

## Exemplar 10: Systematic Scaffolding and Cooperative Learning

### Overview

[Queen's College Old Boys' Association Secondary School](#) and [Po Leung Kuk Yao Ling Sun College](#) share similar backgrounds. Both schools are estate schools situated in Cheung On Estate and Shek Wai Kok Estate respectively. They are also within the same banding.

Students' exposure to English is limited and they tend to lack confidence in speaking and using English.



This exemplar features a number of practices that Miss Ho, Ms Lewis, Mrs Wong and Mrs Leung of both schools have adopted in catering for the students of lower ability:

- Using cooperative learning to promote peer tutoring and peer support
- Designing graded tasks to prepare students for more challenging tasks and equip students with confidence
- Tailoring materials to maximise students' learning capacity
- Using focusing strategies to facilitate learning
- Advocating skills-integration in a unit of teaching

## Peer Learning

In both schools, teachers see the importance of engaging students in different kinds of cooperative learning environments to help them see each other as resources for learning and support one another in their language development. Through the use of pair work and group work, students have gained a great deal of confidence in using English and hence have also developed greater interest in the subject.



## Pair Work

Miss Ho and Ms Lewis have both demonstrated their skill in using pair work very effectively. Their tasks have been designed to motivate students to speak in English, to maximise opportunities for students to use the language and to enhance students' confidence in using the language.



Ms Lewis sees the need to help her students mobilise their language. She believes that her students actually know a lot of words but these remain in their passive vocabulary. So she creates tasks with the intention of helping them "mobilise" what they already know and hence gain greater confidence in using English. This is achieved in her speaking lessons through the use of topics familiar to students or the design of tasks to consolidate students' understanding of what has been covered in their General English lessons.

## An Interview

Miss Ho believes that students would feel more confident if they could perform tasks in pairs. They would feel more competent as they are able to interact with and get help from their peers. Working in pairs also serves as a useful method to lower students' anxiety.

In one of the lessons on pre-writing, students conducted an interview with their partner, asking each other questions on voluntary work. Then they wrote a report on their partner's involvement in voluntary work.

A comment from one of Miss Ho's students suggested that students in general find working with their classmates helpful as they benefit from peer support.

"As we know our partner very well, we feel very comfortable asking each other questions."

*(Miss Ho's S.2 student)*



**The video subtitles in this exemplar have been slightly edited for easier comprehension.**

## Moving Dialogue

The "Moving Dialogue" is an interesting variation of an activity called the "pineapple ring" (Hadfield 1988) that Ms Lewis devised to engage students in pair work with different classmates to reduce their self-consciousness when speaking in English, overcome their inhibition to speak and help them strengthen their confidence. In the activity, she makes use of a skeleton dialogue.

As the activity begins, students in class are seated in a large circle. They are given a short dialogue and asked to practise reading it aloud to their partners. Then, they switch partners and rehearse the dialogue with a new partner. As students become more familiar with the dialogues, Ms Lewis encourages them to practise without their slips. And as students' get to meet different faces in every new round, they gradually become less "self-conscious" of their own speech, less tense when they speak and gradually more relaxed.

Please view the video clip to see how Ms Lewis conducted the "Moving Dialogue". This clip also shows Ms Lewis demonstrating [scaffolding](#) strategies in facilitating her students' learning.



## Ms Lewis' Moving Dialogue Worksheet

F3 Moving Dialog

SET 1 B

A. ....

B. I'm fine. And you?

A. ....

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SET 2 B

A. ....

B. I'm fine. And you?

A. ....

B. Yes, it was great. I have to go now. Bye bye.

A. ....

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SET 3 B

A. ....

B. I'm fine and you?

A. ....

B. Yes, it was great.

A. ....

B. (Answer a question about Chinese New Year) Well, I have to go now. Bye bye.

A. ....

---

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SET 1 B

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B. I'm fine. And you?

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B. Yes, it was great. I have to go now. Bye bye.

A. ....

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SET 3 B

A. ....

B. I'm fine and you?

A. ....

B. Yes, it was great.

A. ....

B. (Answer a question about Chinese New Year) Well, I have to go now. Bye bye.

A. ....

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F3 Moving Dialog

SET 1 A

A. Hi (name). How are you today?

B. ....

A. Fine thanks.

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SET 2 A.

A. Hi (name). How are you today?

B. ....

A. Fine thanks. Did you have a good holiday?

B. ....

A. Bye. See you later.

---

SET 3 A.

A. Hi (name). How are you today?

B. ....

A. Fine thanks. Did you have a good holiday?

B. ....

A. (Ask about Chinese New Year)

B. ....

A. Bye. See you later.

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F3 Moving Dialog

SET 1 A

A. Hi (name). How are you today?

B. ....

A. Fine thanks.

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A. Hi (name). How are you today?

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B. ....

A. Bye. See you later.

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A. Hi (name). How are you today?

B. ....

A. Fine thanks. Did you have a good holiday?

B. ....

A. (Ask about Chinese New Year)

B. ....

A. Bye. See you later.

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## Group Work

With the belief that linguistically weaker students learn better in small groups with the support of their peers, group activities are incorporated into English lessons. The group tasks that you are about to see involve students in group competitions, the teacher preparing students to be little 'teachers' in hosting lessons and group games designed to engage students in active use of the language.





## Group Competitions

Organising group competitions among students is not as easy as it may seem. Mrs Leung shares with us 6 pieces of advice from her many years of experience in teaching remedial students on how to maximise students as a resource for learning:

- **Allow for heterogeneity in the group**  
Put together students of different abilities to enable the stronger to support the weaker, the more active to encourage the quieter and less confident to speak out, and the more confident to urge the less confident ones to try.
- **Set clear goals for the students**  
Establish a fair reward and penalty system and set clear as well as achievable targets for students.
- **Entrust students with responsibilities within the group**  
Assign the group leader with the role of ensuring that students are on-task and monitoring the progress of the group.
- **Give each student in the group a fair chance**  
Find ways to encourage the quieter, the weaker and less active students to be involved in group activities. Inviting the more outspoken and confident to encourage their group-mates to try after being given some help from the group is one possible way.
- **Adjust the rules of the competition if needed to cater for the needs of the weaker students**  
If it happens that some groups may be lagging behind, the teacher could allow them to 'book' the questions they feel confident in answering. Questions could also be categorised into different levels with different marks attached to them. Groups could then decide which category of questions to attempt.
- **Handle wrong answers with tact and sensitivity**  
When giving students feedback on their unsuccessful attempts, the teacher needs to be very careful not to de-motivate students or undermine their confidence.

Here you will see the teacher attaching different marks to each question according to the level of difficulty of the questions. You'll also witness how the teacher offers support to the weaker groups and comments on their performance in a very positive and supportive manner.



Students generally welcome the idea of group competitions and like the way in which it has been organised as it gives them a great sense of satisfaction.

Here is Mrs Leung's rationale for the use of group competitions in motivating students to learn:

"With groups, the strength is in the students themselves, not in the teacher ... they each help other ... They are so keen to perform better in their group. By and by, they're not so worried



about not being able to understand."  
(Mrs. Leung, English Panel Chairperson)

These are the students' reactions to Mrs Leung's lessons:

"The English lesson is very happy."  
(Joe, S.1 student)

"When we compete to answer the questions, we feel very excited and interested ... It's interesting because the questions are quite difficult, so I think it's quite interesting."  
(Micky, S.1 student)

## Students as "Teachers"

To help her students gain greater confidence in speaking in public and to help them see each other as resources for learning, Ms Wong prepares her students to host lessons for their classmates.

Instead of the teacher taking students through the reading passage in the coursebook, students are trained to do so. Working in groups, students take up the role as 'little teachers' to help their classmates understand the passage and develop greater responsibility for their own learning.

Students are given very clear instructions on what they are expected to do in the lesson and are assigned one to two paragraphs of the text to prepare. Students then meet as a group to decide how they are going to host the lesson. Together they work out...

- what to focus on in the paragraph(s) regarding the textual structure and vocabulary
- the meaning and pronunciation of the more challenging words
- how to present their ideas to their classmates and help them understand the paragraph(s)
- questions to set for a simple quiz in class
- what additional information to present them with

Then each group arranges to meet Ms Wong to put forward their plan to her and seeks her advice as well as support, especially with the pronunciation and meaning of the target vocabulary items.

Students then host their lessons.



Through preparing for their presentation, students not only play a more active and central role in class but also report that they have deepened their understanding of the text and enhanced their confidence in using English.

Vincci, one of Ms Wong's students, describes the joy of learning:

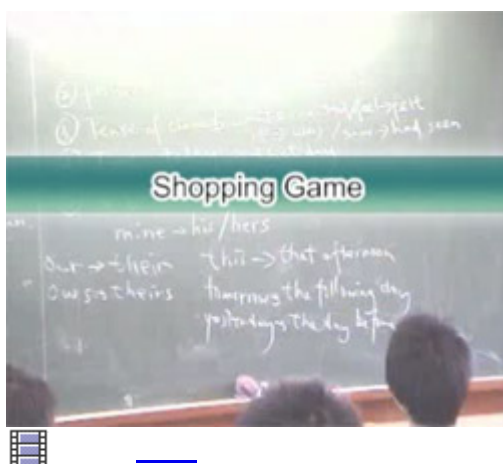
"I think it is very interesting because after the presentation I can remember the words more clearly, because ... I need to study the paragraph very hard, so I remember the vocab very clearly, and I understand information about sharks more."

*(Vincci, S.3 student)*

## Shopping Game

Miss Ho sees the use of games and activities as a means to arouse the interest of her students and to ensure that they are more actively engaged in learning.

One case in point is when she was teaching the reported speech. One of the tasks involved the transformation of sentences from direct speech to reported speech. Miss Ho intended to make her students more aware of the differences in the structure of a direct sentence and a reported sentence, for example, changes in the reporting verbs, the pronouns and the adverbial time phrases. In order to achieve this, she designed a shopping game in which the students were divided into groups of four. Each group was given a direct sentence to be converted into a reported sentence.



To transform the sentence, students had to shop for the language items (the reporting verbs, the pronouns and the time adverbials, etc.) they needed. The less able students in the class were asked to be the shop owners of the items while the rest of the class 'purchased' the grammar items from them. In this way, not a single student was excluded from the game. All the students, regardless of their ability, had a task to perform and were actively involved.

## Grading Tasks

Readily available materials are not always designed at the right level for students with a relatively low language proficiency. Here you will see how two teachers have adapted or designed some tasks to cater for the needs of their students. In particular, you may want to focus on how they have very carefully graded the tasks and adjusted the level of difficulty, moving

- from simpler to more challenging tasks
- from ones involving more controlled language use to more free practice
- from concrete to more abstract tasks

The way in which the tasks were sequenced has proven to have helped reduce students' anxiety in using the language, prepared them better for the more difficult tasks and equipped them with greater confidence to speak in English.

## Skeleton Dialogues

Skeleton dialogues are dialogues presented to students in halves so they only get their share of the dialogue and do not know what their partner is going to say until they carry out the conversation. This creates an information gap, requiring students to communicate with one another to find out the rest of the 'story'.

Ms Lewis has very skillfully graded her "skeleton dialogue" task by presenting the dialogues in different segments to students in strips. So instead of getting the full conversation all at once, they get a small part of it at a time. The language prompts in the dialogue were also graded with an increasing level of difficulty.

- Students were first given only 1 set of short dialogues which they had to read and practise with their partners
- As they developed greater confidence in their reading of the lines, they were given a slightly more challenging set - with more lines and gradually moving from closed to more open-ended dialogues which they had to compose based on question prompts
- Eventually, students were asked to make up the last part of the conversation, improvise it and role-play it to their classmates

Ms Lewis explains how she came up with the design of the skeleton dialogue task:

"Even though I tell them what I am going to say, I always throw in a few ad-lib questions and, you know, they can cope with it. I think it builds their confidence a lot to be able to just talk more naturally, because some of them are quite good, a couple of the kids."

*(Ms Lewis, NET teacher)*

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B. (Answer a question about Chinese New Year) Well, I have to go now. Bye bye.

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F3 Moving Dialog

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A. Hi (name). How are you today?

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## Reading Aloud

The teachers at Queen's College Old Boys' Association Secondary School generally see *Reading Aloud* as an effective way of helping students concentrate on their reading and motivating students to practise the language. The students enjoy reading aloud too.

Adopting *Reading Aloud* to help her students practise their speech, Mrs. Leung carefully grades the task to equip her students with the confidence in reading to the class.



Students were first played the tape of the reading passage from the coursebook paragraph by paragraph and asked to listen for the pronunciation of particular words. Then, Mrs. Leung asked the students to practise these words in groups before they read to the teacher. As they became more familiar with the pronunciation of the words, she got them to focus on the stress patterns of the words and phrases as they appeared in sentences. And having had lots of practice, they then moved on to work on their intonation as they read full sentences to the class.



## Partitioning Strategies

Miss Ho sometimes broke down what she regarded as a complicated language pattern into smaller, more manageable sub-units to facilitate learning.

For instance, when she was teaching students how to convert a sentence from active voice into passive voice, she first dealt with the changes in the sequence of the agent and the recipient, and then she turned to the changes in verb form only when students had mastered the changes in the sequence of the agent and the recipient.



This is the order in which the teaching of passive voice was conducted:

1. Introduce the structure of the active sentence
2. Use SVO to show the word order in the sentence
3. Teach the changes in the sequence of the agent and the recipient
4. Teach the changes in the verb form
5. Teach the meaning of the passive voice



Miss Ho uses partitioning strategies in the teaching of other grammatical patterns too, as she explains how she taught the second conditional:

"Last time I taught type two conditional (the improbable conditional clause). I revised tenses with them. Very often they do not know the past form of the verbs. They may just add 'ed' to the verb 'teach' to change it to the past tense as if it is a regular verb. Therefore, I started with a revision of this kind, making sure that they know the past form of the verbs. Then for the if-structure, I stress that in type two conditional, they will find the structure in past tense. The form would be 'would + infinitive'. I gave them an exercise on that. Then I asked them to form sentences on their own, giving them the condition [in type two] and asking them to create the latter part. This is another example of splitting a complicated problem into simpler parts."

## Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a strategy employed to provide structural as well as lexical support to students in producing the language.

In Mrs. Leung's S.1 remedial class, scaffolding can be seen being used to provide students with the linguistic stimuli they need to start their speech and to equip them with the confidence in speaking to the class. Noticing that her students were having difficulties expressing themselves in class when asked about their shopping habits, she put the following sentence on the blackboard:

*I always go to a bookshop. Sometimes I buy some English books. I spend \$500 each time.*



Once students were given the prompt, they found it much easier to express themselves. The weaker students could simply use the given sentence as a framework and replace the underlined words with their own answers.

This is another approach to the use of the scaffolding strategy. To enhance her S.3 and 4 students' confidence in writing and to facilitate their writing up of a speech which was to be presented to their schoolmates, Ms Lewis provided her students with a [model text of a speech](#). Using the given model with key structural phrases and gapped sentences as their framework, they constructed their own speech with much greater ease.

This very carefully "scaffolded" task lessened students' cognitive and linguistic load when composing their speech. In addition, the ample opportunities students were given to practise delivering their speech to a real audience iV their schoolmates - gave them a great sense of achievement.

See below for Ms Lewis' description of the activity and how it has helped students develop their confidence.

*"All they have to do ... is to use the framework that they kind of fill in with their own information. So it's very stylised, but in fact it gives them a lot of confidence to get up and speak, and it means they've got this model used over and over again ... we had quite a lot of students doing the talk, and some of the ones who have spoken ... said to me that that was the best thing they've ever done in English. You know they just loved it. You know, I was amazed because it's hard to get them to speak. It's like whoosh and they turn to jelly but they loved it. And I think it's because they repeated it so much they had a lot of confidence by the time they said it ... just the fact that they can do it, of course, gives them a lot of satisfaction."* (Ms Lewis, NET teacher)

## **Ms Lewis' Framework for Writing a Speech**

F4 speech framework

Good morning everyone. I'm pleased to talk to you today about keeping fit.

You may learn something new, so I hope you'll listen carefully to the four points I make.

Firstly, keeping fit and being thin are not the same thing.

I'm saying this because a lot of people diet to lose weight and say they are trying to "keep fit".

Keeping fit is about exercise and healthy diet but you don't have to be very thin to be fit.

The second point to remember is that keeping fit requires on-going effort. You need to exercise at least three times a week for about 40 minutes per session. Doing this will mean that your heart and lungs will be healthy.

Additionally, you should make sure you exercise all your muscles. Why do I say this? Because some exercise programs focus on legs or hips or backs and ignore the whole body.

My final point is that keeping fit will give you many benefits. You will feel stronger and more energetic.

I hope you have listened to my advice, because if you do as I have suggested you will feel better each day.

Let me remind you of my main arguments:

- Keeping fit and being thin are not the same thing
- Do regular exercise each week
- Exercise your whole body
- Being fit has many benefits for your lifestyle

You've been a great audience. Thank you for your attention.

### **Possible topics**

- Going shopping
- Playing all-night games
- Eating at McDonald's
- Looking for a summer job
- Dating
- Helping around the house
- Saving money
- Reading
- Playing sport

## Using Students as Resources

After Miss Ho's students had learnt the structure of the reported speech, she introduced the following activity. She had tape-recorded a number of utterances (statements in direct speech) produced by different students in class and the class teacher. While utterances were played back, students listened to them and were asked to guess who the speakers were and then report what they heard to the class, thus using the target structure – the reported speech.

The whole activity was very meticulously planned with a sound rationale behind, as she explains:

"I purposefully recorded each utterance three times, for I am afraid they (the students) could not follow. On one hand, if I played it only once, it would be so fast that they could not hear it. It would also be troublesome to rewind the tape so often. On the other hand, if I were to repeat the utterance myself, the meaning [of making an authentic tape] would be lost. I would rather ask the students to repeat the sentence and allow a pause in between. If they cannot follow, then I can play it back again. Usually when you play it for the first time, they will laugh. No one will be able to hear the utterance properly. After all the fun and laughter, when I play the tape for the second time, they listen attentively. For the third time I play the tape, it is for checking, to see whether they have got the answer."



When Miss Ho designed the task, she has very carefully considered the ability of the students as well as their possible responses. In the video, you will see how she successfully aroused their interest and provided them with a meaningful context for the purposeful use of the reported speech which was the target language structure.





## Mnemonic Devices

Since the attention span of the students of lower ability is relatively short, Miss Ho tries to make use of focusing strategies like mnemonic devices to draw students' attention to and to help them consider certain important learning points.



Constant use of flash cards as a focusing strategy

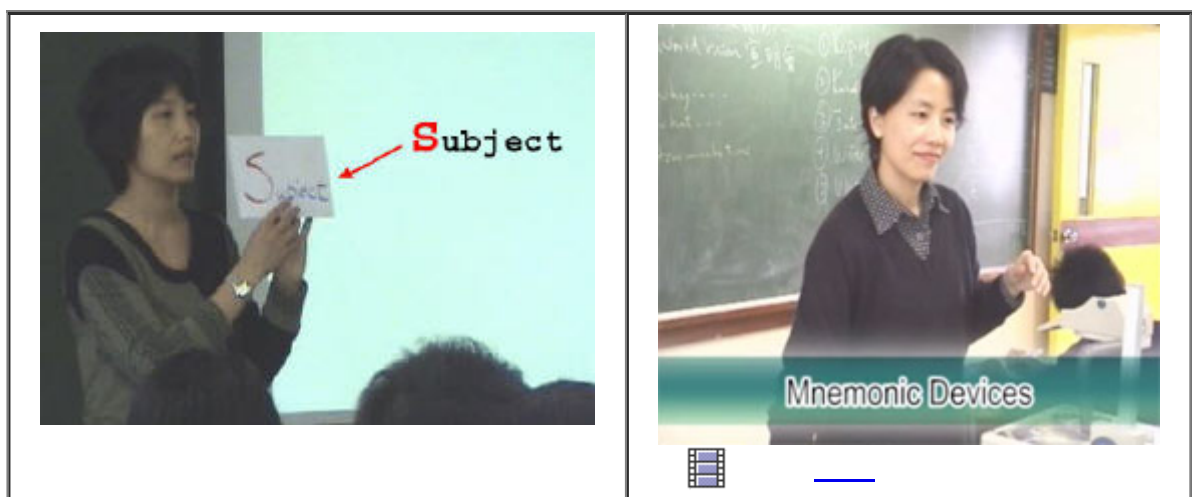
Besides the effective use of the blackboard, Miss Ho makes frequent use of flash cards and word strips as mnemonic devices to help her students learn and better remember the important features of the sentence structures or grammatical patterns.

For example, when Miss Ho presented the language form of the relative clause, she used flash cards to facilitate her students' learning. She broke a sentence down into two parts, namely the main clause and the relative clause, and put them on different cards. She chose letters of different fonts and sizes to enable her students to distinguish more easily between the main clause and the relative clause. She also used different colours to highlight each key feature, such as the relative pronoun introducing the relative clause, to draw students' attention.



To students of lower ability, the relative clauses represent very complicated language structures. In order to master these structures, they would need more support from the teacher than students of a higher language proficiency. Miss Ho believes the use of mnemonic devices would make it easier for them to recall these structures when it comes to applying them.

Miss Ho applies this strategy to the teaching of other topics. In the teaching of the passive voice, she first introduced the word order of a common sentence using SVO on the PowerPoint slides. Then she used flash cards to teach the changes in the sequence of the agent and the recipient and highlighted the initial letter by making it bigger in size.



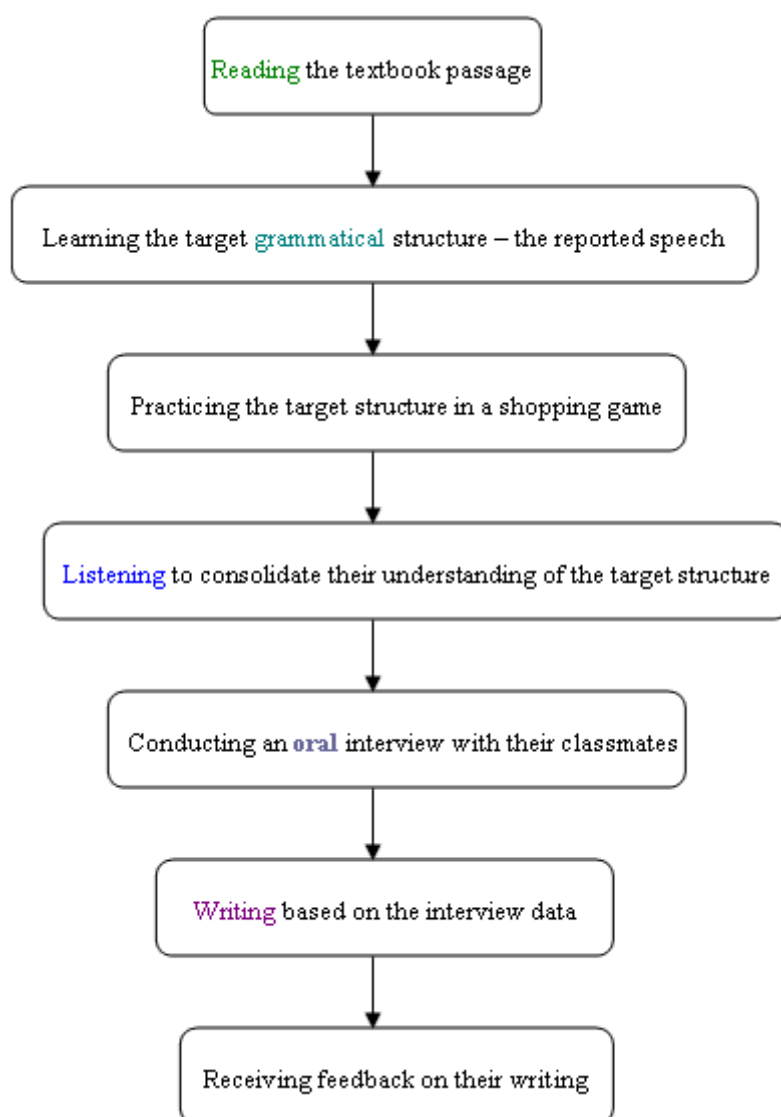


## Integration of Skills

Miss Ho integrates a broad range of language skills in a teaching unit, including grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening, speaking and writing.

In a unit on "charities", she started off by helping students develop their reading skills and learn the vocabulary related to the topic from the reading text. In the grammar lessons that followed, after the structure of the reported speech had been introduced, students practised using the target structure in a [shopping game](#) and [a listening activity](#). With sufficient input, Miss Ho then prepared them to write in the pre-writing lesson. The students interviewed their classmates about their involvement in charity work before they proceeded to write a report based on the information gathered from the interview.

The following diagram illustrates how various language skills were integrated within the unit. Through the integration of skills, the teacher made learning more realistic and purposeful for the students.



By now, you should have seen a broad range of strategies that different teachers have adopted to cater for students of lower ability.

These strategies all have one thing in common. They have been devised to suit the abilities, needs, interests, preferences and learning styles of the students. Tasks and activities designed as well as teaching and learning materials used all aim at arousing students' interest in the topic, keeping them involved in the lesson, helping them see each other as resources for learning and hence take greater responsibility for their own learning. This is achieved through:

- Different forms of cooperative learning where peer support is elicited
- The breaking up of language tasks and activities into more manageable and digestible smaller units
- The systematic and gradual progression from easier to more challenging tasks
- The integration of different language skills

The strategies have proved to play a significant role in developing as well as strengthening students' confidence in learning and using English, the success of which can be attributed to two major aspects:

- The teachers' genuine understanding of the linguistic, cultural, psychological, cognitive and affective factors that hinder the learning progress of their students
- Their readiness to tailor as well as adapt tasks and materials to meet their needs