# **Title: Promoting self-directed learning in reading and writing**

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# Introduction

Developing students' competency to become self-directed and independent learners has been identified as an important goal in the updated English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1- Secondary 6) (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Self-directed learning (SDL) is an umbrella concept which "*may be interpreted as self-regulated learning, self-learning or independent learning, in other contexts.*" (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, Glossary). It encompasses strategies that students use to regulate their 'mind and actions' for learning. This includes processes such as setting goals, selecting appropriate cognitive learning strategies; and, using appropriate knowledge, skills and resources to direct, regulate and monitor learning.

## Promoting SDL amongst primary students

Unlike the past when research on SDL focused primarily on teenage learners, an increasing number of studies have begun to explore the development of SDL amongst young children. These research findings have provided teachers with relevant insights. The following has been used as the premises of this study:

- A student who can regulate his/her learning in certain subject such as English may not be able to regulate his/her learning in other contexts such as Mathematics or General Studies. To promote the transfer of SDL from one learning context to another, teachers of various subjects have a role to play in promoting SDL in student learning (Boekaerts, 1999);
- Students need learning strategies that are subject-specific and task-specific. That means that strategies students need to read and write are different from that they use to solve mathematical problems. Learning effective strategies is an important early step to support students' long term development of SDL

(Paris & Paris, 2001);

- The goal of SDL cannot be achieved by one learning event. It needs to be acquired and practised over a period of time. Teachers may need to teach strategy instruction explicitly and integrate it into their teaching regularly (Zimmerman, 1989);
- Teachers need to model, direct and scaffold students in their learning path towards the goal of SDL. They need to prepare different scaffoldings according to individual students' diversity in SDL capacity (Xu & Ko, 2019).

# **Background of this study**

Students at T.W.G.Hs Sin Chu Wan Primary School were positive about learning and were motivated to succeed. However, they lacked skills and strategies for independent learning; and relied very much on teachers' help. To cater for students' needs and in response to the direction of ongoing curriculum development stated in English Language Education: Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 6) (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), teachers decided to develop their students' capabilities for self-directed learning in Key Stage 2. To promote SDL regularly and effectively in the classroom, teachers adopted the following strategies in their teaching:

- (i) Learning strategies were targeted and modelled explicitly in class. In reading, these skills involved summarizing (self-review), questioning, clarifying and predicting (Palinesar & Brown, 1984) whereas in writing, they included brainstorming, note-taking, writing technique, peer discussion, self-editing and post-writing reflection. These skills are subject-specific and are considered pivotal in promoting literacy development.
- (ii) To integrate the above-mentioned skills into daily teaching, teachers adapted the textbook to create curriculum space. They distinguished language items that occurred more frequently in verbal communication (e.g. *Shall we..., Let's..., I'd like...)* from those that occurred in written form. The former would then receive less attention in terms of writing practice than the latter. This could release attention and tighten the focus on literacy training.
- (iii) To facilitate language learning as well as to promote students' development of SDL, some reading comprehension passages or writing tasks in the textbook were replaced by other instructional materials. This was particularly obvious in the design of the school-based writing curriculum. Instead of covering a wide range of genres such as letters, stories, leaflets,

menus, posters, notices, reports, advertisements or expository writing, teachers focused mainly on a few text types. In this way, students could practise and get familiar with the target skills before they tackled other text types.

(iv) Teachers used an incremental approach in terms of skill training. At first, these skills were modelled and treated as discrete practice; then gradually they were integrated and practised repeatedly in subsequent tasks. The principle of recycling was implemented in the overall curriculum design.

## Literacy Strategies within an SDL Framework:

#### **Promoting SDL in reading**

Teachers used *reciprocal teaching* to promote SDL in the reading lessons. They aimed at using this strategy to help improve students' comprehension power and develop their pivotal ability to read to learn independently. Reciprocal teaching, an instructional activity developed by Palincsar and Brown's (1984), involves four important skills, they are: making predictions about the text, asking questions based on the text, clarifying difficulties with the text and summarizing the text.

#### **Teaching approach**

With reciprocal teaching, teachers adopted the traditional apprenticeship approach (Collins, Brown & Holum, 1991) in classroom teaching. It involved four steps: modeling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching. In modeling, teachers used the think-aloud method to demonstrate how and when these four skills happened in the reading process. Then students practiced these skills separately and took up these roles (i.e. predictor, questioners, clarifier and summarizer) in subsequent lessons. Scaffolding strategies such as collaborative learning (i.e. students work in groups), shorter reading texts, hints for predictions and cue cards (Figure 1) were used to support students in the learning process. Gradually when students were able to take up these roles with confidence, teachers began to withdraw their support. In coaching, teachers monitored the process through activities such as selecting appropriate texts for practice, providing hints if needed, prompting students to ask high order questions, challenging them, offering encouragement and giving feedback.

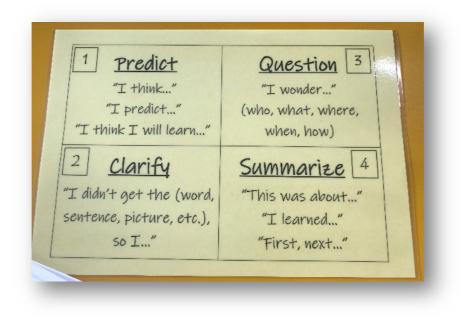


Figure 1: Cue cards were used to scaffold students taking up different roles in reciprocal teaching

#### Students' performance in the reading lessons

Teachers observed that students' reading confidence had improved greatly. They developed a new way of reading. It was no longer a tedious mental process of decoding, but an active cognitive process in which they needed to regulate and monitor to enhance comprehension. This change was captured in the reading lessons videotaped at the end of the school term.

In the videotaped reading lessons, students were asked to read the first page of the story titled *School picnic*. Since teachers did not want students to do any home preparation, the passage was taken from another textbook "English to Enjoy". With the hints given (pictures of raw chicken wings and a football), students worked in groups to guess what problems the children had on the picnic day. They then read silently to prove or disprove their predictions. After that, each group formulated a question about the text and shared in class. These questions were found to be of high quality. They ranged from basic comprehension questions: *What does 'giggles'* mean? to questions that involved connection between ideas: *Why did Patrick say 'We can get off the bus at last'?*. After collecting all the questions, students then took up the role of clarifiers. They had the autonomy to choose the questions they wanted to answer. Finally, students were able to answer all the questions by themselves. When working in groups, students coached one another to evaluate their own questions and summaries. Teachers observed that summarizing the story was a challenging skill. Only one group was able to use the

connectives 'first, then, next, after that' to sum up the story independently without teacher support.

Teachers reflected that reciprocal teaching had taken students to another level of mastering reading skills. It demonstrated explicitly how skill application helped decode the text and, most importantly, it allowed students to assist one another to monitor and to improve their own learning.

#### **Promoting SDL in writing**

In writing, teachers promoted SDL by adopting features of a high-SDL classroom, as proposed by Perry (1998). These features include: (1) assigning students tasks that are open ended; (2) providing students with appropriate instructional support, helping students acquire 'the domain and strategy knowledge they needed to complete the tasks independently' (Perry, 2000) and lastly (3) offering students choices and involving them in evaluating their own or others' work.

## Teaching approach

To illustrate how teachers developed writing skills within an SDL framework, the module *Helping our world/Making a difference* was used as an example. In the textbook "Longman Elect", the reading text composes of a formal letter written by UNICEF Hong Kong and a discussion about what charity events to organize to raise money for UNICEF. The language foci are 'either...or', 'neither ...nor' and 'Shall we...?'. The thematic vocabulary is on charity work. They include 'collect old toys/ books, run a second-hand stall, visit an old people's home' etc. The writing task is to write a letter to the principal about raising money for charity.

To maintain the focus on narrative writing, teachers replaced letter writing in the textbook with story writing (Figure 2). The story is about a group of students visiting the old people's home. They help by feeding the elderly. Then they find that they have forgotten to bring the gifts. They need to think up an idea to solve the problem.

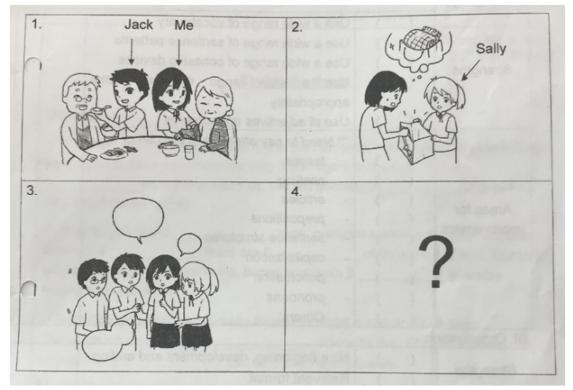
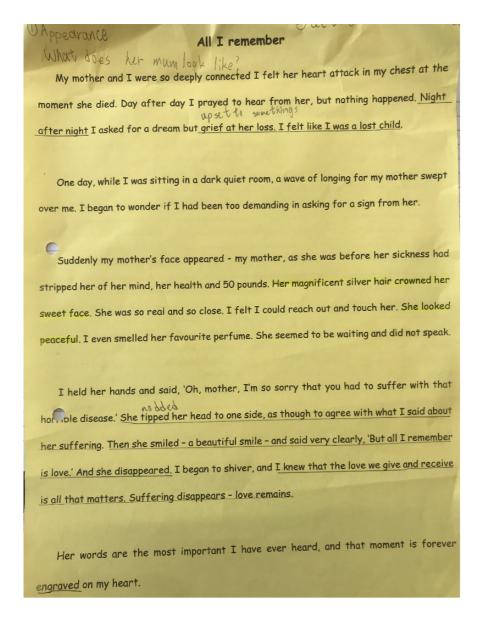


Figure 2: The picture story used to replace the original task in the textbook

Teachers believed that their students would not have difficulty completing the above task. They would be able to produce a story with an ending, but the ideas would be limited and the language would be simple. Teachers decided to provide more input before writing. An additional text (Figure 3) was introduced in class before writing:



# Figure 3: An additional text

#### Source: https://www.chickensoup.com/book-story/36160/all-i-remember

Teachers explained new vocabulary and discussed about the technique and phrases the writer used to express his intense feelings and thoughts. To help students transfer receptive language (i.e. vocabulary learned from reading) to productive one (i.e. vocabulary used to express own ideas), teachers designed a mini-writing task for individual practice. An element of autonomy was introduced into the task design, students were allowed to choose their own level of challenge (Figure 4):

FW (9)       Date: 22 <sup>nd</sup> [cbruwy]         Read the following phrases and use at least 3 of the         Day after dayNight after night 一日 名 一日         grieved for       東京(本地田田島石市台市台)         grieved for       東京(本地田島島石市台市台)         I felt like I was a fost child.         looked peaceful       東京(本地島島石市台市台)         tipped his/her head to one side       東市(本地名)	m to write.
Tread the following phrases and use at least 3 of the Day after dayNight after night 一日 復一日 grieved for 連点(たち日日内からの人子がた magnificent 岩土種民日 I felt like I was a lost child.	m to write.
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grieved for 悲痛(お指の高や気気の人主がせ magnificent 男生雑見ら) I felt like I was a lost child. looked peaceful 美本() 同半高谷	1-15次18-10 5-15-15
magnificent H 生殖良的 I felt like I was a lost child. looked peaceful 表 太小 限 半 高公	9- Fm)
I felt like I was a lost child. looked peaceful	
looked peaceful 7	
<b>ホ</b> タムイヤノ 日光	
upped his/her head to one side	
	福惠白一餐
he/she smiled - a beautiful smile	13
engraved on my heart	
The love we give and receive is all that matters.	
and there are	
Challenge Yourself!	
Level 1:	
Use the phrases to write sentences	
in a principes to write sentences	
T level 2.	
Use the phrases to write a short paragraph	
Level 3:	
Use the phrases to write a short story	

Figure 4: The guideline for the mini-writing task

The following is an average piece of work (Figure 5). This student (Student A) met the minimum requirement of the task and used 3 target phrases (underlined) to compose a short paragraph:

FW(9)	Student A:
Once apon a time The 22 February, NO	Once upon a time, There was a man na
Once apon a time, There was a man nome	luxurious ocean liner. He walk on the de
Paro. He want to land 1	looked peaceful.' Suddenly, the ocean l
He walkon the deck and can the can be an inverses	liner sinked in the sea! Pam took a tiny
Pars. He went to London by a lervirius oceanting. He walken the deck and saw the sea. He stid, "It lakes peaceful." Suddenly the ocean liner crached a stone. Then the	current day after day, night after night.
A THE COUCHER STOLETINE WE	island.
ocean liner sinked in the sea! Pam took a tiny and	
i seri vin se v ony Mo	
escaped. He floated on the current day after day	
, night after night. One day, he saw a magnificent	
island.	

amed Pam. He went to London by a leck and saw the sea. He said,' It liner crashed a stone. Then the ocean and escaped. He floated on the t. One day, he saw a magnificent

Figure 5: A sample of student work at Level 2

Below is an outstanding piece of work. This student (Student B) was able to use a number of target phrases to compose a story:

22 <sup>46</sup> be branner, 2019. When I was studying secondary wheal, I was a teacher giri. Day other day, I watched IV dramas Night Atter night, I played computer games. Although tandimes my mam reminded or scold me, I just grossed or argued with. her. One day, when I was in they may back heme. I get a cell, 'thella I to: Great Hespital. Your mam is in hespital on Her source get were sections. You befor come and wait her.' At that fore, I was skycked She had never teld me she had	could not be could I was essend that drappear. I fift the I was a last do Although her face turned a bit pale, and magnificent to me. I was really o "Mum, I am really seere, I will impear in great, dear. I an really graterial to stoiled — a brackiful smith Houseser. long, mon shid her eyes and will seare from my eyes. The soly thing I can do in to impe	Student B: When I was studying secondary school, I was a terrible girl. Day after of watched TV dramas. Night after night, I played computer games. Alth sometimes my mum reminded or scold me, I just ignored or argued with he One day, when I was on the way back home, I got a call, 'Hello! It's O Hospital. Your mom is in hospital now. Her cancer got more serious. You b come and visit her.' At that time, I was shocked. She had never told me she cancer. Perhaps she didn't want me to worry about her. I quickly got on a and went to Great Hospital. That doctor told me that it is the terminal sta, the cancer. She could not be cured. I was scared that she is going to disapp felt like I was a lost child. I gazed at her. Although her faced turned a bit she looked peaceful and magnificent to me. I was really regret that I o 'Mum, I am really sorry. I will improve.' Mum replied, 'That is great, dear. really grateful to hear that.' Then, she smiled – a beautiful smile. Howeve smile didn't last long, mum shut her eyes and will never open again. Tear from my eyes.
cancer. Perhaps, she didn't much one to morry about her. I	dog en, I changed my bad habbits. I st	The only thing I can do is to improve myself. From that day on, I change-
quickly get on a taxi and ment to Great Hospital. That	oppearaptics of my mather—bright ex	bad habit. I studied hard. And the appearance of my mother – bright
dector table on that it is the terminal stage of the cancer.	skin will engrared on my heart.	lovely smile, white skin all <u>engraved on my heart</u> .

Figure 6: A sample of student work at Level 3

The next step was to enable the students to forge a connection between the additional text (Figure 3) and the final writing task. The writing task was introduced to the students before the lessons and they were asked to prepare for the task by entering relevant words from the reading text and other sources in the preparatory notebook. Figure 7 shows a sample of student work. This student had chopped marks next to No.3, No. 7 and No. 15 entries in the preparatory notebook. Students understood the relevancy of the reading text, the mini-writing and the writing task. Most of them put down sentences or phrases instead of words in the preparatory notebook. Interesting ideas were embedded in these sentences.

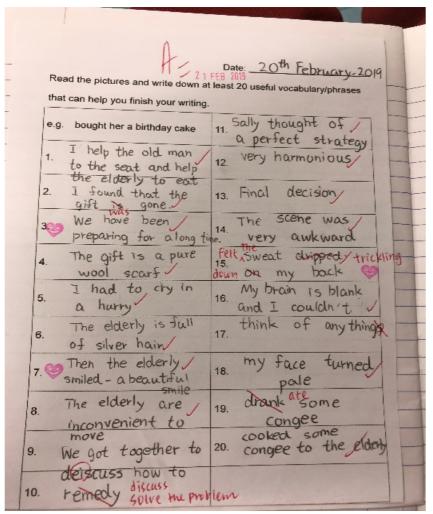


Figure 7: A sample of student work in the preparatory notebook

In the writing lessons, teachers invited those students with chop marks next to their phrases/sentences to share in class. As depicted in Figure 8, the seemingly 'disorganized' sentences or phrases were organized under 4 headings: appearance, feelings, movement and others.

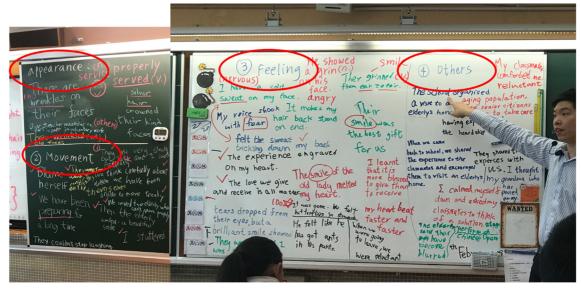


Figure 8: Grouping students' ideas under the headings: appearance, movement, feelings and others

Teachers then discussed these phrases one by one. Students were encouraged to choose words they wanted to learn and copied them into their notebook. Figure 9 shows two students' notebooks. These samples of work show that students followed the way in which teachers categorized the expressions, but they have different choice of words.

Appendance: Appen	I was tacked by her nords and I immediately gave her a big hag, how warm it is. Quettook I. weinkles UEBX (a) wrinkled (adj) eyes became bluered a to a big hag , how warm it is. Quettook I. weinkles UEBX (a) wrinkled (adj) eyes became bluered a att a blame hereals # 1. at very slowly so we wait patiently I 2. # propare for a leng time 1. R to wark, couldn't and by themselves 1. weakle to move freely, sot in a wheelchair, x more prepecty I. stuttered - sprke alerly
Movement: Movement: Blume hearst (1) 15 (2) We have been preparing for a long time They were to weak. They culture to the come bour the short of the come bour the the come to the short of the come bour the short of the come bour the the come bour the short of the come bour the the come bour the the come bour the short of the come the come bour the the co	4. they were glad but I was gladder 4. geringed from ear to car (a big ear) 4. Their wille was the best give for us. 4. The some method my heart 4. Jour couldn't stop laughing 4. reluctant # #%

Figure 9: Samples of student work with different choice of words

After students finished their writing, they used the checklist (Figure 10) to evaluate

their own work. The checklist was designed to be task-specific, focusing on the target writing skills taught in the writing lessons. Given that, at the input stage, teachers had focused on the techniques and language of expressing personal feelings and thoughts, students evaluated their work against one of these criteria. Finally, good pieces of work were published and appreciated in class.

Writing Checklist	1
<ul> <li>Introduction, main body and concluding paragraph</li> </ul>	
<ul> <li>Past tense (liked, loved, went,)</li> </ul>	
First person (I, my, me, we, myself, us)	
The events are in chronological order	1 de marie
Time connectives (firstly, later, meanwhile, finally,)	
Personal thoughts / feelings / a lesson learnt	

Figure 10: The task-specific writing checklist

#### Students' writing performance

Most students showed much confidence in writing. With input from the reading text, mini-writing and peer discussions, students wrote more than the minimum requirement (i.e. 100 words). The following work (Figure 11) illustrates how this student made use of the class discussion about Hong Kong's aging population to provide the story background. He also used phrases learned in the reading text and practised in the mini-writing in the writing. Moreover, he depicted in detail the appearance and movement of the elderly. Most importantly, he added emotion and thoughts to the character, and ended the story with a lesson learned: it is more blessed to give than to receive.

A Visit to an Elderly's Home		A visit to an Elderly's Home
Nowadays, Heng Kong is Sacing the problem of aging population. More	deep breath to ca	Nowadays, Hong Kong is facing the problem of aging population. More senior citizens need us to take care. Therefore, my school organized a visit to the elderly's home and
senior citizens need us to take care. Therefore, my school organised a visit to	1	I participate in the voluntary work. My classmates and have prepared for a long time. We all
the alderly's heme and I participate in the voluntary work. My classmates	think of a suggest	were very excited for the event.
and have prepared for a long time. We were very excited for the event.	made hand-made t	Yesterday, we jumped on the bus and set off to the elderly's home. When we
		arrived, the elderly were waiting at the carpark. They grinned from ear to ear to welcome us.
		Although there were wrinkles in their face, they look peaceful and kind. It was already twelve
. Yesterday, we jumped on the bus and set off to the elderly's home.	In the last	o'clock, so we decided to have lunch together. Frist, we all served an elderly. They were
When we arrived, the elderly wave waiting at the sarpark. They goinged from they have been been a start of the same and the same of the same of the same of the same same same same same same same sam		unable to move properly and freely. Therefore they need to sit on the wheelchair and we
ear to ear to volcome in the was a dready welve o'clock so we decided to have Ve all served an elderly.	which was fold by 1	pushed them to the canteen. Their muscles were too week. They couldn't eat by themselves.
We all served an elderly. Junch together first, They were wrable to more properly and freely. There fore	the back of the he	We feed them with congee and steamed meat which were very plain. After that, we had a
they need to sit on the wheelchairs and we pushed thus to the canteen.	They were ala	ald an is a provide the set of the market be used to be a structure of the set of the se
Their muscles were too weak. They couldn't eat by themselves. We feed them	shewed, Their smile	elderly's home. I thought, Oh! She might be very lonely. My grandma experienced that too. It was such a sad story.
		the second state and a finite state and the second
with congre and steamed meat which were very plain. After that, we had a	scene teached all	knit. However, the scarves were not in the gift bag. They were missing mysteriously. I shake
chat. The lady told me that her can did not have time to take care of	Finally, it was the	
her so he sent her to the elderly's home. I thought, and (She might be very		my classmates. Sally and Jack to think of a suggestion. After a while of thinking, Sally
lenely. My grandma experienced that too. It was such a sad story.	the bus and went	suggested, 'We can made hand-made things to show our sincerity. We all agreed with her.
, , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , ,		in the last session, we gave out our special presents - a heart which was fold
It was almost the end of the visit, we pranted to send them some scarves		by paper. When they read the wishes that was written on the back of the heart, tears
	After the ever	dropped from their eyes but a brilliant smile showed. They were glad but we were gladder.
we knit. However the scarves were not in the gift bag. They were missing	TI. 1 41.11	Their smile melted my heart. It was the best gift fro me. The scene touched all of us. Some of
mysteriously. I shoke with Sear. There were butterflice in my stemach. I took a	<u>This unforgettable</u>	our classifiates even burst into tears. Finally, it was the time we leave, we hugged one
		another before we got on the bus and went back school with a reluctant feeling.
		After the event, I learnt that it is more blessed to give than to receive. This
		unforgettable experience will engrave on my heart forever.

#### Figure 11: A sample of student writing

What would happen if teachers withdrew all scaffolding? With this question in mind, teachers decided to examine students' performance in a controlled setting where prompts, discussions and checklist were absent. In the Final Examination, students were asked to write a picture story titled: The Princess and the Witch (the actual exam paper is not shown here because of copyright concerns). Teachers observed that most students wrote more than required, they were able to produce stories with lots of ideas and details. The example here (Figure 12) is the work of a high achiever. The student was able to transfer the target writing skills to another context, and to provide a background to the story. He added thoughts and feelings to both the witch and the princess. He even ended the story with a message: a kind heart is more important than a pretty face. Most importantly, the student was able to use a lot of key phrases or expressions learned in the writing lessons, though in some cases they looked more contrived than natural and there were a number of careless grammatical mistakes.

aitch's hand. The witch was le answer from Frona The witch was. Princess Fiona was a charming girl. Her father was The Princess and the Witch agree but Princess Fiona was a charming girl. Her father was always always proud of her she was kind-hearted and every the child proud of her. She was kind-hearted and every children in the village liked children in the villiage liked her. She praised when the her. She praised when the children did well. She told stories when they soul! They H children did well. She told stories when they slept." slept. The children always paly with her. It made the witch so jealous! One day, the cunning witch had a plane. She caught the princess back to her home, putting her into a jail. The princess was The children always played with her. It made the with as touched fainted at that time. After a period of time, she woke up, holding her head realous! with her hand. She was puzzled and looking around, she cried, 'Anyone has never One day, the curning witch had a plane. She caught here? Hey! Help me!' cover The The witch heard some noise that the princess made. She the princess back to her home, patting her into a jail walked to the jail with a smile - an evil smile. She started, 'I like your coul, that's The princess was fainted at that time. After a period of time charming face so much! You're young, no wrinkles on your face. If you she woke up, holding her head with her hand she was dropped. Str want to escape from here, you have to change the outlook with me! I'm so jealous that every children likes you!" The princess was shocked, looking the medicine which puzzled and tooking around, she cried, 'Anyone here? Hey! meaningful Help me!' were put on the witch's hand. The witch was so thrilled to hear the days, the answer from Fiona. The witch was trying to made her agree that Fiona The witch heard some noise that the princess may rike he dren stoped her, 'Oh dear! The reason of why the children like me wasn't my She walked to the jail with a smile - an evil smile. appearance but my soul! They like me because I treat they with a kind (attitude)!' She started, "I like your charming face so much! You're 200 rie! The witch was touched by her words. There was a message young, no wrinkles on your face. If you want to excape fro that she has never understood - others will not judge a book by its cover. They won't mind your appearance. If you have a kind soul, that's enough! here, you have to change the outlook with me! I'm so jeak Tears were full of (her) eyes and some dropped. She was so thankful that that every deliderent tikes you! " Fiona taught her such a meaningful lesson. in the coming days, the witch always does as Fiona says. The princess was shocked, looking the medicent which Therefore, the children like her and play with her too.

Figure 12: The work of a high achiever

#### Conclusion

Teachers had the following observations at the end of the study. Firstly, teachers believed that helping students become self-directed learners is a long-term process. It took almost two years before positive results could be obtained in this study. Students demonstrated certain levels of metacognition in reading and writing. They were able to use appropriate skills and strategies to improve their own performance; monitor the learning process and evaluate the progress. Most evidently, students' improvement in writing is more significant than that in reading. This could be best explained by the similarity of the tasks in writing (i.e. story writing) which facilitates the transfer of skill application to another setting. Secondly, teachers did not have to devise many strategies to address motivational issues. This group of students had strong intrinsic motivation to learn. Their personal belief in hard work and high value on personal progress had provided an ideal environment to promote SDL. Their individual variations in SDL abilities were catered for by collaborative learning and other scaffoldings means. Lastly, if time allowed, teachers believed that they should integrate other elements of SDL such as planning strategies (e.g. setting learning goals) and resource management strategies (e.g. controlling the time and study environment) into the school-based literacy programme.

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