School-based Curriculum Action Research Series

The 21st century marks the development of an information or knowledge society with fast-changing needs and environment. In order to prepare our younger generation for their future needs, schools, through constant endeavours in search of excellence, have to provide students with different learning opportunities and experiences. In this respect, the school curriculum should best be aligned with the social development as well as the students’ interest.

Since 1998, the School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section has been collaborating with school teachers in curriculum development in various Key Learning Areas. Building on the strengths and successful experiences accumulated over the years, the Section has initiated action researches jointly with teachers, aiming at empowering teachers to make informed decisions on curriculum research and development.

Why Do We Promote School-based Curriculum Action Research?
Collaborative school-based curriculum action research aims to:

- enable teachers to enhance quality learning and teaching through knowledge generated and constructed in the process of critical and systematic inquiry into different learning and teaching issues;
- develop teachers’ competence in curriculum development and research literacy as well as their sense of curriculum ownership; and
- develop schools into learning organizations through collaborative team work within schools and professional sharing in school networks.

How Do We Conduct Collaborative School-based Curriculum Action Research?
In the course of school-based curriculum development, teachers’ critical reflections will help them identify issues worth addressing in the form of an action research. The following steps illustrate the basic cycle in action research:
1. Examine critically learning- or teaching-related issues worth researching into
2. Define the research focus and review literature for current theories and practice
3. Develop action plans or intervention strategies
4. Implement action plans in contexts
5. Collect evidence and reflect on effectiveness of actions
6. Draw conclusions and use feedback to improve learning and teaching
7. Start a new cycle if necessary
As teachers progress through this spiral cycle, they improve their teaching through continual reflection and move closer to the solution of the identified problems. Taking the role as facilitator, Curriculum Officers from the SBCD(P) Section work as partners with teachers, rendering professional support throughout the research cycle, assisting them in reflecting and conceptualizing tacit knowledge embedded in their practice.

**How Can These Reports Be Used?**

This series of action research reports portrays the participating teachers’ educational beliefs and philosophy, and the developmental pathway undertaken to improve the school curriculum. The curriculum design, intervention strategies, action plans, research tools and instruments, as well as the findings and recommendations may be valuable references for teachers who intend to launch school-based curriculum development and/or collaborative action research in their schools. We sincerely hope that this series can serve as a platform to stimulate professional dialogue in curriculum research and development, and to spark off a research culture in primary schools in Hong Kong.

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Learning English the “Experience” Way

A Collaborative Action Research with

Baptist Rainbow Primary School (P.M.)

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# LEARNING ENGLISH THE “EXPERIENCE” WAY

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Abstract

This is a collaborative action research done by two Primary 2 English teachers and a Curriculum Officer between November 2000 and April 2001. The objective of the action research was two-fold: (a) to assess the effectiveness of adopting the ‘experiential’ approach to language teaching in line with recommendations made in the Curriculum Review 2000, and (b) to enhance professional development of the teachers through the collaborative initiative.

Learning English the “Experience” way required students to go through a diverse range of learning experiences, some real and some imaginative, which stimulated and encouraged them to use English to communicate freely their personal/creative thoughts and feelings.

In this action research teachers experimented with various teaching strategies including storytelling, shared reading, drama activities, creative writing and going on a field trip. Findings show that these strategies have been successful in raising students’ interest in participating in English lessons and increasing their confidence in using English, especially in creative writing. There has been, however, little difference in their ability to read aloud, which could have been caused by the lack of extended practice after reading the big books.

The action research as a powerful means of promoting professional growth has also been affirmed. The continuous discourse, experimentation and reflections have been learning opportunities for all concerned. Teachers have become more experienced in helping students learn English through direct and imaginative experiences. They felt excited by the possibilities but they were also aware of the limitations, such as in the provision of resources and time.

Accordingly, the report concluded with an appeal for the school to allocate necessary resources to promote reading and to build teacher collaboration into the system for more reflective teaching and better dissemination of good practices.
School-based curriculum development has been gaining recognition and currency in recent years in Hong Kong. This represents a moving away from the top-down approach towards more teacher-initiated changes to school improvement. The importance of teacher empowerment in producing effective schools is well documented (Dalin 1983, Fullan 1993, Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins 1999). Unless frontline practitioners are empowered or actively involved in making decisions on what students learn in the classrooms, curriculum changes will not likely be sustained.

While teacher empowerment for a school-based curriculum is a desirable goal for ultimate school development, the government maintains the responsibility of providing leadership, general directions and professional support to schools. The School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section, SBCD(P), within the Curriculum Development Institute, CDI, is one of the responsible agencies for providing this professional support to primary schools in Hong Kong.

Baptist Rainbow Primary (PM) School was among the earliest schools to receive on-site support from the SBCD(P). Our partnership started in 1999 when I worked with two Primary One English teachers, Iris and Marble. In the first year the focus of our work was on adapting the textbooks to suit the relatively low English standard of the Primary One students. We selected manageable learning targets from the textbooks and engaged students in a range of interactive activities. We also used Big Books to stimulate students’ interest in reading and provided them with authentic learning experiences such as holding a Christmas party and having an outing to a park.

As we moved into the second year of school-based curriculum development, we decided to take up a special focus in the form of an action research, a strategy recommended by the CDI to enhance school development. It is hoped that by playing an active role in the research process, teachers would learn to reflect on their beliefs and practices, make changes on the basis of the evidences of student learning, and become more effective teachers.
Part II PURPOSE

A. Finding an area of study

When we were looking for a focus of our action research, two things guided our thinking:
(a) We should build on what we have done and achieved in the first year.
(b) We should work in line with the CDC English Curriculum (1997) and reform measures put forward by the Curriculum Review (2000).\(^1\)

In the first year of our collaboration, teachers had gained useful experience in adapting existing textbooks, using Big Books and organizing activities inside and outside the classroom for language practice. Capitalizing on this experience, we would like to go deeper and wider into the use of literary texts and communicative activities. This emphasis is also in tune with the emphasis put on the purpose of English “as a source for pleasure and aesthetic experience”\(^2\) in the open framework for the English Key Learning Area.

The aesthetic goals of learning English constitute the **Experience Dimension** of the English curriculum. However, it is a general observation that this is the most neglected area in primary English teaching in Hong Kong. At the primary level, the Experience Dimension is about enabling students to enjoy literary texts such as stories, poems and songs, and responding freely with personal thoughts and feelings. However, the average teacher perceives that literary texts are too difficult for their students. As students lack the ability to understand or respond to these literary texts adequately and correctly, they will not be interested in them, and it follows that it is a waste of time and effort to teach literary texts. As a result, much of the language teaching currently done in schools remains dominantly through skills practice, and creative self-expression is generally ignored. To address this pedagogical gap, English professionals have called for a more balanced approach to language teaching in recent years. Our action research entitled “Learning English the Experience Way” can thus be considered a response to this call.

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\(^1\) Curriculum Development Council (2000). *Learning to Learn Key Learning Area English Language Education* Consultation Document. HKSAR

\(^2\) CDC (2000) ibid. p.11
B. Defining “Experience”

(a) The English Language Syllabus, Primary 1 – 6 (CDC 1997)

According to the syllabus, the Experience Dimension targets are to develop in students “an ever-improving capability to use English to respond and give expression to real and imaginative experience.” We therefore aim at providing students with all such experiences that would stimulate them to take a personal interest in using English to express their own feelings and thoughts freely and imaginatively. Narrative texts and authentic situations are the main sources of such learning.

(b) Stern’s Experiential Strategy

The concept of “experience” takes on a broader perspective in Stern’s Experiential Strategy (Stern 1990). It is not limited to literary texts and personal experience; it covers the whole functional-communicative spectrum. However, it has a similar strong emphasis on authenticity of context and purpose: “Experiential teaching creates conditions for real language use, and above all, true conversation.” In his description of an experiential classroom, Stern advocates for more topic control by students, more extended writing and sustained speech by students, and more reaction to message rather than code. Although Stern argues that experiential teaching and analytical teaching are complimentary to each other, and their combination will bring “the highest degree of effectiveness”, the key features of the former are objects of interest for our present action research.

C. The Research focus

Specifically, we would like to address these questions in this research project:
1. Will the use of literary texts and real life experience help to raise the interest level of students towards English learning?
2. Will the related activities motivate students to communicate personal and imaginative ideas in English?
3. How will the improvements, if any, manifest themselves in students’ reading aloud and expressive writing?

While we will ensure the language skills are fully integrated in this rich and diversified programme, for the sake of data collection and analysis, we will be focusing on the reading and writing skills.

3 CDC (1997) English Language Syllabus (Primary), Education Dept., HK, pp 20-21
5 Stern, H.H. ibid. p.106
(a) The Reading Skills

At Key Stage 1 (i.e. Primary 1 – 3), students are expected to learn the simple reading skills of recognizing at sight some basic vocabulary items, applying simple phonics to pronounce new words and using simple strategies to extract meaning from short texts, etc. For young children, oral reading will precede silent reading. As teachers use the Shared Book approach, they will encourage students to participate in plenty of reading aloud activities. We hope that their performance in reading aloud will serve as useful indicators of their mastery of reading skills.

(b) The Writing Skills

As for the writing skills, we expect students to know how to write simple, correct sentences and use the basic writing conventions (e.g. initial capital letters and full- stops, correct spelling, etc.). Besides that we were particularly looking for their ability and willingness to respond creatively and imaginatively to stories and poems. Therefore our focus was on expressive writing in which students express their personal ideas and feelings in real or imagined situations.

D. Expected Outcomes

It is expected that at the end of the project, we would be able to see

- Improvements in students’ reading and writing skills
- Greater interest in learning English
- Enhanced teacher competency
- A greater diversity of teaching and learning resources.

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6 Curriculum Development Council 1997. English Language Syllabus Primary 1-6 Hong Kong.
A. Focus group of students

Twelve students were selected from the two Primary 2 classes according to their English proficiency. There were three roughly equal bands of high, medium and low abilities.

B. Design and procedure

This collaborative research was an exploration of the teaching-learning process. Data collection techniques include participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis, such as teachers’ journals and students’ test results and work products.

Data collection began in November and continued through the following April. The Focus Group of students were given pre-tests and post-tests for their oral reading ability and writing skills. In between samples of their written work were collected and analyzed to track progress. They were also interviewed to assess their interest level in the subject.

Teachers used an observation checklist to note down subjects’ responses and behaviors in relation to the research questions. They also kept a teaching journal to capture significant moments for reflective discussion. For triangulation, I sat in on a few lessons to observe student participation and performance in classroom activities, and conducted interviews with the Focus Group to detect change in attitude, perceived ability and interest level.

We enlisted the help of a Research Officer at data analysis in April. The writing up of the report was done in August, 2001.
C. The two phases of action

**Phase 1:** The first phase went from November to December. A thematic unit was chosen from the textbook and additional literary texts were brought in to match the theme “I can do it.” Students’ work was centred round concepts like ‘ability’, ‘preferences’ and ‘feelings’.

**Phase 2:** The second phase continues from February to April. The central theme for this phase of action was “Animals”. In addition to literary texts, a field trip to a local farm was organized. It provided students with new and interesting experiences to talk and write about. This authentic experience was extended by stories and drama related to the animal theme.

D. Roles of teachers and the external agent

As a collaborative action research, we stressed the “partnership” in our work. We worked closely at every stage of the project, from finding a focus to planning to analyzing data. Throughout the research period, teachers played a key role in the implementation of the plan and in regular critical reflection of what was done.

As an external member of the research group, I was both the collaborator and a “mentor”. At times, I provided teachers with professional and pedagogical inputs, as teacher development was high on our agenda in this project.
Part IV LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this action research was mainly of two kinds: (1) student motivation in language learning and (2) ELT methodology, particularly for young learners.

A. Student Motivation in Language Learning

(a) The Affective Factor

In second/foreign language learning, the creative self-expression is often over-shadowed by the other more intellectually oriented purposes, e.g. learning new words, learning the grammar, understanding a reading comprehension passage, listening for details, etc. The most common approach to language teaching is still through skills practice, with emphasis on step-by-step progression, structured schemes and repetitive drills. This ignores the emotional and moral needs of the children and the non-linear pattern of children’s development of understanding (Lockwood 1996). It fails to excite the children and engage their hearts, and so learning is easily forgotten.

Therefore, we need to have a healthier balance between the expressive and instrumental purposes of our teaching. A stronger affective component in the curriculum will bring about greater personal engagement and motivation to learn. For the more language-conscious teachers, the materials that are primarily used for enjoyment and creativity can also be exploited for extended language study. In fact, in an integrated classroom, it is common to use stories and other literary texts to stimulate language use, so that the language practice will take on a deeper, more personal meaning which promises more effective learning.

(b) Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation:

According to Oxford & Shearin, the intrinsic-extrinsic motivation theories were most commonly known among teachers. Extrinsic rewards are often used to motivate student learning, although intrinsic motivation that comes from the task or within the student is more powerful. Dornyei(1994) describes further complexities in the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy: intrinsic motivation is at the centre of the educational process as evidenced by the fact that students’ natural curiosity and interest will invariably energize their learning. However, recent research has found that extrinsic rewards can be internalized and lead to intrinsic

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motivation. We should therefore make good use of both types of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation appropriately for best results.

We believe that young children need external rewards to reinforce their learning, e.g. getting a sticker from the teacher or winning the highest marks in a competition is sufficient to make them happy and spur them on. On the other hand, to motivate students intrinsically we will take care to select/develop materials and tasks that appeal to their imagination, curiosity and sense of purpose. In this respect the use of stories, songs and games are most appropriate.

(c) Attribution Theory

Attribution, being one of the cognitive learning theories, traces the source of action to the belief formed by an individual from the information he gathers about his chance of success/failure, which in turn determines the effort he makes to achieve the goal (Weiner 1986). Motivation is thus viewed as a function of that individual’s thoughts rather than his needs, instincts, drives or states. When a person thinks that success is caused by his own effort rather than luck or fate, or the teacher, or the easy assignment, he will feel happier about himself and look forward to more future success.

With the focus of our action research on students’ ability to express themselves freely and imaginatively, we have to re-define “success” and “failure”. We will have to relax our stringent demand on language accuracy in order to allow room for creativity, and we will need a different set of criteria for judging student performance.

(d) Scaffolding Theory

Vygotsky’s scaffolding theory is significantly useful in L2 learning. He postulates that learners need to be supported and helped to move from their current stage of language proficiency to the next stage, i.e. “Zone of Proximal Development”. Support, or scaffolding, is needed at the initial stage and can be provided by the teacher or other capable peers. Gradually, the student can self-support and self-correct and finally the language is internalized and proficiency becomes automatic and fluent.9

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9 Oxford & Shearin, ibid p. 23
Implications on strategies used in the action research

1. Exposing students to authentic learning situations
   ➢ To motivate students intrinsically we would arouse their natural curiosity and imagination through the use of stories and communicative activities.

2. Setting challenging but achievable goals
   ➢ To raise students’ self-confidence, we should adjust task difficulty and set realistic expectations, accept mistakes as part of the learning process, and encourage students to a higher level of risk taking.

3. Providing a safe and positive learning environment
   ➢ To support students as they are challenged to take risks, we would praise effort rather than ability, give feedback that is immediate, empathetic and void of sarcasm. We should also involve students in their own monitoring as well as assessment as far as possible.

B. Language Teaching Methodology

(a) Use of authentic texts and experience

All children have two wonderful resources for learning: imagination and curiosity (Cullinan & Bagert 2000). Therefore, any materials, whether in written or spoken form, that can arouse their natural curiosity and catch their imagination is good material to use. At the primary level, some of the suitable text types for the Experience Dimension targets are cartoons, conversations, diaries, jokes, letters, rhymes, riddles, short stories, songs, plays or dramatic episodes, poems, radio and TV programmes, etc.  

The communicative approach to language learning puts strong emphasis on the authenticity of materials and contexts. Falvey and Kennedy (1997) 11 remark that ‘texts used for English language teaching and not for their original purpose can only have a spurious authenticity. A more fruitful approach is to select texts consonant with the interests and experience of the learners. To catch the imagination a text needs to be ‘authentic’ in another sense – it should be writing that rings true, that connects directly with the students’ own lives.’ Only then can it arouse students’ intrinsic motivation to read and respond to it. Language learning will be a natural outcome of such personal engagement.

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10 Curriculum Development Council (1997). English Language Curriculum (Primary), Education Dept, HK
In the existing textbooks there is a paucity of suitable materials for the Experience Dimension. Much of the materials are of the “learn to read” type. But we want more materials to help students “read to learn”. Students will perform the real act of reading when they are focusing on the content rather than on the language; when they are interested in what the writer has to say rather than how he says it. Real reading needs real books (Parker, Richard & Rona, 1995), teachers may have to reach beyond the textbooks for such reading materials.

(b) Shared book experience

Before young children can read a book on their own, they need someone to read it with them. At home, it is the parents who would go through a storybook with them, flipping and talking through the pages. Telling bedtime stories (in the child’s language) are enjoyable moments for both the child and the parent. It doesn’t matter whether the same favourite stories are told and retold many times; the child derives the same joy from the intimacy and the familiarity. The same practice of sharing reading at home can be used with good effect at school, and for second language learning. Enlarged versions of children’s storybooks are used so that everyone in the group can read comfortably with the teacher sitting close to them. The focus of shared reading is upon processing whole meaningful texts with support and guidance (Opitz, 1995). They stimulate children’s interest because of the beautiful pictures and predictable language. Because they are easy to understand and memorize, students will experience success and see that reading is an enjoyable activity. As this pleasurable experience with reading cumulates, the ‘virtuous circle of reading’ will start.

In terms of language learning, Big Books help students to gain a rich repertoire of sight vocabulary within meaningful contexts. They can also be used to teach reading skills and strategies, such as using contextual clues for word meanings, making and checking one’s prediction, sequencing of events, etc. The rhymes that are often used in these books can be used to reinforce phonics teaching. Reading aloud, chorusing, role-playing, painting, drawing and writing are some of the other follow up activities that students enjoy doing (Slaughter 1993).

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(c) **Story-telling**

Closely related to shared reading is story-telling, but the latter focuses on the ‘telling’. As the teacher tells the story, she engages the children with the expressions in her eyes, voice, face, hands and body, firing their sense of imagination and fantasy. Story-telling, in every respect, is a very real communicative act (Laine 1997). There is a tremendous sense of sharing of meaning, feelings and empathy between the story-teller and the listeners.

Telling stories in a second language classroom, teachers often have a concern that students do not understand the words and cannot follow the story. This is a legitimate concern, but Andrew Wright (1999) advises teachers that it is all right to change the language to suit the class. Besides, the listeners do not have to understand every word the teacher says, as Wright remarks, “Arguably, listeners in a foreign language shouldn’t understand everything, as this provides a more genuine preparation for listening to native speakers! Don’t worry. As the story weaves its spell, they will understand as much or as little as they need to understand.”

(d) **Using rhymes and songs**

Another useful strategy is to develop awareness and enjoyment in students of the basic sound patterns of English in poems and rhymes, songs and chants. However, teachers in Hong Kong do not like teaching poems. They think that most poetry uses words that are either too difficult or culturally incomprehensible. They also feel uneasy about the free poetic forms that sometimes defy their normal sense of grammar. If only we could feel like a child again, we would be able to enjoy the word-play, the music, the rhythm and the images created by the poet.

Mike Murphy (1998) advocates adapting textbook language to display features of literary language. Poems that are produced in this manner have a clear advantage of being integrated with the textbook unit and teachers will have little worry about answering to the principal’s or parents’ queries. Poems whose subject matter can be integrated into the theme of the unit are good to use, but we must not forget that children actually have a lot of fun learning the nonsense

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rhymes. So we should keep a balance between the two.

(e) **Using creative drama**

Drama is primarily used to give students oral practice in defined contexts. As students have to memorize the script, they are likely to internalize the language patterns in the process of memorization and thus improve their oral proficiency. Besides speaking, students can also improve their reading and writing skills through engagement in creative drama according to Ernst-Slavit and Wenger\(^{17}\). They will improve their reading skills as they are motivated to read the script and find meaning. Their writing skills will also be enhanced as drama provides input and a purpose for writing. Students can respond in writing with personal thoughts and feelings or imaginative ideas to the characters or events in the drama.

However, the benefit that drama brings to the students is certainly much more than the acquisition of language. Ernst-Slavit & Wenger(1998) say that good drama activities engage students’ emotions and imagination and allow them to experiment with different roles and situations, thus expanding their understanding of this world and developing identity and empathy. Drama therefore is “a rehearsal for living”\(^{18}\).

**Implications on strategies used in our action research**

1. **Diversifying learning resources**
   - We would use a wide range of learning resources including “real” stories and other literary texts, multi-media materials, and real life experiences.

2. **Using effective teaching strategies**
   - We would introduce methods which were new to the teachers, e.g. shared reading, story-telling, drama activities and creative writing. It was hoped that this would bring positive impact on student learning and expand teachers’ pedagogical repertoire in language teaching.

3. **Practising new ways of assessing student performance**
   - We would emphasize formative assessment in the form of classroom observation, on-the-spot feedback, and more holistic marking of


written work using rubrics.

Part V THE PLANNING-ACTING-REFLECTING CYCLE (PHASE 1)

Phase I of the Action Research went from November 2000 to January 2001, i.e. the second half of the first term. The theme chosen was “I can do it”.

A. The Planning:

(a) The Curriculum

Having decided on the research focus in July 2000, Iris, Marble and I made a head start on the curriculum content. High on our agenda was looking for suitable authentic literary texts. We had to pool the resources in the school as well as in our SBP resource library. Finally we found enough quality materials for a few weeks’ work on this thematic unit. Based on the chosen materials, we discussed teaching strategies, planned learning activities and shared in the design of worksheets. So after a few meetings, we had a clear framework for our thematic unit all worked out (Appendix A). Teachers found it very helpful to have a plan like this to refer to, although we all agreed that changes were possible and might be necessary as we got going.

(b) Training for the teachers

Another important aspect of the preparation at this stage was enhancing teachers’ understanding and skills for conducting action research and using shared reading. We had special sessions reading up references for the former and watching video tapes of sample lessons for the latter.

(c) Data collection

We worked together on the observation checklist. We decided on the types of student behaviour and competencies that we would be looking for. We also discussed pre-test materials for reading and writing.
B. The Acting and Reflecting:

Out of all the lessons conducted within this cycle of work, the following lessons were reported because they featured the use of literary texts and language arts activities.

(a) A lesson based on the VCD story “I Can”

The VCD story “I Can”\(^{19}\) was used as a motivational starter to the thematic unit. The two classes were combined for the show in the Activity Room. The video showed a child performing actions of hopping, bending and waving, etc. while saying what he could do. As the language was simple and easy, the students were soon happily imitating the actions. The lesson was brought to a high point when the teachers taught the action song using the words learnt, and students formed circles and danced as they sang.

Reflections:

- Language came alive in the animated story. There was little explanation needed for students to grasp the meaning. We could definitely make better use of such resources in our language classrooms.
- It was a lively lesson with active student participation in the form of physical responses. In the teacher’s journal, Marble wrote, “Everybody participated actively. I noticed that even Cho Ye, who was usually quiet and passive, loosened herself and joined in happily with the class.” Iris echoed this observation in her teacher’s journal.
- The team teaching turned out to be very successful. Teachers felt mutually supported. As one teacher gave the instruction, the other would mingle with the students and facilitate the learning process. The common experience also made the subsequent reflective discussion more fruitful.

(b) A Lesson on Shared Reading

Another highlight in the series of lessons on this unit was the lesson on shared reading using the Big Book “What Can You Do?” It was introduced to extend the language to another new context, this time a birthday party with kids showing off what they can each do.

\(^{19}\) In *Caterpillar 2A* (1999) Hong Kong: Kinder Education
In this lesson students were asked to sit close to the teacher and each other, away from their desks. Then the fear of having to read alone and making mistakes was removed, as the class was invited to read along with the teacher if they felt confident enough to do so; otherwise they would just listen.

As the lesson progressed students moved from listening to the teacher to reading along to acting out in response to the teacher’s requests and questions. Every time the teacher invited students to come up to imitate the characters on the page, students responded enthusiastically. As they jumped and clapped and danced, the class was greatly entertained.

A high point occurred when the teacher took out some colourful balloons and asked some students to blow them up. One boy had a hard time blowing up the balloon but he kept trying, much to the amusement of the classmates.

During the reading, students showed great interest in the food and drink in the pictures. The teacher took the opportunity to satisfy their curiosity by introducing a few new words in English, such as ‘sandwiches’, ‘sausages’ and ‘pineapples’, etc. Although these words seemed difficult, students learnt to say them quite happily. Learning words this way is naturally contextualized, meaningful and self-motivated.

In the following lessons, to consolidate the work done in shared reading, students were given a specially designed Activity Book to do. Inside this book there were pictures taken from the Big Book for factual recall and vocabulary learning. There were also one or two tasks requiring open responses, such as writing speech bubbles, and drawing a photograph of the birthday party. Students’ performance was very satisfactory on the whole. The careful and detailed drawings in many books indicated their high level of interest in the work.

Reflections:
- The Big Book was chosen for its relevance to the theme and its simple language. Quite as expected, students quickly learnt the sentences and were able to read along with the teacher. Even the weaker ones soon had confidence to join in. On the other hand, the teacher realized that the text was slightly too easy and straightforward. There was not much room for prediction and curiosity. Besides, once students learnt how to read the
sentences, it was difficult to sustain their interest in more readings. The teacher could have been flexible and changed the activity to something related yet different.

Teachers were as yet not too used to conducting shared reading sessions. After discussion we agreed that they could have done better in these ways:

- With a simple text, the shared reading might take less than a whole lesson.
- The pointer should be used to guide eye movement while reading.
- Students should be told not to shout when reading together.
- Teacher should not underestimate what children could understand. There should be less need for instructions given in Chinese, or translated words.

Encouraged by the overall positive response of the students, teachers thought that they were ready to venture into books with a stronger story element and more sentence variety, i.e. a book that Falvey and Kennedy would term an “authentic” story\(^{20}\). In Iris’ lesson, she observed that if students were motivated by the interesting story and attractive pictures, a few difficult words would not put them off.

\(^{20}\) Falvey, P. & Kennedy, P. ibid.
Part VI  THE PLANNING-ACTING-REFLECTING CYCLE (PHASE 2)

Phase I of the action research was completed in January 2001, and Phase II continued from February to April 2001. The theme chosen for this period of work was “Animals”.

A. The Planning:

Feedback from Phase 1

The evidence that we had gathered and the feedback from our on-going evaluation helped us to modify and refine the initial plans made at the beginning of the term.

- From students’ response, we were certain of the effect of diversifying learning resources. This was going to continue in the second phase. The strategy of using shared book for reading also proved successful. As teachers became more experienced in conducting shared reading lessons, we decided to go for Big Books with a stronger story element and more complex language.

- We noted that in Phase I expressive writing was relatively neglected. It was apparent that while teachers were willing to experiment with the more open-ended, interactive speaking activities in class, they had deep-down concerns about students making mistakes in writing, as these might be used as harsh evidences against them by the principal and parents. Therefore, when I sensed teachers’ resistance to my gentle persuasion to make writing tasks (e.g. in first term examination papers) more open-ended, I decided to go easy on them and have patience. The worksheet exercises and examination questions used in Phase I were largely conventional structural items with strong teacher guidance. As a result, there was a narrow range of scores for the class, and it was difficult to draw conclusions on student progress in their expressive writing skills. In our plans for the next phase of work, therefore, we wanted to give students more practice in writing open-ended responses and creative writing.

The Curriculum

After careful scrutiny, with consideration given to variety in text type, presentation medium, language complexity, relevance to the theme “Animals”, and level of interest in the content, we put together a diversified yet coherent programme that integrated a range of tasks and language skills. (Appendix B).
Besides vicarious experiences gained through printed and electronic stories, plays and songs, we would also take students to a local farm and offer them some real experience of seeing and feeding some animals. For preparation we went on a location visit to the farm a few weeks before the event. We wanted to structure a language learning environment at the farm with reference to the language focus defined. We would put up labels of animal names in English at the various locations, and also some signs and rules around the farm. Students would have to find out what animals were kept at the farm, observe what they look like and what they eat, etc. There would also be animal riddles for solving. For these activities we designed a simple worksheet to guide students’ observation and investigation. *(Appendix C)*

**B. The Acting and Reflecting**

Again, out of the many lessons taught, a few important ones would be reported to show the effect of the experiential approach on students’ learning. The following lessons featured the use of story and song writing, going on a field trip, creative writing and drama.

(a) **The Gogo story**

It was an animated story on VCD. The purpose of the lesson was to teach students to say where things are using prepositional phrases like ‘in the box’, ‘under the bed’, etc. Needless to say, students were very interested in watching the cartoons depicting Gogo playing hide and seek with the children. The meaning came across so vividly through the animation that the language was mastered without much problem. Besides watching the story, students also learnt the song “Where is Gogo?” which consolidated the language structures.

To extend the ability of the students, and as a formative assessment task, teachers asked students to change the lyrics of the songs. In small groups, students composed their new lyrics, made large drawings on posters and then performed the song in front of the class. Students enjoyed the singing very much and the new songs showed that they had learnt the structures adequately.

**Reflections:**

- Teachers saw how powerful multi-media learning was. The input from the animated story was very captivating and clear on meaning. Unfortunately there was a scarcity of such resources in the school. Teachers would ask for
more funding to purchase interesting multi-media learning materials.

- Multi-sensory learning was also powerful learning. By seeing the video, thinking about the exercises, singing the songs, drawing the poster, and acting out the songs, etc., students were focused on expressing meaning in an interesting and creative way.

(b) A visit to the farm

Before the visit to the farm, teachers prepared the classes by giving them a lot of language input and practice using the textbook units, a Big Book “Down on the Farm”\(^{21}\) and the Gogo story.\(^{22}\) Students became familiar with a number of animal names and the food they eat. They also learned to describe the appearances of the animals in simple patterned sentences such as “Its head is big and its body is green.” To ensure good behavior on the farm, teachers also taught simple instructions, such as “Keep the place clean”, “Don’t climb over the fence”, “Don’t pick the flowers” etc. All these language points were included in a worksheet which teachers designed specially for the visit. \(\text{(Appendix } C, \text{ p. } 44)\)

The outdoor trip was a welcome change from the classroom. The teachers gave instructions again to ensure that students would complete the worksheet without too much difficulty. Soon the children were running around looking for the information required. However, apart from the questions requiring copying from the labels or signs put up, we found that quite a lot of the students were not able to answer the questions because they did not know how to spell the words! Many of them came to us for help, but there was also some peer coaching going on. Small groups were standing there talking, guessing and copying. Some students simply wrote in Chinese, telling us that they would go home and find out the English equivalents from their textbooks or dictionaries. This was an example of creative problem-solving, and we approved of their strategy.

After completing the worksheets, students still had plenty of time for games and free activities. Students played two games: “Animal circle” and “What time is it, Mr. Fox?” However, we underestimated the difficulty of getting all 75 students engaged in the games. When we noted some confusion and inattention among some students, we cut the game-time short.

At free time, the students were most generous in buying food, not for


\(^{22}\) Gogo’s Adventures with English (Reader 3) (2000) Hong Kong: Longman
themselves, but for the animals. Touching and feeding the goats brought great fun to many. The timid ones would go to the rabbits and ducks. There were enough animals and activities to cater for the different interests of the students. As children were ushered back to their buses, they kept asking, “Why do we have to leave so early? When can we do it again?”

**Reflections:**

- We were a little upset by the fact that many students had to struggle with the worksheet. It seemed that they were not able to answer simple questions on their own, even though the language structures were already practiced many times in the classroom. More effort was needed to bring about a transfer of learning.
- There were encouraging signs of students helping each other to do the worksheets. At the end, everyone tried their best, and some promised to improve on the answers at home.
- Some problems were noted in conducting the games. It was difficult to engage the interest and attention of all 75 students.
- We could not claim too much achievement as far as language learning was concerned. During the visit, apart from writing on the worksheets, students were not required to use English because we did not want to ‘gag’ them and spoil the fun. However, we were certain that the real encounter with animals would make them more interested in the tasks that followed (e.g. animal riddles) and give a more authentic flavour to their work.

(c) **The writing lessons following the farm visit**

As follow up to the visit, we concentrated on more writing as planned. Students did three writing tasks: (1) a description of “My pet”, (2) animal riddles and (3) photo album for the farm visit. In each of the writing tasks, there was careful scaffolding in the form of varied models as input. Students were able to use the models in their own ways. The better ones used learned phrases to write new descriptions while the less able ones just stringed together copied sentences. However, all of the compositions made good sense, and we were quite pleased about it.

The writing of the photo captions was done as group work. Students discussed the photos taken at the farm and drafted the captions on paper. They worked together to write and improve the sentences. When the “writer” forgot to begin the sentence with a capital letter, someone in the group would point it out. Similar corrections were made in punctuation and spelling. Later the corrected
sentences were copied onto colour papers as captions to the photographs. The final product was a well-captioned, colourful photo album of the visit to the farm.

Reflections:

- The free writing tasks were a challenge to both teachers and students. For most of the first term, teachers hesitated in asking for open responses from students. However, when writing was a natural outcome of reading, speaking or listening activities, students were sufficiently scaffolded for the writing tasks and their performances often surpassed teachers’ expectations in both language use and original ideas.

- For students lacking the confidence to write on their own, group writing tasks are opportunities to learn from each other. This was the case with writing the photo captions.

(d) A lesson on story-telling and dramatization based on a Big Book

The last segment in this expanded thematic unit on “Animals” was some language arts activities designed around the story “The Three Little Pigs” (Bitterger 1989). It was our intention to bring students back from real experience to more “read” experience. “The Three Little Pigs” was chosen for its strong story interest and the repetitive language which made it fun to predict and chorus.

We started with the teacher telling the story to get students into the mood. Then the story, with the text re-written by teachers as a play, was used for shared reading. Finally the story was acted out by groups, supported by teachers but allowing room for each group’s experimentation, collaboration, casting, props preparation and presentation.

Throughout the week, students’ interest in the story was sustained through shared reading and preparation for the drama. Teachers reported that the reading of the script proved to be more difficult than they thought. They had to give extra time to rehearse the lines with each group. However, students participated eagerly. Perhaps knowing that they would be putting up a public performance and having a real audience was enough incentive for students to persevere and improve their reading. Teachers also observed that out of each group, a leader would emerge to “direct” and “orchestrate” the performance and the members would happily go along.
On the day of the drama performance it happened that the headmaster wanted to sit in on Iris’ class for his annual staff appraisal, and so I stayed away, but asked the lesson to be video-taped. From the video-tape, I saw the first group shuffling for their positions to begin. The headmaster was outside the camera, but the tension could be felt. The narrators mumbled, the “pigs” seemed scared, probably not of the “wolf”, and the “wolf” was anything but ferocious in blowing down the house. Things, however, began to improve. I could hear laughter coming from the audience. Then the actors began to loosen up. A momentum was built up and the drama transformed the classroom into the fantasyland where the pigs ran for their lives and the wolf met his humiliating end!

**Reflections:**

- I could criticize the students for not reading with natural stress and intonation. I could hear mispronunciations and stumbling over difficult words. Some students read too fast and did not articulate clearly enough. Above all, however, I was moved by their total involvement, their creativity, and humour. Each group had their own props, and one group even made claws for Mr. Wolf. All these efforts showed their strong self-motivation to do their best. At a student interview session I conducted later on, some students remarked that they could have made the props even better if there was more time. Sam, one of the weaker students in class, told me with great pride, “I was chosen to be the narrator, and I had to read so much.” When I asked how he learnt to say all the sentences, he said, “I brought the paper home and rehearsed many times.” This is the kind of “homework” that students would not mind doing.

- Both Iris and Marble had similar observations in their teaching journals. Marble was especially pleased to see that every student in her class was actively participating and contributing to the performance. The group members chose their own roles according to their interest and ability, and they shared the work of making props. Throughout the rehearsals there was a lot of peer coaching by the more able students, and the ones being coached were eager to improve. All of them were bonded by the same desire of putting up a great show.

(e) **Creative writing as a follow-up to story-telling and dramatization**

Teachers had prepared a small book showing the main scenes in “The Three Little Pigs” up to the third pig’s house. Students were asked to continue and write a new ending for the story. Did the wolf get into the house? Did he eat up the
pigs? Did the pigs think of ways to get rid of the wolf? These were some of the questions used by the teachers to stimulate students’ imagination. There was brainstorming in class with teacher helping with the expressions in English. Then individual students went about drawing and writing the last episode of the story.

Both teachers reported high interest level in the writing task. Iris, however, noted that students’ creative ideas far exceeded their language ability. She became their scribe. She would listen to their ideas and write the sentences for them to copy. The final products were quite amazing. On many book covers was beautiful artwork showing the pigs and their houses. The new endings were full of imagination. Although students’ language could not measure up to their ideas, the pictures they drew were often rich with details and were a powerful means for personal expressions.

**Reflections:**

- This was yet another ‘brave’ attempt by the teachers at teaching creative writing. In a way students were scaffolded for the task, but the scope of choice for this task was so big that there was no way the teachers could prepare students adequately. As a result teachers found themselves overwhelmed with requests for help with expressing wild imaginations in English. They remarked that sometimes they felt the pressure of being tested for their English.

- Although students were limited by their language, some of them found their ‘voices’ in drawing pictures. In some of their work we were amazed to find a richness of details and feelings coming through their artwork. We realized that we have to appreciate and encourage such non-verbal expressions as bridges to literacy. Besides, when we allow students to use alternative modes of expression, we are developing their multiple intelligences and their self-confidence.

- I interviewed the Focus Group after the series of lessons on “The Three Little Pigs”. I asked them to tell me about their writing experience. They talked about it enthusiastically and gave fascinating explanations of what they wrote. However, very few could actually read the sentences they wrote correctly. As many of the words were provided by the teachers acting as their scribes, they soon forgot how to say them, although they knew exactly what they meant. This led us to reflect on the need, and difficulty, of sustaining learning. What more can we do to make learning stick? How do
we make students play a more active part in sustaining and monitoring their own learning? These are daunting questions waiting to be explored.
Part VII DATA ANALYSIS

A. Data analysis of students’ level of interest in English

Two interviews were conducted with the 12 students in the Focus Group, once in October 2000 and again in April, 2001.

(a) The First Interview - October 2000 (Appendix D)
Questions for the first interview were centred on why they liked or did not like English, and how they felt about shared reading in general. Except for 2 students, the majority said they liked English and gave various reasons. An analysis of these reasons shows that their motivation was strongly influenced by their perceived ability in the language. Most students were aware of the importance of English for their study and future lives. Only 4 responded that they liked English because the lessons were interesting.

When asked whether they liked to read aloud to the whole class, the majority said that they would feel nervous because their classmates might laugh at them when they made mistakes. The same anxiety was detected when they were asked whether they would respond freely if the teacher invited them to predict the story. Most of them expressed reservation because they felt they did not have enough English or imagination. Some did not quite understand the meaning of ‘predict’ and responded that they made wrong guesses because they had not read the book. Once again, students’ perception of teachers’ demand on accurate answers affected their willingness to respond to open-ended questions.

From the answers to the remaining questions, it was found that students had little language support and stimulation outside the school. Only a few watched ETV at home but admitted that they did not understand the English. None of them read library books in English or had English books and magazines at home, nor did they have any reason to use English outside school. This indicates that the school is the only source of learning English for most of the students, and so it makes it more important for teachers to provide rich learning experiences for the students.

(b) The Second Interview - April 2001 (Appendix E)
In the second interview, students were again asked if they liked having English lessons. All of them gave positive answers. Questions were then focused on the variety of events and activities students had experienced in recent months.
Students were asked if they liked the activities and if the activities had helped them improve their English. All the students, irrespective of their ability groupings, talked enthusiastically about the activities. They could recall details of the lessons vividly and they really enjoyed talking about them. Both classes picked the story of “The Three Little Pigs” as their favourite. The farm visit and the Gogo video were runners-up.

All students felt that the activities made them become more interested in English. In Ben’s words, they could “learn English and have fun at the same time.” Although students were still aware of their limited language, there were signs of strong motivation to do challenging tasks despite that, such as learning the lines and acting out the story, writing new endings, etc. Students were also able to learn from each other in group work, and they actively sought the teacher’s help when they had problem expressing their ideas in writing. When students were asked in what ways they had improved, they gave modest answers, but agreed that they had more opportunities to speak and read and write.

B. Data analysis of reading aloud skills

Two reading aloud tests were given, one in October and the other one in April. In both tests, students were given short story books to read aloud individually. Scores were given in three categories: (a) sight words, (b) phonic knowledge, and (c) comprehension. As different storybooks were used, it is difficult to test the same sight words and phonic sounds, or ask the same comprehension questions. Consequently, we found that it might not be useful to compare the scores of the tests. Instead, the common errors were identified and analyzed.

The sight words used in the two tests were:

- (1st test) a, are, and, like*, old*, these*, I, I’m, you, have*, my*, please, yes, no, thank you
- (2nd test) me*, my, can, look, fly, play, playing, swing*, jump, comes*, ball, rain*

(*Common errors are in bold type.)

Ranked in order of frequency, the common errors were:

- (1st test) these (11/12), old (6/12) have (5), like (2), my (1)
- (2nd test) comes (9/12), rain (5/12), me (5), swing (1)

Most of the errors were words of high frequency, but obviously some students still had problem recognizing them in print. In the second test, we were surprised to
find that so many students had difficulty with the word “come”. Teachers reported students had no problem understanding the word when given as instructions (e.g. Come here), but somehow they could not associate the spoken word with the printed word, and they lacked the ability to apply phonetic skills to sound them out.

As for the story comprehension, students did quite well in both tests. They were able to understand the teachers’ questions and provide the correct answers. As they were reading from picture books, they would naturally have used the strategy of getting clues from the pictures.

Students’ overall performance in the 1st and 2nd tests on reading aloud did not form any clear pattern. In each of the ability groups, some students improved and some did not. On the whole, there was not a significant change in students’ reading aloud skills as far as the scores showed.

C. Data analysis of expressive writing skills

The majority of written work done in Phase I was rather teacher-controlled and students were not given much room for self expression. Therefore, we made a conscious effort to increase the amount of expressive writing in Phase II. As a result, four major writing tasks were done in which free writing was a strong element. The writing task of changing the story ending for “The Three Little Pigs” had the strongest free writing. However, we decided not to choose it because there was a substantial amount of teacher support in some of the students’ work, particularly of the weaker ones. As for the writing in the photo album, we also decided to leave them out on the ground that it was collaborative writing, and it would be difficult to assess individual effort.

For data analysis, therefore, we selected 5 samples of student work:
(1) Story of Little Rabbit (Pre-test); (2) Worksheet “I can / I can’t”; (3) My Pet; (4) Animal riddles, and (5) My Pet (Post-test)

Comments on the analysis: (Samples of students’ work at Appendix F)
1. Story of Little Rabbit (Pre-test) - October 2000

On the whole students had few sight vocabulary and structural errors were common. A few could only give one-word responses. Some typical sentences were

- sad
- He a sad.
Quite a few of the students were not aware of writing conventions such as capital letters and full stops, and their spelling was poor, e.g.

- is it’s ball
- Daddy Mummy Thank you
- robber (for ‘ruler’)
- dreen (for ‘dress’)

Despite the language inaccuracies, however, all the responses were appropriate and showed adequate understanding of the story.

2. Worksheet “I can/I can’t” – November 2000

The second piece of writing was rather teacher-controlled. Students were required to write sentences with the help of the pictures and language support. Only in the last frame were they asked to draw their own picture and write their own sentence. All students except one had no problem scoring high marks in this worksheet, although their open-ended responses were rather similar, indicating a limited sight vocabulary.


The 3rd piece of writing saw a significant leap in most students’ scores. There was little difference between the high-ability and mid-ability groups. Most students were able to write short texts of 4 – 7 coherent sentences describing their pets. The sentences were meaningful and personal feelings were occasionally given. Students were able to learn from the reading texts and use the new words or expressions in their writing. As a result, there was a good variety of sentence structures and vocabulary. Grammar mistakes were minor and did not interfere with the meaning. Another improvement students made was a more consistent use of writing conventions, such as capital letters and punctuation marks.

Compared to the one-word or jumbled-word responses at the Pretest, the low-ability group made remarkable progress by writing 4 or more meaningful sentences with some new words copied from the reading texts. Ben even wrote 8 sentences giving interesting details about his pet, although in his fluency he made a lot of language errors, e.g.
My rabbit in Bobo. She’s three year. She’s eye big. She’s tail is shirt. She like jump and like carrots. But she bon’t like grass. She can’t like fly and swim.


The animal riddles were written soon after the “Pets” writing. However, quite surprisingly, students were not performing as well as in the last writing task. The writings were shorter in general, and the sentences were more patterned. In some riddles, there were not enough clues and adjectives used were limited. Most students just described the body features and forgot to talk about ability, or eating habits, etc. of the animals. In searching for an explanation, we speculated that it might be due to the absence of varied models as in the earlier writing task on “My Pet”. Teachers took for granted that after the “Pets” assignment, students should find no problem writing the riddles. They forgot to provide the necessary scaffolds for the work. Besides, as the work was done as a home assignment, students might have gone back to the textbook for support. That could explain why so many of the riddles were rigidly patterned as the textbook example.

5. “My Pet” (Post-test) - April 2001

This was similar to the classwork “My Pet”. However, with a lapse of almost two months, we thought it might be interesting to see how students performed under examination conditions where the teacher was not there to give help. We would not be surprised if there was a drop in performance. However, the result was more solid than we expected. Except for three students who did do worse, the others maintained their good performance and produced sensible and correct sentences.

General remarks

Comparing pre-test and post-test results, we could see quite impressive gains by the majority. The low-ability group gained the most (49%), followed by the mid-ability group (35%) and the high-ability group (21%).
Part VIII   DISCUSSION

This action research proposed to find out if the use of literary texts and real experiences would (a) raise students’ interest in learning English, (b) increase their participation and free expression in classroom activities as well as in writing, and (c) improve their reading and writing skills.

From the foregoing reflective discussions on the activities conducted and analysis of data collected on students’ reading and writing, we have evidence to say that the effects were in general positive on all aspects of the research focus.

A. Students’ interest in learning English

From all the literature on motivation in learning a new language, we know that it is a multi-dimensional, complex mix of social, affective and cognitive factors. In our study we find that all these factors play a part in motivating students to participate and perform. However, the affective factors seemed to be the most decisive. Comparing students’ responses at the two interviews, we can see a big change in the reasons given for liking English. In the first interview, students liked English because they vaguely sensed that it was important as a subject and for their future lives. After six months learning English the “Experience” way, their responses clearly show that they liked English because of a greater sense of achievement, the enjoyment and the pleasure experienced in the learning situations.

B. Students’ expression of personal and imaginative ideas

From our observations, as confirmed by the students themselves at the interviews, the most liked lessons were those based on stories such as “The Gogo adventures” and “The Three Little Pigs”. In these lessons, students were engaged in open-ended tasks, and they often responded freely and creatively. Such student behaviour was made possible by these factors:

➢ The story was the focus, not the language.

   Students were responding with their hearts, not their heads. They were sharing feelings and meanings, not worrying about getting the right answers. When students were thus communicating personal interest and enthusiasm, they were free to enjoy. In the drama lessons, teachers told me how hard it was to teach the class to read the lines of the play at the beginning. However, as students got the hang of it, they started to enjoy and improvise. We saw their bold attempts to add
one or two lines for Mr. Wolf when he fell into the fire. It was the intensity of the emotions that compelled them to want to express more. Even though one or two lines did not amount to much, to these students it was a significant step forward, because they were stepping out of the boundary of copying and memorizing into the realm of expressing personal feelings and meanings. They were practicing communicative skills for a real purpose, and were drawing on their repertoire of language to express the intended meaning.

- **Students were allowed to express themselves through artistic & other means.**
  Besides language use, students also expressed themselves freely through dancing, singing, drawing, and dramatizing. Through this diverse range of activities, students were able to experience multi-sensory learning and use their multiple intelligences co-operatively.

- **Students were given challenge and support.**
  In the free, creative writing such as changing the ending of the pigs story, teachers were at first concerned that students might just give up in the face of the task difficulty. However, quite contrary to their expectation, students took the challenge enthusiastically. Cognitive motivational theories tell us that it is our belief that we can do it that energizes our actions.\(^{23}\) We could perhaps say that when students had gone through the learning process of story-telling, shared reading and public dramatic performances, they began to feel a sense of achievement, and the task did not appear to be that difficult. It was the combination of giving students some degree of choice and a sense of control that made the students willing to take risk and exercise their imagination in spite of their limited English. Teachers also noted that students were seeking help from them more actively when they had language problems. Again, it could only happen when students felt safe and supported in the learning environment that teachers created.

- **There were clear, progressive learning goals.**
  To develop positive attribution, the learning goals have to be “specific, hard but achievable” so that success is possible with effort (Oxford and Shearin, 1994). In our planning for the curriculum, we aimed at structuring a systematic progression of activities so that there was enough scaffolding to move students along Vygotsky’s “zones of proximal development”. While we must admit that there were inevitable gaps between intentions and implementations of the curriculum, most students benefited from the progressive activities that built up their

\(^{23}\) Arnold, J. (Ed.) ibid. p.13
C. Students’ performance in reading aloud and expressive writing

Data analysis in students’ reading aloud tests did not show a clear pattern of improvement. Some students still failed to recognize simple sight words such as ‘comes’ and ‘rain’ although they knew them when they heard them. Their phonic skills were still too rudimentary to help them to decode new words. However, they were able to follow the story and respond to comprehension questions correctly. All this showed that their listening and speaking skills were more developed than their reading skills.

Their apparent lack of progress in reading might be due to the fact that after shared reading using the Big Books, they did not have the corresponding small books for continued practice with reading partners or individually. The lack of practice therefore accounted for the lack of improvement in students’ reading aloud performance. The school has to find a solution to this problem in the next year’s provision.

On the contrary, we saw quite encouraging improvements in students’ writing skills. While much of the written work done in Phase I was teacher-controlled and involved mechanical copying, a stronger element of free response was introduced to the work in Phase II. The evidence showed that when students were given the opportunity to write freely, most of them would be motivated to respond creatively and imaginatively. When the challenge to express freely was supported by varied input and practice, students became more confident to take risk and experiment with their words.

From the setback in the animal riddles, teachers learnt that they could not take it for granted that students would relate parts to whole automatically; they need explicit instructions to make the connections between episodes of learning, to raise their meta-cognitive awareness. Once again, we were reminded that learning does not take place in a linear fashion. We have to review, revise and recycle our curricular materials to help students construct their knowledge effectively into a meaningful whole.
D. Action Research as a Powerful Means of Professional Development

The main focus of this Action Research is on student learning. We have seen encouraging signs of students gaining greater interest and competence in learning English. The same could be said about teachers and myself. In developing and trying out the instructional materials and strategies we have experienced professional growth. Through our actions and reflections, we affirmed some of our beliefs, gained fresh insight and practical knowledge in making learning and teaching more effective. The following are some of the insights gained and knowledge generated during our collaborative project.

- **“Real” books for real reading**
  The selection of books for shared reading made a difference to student motivation. We had chosen a book for its simple language, but it offered little room for prediction and imagination. As a result, student interest was difficult to maintain beyond a few readings. Later we used a book with a stronger story element and more complex language. Students developed anticipation and responded with their feelings as they read along. Despite the more difficult language, students enjoyed the reading and the follow-up activities tremendously. This convinced us that “real” books are needed for real learning (Parker & Parker 1995). The authenticity of the story catches the imagination of the students and arouses their motivation to read and respond to it.

- **Text adaptation**
  When we selected the more difficult book, we re-wrote part of it to make the language more manageable, but we retained the repetitive phrases which are emotionally loaded and most fun to read. I think we did the right thing. Students were able to read the simplified text without lessening their enjoyment of the story and the illustrations. Teachers therefore should feel free to use any storybook that appeals to them if they would adapt the text to suit their students. However, it is advisable to set the standard and expectations on or above the students’ reading level, not below, if we want to keep them “on their toes”.

- **Collaborative learning**
  Teachers mentioned many times in their teaching journals that students learned better when they worked in a group. Their observations of the group dynamics were mostly positive. Given a common learning goal, students would usually

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help each other towards it. There was peer coaching and correction going on within the groups. As a result, the end products were often more accurate and refined. Teachers therefore learnt to be more flexible in their classroom organization, and make good use of whole class, pair, group and individual work for the desirable learning outcomes.

- **Tolerance of ambiguity**
  If we want to develop students’ creativity, we must give them space to create and respond freely. A trade-off of giving self-control to students was some degree of chaos. When learning is under teacher control and conducted in lock-step fashion, individual differences are often masked. However, under the new learning conditions, differences in learner ability and learning styles will surface and cause problem for the teacher in both classroom management and instruction. Students’ responses become less predictable and errors are more varied. Even though good lesson preparation is still important, teachers realize that they cannot rely solely on prepared strategies or model answers. Ingenuity and sensitivity are needed in dealing with the changing classroom situations. In this respect, ironically, teachers did feel greater anxiety while they were trying to lessen the anxiety for the students. However, teachers, as well as students, have to learn to tolerate ambiguity and treat errors as opportunities to learn. This calls for a whole new attitude towards marking and assessment, which we would continue to explore and develop.

- **Using Chinese in English lessons**
  In the lessons in which the teachers encouraged students to predict and to imagine, they often got answers pouring out in Chinese. This is an inevitable result of having an urge to communicate but with too little language. Teachers, out of professional concern, felt uneasy letting students use Chinese. However, if they insisted on hearing English only, it would have silenced most of the class. So, how much Chinese should we allow? I don’t think we have an answer. This is a dilemma for many EFL teachers, as noted by Rao (2000)\(^\text{25}\) who thinks that the mother tongue can be used effectively for humanistic and practical reasons. He concluded that most English teachers would agree that “a limited use rather than a total dependence on the mother tongue will benefit the EFL teaching”, but he admitted that he did not yet know accurately to what degree the mother tongue should be utilized.

However, in considering the question, it might be helpful to refer to our learning goals of the moment. We can ask ourselves: Are we concerned more with “attitude goals” or “content goals”?26 If at the moment we are trying to encourage students to explore ideas, to take risk and “have a go”, then realistically we cannot insist on all English. We have to accept every student’s contributions, in whichever language, in order to affirm their effort to communicate and build up their confidence. However, we must make clear to them our expectations that they should use as much English as they can, and help them use bits of their half-learnt language to give shape to their thoughts, both in speaking and in writing.

Having something real to say is a strong motivator to learn a language, and we should not undermine students’ motivation and confidence by asking them to do the impossible. By proximal goal-setting and effective scaffolding, we can bring students step by step closer to mastering the language.

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Teachers’ Voices
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Towards the end of the action research, teachers were requested to review the whole process and talk about their experience. This was what they had to say:

**On overcoming anxiety and meeting the challenge:**
- At the beginning, I was all confused and worried. I did not even know what an action research was. However, after each meeting, I became clearer of the directions and more confident in what we had to do. (Marble)

- Keeping up the teaching diary was stressful at first. I was exhausted by the time I got home. But after a while it became a habit and I actually enjoyed noting down what I observed in class that day. My students constantly surprised me with their responses and remarks. I found that I was compelled to write them down. (Iris)

**On teachers’ motivation and expectations:**
- Why did I want to do this action research? I think it has to be my professional development. I wanted to learn more teaching techniques and know more about student motivation so that I could help students learn more enjoyably and effectively. (Marble)

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26 Halliwell, S. Teaching English in the Primary Classroom, p.10
I think this is a meaningful project. I expect to see improvement in students’ learning motivation, classroom performance and writing skills. (Iris)

**On learning outcomes:**

- Students enjoyed having English lessons and they participated actively in class. In one lesson when we were playing games, the least responsive student actually came to talk to me in English. It was really amazing. (Iris)

- As I watched students doing group writing, I realized how peer learning took place. The able students would contribute more, but there were no idle ones. The weak students learnt with peer encouragement in a low stress environment. At the group presentations, students showed great interest in other groups’ work, and were able to appreciate good work and correct mistakes. (Marble)

- My experience of doing creative writing with the students was impressive. At first I was afraid it would be too difficult and they would give up. But just look at them trying all the means to punish the big bad wolf in “The Three Little Pigs”, or writing the funny lyrics for the Gogo song. I knew I did the right thing by opening up space for their imagination to roam free. It was exciting. (Iris)

**On teacher development:**

- I think collaboration was the key to our achievement. It was very comforting to know that I did not have to work alone, but have other people to share the work, the joy and the worries. I hope that this collaboration will spread to other subject departments so that everyone will benefit. (Marble)

- The work involved was tremendous and there were only two of us to share the workload. However, we were a great team and had much fun planning, designing, and carrying out all the activities. We had a lot of professional input and advice from the Curriculum Officer. Together we solved problems and celebrated success. (Iris)

- At the time of data analysis, we had the assistance of a Research Officer from CDI. With her input we were able to draw useful information from the mass of students’ work. This is also an educative process for me. (Iris)
I think I am a better teacher because of this action research. Besides teaching techniques, I also learnt how to collect data and analyze it. I have better understanding of my students. I learnt how to make evidence-based decisions about my teaching. These valuable experiences have enhanced my professionalism. (Iris)

I came to understand the real meaning of catering to students’ needs and interests. I gained the knowledge and skill to use the textbooks and resources flexibly and creatively to achieve learning goals. I feel I have grown so much professionally. This experience will help me greatly in my future work, no matter what subject I am going to teach.” (Marble)
Part IX  CONCLUSION

In this collaborative action research, we set ourselves the task of developing a school-based English curriculum that had an enriched “Experience” component. The experience was of both a ‘read’ and a ‘real’ kind, aiming at bringing about more personal engagement and motivation to learn. Our expected outcomes included improvements in student learning and attitudes, enhanced teacher competency and a greater diversity in teaching resources and strategies. In all these aspects, the evidences point to the fact that we did achieve some success. However, six months for this experimental teaching is too short a time to yield any definitive results. At best we are assured that we have traveled on the right road, one that would bring pleasurable and effective learning to our students. However, in reality, we are afraid that without proper measures to sustain the learning, the positive effects could be eroded quickly. Therefore, true success demands us to persist in what we are doing, to learn more about effective teaching and learning, and work with more people to improve on the practices.

While teachers are working hard to support effective learning, they also need support from others to make their work effective. The school can support teachers in a number of ways:

1. Allocate appropriate resources

   Schools should **endorse the greater use of literary texts** in the English curriculum across all levels and **allocate more resources** for the acquisition of books and multi-media learning packages. In fact in recent years the Education Department and various professional organizations have produced learning packages or teacher development resources on new trends of English teaching. Unfortunately such resources often escaped teachers’ attention in their busy schedule, or even worse, failed to find their way to the individual teachers as they got shelved or locked up in storage. The school could perhaps **review their circulation system** and make sure that the new resources can be studied and assessed for their usefulness and preferably get their day in the classroom, at least for a trial-run.

   The shared reading lessons that were so much enjoyed by the classes were used to motivate and support students in their beginning attempts at acquiring the reading skill (and hopefully the reading habit). But eventually they have to learn to read with less teacher support and then independently. Teachers were aware of this end. However, they were hampered by not having corresponding small
books to the big books in use. As a result, students were not able to do pair reading or take the books home for private reading. The effect of the shared book experience was therefore diminished, which could explain the relatively small gain in students’ reading aloud skill. This would be something important for the school to consider for next year’s provision.

2. **Schedule reading time to promote a reading habit**
   
The school administrators can also change the timetables in such a way that students have regular reading time in school with teacher help at hand. This is all the more important when most students come from families who cannot give any quality support in learning English. As the school is their only/major source of learning the second language, students should be given access, and time to access, the wide range of learning resources. Researches report fourth-grade “slump” when students suffer a drop in their reading achievements and experience reading problems. Local studies (Wong, et al 1997, 1999) also shows that there is a general decline in learning motivation from Primary 3 onwards. For prevention, we need **early intervention** by putting together a stronger, more interesting literacy programme in the early primary years to lay **a solid foundation** for later years.

3. **Build a collaborative school culture**

   Another support that teachers need greatly from the school is time for planning, preparation and sharing among the staff. “Teaching should not be a lonely or isolated activity.” Teachers need to talk about what they think, what they have done and how they feel. The informal, spontaneous exchanges in the staff room may be useful in building a congenial, trust relationship among teachers and solving small practical problems, but we also need formal, regular meetings to **establish shared values, produce comprehensive understanding of aspects of policy and practice, and arrive at rational decisions on curriculum development.**

   This action research is characterized by interactive collaboration between the external agent and the teachers. We had frequent meetings to plan and discuss strategies. Teachers’ observations of students learning and practical knowledge were objects of much of our discussions. Through reflection, teachers articulated their tacit knowledge and were able to see how practice was

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28 Scottish CCC. (1997) Teaching for Effective Learning, a paper for discussion and development,
related to theories of learning. Teachers acknowledged that this mode of learning is most beneficial to their professional development. However, being a small team, teachers realized how limited influence they had on the school as a whole. During the term, we have had the help of the School Curriculum Co-ordinator and the Teacher Assistant, but other teachers have had little time to share any of our meetings or activities. For better dissemination of good practices, we have to build teacher collaboration into the system. We need to form a larger supportive learning group to share values and innovate on methods and processes.

“Learning to learn” is not meant just for our students, but for all of us in the teaching profession. It is towards developing the school into an effective learning organization that we devote our efforts.
Reference


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1st Phase Theme “I can do it.”

Learning targets:
KD a – to provide or find out and present simple information on familiar topics
KD b – to interpret and use simple information through matching, describing, classifying and following instructions
ID b – to converse about feelings and interests
ID e – to obtain and provide information through interactive games and role plays
ED a – to enjoy action rhymes and songs
ED b – to respond to characters and events in stories

Textbook units covered: (New On Target 2A)
- Unit 1 “Hello Again” - Read a Story “Supergirl can run.” (P.4)
  Look and Say “Can you swim?” (P.5)
- Unit 2 “How do you feel?” (P.21 – 23)

Other teaching materials used:
- VCD – “I Can…” Kinder Education Press Ltd. 1999
  “Little David”
- Big Book - “What can you do?” Longman 2000

Language tasks:
- Students watch VCD story “I Can..” and sing an action song.
- Students do shared reading of “What can you do?” and complete the tasks in the Activity Book
- Students conduct a class survey of what they can do with picture support.
- Students complete the tasks in the Activity Book for “What I like & How I feel”.

Language focus:
- I can/ can’t ..
- Can you..? What can you do?
- I like/don’t like...(He likes/doesn’t like..)
- What do you / does he like? Do you / Does he like...?
- I’ m / He’ s hungry/ thirsty/ sad/ angry/ afraid.

Assessment:
- Teachers’ observation and journals
- Worksheets, Quiz sheet, activity books
- formal tests
### 2nd Phase Theme “Animals”

**Learning targets:**

- **KD a** – to provide or find out and present simple information on familiar topics
- **KD b** – to interpret and use simple information through matching, describing, classifying and following instructions
- **ID b** – to converse about feelings, interests and experiences
- **ID e** – to obtain and provide information through interactive games and role-play
- **ED a** – to enjoy action rhymes and songs
- **ED b** – to respond to characters and events in stories by participating in dramatic activities and other means
- **ED d** – to express own experience through various activities

**Textbook units covered: (New On Target 2 B)**

- “A Class Picnic” (p. 11–13)
- “On the Farm Again” (p. 15-18)
- “More Animals” (p. 20-21)

**Other learning materials used:**

- **VCD:** “Gogo Adventures – Where’s Gogo?” (Longman 2000)
- **Big Books:**
  - “Three Little Pigs” (Addison-Wesley)
  - “Down on the Farm” (Creative Teaching Press)

**Language tasks:**

- Write animal riddles
- Dramatize “Three Little Pigs” and do follow-up activities
- Do crossword puzzles and bingo games
- Find out about animals, look for locations and signs, and play games during visit to farm
- Produce a class photo album after the visit

**Language focus:**

- identify and name the animals, describe their appearances and talk about their eating habits
- understand and respond to signs and rules
- talk about locations and positions

**Assessment:**

- Teachers’ observation and journals
- Class photo album; class work
- Students’ dramatized performance
- Student interviews
# A VISIT TO THE FARM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. What is the name of the farm? ___________________________________

2. What animals can you see? Put ✓ in the (   ).
   - Goats (   ) pigeons (   ) horses (   ) cats (   )
   - Pigs (   ) tigers (   ) rabbits (   ) birds (   )
   - Hens (   ) fish (   ) ducks (   ) squirrels (   )
   - Elephants (   ) cows (   ) dogs (   ) monkeys (   )

3. Look for the signs “A”, “B”, “C” and “D”. What animals can you see?
   - ☺ What can you see at “A”?_________
   - ☻ What can you see at “B”?_________
   - ☹ What can you see at “C”?_________
   - ☛ What can you see at “D”?_________

4. Find 4 signs on the farm (e.g. Keep the place clean.)
   - (1) ____________________________________________
   - (2) ____________________________________________
   - (3) ____________________________________________
   - (4) ____________________________________________

5. Choose 1 or 2 animals that you like. Draw and describe it/them.
   - What are they?
   - Are they big or small?
   - Do they have long or short tails (or ears)?
   - Do they have big or small eyes (or nose)?
   - What colour are they?
   - What food do they like?

6. Read the animal riddles on the wall. How many can you answer?

| A | B | C | D | E |
浸信會天虹下午校 □ 第一次學生訪問

1. 你喜歡英文科嗎？喜歡英文科的哪些東西？為什麼？

2. 當老師叫你站起來讀書時，你會覺得怎樣？為什麼？

3. 你喜歡一個人單獨朗讀還是和同學一同朗讀？為什麼？

4. 老師以前上堂有用大故事書嗎？你喜歡老師用大故事書上課嗎？為什麼？

5. 在堂上聽故事時，你會否想到一些東西要告訴同學？若老師請你講俾全班同時聽時，你鍾唔鍾？

6. 當在英文方面遇到困難時（例如有生字唔識讀／唔識解），你會點？會唔會問人？問邊個？會唔會查字典？

7. 除了上課以外，佢會看哪些有英文字的東西？圖畫多還是字多？（會看英文TV嗎？）明唔明？

8. 除了上課以外，平日你有沒有機會講英文？什麼情況下？講些什麼？
浸信會天虹下午校 无意 第二次學生訪問

1. 你還記得最近的英文活動嗎？你喜歡那些活動呢？可以舉一些例子給我嗎？
   - 看Gogo video
   - 唱英文歌，例如“Where’s Gogo?”
   - 改寫故事結局
   - 參觀農場
   - 一起讀大故事書
   - 戲劇表演

2. 你喜歡這樣的英文堂嗎？你覺得這些英文教學活動會不會提高你對英文科的興趣呢？

3. 又，你覺得這些英文活動有沒有幫助你認識多了英文的生字或句子？或者，你是否覺得你今年多了機會去說英文呢？

4. 你認為你的英文有進步嗎？哪些方面呢？

5. 你有盡力學好英文嗎？你可不可說說你做了甚麼？你認為還可以做些甚麼？

6. 你覺得你英文科那些方面你需要向他人求助呢？如果當你英文科遇上問題時，你會向誰求助呢？

7. 你在家中會否有人幫你溫習英文呢（包括補習老師）？你的家人會否經常檢查你的功課或關心你的成績嗎？

8. 在學校，你試過同你們的外籍老師傾談過嗎？你覺得外籍老師可以幫助你鍛鍊英文嗎？哪些方面呢？

9. 你有沒有信心你的英文將來會學得更好？