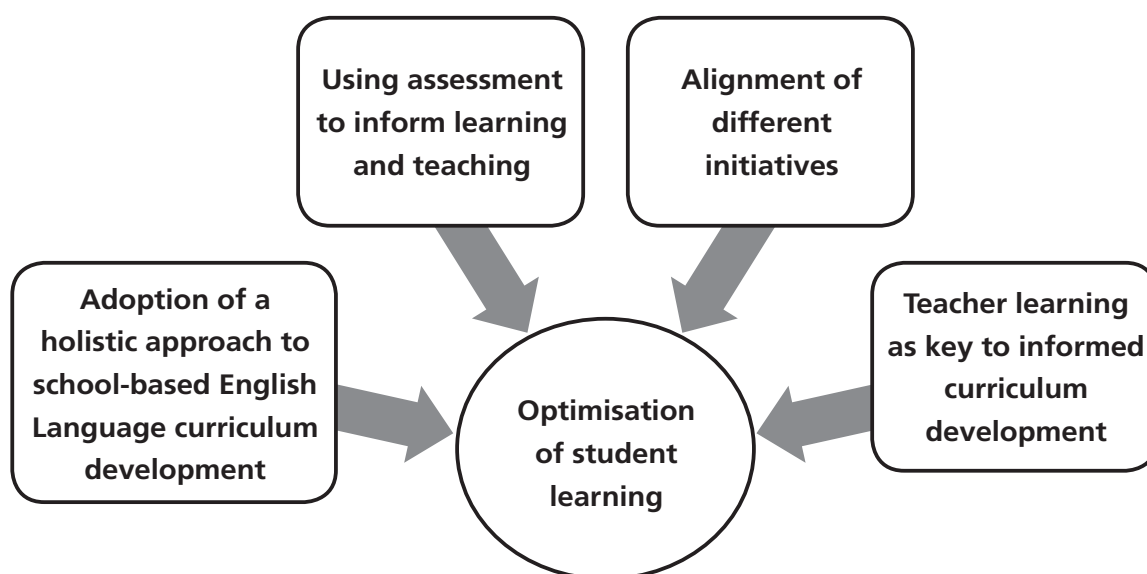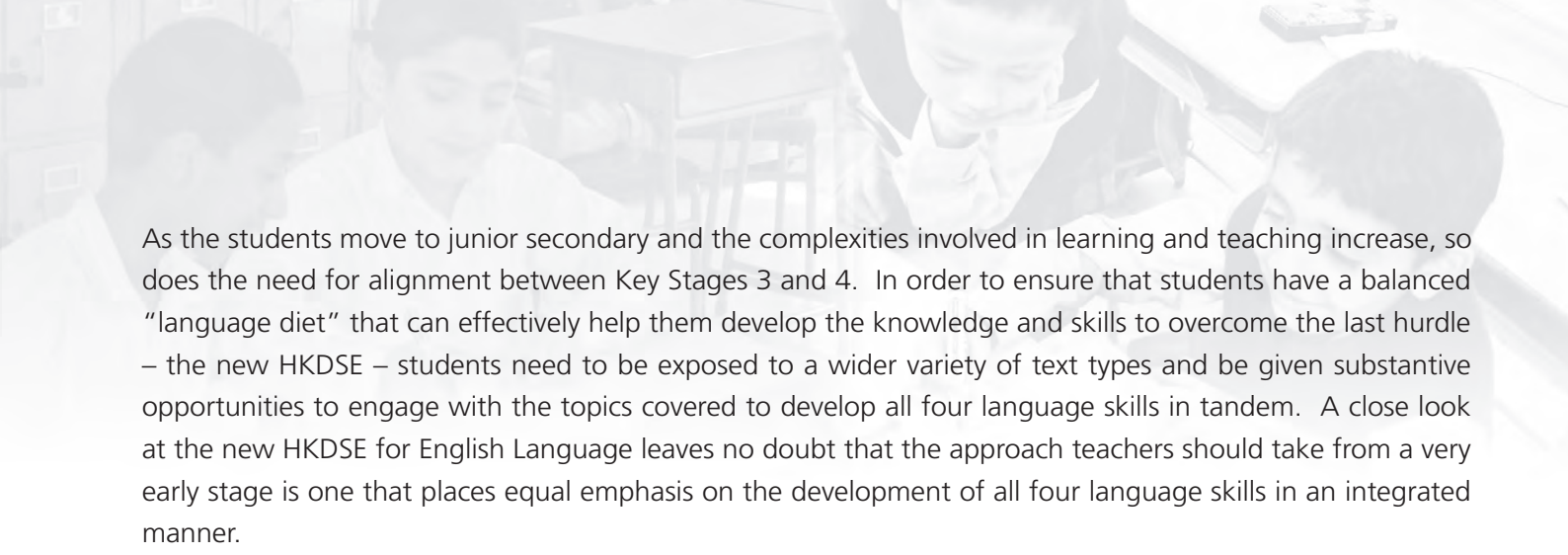

1. Adoption of a holistic approach to school-based English Language curriculum development

Since the inception of the Language Learning Support Section in 2004, our Language Support Officers have worked with teachers in diverse contexts to promote the key concept of holistic curriculum development. In practice, this means that in order for school-based curricula to be robust, they need to:

• show horizontal (within the same year level) and vertical coherence (across levels and key stages)
• create the conditions for teachers to plan for the integrative use of the four language skills in the completion of meaningful and contextualised tasks
• have reading as a foundational stone – the development of solid reading literacy skills enables the students to unlock meaning not just in the English language lesson, but also across the curriculum

The significant task of approaching the development of the school-based curriculum holistically poses slightly different challenges to primary and secondary school teachers. At primary school level, this process will involve not only laying a solid foundation for literacy development at Key Stage 1 (e.g. developing phonological awareness, learning to read, mastering word attack strategies, etc.), but also looking into the future to anticipate in Key Stage 2 what knowledge and skills the students will need as they move to junior secondary. This includes building on the foundation set and aligning the work of teachers and students to ensure that the students' more immediate communicative needs are met, whilst addressing the longer term goal of many students of learning across the curriculum through the medium of English.

As the students move to junior secondary and the complexities involved in learning and teaching increase, so does the need for alignment between Key Stages 3 and 4. In order to ensure that students have a balanced "language diet" that can effectively help them develop the knowledge and skills to overcome the last hurdle – the new HKDSE – students need to be exposed to a wider variety of text types and be given substantive opportunities to engage with the topics covered to develop all four language skills in tandem. A close look at the new HKDSE for English Language leaves no doubt that the approach teachers should take from a very early stage is one that places equal emphasis on the development of all four language skills in an integrated manner.

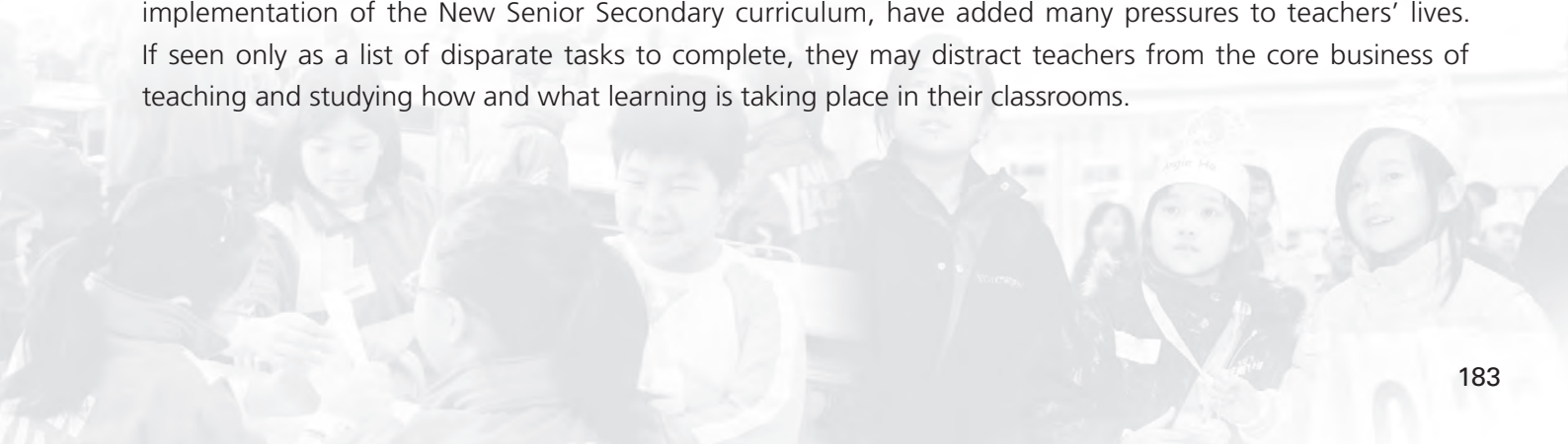## 2. Using assessment to inform learning and teaching

Given the amount of time teachers spend marking and assessing their students' work, it is imperative they start attending more to the formative value of assessment. There is probably nothing more demoralising to a teacher than seeing students make the same mistake again despite the teacher's best efforts to correct them. However, for the task of marking (regardless of skill) to be effective and yield positive results, rather than focus solely on the corrective aspect of feedback (i.e. correcting a student's every mistake), teachers need to find ways of engaging students productively in an objective and outcome-led planning, teaching and assessment cycle. They do this by:

- sharing learning objectives, outcomes and success criteria with students
- designing meaningful learning tasks and activities that create space for students to demonstrate attainment of target knowledge and skills
- using the completion of tasks as an opportunity to gather evidence to make or modify instructional decisions
- probing through questioning and talking to students about their learning and so developing a better understanding of misconceptions and knowledge gaps
- giving rich, qualitative and forward-looking feedback focused on the success criteria set
- training students to understand and use success criteria to self-assess and give peers feedback in order to help students set their own learning and improvement goals
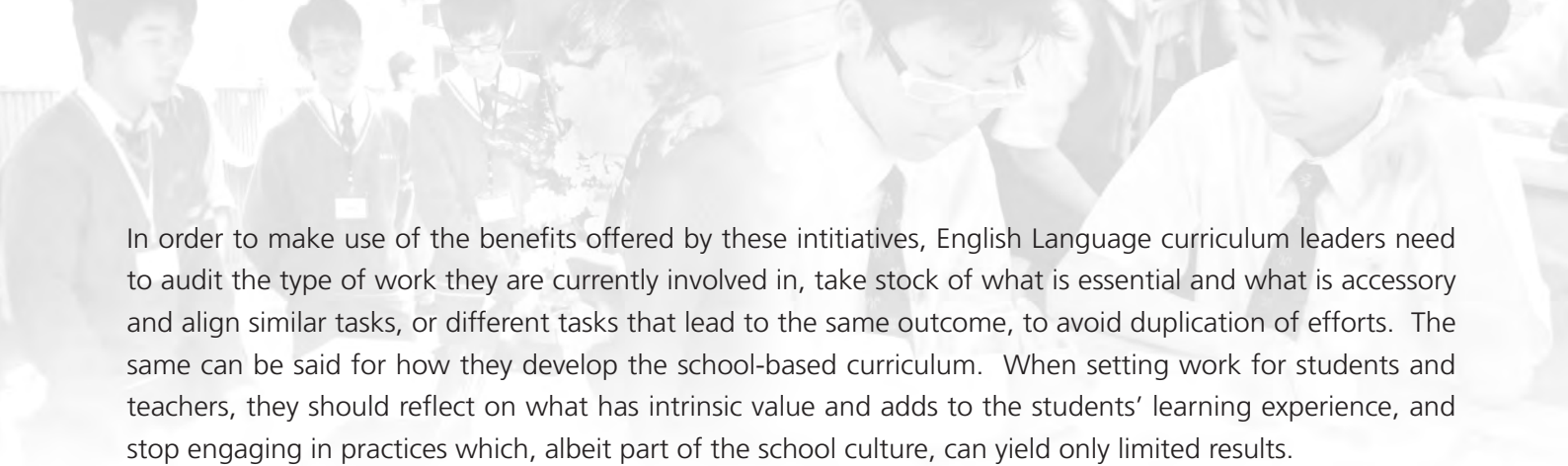
(adapted from Assessment Reform Group (1999) Assessment for Learning)

The school experiences reported in this section confirm what we already know from research – schools that devote time to the implementation of these assessment for learning strategies see increased student motivation and better learning outcomes.

3. Alignment of different initiatives

In addition to the regular routines that teachers have to handle every day, initiatives such as the English Enhancement Scheme, the Fine-tuning of the Medium of Instruction, Small Class Teaching or the implementation of the New Senior Secondary curriculum, have added many pressures to teachers' lives. If seen only as a list of disparate tasks to complete, they may distract teachers from the core business of teaching and studying how and what learning is taking place in their classrooms.

In order to make use of the benefits offered by these intitiatives, English Language curriculum leaders need to audit the type of work they are currently involved in, take stock of what is essential and what is accessory and align similar tasks, or different tasks that lead to the same outcome, to avoid duplication of efforts. The same can be said for how they develop the school-based curriculum. When setting work for students and teachers, they should reflect on what has intrinsic value and adds to the students' learning experience, and stop engaging in practices which, albeit part of the school culture, can yield only limited results.

4. Teacher learning as key to informed curriculum development

Given the many and varied constraints on teachers' time, keeping abreast of the latest developments in teaching methodology can be a significant challenge for most teachers. However, understanding the essence of the changes proposed and having a solid grasp of the principles underlying the reforms introduced over the last 10 years enables teachers to make informed and principled instructional decisions. The opposite, i.e. changing without understanding why or tagging new bits of fashionable jargon onto our unreformed practices, leads, in the long run, to innovation overload, resistance to change and the development of an "all things change, all things stay the same" attitude. Change, however, will not go away because we don't like it or are tired of it - it is a fact of life and having a solid, evidence-based understanding of classroom practice borne out of reflection and participation in continuing professional development activities empowers teachers to better cope with reform, choose which practices to keep and which to drop. The best teachers are first and foremost learners themselves.

This list of principles is by no means meant to be exhaustive and our readers could surely suggest others. Nonetheless, it provides a productive starting point for both school leaders in charge of designing school-based curricula and teachers at the chalk face entrusted with the mission of making use of every opportunity to optimise student learning.

Strategic use of a four-step approach to teach writing

Background

Good writing skills are essential for effective communication. Developing good writing skills in primary school is an essential component of a balanced curriculum. Writing provides students with opportunities to not only apply language structures and vocabulary learned in class, but also express themselves and develop thinking skills. A well-planned writing curriculum in primary schools lays the foundation required for further development in secondary schools.

To better inform teaching and learning, a criterion-referenced assessment on writing was done in five network schools to collect information about students' writing performance. The assessment results showed students' strengths and weaknesses in writing a narrative text from which in turn the teachers were able to draw insights into how to teach writing.

	Strength	**Weakness**
Content	• Some students showed some attempts to elaborate ideas (e.g. giving reasons or describing feelings).	• Some texts were too short. • Very little elaboration of ideas was found in most work. • Some students wrote a very brief ending while some did not provide any ending at all. • Some texts were too lengthy as there was a lot of irrelevant information.
Language	• Some students were able to use past tense. • Some were able to incorporate the use of dialogues into the narrative text.	• Many students only employed a limited range of vocabulary and verb forms. • Tenses, spelling and punctuation mistakes and malformed sentences were widely observed.
Organisation	• Only a few students attempted to use a small range of cohesive devices (e.g. so, but, because, and). • A few were able to write the narrative text in paragraphs.	• Most students did not use any cohesive devices or used them inappropriately. • Numerous students did not use paragraphs.

This article explains how the members of the Primary Literacy Network helped students develop effective writing habits and overcome anxiety, and other difficulties such as lack of ideas and vocabulary, by adopting a systematic approach to writing. Teachers exposed students to a variety of text types and raised their awareness of the stages of writing by teaching writing skills explicitly and providing learning tools for independent writing.

Level

P5

Strategies used

A four-step approach was introduced to the teachers of the five network schools so as to help them better plan their writing curriculum and equip students with the skills and tools needed to produce good texts.

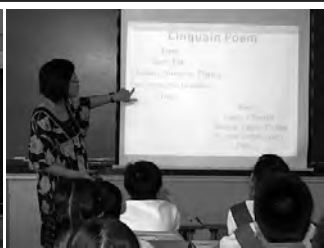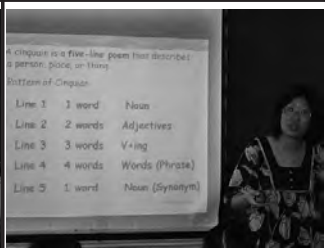| The four-step approach	Rationale/ Objective	Example of learning tool and class activity
1. Designing a meaningful writing task	• To create an opportunity for students to put lexis and structures learned into authentic use	- - - -
2. Helping students recognise text type features by deconstructing reading texts	• To move from reading to writing in order to help students understand both external (the layout) and internal (language use, register) text type features • To provide students with a model for their own writing	• mind map • bingo game • group discussion and presentation
3. Helping students construct a text using a variety of activities	• To provide pre-writing support for vocabulary building, idea generation, sentence making, text organisation, etc. through different consolidation activities and games • To introduce effective use of graphic organisers	• jumbled words exercise • sequencing exercise • proofreading exercise with particular language foci • graphic organisers of different text types • shared writing practice
4. Revising and editing	• To consolidate students' knowledge of the text type features and target language structures by introducing the use of revision and editing checklists • To promote independent learning skills and ownership of the writing process through self-correction before students publish the final version	• revision checklist • editing checklist

In the school cases below, teachers structured their teaching following the suggested approach. Although all the network members followed the suggested approach, each school used different strategies and activities in the pre-writing stage to scaffold students' learning.
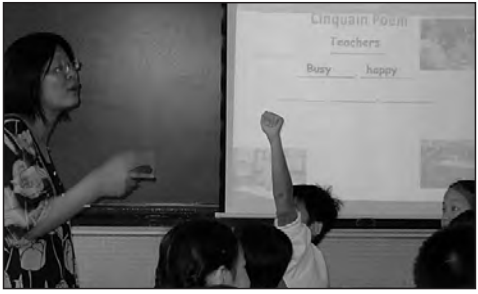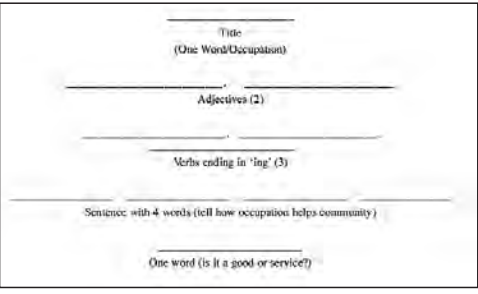
The first school case places emphasis on the application of lexical sets. Group discussion and group presentations were done to help students generate content before the writing. The second school case illustrates how to move from reading to writing through a detailed analysis of the features of the model text. Special support was also given to help students use different tenses in their written production. The third school case details how graphic organisers were used to help students generate ideas and plan the structure of their texts. Teachers also emphasised the use of cohesive devices to form paragraphs.

What happened

Case 1: Teaching students to write a poem to show appreciation to a particular job

School: SKH Yuen Chen Maun Chen Jubilee Primary School

Objective	What happened
• To design writing tasks based on what students have learned so as to create opportunities for students to put the vocabulary items learned in use and express their own ideas and feelings	**Step 1: Planning the writing curriculum** In unit 1 of the 5A textbook, students learned the following: • names of jobs • vocabulary related to workplaces • verb phrases to describe job duties • to use "because" to express job preferences In addition to exposure to questionnaires, notes, rhymes and riddles in the textbook unit, the students were also given the opportunity to write a poem about an occupation of their choice. This writing task provided the context for students to use the target grammar items and lexis covered in class.
• To expose students to different types of poems and teach the text features of a cinquain poem explicitly	**Step 2: Helping students recognise text type features by deconstructing reading texts** Before writing, students were asked to read different types of poems in order to learn the features of this particular text type. With the aim of preparing students for their final task, they were asked to read several examples of cinquain poems. Through discussion, students were able to deduce the structure of this type of text, and tell whether a verb, an adjective or a noun should be used in each line. Students were exposed to different kinds of poems like shape poems, acrostic poems, cinquain poems, etc.　　Teacher helped students deconstruct a cinquain poem.
• To engage students in shared writing so as to build up their confidence in writing • To enable students to make use of graphic organisers to plan and organise writing ideas	**Step 3: Helping students construct a text using a variety of activities** After developing a thorough understanding of the text type, shared writing was done in class so that students and teacher could collaborate to work out one cinquain poem on a selected occupation. After shared writing, students selected a job and created their own job poem based on the guidelines given. Students could make reference to the textbook, vocabulary list given and dictionary during the writing process. In order to motivate students to write and add fun elements to the writing process, students had to write their final version on a cut-out which could symbolise their chosen job.

• To ensure the use of correct spelling, grammar and vocabulary by encouraging students to make use of available resources • To encourage students to present writing using appropriate layout and visual support	Teacher did shared writing with students before individual writing. / Students made good use of a graphic organiser to plan their own writing. Students enjoyed writing the final version of their poem on a cut-out.
• To engage students in drafting, revising and editing with teacher and peer support	**Step 4 : Revising and editing** After individual writing, students were invited to recite their own poem so as to make known to others what their dream job was. Through this sharing process, students' writing mistakes could be spotted and corrected by their peers. Students also exchanged their work with their partners for peer checking. Students were chosen to read their poems aloud.

Case 2: Teaching students to write a reply to an email from a friend
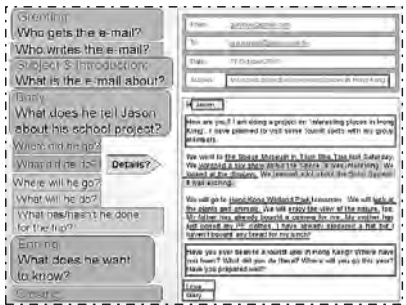**School: Father Cucchiara Memorial School**

Objective	What happened
• To design writing tasks based on what students have learned in order to provide opportunities for students to apply the sentence structures and vocabulary items learned	**Step 1: Planning the writing curriculum** The theme of the textbook unit is "Out and About in Hong Kong". Students learned the following: • to use vocabulary to talk about places and activities in Hong Kong; • to use the present perfect tense to talk about experiences; • to ask and answer questions about whether people have been to certain places; and • to use the simple past tense to talk about past activities. To reinforce the sentence structures and vocabulary that the students had acquired in the textbook unit, they were asked to write a reply to an email from a friend about the places that they had been to and the places that they would visit.

• To identify the purpose and audience of the writing task	**Step 2: Helping students recognise text type features by deconstructing reading texts** Students read the instructions and an email from Gary telling his friend, Jason, about his plan to visit Hong Kong so that they knew what they needed to do in the writing task. They were guided to make use of the instructions and the reading text to identify the purpose and audience of the writing task. They numbered the questions asked by the writer in the email.
• To understand the features of an email	The features of an email were analysed in order to help students use appropriate formats and conventions in their writing. They were asked to label the parts of an email to check their understanding.
• To gather and share information and ideas	**Step 3: Helping students construct a text using a variety of activities** After being shown some tourist spots in Hong Kong and the activities that could be done there, students were divided into groups to work on two places assigned by the teacher. They discussed the activities, brainstormed adjectives to describe the places and activities and thought of the things that they had to prepare for their trip. Language input for discussion was given to the students. Students presented the information they had. Weaker students were given a framework for the presentation.
• To select and organise information and ideas	Based on what they had collected from the presentations, students had to select the information for their own writing. They were given a table to fill in the information that they needed.
• To use appropriate tenses	Since writing the email required the use of various tenses and verb forms and students might find this challenging, teachers provided guidance as shown below to help students decide which tense to use. This also provided an opportunity for teachers to revise the different verb forms with students.
• To organise ideas and draft the email with teacher support	Students were given a graphic organiser to help them organise their ideas. Shared writing was done in class to demonstrate how to use the information in the tables and the graphic organiser to present ideas. Teachers also showed how to use appropriate cohesive devices and how to elaborate ideas. Then students wrote their draft individually.

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• To revise and edit the email with peer support	**Step 4: Revising and editing** Students were given a revision checklist and an editing checklist to help them revise the content and edit the mistakes they had made. Since students would find it difficult to correct all the mistakes they had made, the editing checklist drew their attention to the language focus of this unit only. Peer editing was done to encourage peer support. After revising and editing, students submitted their final product.

Case 3: Scaffolding students to write a diary entry about bad behaviour
School: HKTA Shun Yeung Primary School

Objective	What happened
• To provide students with opportunities to apply different language structures and vocabulary learned through the completion of purposeful writing tasks	**Step 1: Planning the writing curriculum** In collaboration with the officer, P5 teachers carried out a review of their existing school-based curriculum in order to devise a literacy programme based on a wide variety of text types. This review enabled the officer to enhance the teachers' understanding of how to plan a holistic curriculum that effectively addresses the need to develop students' writing skills progressively. The features of some text types were taught explicitly: • diaries • emails • stories School-based writing curriculum with clear text types targeted By integrating two textbook units "Good behaviour" and "Be nice to others", students learned to: • use adverbs of manner to describe proper manner • use past tense to talk about past events • use the modal verbs "should" and "should not" to give suggestions To create an authentic context, students wrote a diary entry narrating an event in which they had behaved rudely, and had to reflect on what they could do to improve.
• To help students recognise text features and language structures of a diary entry	**Step 2: Helping students recognise text type features by deconstructing reading texts** Teachers first explained the purpose and target audience of the writing task. Then a diary entry was presented to introduce text type features such as what content to include (for example, references to the weather), and language items such as the use of past tense when narrating a past event. A diary graphic organiser was used to recap the text features.

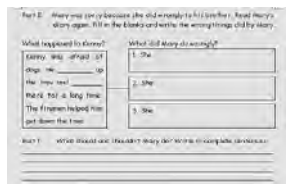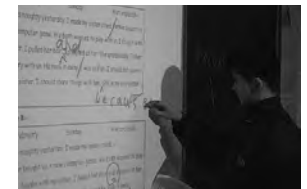|	
• To strengthen and consolidate knowledge of relevant language structure for use in the writing task	**Step 3: Helping students construct a text using a variety of activities** Before asking students to compose their diary entries, teachers revisited target vocabulary and language structures using poems and articles in the textbook units. Interactive games were used to consolidate what students had learned. Pre-writing activities were carried out to provide sufficient language input
• To teach students to expand and elaborate ideas by using graphic organisers	To help students reflect on and narrate their own experience, a modified "cause-and-effect" graphic organiser was introduced. Students structured the content by describing the cause (event) and the effect (wrong behaviour), and giving suggestions (reflection). Teachers then conducted shared writing using ideas collated from the students, and also taught them how to elaborate and expand ideas by adding details in the graphic organisers.
• To arouse students' awareness of paragraphing and use of cohesive devices	After analysing the class writing, teachers decided that there were two major areas for improvement – paragraphing and use of cohesive devices to link ideas. Teachers used some poorly-written exemplars to focus on these two areas explicitly in class. Students were then asked to apply the newly-learned skills and revised their class writing. An improved version was constructed collaboratively between the teachers and the students.
• To have students apply newly developed writing skills in their own writing task	After revisiting the writing task requirement, students wrote their own diary content and structured the overall text with the help of various graphic organisers. Some guiding questions were given to help students elaborate ideas. Students were also encouraged to look up unfamiliar words in their word bank to enrich the content.
• To develop students' skills to revise and edit with peer support	**Step 4: Revising and editing** Teachers first discussed common writing problems identified from students' drafts. Students then exchanged their own pieces and helped each other correct and expand ideas. More ideas were observed in the final version.

Students structured the ideas using different graphic organisers

Students used cohesive devices to edit the work

Draft	Final version

Impact

- **Teachers are willing to spend more time on designing writing tasks and teaching writing skills explicitly.**
  As shared in the network meetings, more pre-writing activities such as sentence formation and text analysis were incorporated into the writing task design. The sharing of network teachers' successful teaching experience reflected that they saw the value of infusing more scaffolding activities in the teaching of writing. Cross-school fertilisation had also taken place well in the exchange process.

- **Students were able to make improvement in their writing and write longer texts independently.**
  When doing self and peer checking, students were able to correct their own mistakes as well as giving relevant feedback to their peers. Hence, the accuracy of tenses, spelling, punctuation, and grammar was improved. The range of vocabulary and sentence structures employed was wider and richer. They were able to elaborate their ideas in greater depth in their work. They could also write appropriate endings for various text types.

Facilitating factors

- All these schools shared similar concern. The Primary Literacy Network provided a platform for building a learning community. The success of the network hinged on a shared understanding of the needs of students' writing and the presence of a group learning process, through which teachers explored problems, worked out strategies, and examined student work together.

- The presence of a systematic scaffolding process helped students make connection between the input and output, and develop study skills by evaluating their own learning through self and peer revising and editing.
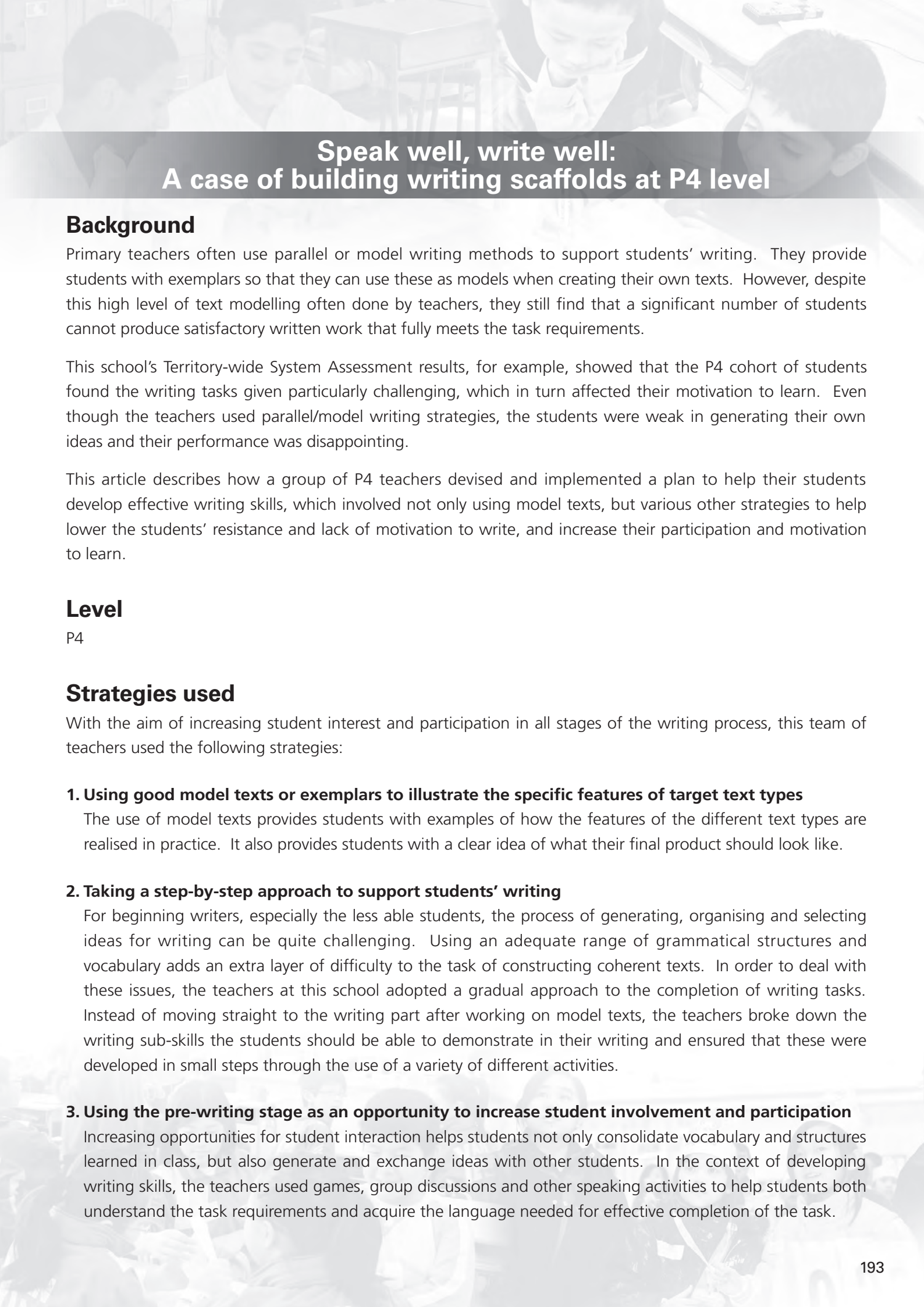
Suggestions

- Schools are encouraged to develop holistic plans to ensure a balanced coverage of text types within the same level and across key stages.

- Writing tasks should be designed based on the textbook units or readers in the Reading Workshops. In this way, teachers can ensure there is adequate and relevant language input for the writing tasks from the textbooks or readers.

- The explicit teaching of writing skills took more time than expected as more lesson time was allocated for pre-writing activities. Therefore, it is important that teachers plan ahead and set clear priorities in their scheme of work well in advance.

Reference

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

Father Cucchiara Memorial School
HKTA Shun Yeung Primary School
SKH Yuen Chen Maun Chen Jubilee Primary School
Connie LAM (Language Support Officer)
Stephanie LO (Language Support Officer)
Amy FAN (Language Support Officer)
Joanne NG (Language Support Officer)

Speak well, write well:
A case of building writing scaffolds at P4 level

Background

Primary teachers often use parallel or model writing methods to support students' writing. They provide students with exemplars so that they can use these as models when creating their own texts. However, despite this high level of text modelling often done by teachers, they still find that a significant number of students cannot produce satisfactory written work that fully meets the task requirements.

This school's Territory-wide System Assessment results, for example, showed that the P4 cohort of students found the writing tasks given particularly challenging, which in turn affected their motivation to learn. Even though the teachers used parallel/model writing strategies, the students were weak in generating their own ideas and their performance was disappointing.

This article describes how a group of P4 teachers devised and implemented a plan to help their students develop effective writing skills, which involved not only using model texts, but various other strategies to help lower the students' resistance and lack of motivation to write, and increase their participation and motivation to learn.

Level

P4

Strategies used

With the aim of increasing student interest and participation in all stages of the writing process, this team of teachers used the following strategies:

1. **Using good model texts or exemplars to illustrate the specific features of target text types**
   The use of model texts provides students with examples of how the features of the different text types are realised in practice. It also provides students with a clear idea of what their final product should look like.

2. **Taking a step-by-step approach to support students' writing**
   For beginning writers, especially the less able students, the process of generating, organising and selecting ideas for writing can be quite challenging. Using an adequate range of grammatical structures and vocabulary adds an extra layer of difficulty to the task of constructing coherent texts. In order to deal with these issues, the teachers at this school adopted a gradual approach to the completion of writing tasks. Instead of moving straight to the writing part after working on model texts, the teachers broke down the writing sub-skills the students should be able to demonstrate in their writing and ensured that these were developed in small steps through the use of a variety of different activities.

3. **Using the pre-writing stage as an opportunity to increase student involvement and participation**
   Increasing opportunities for student interaction helps students not only consolidate vocabulary and structures learned in class, but also generate and exchange ideas with other students. In the context of developing writing skills, the teachers used games, group discussions and other speaking activities to help students both understand the task requirements and acquire the language needed for effective completion of the task.

4. Making use of collaborative learning groups

The scaffolding concepts first developed by Vygotsky (1978) find their practical application in the classroom through the use of activities that require students of different abilities to work together in order to complete tasks slightly above their level. The use of collaborative learning groups helped the teachers in this school ensure that the less able students could benefit from structured opportunities to interact with their linguistically stronger peers. These collaborative tasks involved a summing up and reporting back stage which gave students more control over their learning and put friendly pressure on them to communicate the outcomes of their work together.

What happened

An example is shown below to illustrate how pre-writing scaffolds were used to support the development of writing skills.

Unit: Food

Writing task: Writing a food survey report

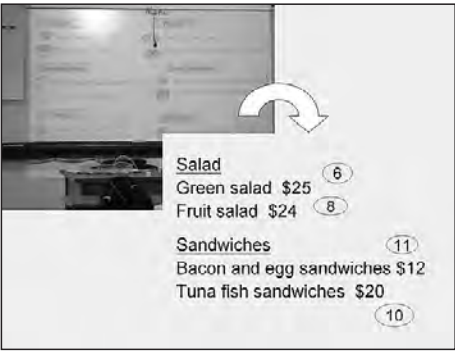**Learning outcomes:** The students will be better able to

- collect and analyse survey data to be included in a mini-report
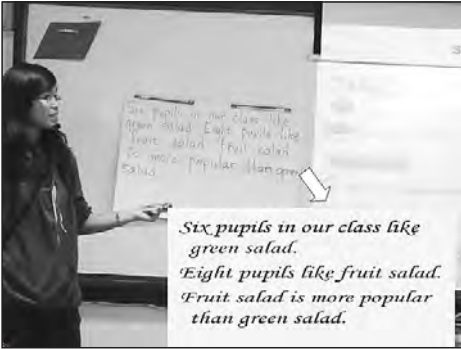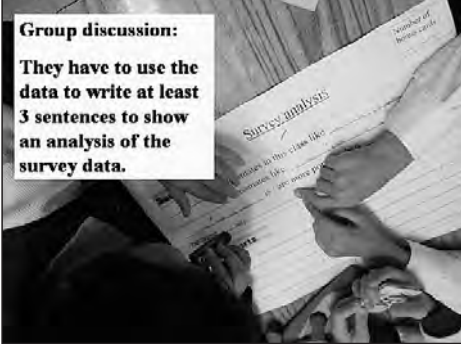- use the comparative of adjectives and quantifiers to describe the data collected

Problems anticipated: Many students find it difficult to write a report independently because this process involves collecting relevant information and using other research skills such as comparing and contrasting data and reading statistics to draw appropriate conclusions.
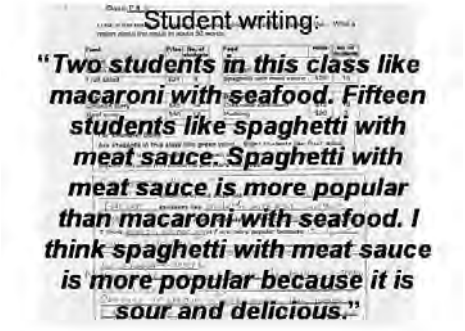
Target text type: A mini-report

Writing scaffolds: Whole-class discussion, group analysis of data and findings, group drafting of a mini-report and reporting back.

The table below explains how the scaffolding process was put into practice:

Step	Objective	Writing scaffold used
1. The whole class voted on popular foods. 	• To activate schemata • To generate data through a whole-class survey on favourite food items • To consolidate food vocabulary and recycle the use of quantifiers	Vocabulary activities designed to help students recall and recycle topic-related vocabulary and grammar

2. The teacher showed an example of data analysis based on the whole-class survey. 3. The teacher set the task and explained the requirements. 	To model the expected outcome	Modelling of how data is used to write the target text type
4. Students worked in groups to select and compare any two food items on the blackboard.	To develop students' ability to read statistics and compare food items	Focussed work on language for comparison and contrast
5. Group discussion 	For students to collaboratively generate relevant content points for the report	Allocation of different roles to group members – the more able students led the discussion and the less able students were asked to record information on two types of food on the blackboard; those who were better at spelling wrote down the points with input from group members
6. Group writing Sentence level • Students wrote sentences comparing the different food items and giving reasons for their popularity. Paragraph/text level • The students planned and organised information and made decisions regarding sequence of content and appropriate format and writing conventions.	To provide students with an opportunity to use grammar in context (use of comparative adjectives to describe the more and less popular food items, and appropriate cohesive devices to give reasons)	Collaborative sentence writing – the students were able to pool their linguistic resources and apply previous experience of the topic (for example, food tastes) Transfer of previous knowledge of appropriate text format and conventions into own writing

7. Debriefing/reporting back	For students to communicate the outcome of their work together	Making outcome of collaborative work public – the requirement that groups present their conclusions to the class puts friendly pressure on them to perform
8. Independent writing	To provide students with an opportunity for independent application of skills and knowledge developed collaboratively	

Impact

1. Impact on students

To find out whether the strategies employed had been effective, the teachers compared and contrasted previous writing done by the students with the writing tasks handed in after these strategies had been implemented. From this analysis the teachers were able to conclude that the students were showing improvement in carrying out simple data analysis and giving reasons for the popularity of some food items. The students' written work also showed that they were able to present information, ideas and feelings more clearly and coherently.

The teachers also conducted student evaluation questionnaires at the end of the second term to gauge how students felt towards the changes to the way writing was taught. The results showed that students found the completion of writing assignments a less daunting task.

The emphasis on structured collaborative group work and interactive writing scaffolds enabled all students to feel equally supported and challenged. It also helped reduce anxiety levels. The focus on speaking and presenting ideas in class before writing helped students "become more confident in speaking through interacting in English". They also felt that they had "learned many new words" and that "the lessons provided many opportunities for us to speak in English".

2. Impact on teachers' pedagogy

The students' reflections and the positive impact of the strategies used on the quality of students' writing convinced the teachers that using an integrated approach to skills development (for example, by building interactive speaking activities into the pre-writing stage) together with more collaborative writing activities would yield better results than simply using model texts to prepare students for writing.

Facilitating factors

1. Full support from the school management

The principal welcomed any initiatives which may improve teachers' pedagogy and student learning. She was particularly in favour of using group work to develop interaction skills and motivate students. This support in practice meant that teachers were given the freedom to make changes to their schemes of work to accommodate the new strategies, and also make use of school facilities other than the classroom for language activities.

2. Strategic deployment of professional and enthusiastic teachers

The teachers involved were eager to explore new teaching and learning approaches. They had a positive attitude to change and were willing to experiment. The panel head's support and participation in co-planning were also essential to the success of this initiative.

Difficulties and suggestions

The teachers had to put extra effort and time into planning the lessons. There were gaps of knowledge and unpredictable obstacles in logistics such as implementing group work in class. Fortunately, the teachers' "practical wisdom" (Elliot, 1993) accumulated in their daily teaching helped them find solutions to the problems promptly. The collaborative work culture also enabled the teachers to share preparation of materials, alert each other to problems observed in any tried-out lessons and make appropriate improvements.

Way forward

In order for this project to become sustainable in the long run and yield positive results consistently across the upper primary levels and for all students, teachers are advised to continue studying and trying out ways of making the writing process more interactive and more collaborative.

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Hong Kong and Macau Lutheran Church Wong Chan Sook Ying Memorial School
Cecilia CHU (Language Support Officer)

Teaching grammar in the context of writing

Background

Grammar teaching and learning is often a challenging area for both teachers and students. There are some common practices of grammar teaching, for example, explaining grammar rules in isolation, focussing a lot on forms and giving a lot of exercises to drill students. Teachers often comment on the fact that students are able to answer their questions about discrete grammar items or fill in the blanks for grammar exercises after grammar lessons. However, the connection is not made with their everyday writing. There is a gap between learning and application. Not only do students find grammar learning boring and useless, but they are also frustrated with many red marks in their writing as teachers usually correct all grammatical mistakes as the main form of feedback. Many teachers doubt whether isolated, formal instruction of grammar is the most effective method. Those doubts were the starting point of this project.

Level

P6

Strategies used

Grammar is fundamentally important. It is time to reflect on how to teach or learn grammar effectively. Given the importance attached by most language teachers to grammar, it is essential to reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies we use. There are two messages in the English Language Education KLA Curriculum Guides (P1-S3) and (P1-6) that are particularly relevant to this project. The first message focusses on the role of task-based learning in helping students develop a better understanding of how, why and when to use particular language structures and items. The second message focusses more specifically on how improving writing skills can provide an effective context for learning and teaching grammar. Creating opportunities for students to work on specific grammar items during the process of drafting, revising and editing their written work is one example of how the students' work can be used to develop both their writing skills and language awareness.

Weaver (1996) proposes that teachers should minimise grammatical terminology and maximise the use of examples. She also suggests that teaching grammar within the context of students' own writing is more effective than teaching it in isolation. She (2007) suggests teaching grammar throughout the writing process. This can be done, for example, by:

- sharing a model from literature, students' work or created by the teacher;

- creating the opportunity for the students to use the target language in their own writing;

- teaching a mini-lesson and/or holding revising or editing conferences to re-teach a concept as needed, showing students how to apply the concept in their own writing.

What happened

A unit excerpt focussing on the use of different tenses in a biography is shown below.

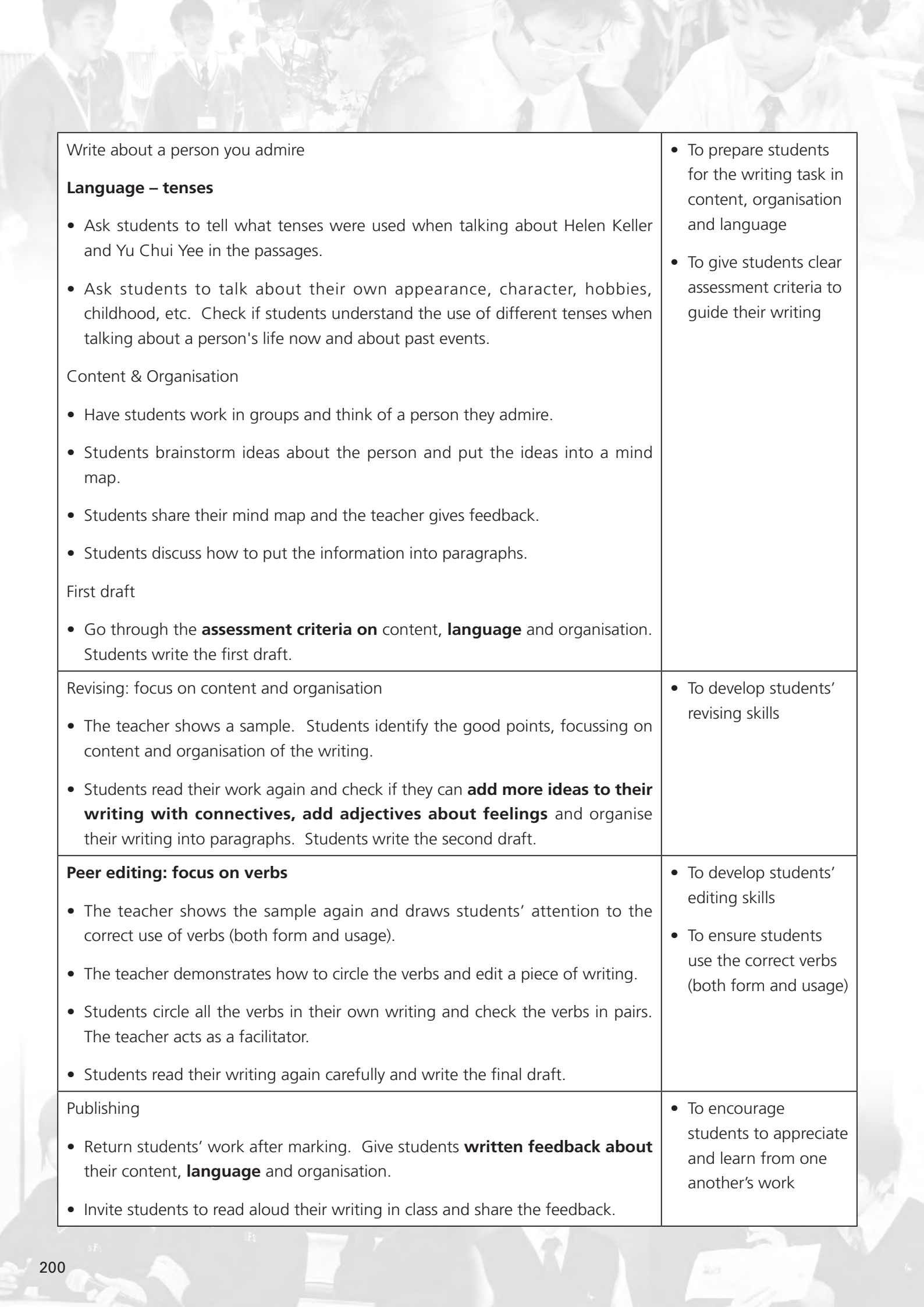| Activity / Task	Objective
Introduction and Motivation • Show PowerPoint slides with an introduction about Yao Ming and Guo Jing Jing for motivation. Ask students whether they like Yao Ming and Guo Jing Jing and why. • Ask students who they find special to them and why.	• To arouse students' interest in the topic
Read a biography of Helen Keller • Show PowerPoint slides about Helen Keller and read the passage about her. Ask students questions about Helen Keller. • Direct students' attention to features of the biography including the **use of tenses**, sentence patterns and organisation of information. • Show a mind map with the key questions of the passage. Students arrange the questions into the correct order based on the passage. • Discuss how to arrange biographical information into paragraphs.	• To enable students to learn the features of a biography, including the tenses used
Read an interview with Yu Chui Yee and rewrite it as an article • Show PowerPoint slides about Yu Chui Yee and read an interview about her. • **Highlight the use of tenses and connectives in the interview**. • Provide a mind map with the key questions of the interview and ask students to think about how to organise the information into paragraphs. • Students rewrite the interview as an article about Yu in groups. **Remind students to use the correct pronouns and tenses** and to paragraph their work. Share students' work in class. • Complete a table about Helen and Yu. **Discuss the use of different tenses** when talking about the two personalities.	• To enable students to write a biography • To develop students' understanding about the use of different tenses in context

Students doing peer editing

Students talking about how many mistakes they have found in their drafts

Students sharing their work in class

Write about a person you admire **Language – tenses** • Ask students to tell what tenses were used when talking about Helen Keller and Yu Chui Yee in the passages. • Ask students to talk about their own appearance, character, hobbies, childhood, etc. Check if students understand the use of different tenses when talking about a person's life now and about past events. Content & Organisation • Have students work in groups and think of a person they admire. • Students brainstorm ideas about the person and put the ideas into a mind map. • Students share their mind map and the teacher gives feedback. • Students discuss how to put the information into paragraphs. First draft • Go through the **assessment criteria on** content, **language** and organisation. Students write the first draft.	• To prepare students for the writing task in content, organisation and language • To give students clear assessment criteria to guide their writing
Revising: focus on content and organisation • The teacher shows a sample. Students identify the good points, focussing on content and organisation of the writing. • Students read their work again and check if they can **add more ideas to their writing with connectives, add adjectives about feelings** and organise their writing into paragraphs. Students write the second draft.	• To develop students' revising skills
Peer editing: focus on verbs • The teacher shows the sample again and draws students' attention to the correct use of verbs (both form and usage). • The teacher demonstrates how to circle the verbs and edit a piece of writing. • Students circle all the verbs in their own writing and check the verbs in pairs. The teacher acts as a facilitator. • Students read their writing again carefully and write the final draft.	• To develop students' editing skills • To ensure students use the correct verbs (both form and usage)
Publishing • Return students' work after marking. Give students **written feedback about** their content, **language** and organisation. • Invite students to read aloud their writing in class and share the feedback.	• To encourage students to appreciate and learn from one another's work

Impact

On students

- Students showed improvement in grammar usage in the specific language focus dealt with. Most of the students were able to use the tenses appropriately in their final work. The number of mistakes related to the main verbs dropped over 60% when comparing the first and the final drafts. Students understood the target grammar items better and they were able to correct their own mistakes in the drafts.

- Students also expressed that they had learned how to revise and edit their writing and they could apply the skills on their own in future. Students learned to improve not only the language, but also the content and organisation of their drafts in the process. They also treasured learning from peers.

Students' second draft	Annotation
	• This student could use past tense to talk about Mother Teresa in his original draft. • The editing work shows that the student has learned the difference between talking about Mother Teresa (past tense) and talking about his feelings (present tense). The student could use different tenses appropriately in context.
	• This student could use present tense to talk about her mum's present states and what she always does in her original draft. • The editing work shows that the student has corrected the tense and the form (especially subject-verb agreement) of the verbs.

On teachers

- Teachers' awareness and skills in teaching grammar in context were developed.

- Assessment for learning strategies like feedback, peer and self-review, and assessment criteria were used to improve learning.

- Teachers were able to make good use of students' work as assessment data and make professional judgments on planning and teaching, and make alignment of learning, teaching and assessment. Teachers further explored students' difficulties with grammar items in their writing. They followed up by emphasising the grammar items in reading and writing lessons. Teachers also designed writing assessment tasks with clear objectives to assess students' use of target grammar items and evaluate student learning.

Implications for teaching and learning

Based on this experience, the teachers involved were able to draw the following conclusions:

• Language lessons should provide students with meaningful contexts that have relevance to their life.

• The contexts and the grammar items should be presented in an interesting way.

• Good examples of grammar usage can best be illustrated by making reference to reading materials, teacher's writing or students' writing.

• Students should be provided with an opportunity to discuss and investigate. They should not simply be asked to complete usage exercises from a grammar book.

• Students should be provided with an opportunity to apply the grammar items, for example, in speaking or writing tasks.

• Language awareness can be raised effectively through writing process.

Way forward

When teaching grammar in the context of writing, teachers may not be able to ensure that students' work is completely free of grammatical mistakes. Students' mistakes can be treated as an inevitable part of their learning process. The most important points to remember are that students can learn from the mistakes they make in their writing, that their awareness of accurate language use can be raised and that they can apply the writing skills in future. Engaging the students in this type of work will help them make fewer mistakes and develop the metalanguage required to self-correct their own mistakes.

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Yan Chai Hospital Chiu Tsang Hok Wan Primary School
Pearl KOAH (Language Support Officer)

Making grammar learning meaningful

Background

Many teachers find that despite their best efforts students tend to forget how to apply grammar concepts very easily. Weaver (1996) points out this may be because students do not necessarily learn grammatical items in the order in which they are taught in textbooks. Very often, the grammar items are dealt with in isolation, and students are not provided with rich opportunities to see the grammar items in contexts and use them to express personal meanings. These opportunities are vital for gaining cognitive understanding of patterns and their communicative purposes. To help students better acquire the grammar concepts, a meaningful context is necessary and reading can serve such a purpose. Weaver (1996) believes wide reading can help students develop sentence sense, and Catanese (2009) and Dean (2008) also claim that connecting grammar to reading and writing can increase student engagement and learning. If students frequently encounter effective use of grammar in books, they are more likely to recognise patterns and hence internalise the grammar concepts.

The teachers of this school were eager to explore alternative ways to help their students develop stronger grammatical competence. In particular they were interested in helping students unlock the meaning and use of different tenses. This case explains how they used a classic story to guide students through the process of discovering how to use the past continuous.

Level

P6

Strategies used

Strategy used	Rationale for using the strategy
• Provision of a rich context where the target structure occurs naturally	• To expose students to the use of the target structure
• Gradual, step by step elicitation of meaning and usage rules	• To help students develop a conscious understanding of the language item, so they understand when, why and how it is used • To ensure that students are able to formulate their own rules and apply them
• Varied activities and tasks	• To create opportunities for students to internalise the grammar rules
• Creation of opportunities for repeated encounters with the language item	• To maximise exposure to the language item and increase students' awareness of meaning and use
• Selection of an appropriate reader	• To provide a meaningful context for using the target structure

What happened

Number of lessons: 20 lessons (Textbook units 2 & 3 and reading lessons)
Key language focus: the past continuous

Objective	Procedure
• Create the context for learning the grammar item • Help students discover the meaning of the target structure	• Students read the book report of "Beauty and the Beast" from the textbook. The teacher used questions to help them understand the storyline and elicit personal responses. • The teacher drew students' attention to sentences in the book report where the target structure was used. Through questions the teacher guided the students to work out the meaning of the past continuous and why it was used. • The teacher utilised time lines and examples from the book report to familiarise students with the meaning of the past continuous.
	When to use? (Function) ■ when you talk about a long action that carried on in the past e.g. Dad was picking roses for Beauty when the Beast came out. (Picking roses was a long action in the past.) The Beast was lying on the ground when Beauty found him. (Lying on the ground was a long action in the past.) Reference: http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/elc/studyzone/330/grammar/pascon.htm **Example 1** — Beauty found him 9:00 9:30 10:00 10:30 11:00 — lying lying lying lying lying The Beast was lying on the ground when Beauty found him. The Beast started lying on the ground before 9:00 and Beauty found him at 11:00. He was lying there for hours. When you talk about things in the past, "when" is most often followed by the verb tense
• Use multi-sensory stimuli to help students internalise the meaning of the grammar item	• Students watched an episode of the story and chose the sentences to describe the scenes. • Students listened to a song and filled in the missing words. • Students pretended to be the characters. They mimed actions from the story and then asked their fellow classmates what they were doing.
	B. Watch the video and choose the best sentences to describe the scenes. Write the numbers in the boxes e.g. [1] for the first scene. ☐ The wagon was moving when Belle got off. ☐ The people were singing while Belle was riding on a wagon. ☐ The librarian was talking to Belle while she was climbing up the ladder. ☐ Belle was talking about her book. ☐ Belle was singing when people said 'Bonjour' to her. ☐ Belle was singing when a sheep ate up a corner of the page. ☐ Belle was reading while she was walking. Fill in the missing lyrics of the song 'Jealous guy' by John Lennon

• Give students repeated exposure to the language item	• The past continuous was deliberately used in the questions and worksheets when helping students read the storybook. This aimed to provide models of proper use of the tense in speaking and reading.
	
	• When guiding students to practise reading strategies, teachers constantly used the tense in the questions. For instance, the following questions were asked to help students scan for specific information.
	
	  - What was the merchant doing when the weather became cold? (He was riding home.)
	
	  - What was he doing when the Beast came out? (He was picking roses.)
	
	  - What was the Beast doing before Beauty and her father arrived? (He was waiting.)
	
	• The language item appeared in different parts of the worksheets so as to maximise students' exposure to it e.g. story map, matching, sequencing and filling in the blanks.
	
	Verbs in the past continuous tense appeared in different parts of the worksheets

• Promote self-learning and encourage students to practise on their own in their free time	• Students were encouraged to extend their learning beyond the classroom and the lesson time. Links to online exercises and games for language items of each unit were provided on the school's webpage. Students were required to fill in a record upon the completion of an exercise or game. They needed to rate it in terms of usefulness, interest level and difficulty. Links for online practice on the school's webpage Completed records of online exercises and games by students
• Create the opportunities for students to actively use and apply the target language item	• Students were asked to write diary entries after reading the story. They could write about a day of one of the main characters i.e. the Beast, Beauty or the merchant. They were guided to use an organiser to brainstorm ideas on different aspects such as the people involved, place, time, events and feelings first. Then they presented their ideas in paragraphs in their diary entries.

The past continuous tense was used to describe past actions over a period of time.

Impact

On students

- **Better knowledge of the meaning, use and form of the target language item**

  Students were able to tell that the past continuous tense was used to describe a long action in the past. They understood the usage better because the learning activities were better connected which made them more impressive. The post-reading writing task revealed that most students could use the tense accurately in terms of meaning and form. The use of varied well-planned and well-sequenced activities to illustrate the meaning and usage of the past continuous also helped students develop a better understanding of the target language. The teachers' confidence was further boosted by the fact that students were also able to use the past continuous correctly in another writing task with a different context. As reflected in the pre- and post-tests, there was an increase of 30% in the number of students who were able to use the tense accurately. 109 out of 128 students (85% of P6 students) made improvement.

- **Learning beyond the classroom**

  Most students enjoyed doing the online exercises and playing grammar games because they found them interesting and easy to do. They could work on them in their free time and at their own pace. This not only helped consolidate what was being taught but also helped develop the habit of self-learning and promoted learner autonomy.

- **Development of creativity**

  Teachers noticed that students were deeply involved in their writing task. Many of them produced interesting and creative ideas. In fact, many students wrote about the day after the Beast was transformed from a beast into a handsome prince. They were able to use their imagination and creativity to describe the happy experiences from the perspectives of different characters.

On teachers

- **Better lesson planning skills and enhanced teaching repertoire**
  Teachers have become more aware of the importance of creating rich contexts when teaching grammar. The way activities were sequenced made the lessons more coherent and helped save time and effort as it enhanced teaching effectiveness. The impact was impressive and the teachers learned to create meaningful contexts to teach grammar items. They also gained hands-on experience in developing and adapting resources and activities for the learning and teaching of grammar. In short, their teaching repertoire has been expanded.

- **Better awareness of how to address individual differences**
  Teachers now have confidence in designing graded activities and worksheets. Through providing a self-learning platform they could better accommodate students of different abilities and learning styles.

Facilitating factors

- **Gaining concerted support from enthusiastic teachers and the school**
  Teachers are receptive to new ideas and changes as long as they are beneficial to students. They are eager to explore effective strategies and work out quality materials. They were willing to carry out curriculum adaptation to make room for the reading lessons and took an active role in designing materials. The school management was also very supportive in allocating resources to the programme such as making space available on the webpage for posting the links to grammar exercises and games.

- **Using a reader to create a context for grammar learning and teaching**
  Some teachers may consider readers as supplementary to the GE programme and use them only to teach reading strategies. However, the reader can provide a meaningful and purposeful context to help students discover how the target grammar item is used in authentic contexts.

Conclusion

Grammar learning is meaningful when students can recognise syntactic patterns in contexts, understand why they are used and then apply them to express their thoughts. Reading provides such opportunities for them to encounter grammatical structures and generate an understanding of their usage, thereby developing their grammatical competence.

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Wong Tai Sin Catholic Primary School
Maria CHAU (Language Support Officer)

Restructuring the curriculum
to nurture budding English speakers

Background

Students do not look up when they present in front of an audience. Their voice is not loud enough when they are making a speech. Teachers keep stressing the importance of eye contact and voice projection but students still fail to look up and speak up. The limited class time makes it difficult for teachers to give feedback on students' speaking performance.

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

Like many teachers, the English teachers of this school also find teaching, learning and assessing speaking a challenge. Over the last two school years, the P3 and P4 teachers have addressed these issues by revamping the speaking component of their school-based English Language curriculum.

Levels

P3-4

Teachers brainstorming ideas to improve students' speaking skills

Strategies used

An integrated approach

Although teachers know students' speaking skills need improving, they also understand language is better learned as a whole and so speaking skills should be developed holistically alongside other language skills. They decided to use a **task-based framework** to plan units of work in order to promote the integrated development of the different skills. A task-based unit of work provides students with a context in which to draw on their framework of knowledge and skills, which can in turn improve their confidence and competence to speak (Curriculum Guide, 2004).

Implicit learning and explicit teaching

The integrated approach, however, bred anxiety. The development of speaking skills was often played down in an integrated unit because of the tight teaching schedule. The teachers were also concerned about how they could cater for the varied learning needs of their groups and improve their speaking through this type of approach.

In order to address teachers' concerns while still building in time for the systematic development of speaking skills, speaking was infused into the curriculum in two ways:

1. Use of language games/activities for **implicit skills building**: After pre-teaching language structures and vocabulary, students took part in language games/activities to consolidate the target language/vocabulary. The language/vocabulary revisited in the games provided the building blocks needed for students to become more confident and improve their speaking skills.

2. Use of pre-speaking activities for **explicit skills teaching**: Pre-speaking activities were used to equip students with more strategies to be effective speakers.

Implicit learning and explicit teaching can cater to the needs of different learners. While some students benefit more from explicit skills teaching, others learn the skills implicitly through taking part in language

games/activities. Therefore we need to strike a balance between developing implicit knowledge of the second language while not neglecting explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2008). As Henriksen (1998) puts it, both implicit and explicit learning "play a central role in language learning".

Assessment for learning in action

Although timely and relevant feedback plays a crucial role in helping students improve their speaking skills, time constraints often makes it difficult for teachers to give individual students feedback. The teachers tried to use assessment for learning by involving students to be peer assessors to widen the spectrum of feedback. Assessment for learning was also promoted beyond the classroom through a range of other activities. By doing so, the teachers hoped that more students could receive feedback to improve their speaking skills.

What happened

In both forms, speaking skills were introduced and reinforced by using implicit skills building and explicit skills teaching in the task-based units. Since the development of speaking skills is the core focus of this article, this section describes the plans on learning, teaching and assessing speaking. The examples below are drawn from the experience of the P4 project.
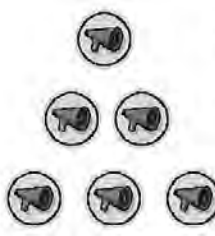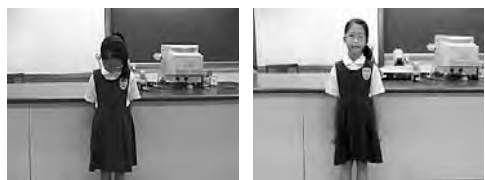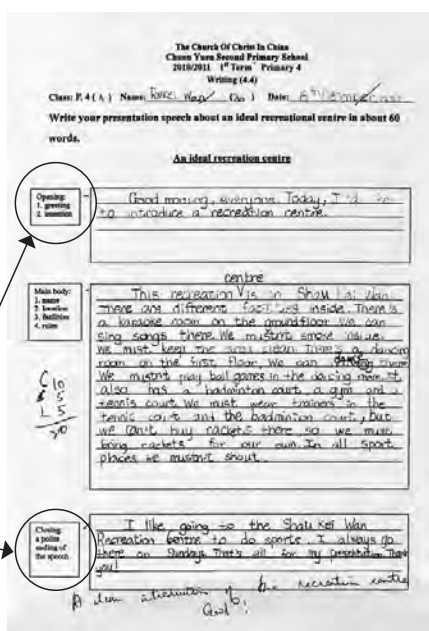
Use of language games/activities for implicit skills building

The examples listed in this table took place after the teaching of target vocabulary and/or structures.

Unit	Language game/activity	Objective of game/activity
First term: Promoting Hong Kong	**Spinning game**: Students write adjectives, for example "interesting", on a spinner. They take turns to spin and tell one another about Hong Kong using that adjective. Adaptation: Less able students are expected to make simple sentences such as "Hiking is fun" whereas more able ones make more complex sentences such as "Riding on the cable car is more relaxing than riding on the roller coaster".	- To revisit target vocabulary and language: adjectives to describe things to do in Hong Kong, comparatives and superlatives - To boost confidence and interest in speaking - To improve speech fluency Students playing a spinning game
First term: Recreation centres	**On the ball**: Students form a circle to pass around a ball. The one with the ball has to tell others loudly about a facility of a recreation centre. The distance between students as well as the noise would make it necessary for students to speak up. Adaptation: Less able students make simpler sentences than the more able ones.	- To revisit target vocabulary and language: vocabulary about facilities and activities available at a recreation centre - To boost confidence and interest in speaking - To improve speech fluency - To improve voice projection

| Unit	Language game/activity	Objective of game/activity
Second term: Chinese New Year	**Distance call:** 1. Students sit in a row. The last ones in each row have information that the first ones do not have. 2. The first ones in each row ask the last ones for the information loudly and clearly. For example, the first student in a row asks, "Whose turnip cakes are these?", and then the last student in the same row answers, "They're Kitty's". 3. Then the first ones in each row go to the end of the row while the next ones take their seats and become the first ones and ask for information. 4. Students repeat Steps 1 – 3. The distance between students as well as the noise would make it necessary for students to speak up. Adaptation: The information to be exchanged in each row can be differentiated to cater for learner diversity.	- To revisit target vocabulary and language: Chinese New Year related vocabulary, asking and answering questions using "whose" and the possessive form of a noun e.g. Henry's - To boost confidence and interest in speaking - To improve voice projection Students exchanging information loudly and clearly
	Picture relay: Students form groups and take on the roles of a messenger and writer. The messengers take turns to look at a big picture with many things related to Chinese New Year. They take turns to go back to their own groups and tell the messengers what they saw in the picture. The writers dictate the words. Adaptation: This is an easy version of "food relay" done in the second term.	- To revisit target vocabulary: Chinese New Year words - To boost confidence and interest in speaking The relay in progress
Second term: Food	**Food relay**: This is a more advanced version of "picture relay". The messengers have to describe the amount of food to the writer, who then puts down the information. In the process, there are more opportunities for communicating in English.	- To revisit target vocabulary and language: food words, plenty of/ a little/ a few - To boost confidence and interest in speaking - To improve voice projection - To improve speech fluency

Use of pre-speaking activities for explicit skills teaching

| When	Pre-speaking activity	Objective of pre-speaking activity
At the beginning of the school year and/ or whenever necessary	**Loudspeakers**: Teachers draw loudspeakers on the board and demonstrate speaking softly with 1 "loudspeaker", and loudly and clearly with 3 "loudspeakers". The loudspeakers, used as an indicator to raise students' awareness in voice projection, are used at different times of the year as a reminder whenever appropriate.	- To improve voice projection 1 = very soft, others can't hear you 2 = not soft, but not loud enough 3 = loud enough, others can hear you clearly Using "loudspeakers" as indicators of voice projection
	Dos and don'ts before you start: Training video clips were prepared to show the dos and don'ts before making a speech. After viewing the clips, students give comments and discuss. The importance of seizing the time before making a speech to establish rapport with the audience is stressed.	- To establish rapport with the audience through improved body language and eye contact Dos and don'ts before you make a speech
	People I like: Students draw people they like. They make a stand for their drawings and put them on the desk. Then they locate 3 faces, one in the middle, one on the left and one on the right and look at them from time to time as they present.	- To create a low-stress environment - To boost confidence and interest in speaking - To improve eye contact
	How to begin and end a speech: Many students begin and end their speech abruptly. To improve the organisation of their speech, they are taught the three parts of a speech – introduction, body and conclusion. They are also taught how to start and end appropriately. Students were prompted to begin and end their speech appropriately.	- To improve text organisation

Assessment for learning in action

• Widening the spectrum of opinions

The teachers do not always have time to feedback on individual performance in class and so they invited students to give feedback to their peers. A user-friendly assessment form was used to facilitate peer evaluation and the assessment criteria were specific and familiar to students.

Students assessing one another using familiar criteria

• Assessment beyond the classroom

At the beginning of the school year, students of different proficiency levels took part in a pre-speaking test after class. To sharpen their skills, they reviewed their performance to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Meanwhile, the teachers introduced task-based units in class to develop their speaking skills. Then a post-speaking test was conducted to track the students' learning progress.

A snapshot of a student making a speech in the pre-test

The teachers hoped that students will take part in similar tests at least once at KS2 to improve their speaking skills. Selected clips from the pre-/post-speaking tests will be uploaded onto the school intranet to build a resource bank for teaching and learning purposes.

Students' eye contact and voice projection improved in the post-test

Impact

More planning, more exchange

There was not much explicit planning of how to teach speaking in the past. The work over the last two years has made teachers more aware of the fact that they can draw on a range of strategies for developing speaking skills. Through careful planning, the speaking component in the curriculum has become richer and more organised. The experience has gradually equipped teachers with confidence and competence in revamping the speaking component, leading to more professional exchange in the panel.

Learner diversity addressed through games

The use of language games/activities is an effective strategy to cater to different learning needs. Games by themselves are fun and motivating. As observed by teachers, with appropriate input and support, even those who used to be reluctant to speak English were interested in taking part in games such as the spinning game. Language games are also easy to adapt. They can be modified to achieve different learning objectives. For example, the picture relay can be used as a beginners' game requiring players to report vocabulary items only. Likewise, to increase the challenge level, players may be asked to report information to their partners with the target language in complete sentences, leading to more opportunities for sustained communication.

Don't just tell them. Show them.

Although explicit skills teaching is useful to the development of speaking skills, some teachers may share the frustration that students do not look up and speak up when they present, no matter how many times they are told to do so. For explicit teaching to be effective, the teachers realised that they should not just tell students what to do, but that it is equally important to model how to do it. For this reason, they showed students concrete indicators such as the loudspeakers which are easy to understand, and students have become more aware of what is meant by speaking up and what they are expected to achieve.

Using performance to improve performance

The pre- and post-test video clips were shown to students to help them assess the impact of the strategies used on their speaking skills. The use of student performance to improve performance can help students identify their strengths and weaknesses for themselves. The learning evidence made it easier to convince them to do better.

Facilitating factors

Cost-effective strategies

Both strategies mentioned earlier proved to be cost-effective in addressing teachers' concerns about time. Using an integrated approach to unit planning enabled teachers to provide students with input and a context in which students could draw on their prior knowledge and skills to complete different tasks. This, in turn, helped students consolidate knowledge of vocabulary and structures and boost their confidence and overall competence. The benefits of this approach were enhanced by the implicit and explicit teaching of

Teachers discussing what strategies to use

target speaking skills, which was an effective way of addressing the needs of different types of learners.

Creating a low-stress environment

Stress may undermine student performance. The teachers are sensitive to students' needs and feelings and tried to create a low-stress environment through games. The provision of a low-stress or even stress-free learning environment can encourage students to interact in English and to establish rapport with the audience as they present. With time, their psychological barrier can be overcome and they will be more used to speaking English to others.

Way forward

After focussing on improving eye contact and voice projection, the teachers have planned to move on to the use of intonation and body language to express feelings in the latter part of the second term. Students' speaking skills can be sharpened with authentic public speaking opportunities. They hope they can establish more platforms both inside and outside school to help students learn from the good practices of others. Such platforms would provide a channel for them to put into practice what they have learned, and gradually students can be nurtured into effective public speakers.
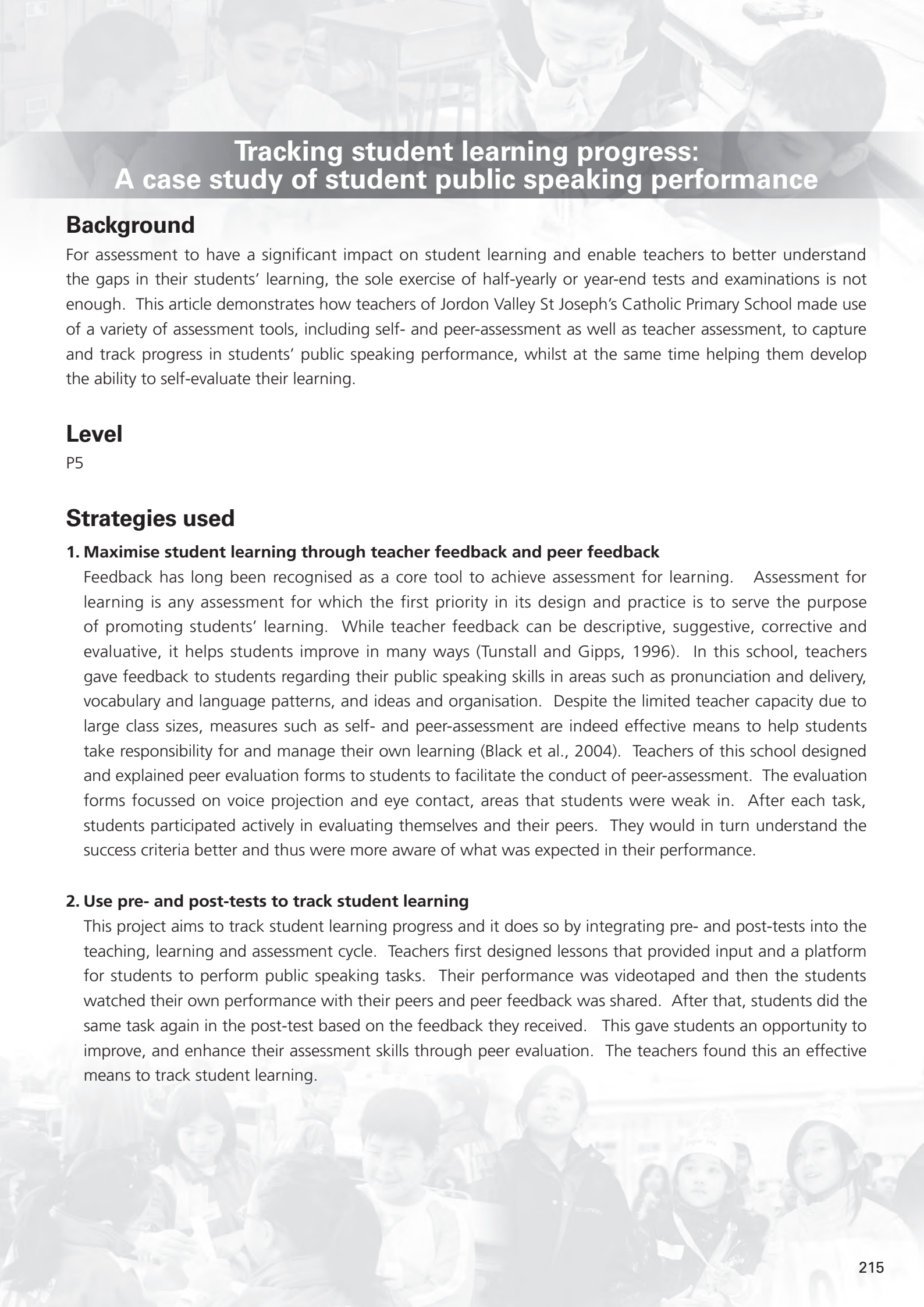
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CCC Chuen Yuen Second Primary School
Florence YIP (Language Support Officer)

Tracking student learning progress:
A case study of student public speaking performance

Background

For assessment to have a significant impact on student learning and enable teachers to better understand the gaps in their students' learning, the sole exercise of half-yearly or year-end tests and examinations is not enough. This article demonstrates how teachers of Jordon Valley St Joseph's Catholic Primary School made use of a variety of assessment tools, including self- and peer-assessment as well as teacher assessment, to capture and track progress in students' public speaking performance, whilst at the same time helping them develop the ability to self-evaluate their learning.

Level

P5

Strategies used

1. Maximise student learning through teacher feedback and peer feedback

Feedback has long been recognised as a core tool to achieve assessment for learning. Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. While teacher feedback can be descriptive, suggestive, corrective and evaluative, it helps students improve in many ways (Tunstall and Gipps, 1996). In this school, teachers gave feedback to students regarding their public speaking skills in areas such as pronunciation and delivery, vocabulary and language patterns, and ideas and organisation. Despite the limited teacher capacity due to large class sizes, measures such as self- and peer-assessment are indeed effective means to help students take responsibility for and manage their own learning (Black et al., 2004). Teachers of this school designed and explained peer evaluation forms to students to facilitate the conduct of peer-assessment. The evaluation forms focussed on voice projection and eye contact, areas that students were weak in. After each task, students participated actively in evaluating themselves and their peers. They would in turn understand the success criteria better and thus were more aware of what was expected in their performance.

2. Use pre- and post-tests to track student learning

This project aims to track student learning progress and it does so by integrating pre- and post-tests into the teaching, learning and assessment cycle. Teachers first designed lessons that provided input and a platform for students to perform public speaking tasks. Their performance was videotaped and then the students watched their own performance with their peers and peer feedback was shared. After that, students did the same task again in the post-test based on the feedback they received. This gave students an opportunity to improve, and enhance their assessment skills through peer evaluation. The teachers found this an effective means to track student learning.

3. Motivate students to speak English using public speaking as an entry point

Speaking is one of the key elements in English learning in all Key Stages. However, there are always challenges to improve students' speaking skills. In this school, teachers found that students lack confidence in speaking loudly in front of the class and they often have poor eye contact. In order to help students improve in these areas, public speaking was integrated into the formal curriculum. While students can enhance their voice projection and eye contact, they can also learn in groups and take turns to be speakers and audience. This provides a platform for peer learning.

What happened

Task	Detail	
A writing task designed to be integrated with the textbook unit "Interesting places" in the first term	- All English teachers in P5 planned and designed a writing task that would provide the basis for a public speaking task. - In the writing task, students played the role of a tour guide and introduced an interesting place in Hong Kong. - Students needed to explain why they would recommend that place to tourists.	 The writing worksheet
Proofreading and modification	- Students received feedback from their teachers and made corrections to their speech "Introducing a place in Hong Kong".	 Students modifying their speech
Public speaking performance: The pre-test	- Students were divided into groups and took turns to perform the public speaking tasks. - Students introduced an interesting place in Hong Kong in this pre-test. - The librarian and the Language Support Officer from EDB helped facilitate and assess students' performance. - The students' performance was videotaped.	 Students performing the public speaking task in the pre-test

Screening by teachers and Language Support Officer	- Four to five students from each class were selected to do the post-test. - These students were from the average stream.
Preparation for the post-test	- The selected students prepared for their post-test in groups. - The students viewed and evaluated their own and peers' videotaped performance. - The success criteria focussed around voice projection and eye contact, which were areas teachers wanted their students to develop. - Peer feedback and teacher feedback was given in the four groups. Students viewing their pre-test performance before doing the post-test The peer evaluation form
Public speaking performance: The post-test	- The selected students did the same pre-test task. - They had another opportunity to improve after hearing the feedback given by their peers and teachers. - The post-test was videotaped. - These videos (both pre- and post-tests) became useful materials for students to track learning progress and for teachers to demonstrate student improvement. Students performing the public speaking task in the post-test
Another writing task designed to be integrated with another textbook unit in the second term	- The same process will be carried out again. - Another four groups of students from the four respective classes will participate in a new round of public speaking tasks. - Pre- and post-tests will be done as in the first term to track student learning.

Impact

In this project, teachers did pre- and post-tests with students on a public speaking task. While watching the videotaped pre-test had helped students identify their weaknesses, the post-test provided them with an opportunity to improve. Teachers' main objective was then to bridge the gap between the students' performance in the pre-test and the expected learning outcome – improvement in voice projection and eye contact. Having identified these two focusses, teachers explicitly taught students the skills involved in class. They borrowed the idea they learned from CCC Chuen Yuen Second Primary School and demonstrated to students the benefits of speaking loudly and having good eye contact with the audience using the following icons:

👁	Poor eye contact
👁 👁	Satisfactory eye contact
👁 👁 👁	Good eye contact

🔈	Poor voice projection
🔉 🔉	Satisfactory voice projection
🔊 🔊 🔊	Good voice projection

Teachers found that the above way of teaching speaking skills explicitly was useful and effective. They frequently demonstrated to students speeches with different levels of loudness and eye contact. It was found that students' awareness in these two areas was greatly increased.

After doing the post-test, teachers observed that students had improved their voice projection and eye contact. From the questionnaire results, all student respondents agreed that they found it useful to watch the recording of their pre-test performance. Also, over 90% of the student respondents commented that they had better eye contact with their audience and they could speak louder after participating in this school project. From the interviews, student respondents reflected that they knew better the success criteria of public speaking and thus felt more confident in improving their own performance in future.

This project has also helped teachers infuse school-based assessment into their day to day teaching. Assessment is not confined to tests and examinations anymore but is conducted formatively in class as well as beyond class hours. This is a good preparation for students as oral presentation is such an essential skill in different subjects at secondary level. The consistent practice of helping students use assessment criteria, self-assessment and peer-assessment will help them reflect on and improve their own learning.

Facilitating factors

1. Principal's support

Seeing the potential of this project in developing new practices in learning and teaching, the principal has given the panel heads and teachers involved the autonomy of curriculum design when implementing the project. Teachers were encouraged to make profession discretion on the content to be covered, the use of curriculum time during and outside the timetable, the way the textbook was adapted, etc.

2. Teachers' concerted efforts

With trust and autonomy given, teachers including the English panel heads, regular English teachers and the school librarian worked closely together. For instance, the English panel heads designed the writing tasks with English teachers, the Language Support Officer of EDB screened the students' pre-test performance with teachers and the school librarian helped conduct the pre-tests in all classes.

3. Advance and flexible planning of the curriculum

Planning ahead was crucial to the successful completion of this project. In order to track students' learning progress, the pre- and post-tests have to be carried out at the right time despite the very tight schedule. The potential disruption to the teaching schedule was minimised by, for example, turning one of the textbook writing tasks into a public speaking task and using it as pre- and post-tests. Also, students were given enough time to view their pre-test performance, and listen to the teacher and peer feedback before conducting the post-test, which provided them with another opportunity to improve.

Suggestions

1. Scheduling

Since this school project would invite students to take the post-test after school, special arrangement had to be made to avoid clashes with other after-school activities. This requires teachers' coordination and understanding to reschedule some of these activities to make room for this project.

2. Technical support

As technical support is needed to edit the pre- and post-tests' performance videos and turn these into suitable teaching and learning materials, it is advisable to invite the help of a teaching assistant.

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Jordan Valley St Joseph's Catholic Primary School
Rona LI (Language Support Officer)

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Our concerted efforts in preparation for the NSS speaking components

Background

This article is about how the teachers in this school seized the opportunity provided by the curriculum reform and the availability of extra resources to look more closely at the gaps in their students' performance, and come up with an action plan to address these gradually.

Anticipating the challenges posed by the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum, the English teachers in this school decided to make use of the English Enhancement Grant to redesign their school-based curriculum in order to enhance the interface between Key Stages 3 and 4. After diagnosing the needs of the students and mapping these against the curriculum and assessment requirements, the teachers decided to further enhance the development of speaking skills. They did this by infusing the NSS elements from both the core and the elective components into the design of task-based units from S1 to S3.

Levels

S1-5

Strategies used

Towards a better understanding of how to use data to inform learning and teaching

The teachers in this school understand that data is important for setting clear and practical goals (Kirkup et al., 2005). To make informed decisions, the teachers used several sources of data, including curriculum and assessment documents, and also the school's external review findings and other internal diagnostic tests. Through mapping the school's needs against the curriculum and assessment requirements, they managed to diagnose needs, prioritise areas for development, and identify appropriate strategies.

Identifying strategies

Based on the data, three prime areas for development were set – **communication strategies, critical thinking, and skills in making questions and giving responses**. The teachers decided to use public speaking, social issues, and questioning and feedback techniques as entry points to help students develop these three areas.

Public speaking can improve communication strategies, helping students become more audience-centred. When students work to organise their speeches, they "gain practice in the general skill of establishing clear relationships" among their ideas (Lucas, 1989). Hence, they are using their critical thinking skills in the process of improving speech organisation. Analysing **social issues** is another example of how critical thinking skills can be nurtured as students need to go through "a process that requires critical reflection" (Clarke, 2005). **Questioning and feedback techniques** can improve classroom dynamics and interaction. Questions and feedback are a vital part of the teaching and learning process. When set at the right level of difficulty, they can provoke higher-order thinking (Limbach & Waugh, n.d.).

The adoption of these initiatives had implications on manpower deployment, though. The teachers realised the mission could only be accomplished through concerted efforts. Together they hoped to generate knowledge and experience of all the three areas and pave the way for the implementation of the NSS curriculum.

What happened

Step 1: Needs analysis and objective setting

As much time and effort had been placed on oral discussion over the previous years, the teachers planned to put more resources on the development of individual presentation skills. They conducted pre-speaking tests with S1 and S2 students of different proficiency levels. It was found that junior form students could generally present relevant ideas but were relatively weaker in using communication strategies. They tended to neglect rapport with the audience and appropriate use of body language to look more confident and approachable.

The school's external review findings revealed that students' motivation and ability to answer questions in class could be further enhanced. More support could be given to help them respond to questions and lesson time could be used more effectively with the provision of more feedback on student learning.

After understanding the gaps in their practice, the teachers then took into consideration the curriculum and external assessment requirements. They analysed relevant documents, including HKDSE speaking assessment criteria, exemplar paper and School-based Assessment criteria. The school data was mapped against the curriculum and external assessment requirements in order to draw up a plan to prepare for the NSS speaking components:

Area to develop	Possible action to take
Communication strategies (e.g. body language, facial expression, voice projection, pronunciation, audience awareness, etc.)	- **Infuse public speaking into the curriculum.** - Introduce fright-fighters to boost confidence and improve body language, facial expression and voice use. - Introduce attention-getters to maintain rapport with the audience. - Introduce persuasive devices to make ideas more convincing.
Critical thinking (e.g. organisation skills, supporting ideas with evidence, etc.)	- **Introduce social issues.** - Teach students how to approach a social issue. - Teach students how to give and justify solutions. - Develop higher-order thinking through asking questions of different levels of complexity. - **Infuse public speaking into the curriculum.** - Improve text organisation. - Develop ideas of a speech logically and coherently.
Skills in making questions and giving responses	- **Introduce questioning and feedback techniques.** - Use questions of different levels of complexity. - Use a range of strategies to elicit responses. - Provide timely and appropriate feedback.

The mastery of communication strategies would improve students' performance in HKDSE Speaking Paper and School-based Assessment. With critical thinking and questioning and feedback techniques, students would be more able to understand a question or topic raised, and come up with appropriate responses.

After identifying the strategies, the team decided on the division of work as follows:

Form	Public speaking	Social issues	Questioning & feedback
1	*	*	
2	*	*	
3	*	*	*
4	*		
5		*	

Step 2: Planning and implementation

Public speaking

Public speaking was launched in S1, then rolled out to S2 – S4 in the same year. It was incorporated into units developed in previous years. In S1, teachers infused public speaking into a unit on rap music. In S2 and S4, it was linked with the short stories unit. In S3, it was linked with the popular culture unit. The example of the S1 project is detailed below to illustrate how public speaking can be infused into the English curriculum.

Infusing public speaking through a unit on rap music in S1

Writing task: Students write their own raps and then write a speech to explain why they are the best rappers.

Speaking task: Students make a speech to convince the audience they are the best rappers.

Stage	Objective	Learning/Teaching activity/ Action taken
1	To prepare training materials on public speaking The making of a public speaking training video pack	- The panel heads, students and Language Support Officer worked together to prepare a training video pack on public speaking. The video focussed on using fright-fighters to get rid of stage fright, using attention-getters to arouse interest and establish rapport, and improving text organisation. - The teachers also gave ideas on the preparation of a booklet entitled "Attention-getters and Fright-fighters" to improve students' confidence and communication strategies.
2	To develop an understanding of and response to raps Students enjoying clapping and rapping	- Teachers set the scene by telling students that they would be developed into great rappers and public speakers. - Students listened to English raps. The teachers demonstrated how to rap and the class rapped along. - Students wrote their own raps and rapped along with the class. To add to the fun, they clapped or did some gestures as they were rapping.

3	To scaffold content, language and organisation through pre-writing	- Through using pre-writing tasks, students scaffolded the content, language and organsation of their speech.
		- Content: Students had a one-minute brainstorming activity to come up with as many reasons as possible to convince the audience that they should be chosen as the best rappers. Then they played "Speaking Relay" and took turns to give reasons.
	Using language to make a speech more persuasive	- Language: Students learned to sound more persuasive using adjectives, superlatives, imperatives and questions.
		- Organisation: Students recapped the structure of "introduction, body and conclusion" and learned to give reasons.
4	To improve confidence and speaking skills through pre-speaking tasks	- Pre-speaking tasks were used to help students get ready for speaking in front of the class:
		- Fright-fighters: With the help of the training video, students did anti-fright exercise to relax before making a speech.
	Getting rid of stage fright through anti-fright exercise	- Attention-getters: Students learned attention-getters introduced in the booklet and selected appropriate techniques to draw the attention of the audience. They used strategies such as questions to establish rapport with the audience.
5	To improve confidence and speaking skills by providing a platform for public speaking	- Students extended their learning in an inter-school contest aimed at the promotion of public speaking called "Budding Public Speakers Showcase". They also got advice from experienced public speakers. Those who participated as audience learned a lot from the speakers and got a chance to put into practice what they had learned in an interactive activity.
	Students taking part in the Budding Public Speakers Showcase	

The image in row 3 contains:

Adjectives:
e.g. I am *loud* and *clear*.
loud/ clear/ fluent/ eloquent/ brave/ confident/ friendly/ sincere

Superlatives:
e.g. I am the *best rapper* in the world!
e.g. Whose rap is the *most interesting*? Mine!

Imperatives:
e.g. *Listen!* I am telling you what I have longed for since I was one!
e.g. *Don't worry about your future.* I'll give you some ideas.

Questions:
e.g. Do you remember how to change verbs into past tense? You'll learn how after listening to me. Are you ready?

Social issues

As critical thinking can be nurtured through discussing social issues, the school decided to offer the social issues elective module in S5. However, in order to pave the way for the elective module and simultaneously help students develop higher-order thinking skills and ability to organise ideas in their speeches, social issues elements were also progressively integrated into the junior form curriculum.

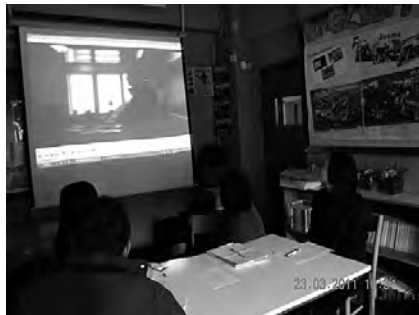## Adding a touch of social issues from S1 to S3

In order not to overburden the teachers, the elements of social issues were infused into existing initiatives as much as possible. The exposure they got from the existing initiatives would be useful input for them to develop an understanding of and response to social issues texts.

Level	Focus	How
S1	How to approach a social issue and give reasons Using question words in analysing the topic "animal products"	- The teachers identified motivating topics in the textbook. They looked for related articles and set questions to help students approach a social issue with question words such as "what", "who", "when", "where" and "how". They also learned to state their ideas and support them with reasons.
S2	Stating problems, giving and justifying solutions S2 teachers discussing how to help students state problems, give and justify solutions	- The S2 teachers adopted a similar approach. They designed extended tasks for students to explore a social issue further after teaching a unit. Students were given opportunities to approach a social issue and identify the problems involved. They used language and vocabulary taught previously to give solutions to the problems and justify their views.
S3	Teaching higher-order thinking Using Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking skills to develop higher-order thinking	- This was linked to the questioning and feedback project. When introducing a social issue, teachers set higher-level questions. For example, students were asked to evaluate a social issue from different perspectives. (For details of the project, please refer to the next section.)

Questioning and feedback techniques

Since this strategy was new, it was launched as a pilot project. S3 was chosen as the teachers were both interested in and ready for the initiative. By the end of the current school year, it was hoped that the S3 teachers would generate some knowledge in this area to share with other teachers. With more knowledge and experience, the project will be rolled out to other forms next year.
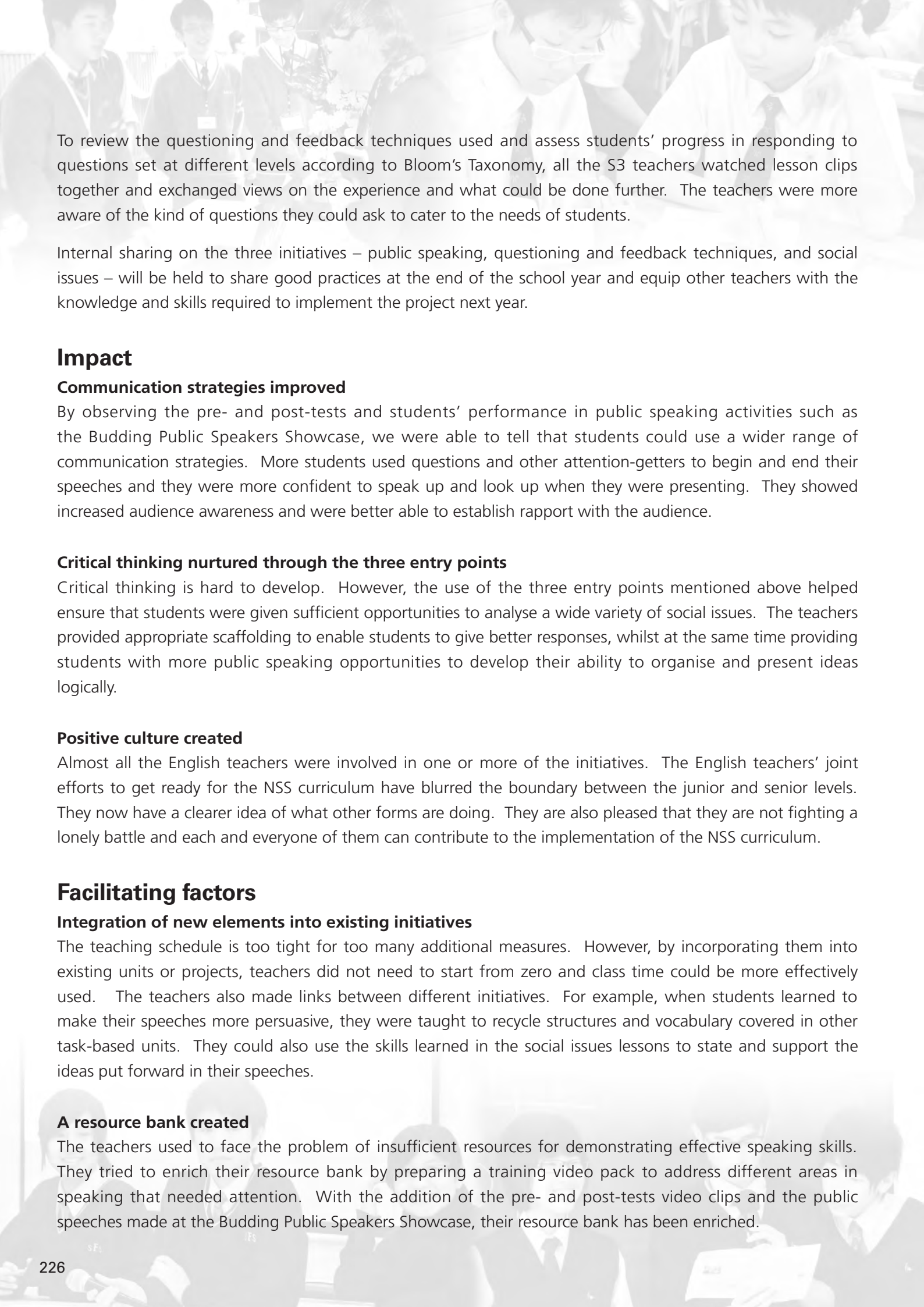
Improving questioning and feedback techniques in S3

Stage	Objective	Learning/Teaching activity/ Action taken
1	To facilitate capacity building of teachers Workshop on questioning and feedback techniques	- A workshop on questioning and feedback techniques was organised for S3 teachers. Questions of different levels of complexity were introduced. Strategies to elicit responses from students, for example, using wait time, rephrasing, redirecting, etc. were shared. The teachers also discussed how to provide timely and appropriate feedback to improve classroom dynamics.
2	To infuse questioning and feedback techniques into the curriculum	- The teachers put into practice the principles and strategies introduced at the workshop. They generated a range of questions of different levels related to the reading passages of the textbook units. The questions designed would be asked at the pre-, while-, and post-reading stages.
3	To foster cross-fertilisation Teachers watching lesson clips together	- Lessons of all S3 teachers were filmed. Then they met to watch and comment on each other's questioning and feedback techniques and make suggestions for improvements.

Step 3: Evaluation

A post-speaking test was conducted to assess students' progress in the use of communication strategies and critical thinking skills. Both the pre- and post-tests were filmed to help the teachers assess students' public speaking performance. The video clips will also be shown to those who took part in the tests so that they can identify their strengths and weaknesses and make improvement accordingly.

To review the questioning and feedback techniques used and assess students' progress in responding to questions set at different levels according to Bloom's Taxonomy, all the S3 teachers watched lesson clips together and exchanged views on the experience and what could be done further. The teachers were more aware of the kind of questions they could ask to cater to the needs of students.

Internal sharing on the three initiatives – public speaking, questioning and feedback techniques, and social issues – will be held to share good practices at the end of the school year and equip other teachers with the knowledge and skills required to implement the project next year.

Impact
Communication strategies improved
By observing the pre- and post-tests and students' performance in public speaking activities such as the Budding Public Speakers Showcase, we were able to tell that students could use a wider range of communication strategies. More students used questions and other attention-getters to begin and end their speeches and they were more confident to speak up and look up when they were presenting. They showed increased audience awareness and were better able to establish rapport with the audience.

Critical thinking nurtured through the three entry points
Critical thinking is hard to develop. However, the use of the three entry points mentioned above helped ensure that students were given sufficient opportunities to analyse a wide variety of social issues. The teachers provided appropriate scaffolding to enable students to give better responses, whilst at the same time providing students with more public speaking opportunities to develop their ability to organise and present ideas logically.

Positive culture created
Almost all the English teachers were involved in one or more of the initiatives. The English teachers' joint efforts to get ready for the NSS curriculum have blurred the boundary between the junior and senior levels. They now have a clearer idea of what other forms are doing. They are also pleased that they are not fighting a lonely battle and each and everyone of them can contribute to the implementation of the NSS curriculum.

Facilitating factors
Integration of new elements into existing initiatives
The teaching schedule is too tight for too many additional measures. However, by incorporating them into existing units or projects, teachers did not need to start from zero and class time could be more effectively used.   The teachers also made links between different initiatives. For example, when students learned to make their speeches more persuasive, they were taught to recycle structures and vocabulary covered in other task-based units. They could also use the skills learned in the social issues lessons to state and support the ideas put forward in their speeches.

A resource bank created
The teachers used to face the problem of insufficient resources for demonstrating effective speaking skills. They tried to enrich their resource bank by preparing a training video pack to address different areas in speaking that needed attention. With the addition of the pre- and post-tests video clips and the public speeches made at the Budding Public Speakers Showcase, their resource bank has been enriched.

Way forward

After making a successful start this year, the teachers will continue to strengthen the design and practice of the three initiatives in 2011/12. They have ignited an interest in public speaking and will explore other useful and practical public speaking strategies further. The Budding Public Speakers Showcase was well-received and will be offered again next year because network activities of this nature can provide an authentic platform for public speaking and extend classroom learning.

As far as staff deployment is concerned, some teachers will stay in the same form to facilitate experience sharing while others will teach both junior and senior forms to ensure vertical coherence. Nonetheless, no matter which forms they teach, they are convinced that with concerted, systematic efforts, the challenges posed by the NSS curriculum can be addressed successfully.

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ELCHK Lutheran Secondary School
Florence YIP (Language Support Officer)