

Title: Developing Reading & Writing Skills Across different content areas in English Language Learning

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Introduction

On a bright September morning in the conference room of a primary school, a group of English teachers were learning how to create a **simile** worksheet that would help children learn to write descriptive writing.

The supporter who co-worked with the school teachers, displayed examples of student work. A 6-year-old had produced the following phrase: "*My face is as red as an apple*" — she wanted to show 'she was very hot' at the moment. If the Primary One student did not learn how to make use of simple words learned in kindergarten to make a lively description as this, by upper primary school she could still be writing phrases like this one: "I felt very hot", "I was very hot".

Not until Primary 6, according to nowadays' textbook syllabus, do students begin to learn **similes** for describing people and things.

Focusing on the fundamentals of text book grammar during primary years is one approach to teaching writing. But it should by no means be the dominant one. As educators, we should concern less with sentence-level mechanics than with helping students **draw inspiration from their own lives**, and to **learn how to 'show', not 'tell'** when describing things. Exposure to a variety of reading materials especially narratives is crucial.

Background

Over the years we have tried to analyse the performance of students in different writing tasks at different levels in the hope of finding ways for further improvement. As reflected in the public assessments, lower primary students achieving basic competence in writing tasks understood the task requirement in the writing tasks. Regarding the 2018 TSA writing assessment, the Territory-wide System Assessment Report - *John's Picnic*, states “*Primary 3 students were able to provide a factual account of the story based on the pictures with almost no supporting details*” (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2018, P. 140), “*For the topic writing task, The Activity I Like Best, students were able to provide relevant ideas using the prompts* (P. 140).” It also states that in terms of language, students were able to use a limited range of vocabulary, sentence patterns and/or cohesive devices fairly appropriately, with some grammatical and spelling mistakes in both writing tasks. This was similar to the performance of the year 2017 and 2016.

As a teacher educator and supporter, I have visited many classes over the years to observe both pre-service and in-service teachers having lessons. After observing and talking to teachers about ways to teach writing, the questions that continue to come up are:

- *How do I develop my students into writers who expand on their ideas and develop rich sentences their readers will devour?*
- *What does it look like in the classroom to have students write beautiful sentences that paint a clear picture for the reader?*

For many teachers, moving away from the text book grammar teaching means leaving behind isolated grammar instruction with worksheets. Instead, we should be pushing students to write originally and to make connections to their daily lives. Teachers need to provide explicit instructions for their students and demonstrate how sentence construction and mechanics combine to form strong sentences. This can and should start early for students when they are young.

Teachers from *Meng Tak Primary School* and *SKH St Peter's Primary School* began to teach their P. 1 & 2 students to identify areas where they can expand their sentences by adding details that can paint a vivid picture for the reader. Using the basic sentence structure – *Subject-Verb-Object*, teachers first modelled how to identify well-written, elaborated sentences during reading and then demonstrated how to add different elements e.g. adjectives of colour, number and specific names to sentences during a shared writing time with their students (See Figure 1).

c) Make super sentences using additional words.

Example:

1. Simple clause
There are cats.
2. Add number
There are two cats.
3. Add colour
There are two ginger cats.
4. Add name
There are two Domestic ginger cats.
5. Add place
There are two Domestic ginger cats in my house.
6. Add adjective
There are two Domestic ginger cats in my small house.
7. Add feelings
There are two Domestic ginger cats in my small house. I love them!

C. Sentence Pyramid: Expansion
Try to make sentences longer by adding more ideas.

For example:

1. Basic sentence
My nose is long.
2. Add size / shape / colour / adjective
My big nose is long.
3. Add size / shape / colour / adjective
My big nose is long and straight.
4. Add simile
My big nose is long and straight like a ruler.

Exercise:

1. Basic sentence
My hair is ~~long~~.
2. Add size / shape / colour / adjective
My brown hair is ~~long~~.
3. Add size / shape / colour / adjective
My brown hair is ~~long and~~ ~~off~~.
4. Add simile
My brown hair is ~~long and~~ ~~off~~ like some noodles.

I like this

Brilliant

Figure 1: P. 1 students wrote their sentences using the Pyramid structure. They learned how to expand the sentence gradually to form a longer sentence.

Time spent daily on writing instruction that encourages students to paint a clear picture by stretching out their sentences and makes them ponder what their sentences are saying to the reader is very valuable. Teachers and students alike will be able to move from task writing to more fulfilling and enjoyable writing when they put these simple steps into place. When learning the topic – *Stationery*, P. 1 students of *SKH St Peter's* had the opportunity to use this technique to write about their beloved pencil case including the stationery (See Figure 2).

Read the following sentences. Mark the additional words used in the sentence with numbers 1-7 in the given brackets.

(e.g. 2) (4) (3) (5) (6)

There are three Samsung navy blue mobile phones in my pretty bag.

Now expand your sentence using 3 additional words listed on p.3.

There is / There are two Roxy blue pens.

God!

Figure 2: Students modelled on the sentence given by the teacher. They added number, brand name, colour and an adjective to the sentence.

After some sentence practising, students moved on to write a paragraph about their pencil cases. Figure 3 shows two pieces of sample writing from students.

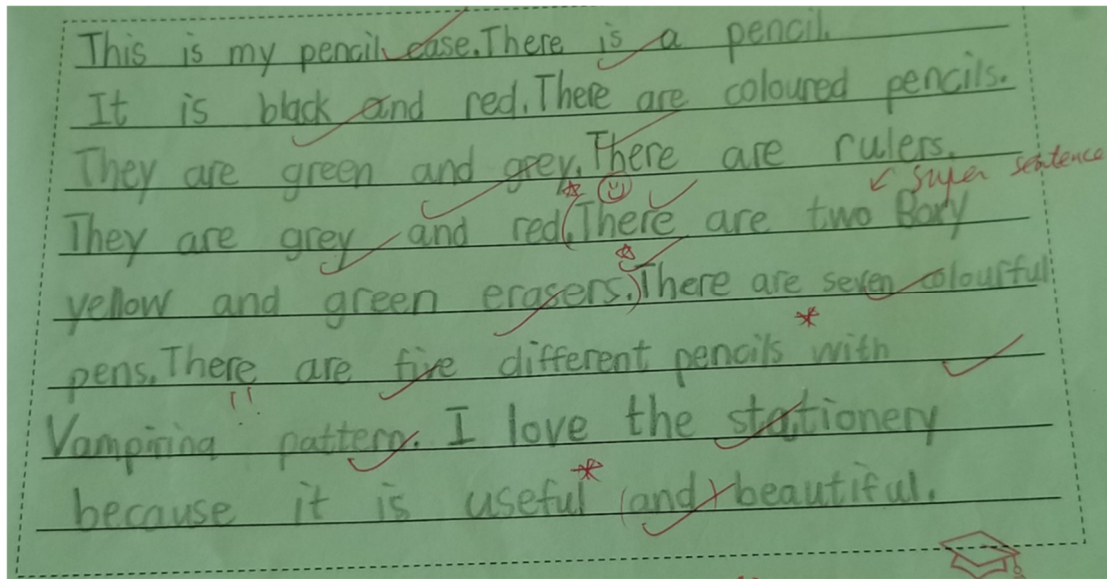
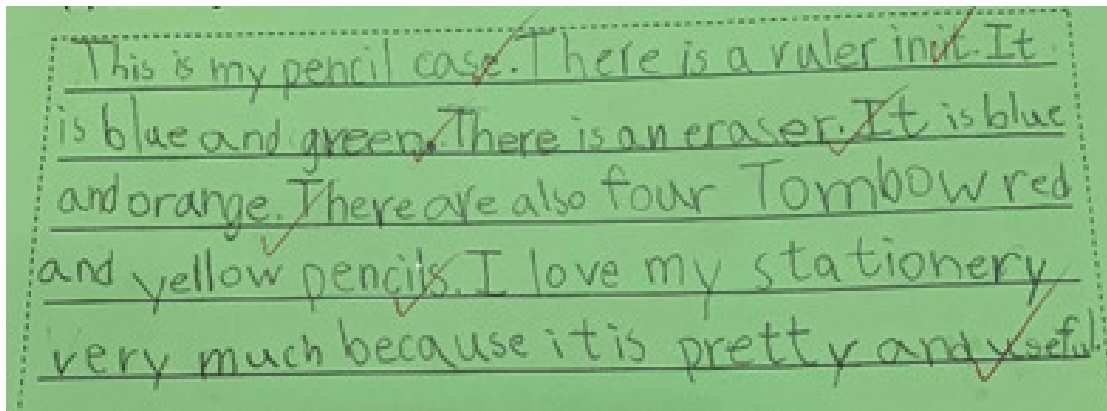


Figure 3: After some sentence practicing, they applied what they learned in the final writing task.

Descriptive writing

The primary purpose of descriptive writing is to describe a person, place or thing in such a way that a picture is formed in the mind of the reader. Capturing an incident through descriptive writing involves paying close attention to the details by using all of our **five senses – see, feel, hear, touch and smell** (McCarthy, 1998. P. 12-13). They would find their writing look more interesting to others and more engaging to read if they try to use their senses to tell their feelings. Teaching students to write more descriptively at early age will definitely improve their concept about writing in the long run.

That said, there is no one way to teach descriptive writing but only through developing descriptive writing skills by **teacher modelling and the sharing of quality pieces of writing full of good descriptions**. Here calling students' attention to interesting, descriptive word choices in classroom writing is also very important. Both school teachers **provide students with useful words that are extended from their text books**. As encouraged by the supporter starting from the first module, **SKH St Peter's teachers** gave their students more chance to **take some time off their text book and do**

some observation of their pencil cases. What pencils/pens/rulers/rubbers do they have? What are the brand names? What colours are these? They had each student write at least two adjectives per sentence this way and asked them to share what they wrote with the class. *Meng Tak* teachers moved away from the textbook boundary by encouraging their P. 2 students to draw and write about their *dream school*. They supported them by providing them with a rich word bank and a **Smart Zone** where students could write any words they came across (See Figure 4).

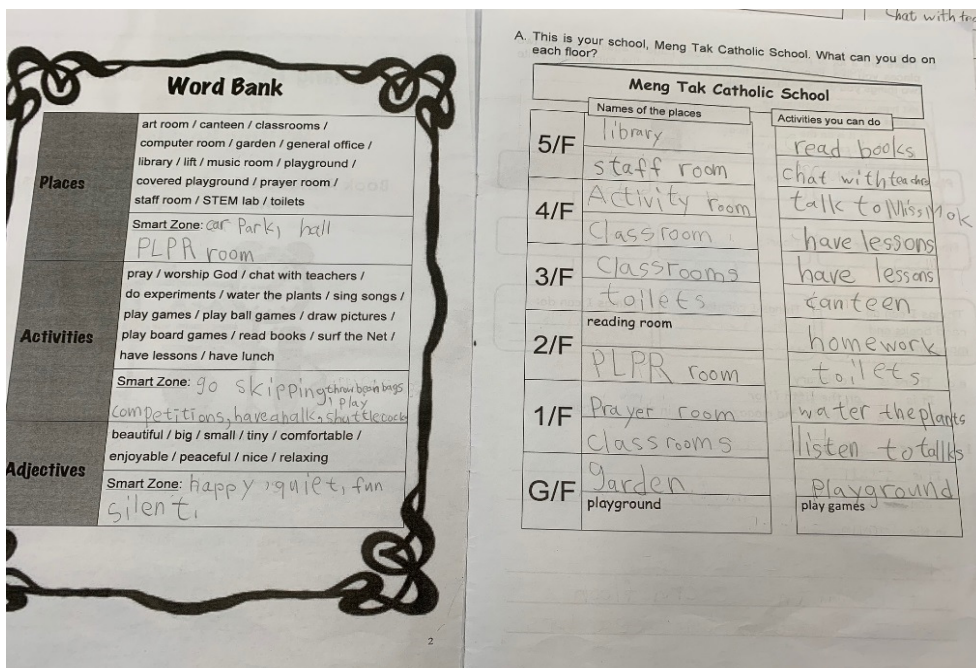


Figure 4: My Dream School word bank (P.2)

Good descriptive writing uses precise language. Adjectives, nouns, and verbs that are too general do not have a place in good descriptive writing. Specific adjectives, nouns and strong verbs **give life to the picture you are painting in the reader's mind.** A piece of good descriptive writing often makes use of **figurative language** such as **similes** to help paint the picture in the mind of the reader. Similes are used to illustrate a point or elicit an emotion by comparing two objects or actions equally. Similes can be recognized by the grammar patterns "... as (adjective/adverb) as ..." or "(verb) like ...". Similes can be easily introduced into daily lessons to stimulate the students' creativity, interest, and humor while teaching grammar forms or parts of speech. *Meng Tak* English teachers tried out the simile activities this year (See Figure 5).

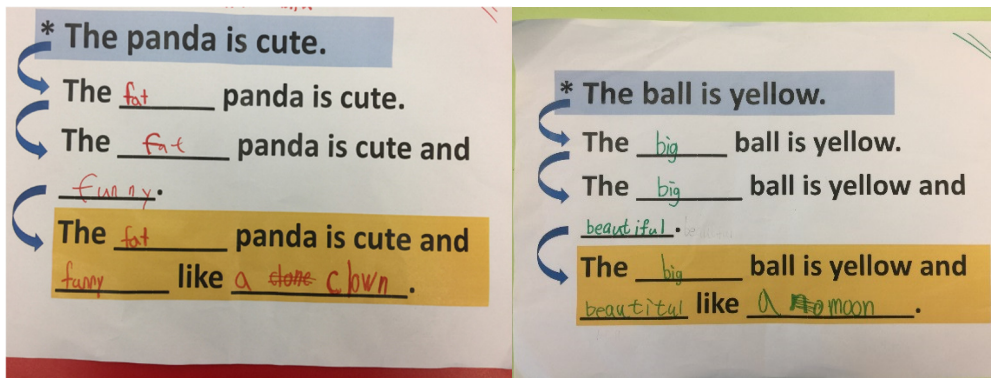


Figure 5: Students were guided to add in adjectives to the comparison.

Figure 6 shows a group of P. 2 students working in groups to make the comparisons



Figure 6: P. 2 students working in groups to make the comparisons.

In Figure 7, students were prompted by teachers to think about what words they knew were associated with the key word in the middle. Then, they made a simile out of each word like ‘strawberry’ and ‘apple’. The activities worked as building blocks to create similes for practicing the comparative patterns. One of the students made an interesting sentence with a simile, “My mouth is pink like strawberry”. This is quite amazing as they are only P. 2 students. The use of descriptive words and similes were applied to consecutive writing topics throughout the year including *Dream school*, *Dream home*, *My family* and *My party*.

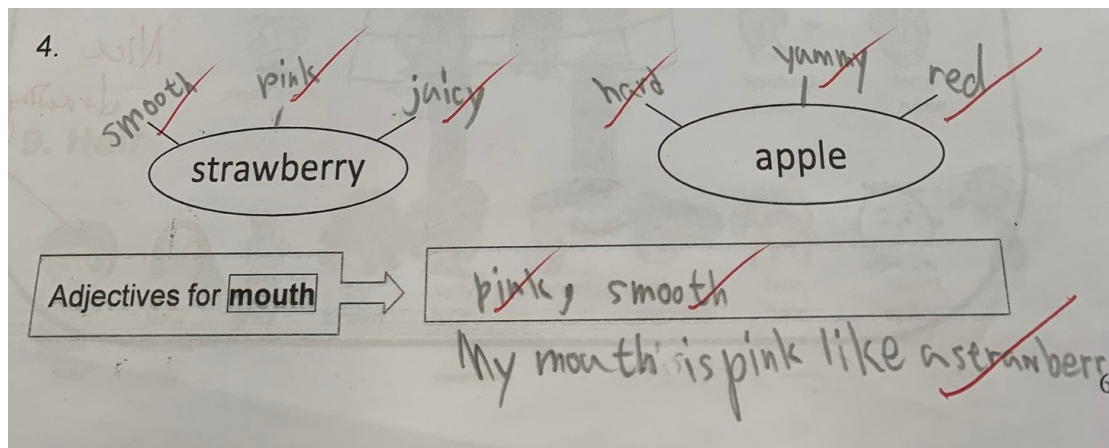


Figure 7: Students were prompted by teachers to think about what words they knew were associated with the key word in the middle. Then, they made a simile out of each word e.g. *My mouth is pink like a strawberry*.

Picture Writing

By looking into Primary 6 TSA writing assessments this couple of years, we also understood that students generally comprehended the writing task requirements. In terms of content, most P. 6 students who achieved basic competencies were able to provide a factual account of the story based on the pictures with some details for picture descriptions, and they provided some relevant ideas with some details using the prompts given in topic writing tasks. In terms of language, it reports that students were able to use a limited range of vocabulary, sentence patterns, cohesive devices and verb forms fairly appropriately, with some grammatical and spelling mistakes in both writing tasks (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2017, P. 217).

After two years of school-based English writing development and having gone through numerous writing analysis work based on internal and external performances, *Tai Po Baptist Public Primary School* teachers discovered the key to helping their students write a narrative that tells more interesting and organised story. They supported the need for developing their writing curriculum so that students could express themselves more independently. Teaching writing through pictures has quite a lot of advantages. Students learn to sharpen their observation skills and express their ideas in a detailed way. Pictures are also highly engaging and add an enticing visual element to writing tasks.

Teachers introduced concept mapping to help students build vocabulary. They created headings with – *Wh* and then got students to provide words or phrases to elaborate on the headings. They went around prompting students with questions. It didn't matter if students did not have complex vocabulary to express their thoughts on the picture. As long as they were able to tell or write in plain, simple English to convey meaning, the teaching goal has been achieved.

During the picture writing lessons, teachers kept on soliciting students' opinions about the pictures and prompted them to give details. The lesson was very student-oriented (See Figure 8).

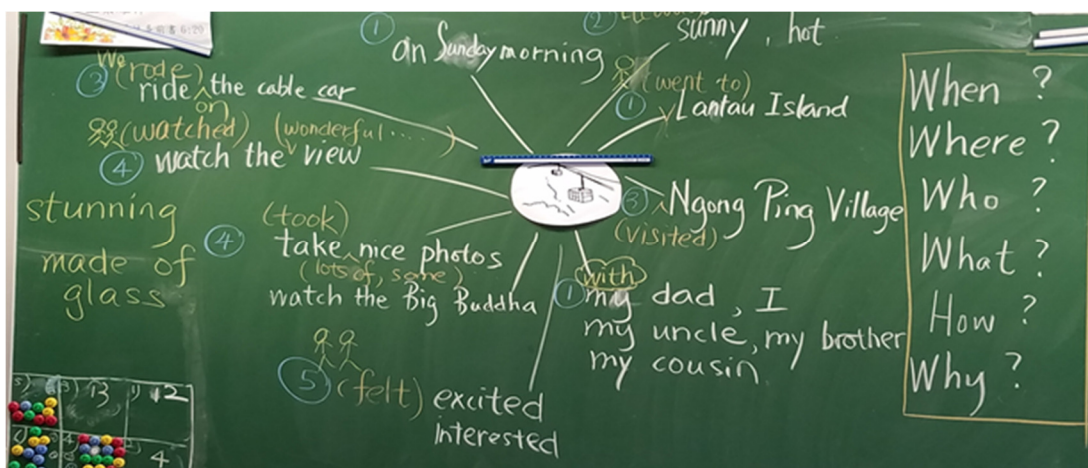


Figure 8: The teacher brainstormed ideas about the picture using the Wh- with P. 4 students.

After the shared writing on the first picture, students formed groups to write about the second and the third pictures and to peer editing. After editing the work of another group, each group then corrected their mistakes and rewrote before submission. **Students took ownership of their own learning and learned to collaborate with one another** during the course of writing.

Figure 9 shows a sample of student's writing. Students brainstormed ideas in groups. They added elements like time markers, action verbs, dialogues with an interjection to the picture based on what they observed.



Figure 9: Students formed groups to brainstorm ideas on the picture. This is a sample student work.

Narrative writing incorporates lots of details. Adding details about the character, explaining a setting, describing an important object etc. improves the writing quality a great deal. In order to teach students how to add details, teacher did spend more time on the pre-writing stage scaffolding students with lists of words, phrases, sentence starters and sentence patterns that were associated with the writing task. It is important that writing skills, such as **elaboration skills of growing or expanding a sentence** by adding adjectives, adverbs and the Wh- elements (time, place etc.) in a sentence; giving reasons using 'because'; using dialogues with interjections in story writing; using similes and

expressing feelings whenever appropriate, to be taught in class explicitly. A couple of teachers initiated a goal setting process in some weaker classes by breaking the steps of writing to even smaller steps. They taught students how to connect the words into a sentence and how the dialogues could be added by using the **star-shaped post-it** (See Figure 10). Students found this idea impressive. They also found it easier to always remember to add dialogues if it was done this way. Below is one of the sample group picture writing tasks.

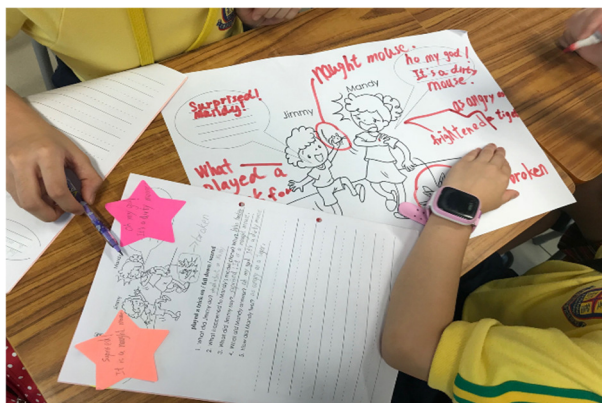


Figure 10 shows P. 3 students using star-shaped post-it to write about the dialogues they would like to add to the picture.

Reading Model Text

Quite a length of this abstract has been spent on talking about writing. Writing cannot be isolated from reading. **Encouraging reading is the only key for good writing in the long run.** Good writers tend to be avid readers themselves. The more children read, the more they will be exposed to new vocabulary and the more words they will learn. Once a word is part of their receptive vocabulary, it is a lot easier to turn it into productive use. Reading also exposes children to different ways of using the same word and a variety of sentence patterns that they can use in their own writing.

Teachers are encouraged to adopt '**Modelled Reading**' which is a recognised strategy which allows the teacher to explicitly demonstrate the process of reading by 'thinking aloud' about the strategies that are being used to decode words, comprehend meaning and read with fluency and expression (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 2006). **The purpose of modelled reading** is for students to engage with a text that is supported by teachers. The text has been carefully selected to suit the teaching purpose of a particular topic/module, students' interest level, understandings and challenges for their learning. Through thoughtful attention to the selection of texts being read to students, the teacher can ensure that students have a model for reference before they have their writing. Once the framework of the final writing task has been explained, teachers have students read at least one model writing, for example, a story, that exemplifies the writing elements teachers are looking for. They will be looking at how the author writes the text in a descriptive way, so that they can use those same strategies in their own writing later on. Have students look at the

rubric and find places in the model text that illustrate the qualities listed in the rubric so that they can see the underlying structure. Figure 11 is a sample model text that teachers provided for students and analysed with them before writing. Teachers pointed out the topic sentence and the supporting details respectively. They used Wh- questions to prompt students for further comprehension.

<p>T (Topic)</p>	<p>My name is Jason. I am a boy. I am nine years old and my birthday is on 8th September. I live in a flat with my parents and younger sister</p>
<p>I (Ideas) D (Details)</p>	<p>I am short but look strong. I have short hair and a round face. I have black eyes and large ears. I have brown hair and beautiful blue eyes. My eyes are as blue as the sky.</p>
<p>I (Ideas) D (Details)</p>	<p>I love reading English storybooks. I usually read in the library. I always go swimming on Wednesdays with my younger sister. She swims faster than me. I like playing basketball, collecting stamps and reading funny comics.</p>
<p>I (Ideas) D (Details)</p>	<p>I have a happy school life. I have got a lot of friends at school because I am friendly and outgoing. At recess, we go to the playground to play. I want to be a helpful boy too.</p>
<p>E (Ending)</p>	<p>Can you tell me about your school life? I hope we can be good pen friends. Please write back soon.</p>

Figure 11 shows a sample model text from the module ‘School Life’.

Model texts can illustrate a number of language features. Apart from ideas, effective word choice and varied sentence structures are included. During the course of writing, teachers encouraged students to read those texts carefully and slowly. During the co-planning meetings, we all agreed that students should also be exposed to good model texts from a variety of sources, including magazine

articles, newspapers, books, the teacher's own writing and peer writing samples. Teachers observed that **students were more reflective about the text and took an interest in their writing** and they could **apply the skills they learned in different module tasks**.

During the sharing session, teachers helped teacher participants gain an understanding of how students developed their reading and writing techniques, identified effective pedagogy and classroom strategies to promote reading and creative writing in English Language learning. Providing sufficient encounters with target vocabulary represents one of the biggest challenges for language teachers. Finding ways of recycling previously introduced vocabulary is crucial to effective vocabulary instruction. This year teachers of *SKH St Peter's Primary School, Meng Tak Primary School and Tai Po Baptist Public Primary School* proactively designed learning materials which encompassed banks of useful vocabulary to widen P. 1-4 students' vocabulary pool respectively. By providing rich contexts containing the target language and by giving our students time to ponder and reflect on what the language item means, teachers could help students gradually piece together the meaning of the words and start to use them correctly, appropriately and fluently.

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