Using authentic audio-visual materials in primary school
English language classrooms

Background

Hong Kong primary school students are often given tailor-made ELT materials for learning in the classroom. These are considered more appropriate as they are adapted to Hong Kong students’ English language standard. However, some Hong Kong students still find it hard to communicate with native-speakers of English in genuine daily situations after receiving English language education for more than ten years. We see a gap between what students learn at school and how the language is used in everyday life. This is a sign suggesting that while we need learning materials which are close to students’ language abilities, students should not be denied the opportunity to interact with real-life authentic materials. As the English Language Curriculum Guide (P.15) indicates “Mastery of an authentic text gives learners a strong feeling of achievement and motivates them for further development.” Taking on board this idea, teachers in Ching Chung Hau Po Woon Primary School introduced authentic audio-visual materials to their students.

Authentic materials refer to texts we encounter in everyday life. They usually demonstrate language in use for some genuine communicative purposes (English language curriculum Guide P.15). Teachers in Hong Kong may find it difficult to incorporate authentic materials into the classroom because they are not native speakers of English. However, thanks to the ever-improving technology, English television programmes in VCD and DVD formats give students and teachers a very handy way of accessing real life English in the classroom.

This paper aims at describing how this school planned and implemented the idea of introducing authentic audio-visual materials into the school curriculum. Students and teachers’ feelings about the project and knowledge generated from the process will be presented in the following sections.
Why incorporate authentic audio-visual materials into the English language curriculum?

Teachers at the Ching Chung Hau Po Woon Primary school selected authentic audio-visual materials as one of the curriculum focuses for Primary 4 students for the following reasons:

First, “video is a good means of bringing ‘a slice of living language’ into the classroom” (Allan, 1986 P.48). With real people and real setting in the production process, examples of language use in videos are life-like. Audiences can see and listen to the communication between people in videos which resembles actual communication processes in the real world. This daily language presented in videos benefit students in two ways. It re-affirms to students that what they are learning in the classroom is actually used in the real world. Also, students may gain confidence in using English when dealing with real world situations as they have already been exposed to real English in the classroom. While choosing the authentic materials for their students, teachers deliberately selected materials produced in America which is made with real American English for the purpose of entertaining American children. They are free from typical ELT features like very slow speech and very simple vocabulary. It is hoped that through watching the English videos, students in Hong Kong get a slice of American English and American life. They watch English videos made for real television audiences rather than for second language learners.

Second, considering the fact that most students in Hau Po Woon primary school are from average family backgrounds with limited English exposure, video programmes with abundant English language create a language-rich environment where students can interact with correct pronunciation, stress and intonation. In normal Hong Kong classrooms, primary school students are exposed to very little English other than their textbooks and English teachers. This problem is one of the major stumbling blocks for students to communicate effectively when meeting real situations requiring English communication such as talking to an English-speaking tourist in Hong Kong. Authentic audio-visual materials provide extensive models of speech and pronunciation from native speakers of English. The authentic audio-visual materials chosen by the Ching Chung Hau Po Woon primary school demonstrate to students how Caucasian and African Americans speaking English with different accents and this provides students with a better taste of realistic spoken English. The use of DVDs with English subtitles is also a great help to students who can then match speaking with the written language if they have problems following fast native speakers’ speaking pace.

The fact that children usually associate television with entertainment (Allan 1986 p.49) is another reason for incorporating authentic audio-visual materials into the school curriculum.
According to a pre-programme questionnaire conducted with Hau Po Woon Primary school students, two-third (62.5%) of the Primary Four students spend more than three hours every day watching television. This figure suggests that in general watching television is Hong Kong children’s most favourite leisure time activity. Children expect to see something interesting when the television is turned on at home. Children’s expectation will be the same when a video is shown in the classroom. It is hoped that authentic audio-visual materials can further boost students’ interest in learning English. Letting learners associate English with fun could be an effective way in enhancing their motivation to learn English.

Another important rationale concerns the cultural aspect of learning a language. ELT textbooks often ignore the cultural aspect of a language. However, a positive feeling towards the culture of a language will guarantee more effective and efficient learning of a language. We hope that through watching authentic audio-visual materials, children will develop attachment to English-speaking culture by understanding more about American life. In fact, research (Robertson and Nocon, 1996) has shown that it is possible for learners to develop positive attitudes towards another culture through instructional program that allows learners to have meaningful interaction with members of the target culture. In this regard, culture is introduced to the Hau Po Woon Primary school in two main ways. Teachers explicitly teach American culture or other cultures mentioned in the programme. Teachers also teach some simple American slang whenever appropriate.

The authentic audio-visual materials chosen by this school have another exceptional feature: they are divided into small episodes in manageable length. Unlike conventional English movies which are too long to cover in a primary school lesson time which is usually 35 minutes, the selected materials are short and do not follow a particular sequence. They also cover wide snippets of everyday life situations where language is at work. Teachers can easily choose an episode they like to suit the curriculum development of their school.
How are authentic audio-visual materials incorporated into the English language curriculum?

Teachers have laid down three principles of incorporating authentic audio-visual materials into the English curriculum.

**Integrating the four language skills**

The four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening have to be integrated into the curriculum. While designing the curriculum, teachers realized that authentic audio-visual materials cannot be introduced to the school as a stand alone project. To consolidate knowledge learned from coursebooks, other English lessons and authentic audio-visual materials, there is a need to design a curriculum integrating the four language skills: reading, speaking, listening and reading. That way, students can recycle the language they learn in different English classes.

**Matching central curriculum and authentic audio-visual materials**

The videos are chosen to match specific modules determined by the school. Teachers design pre-viewing, while-viewing and post-viewing exercises based on the modules. The advantage of designing audio-visual materials around a textbook theme is that students will be able to explore another perspective of the same topic and see how the topic is treated differently in different media. It is hoped that this approach will lead to deeper understanding of different topics.

**Introducing phonic skills**

Phonic skills are introduced when necessary because students at the school were not taught phonic skills systematically from P1 to P3. Videos packed with language are most useful in developing pronunciation skills. Teachers involved would like to use the opportunity to demonstrate how the different sounds are pronounced by native speakers of English.

Five teachers at Primary Four level have been involved in the programme, each teaching a class of eighteen to thirty-six students. They take turns to design programmes matching modular themes, utilizing the four language skills and teaching students phonic skills. They also write teacher’s diary recording students’ performance and suggestions. A number of English language DVD programmes with English subtitles were bought for the purpose of teaching. The DVD programmes are shown to students every other week.
Feedback from students:

The following is some oral feedback extracted from student interviews.

Enhanced interest in authentic English language audio-visual materials

I now watch “Sesame Street” at home even though my mother does not speak English.
I felt very happy watching the programmes.
I watch more English ETV after watching the “Sesame Street” programmes.
I watch more English television programmes at home.
The programmes are fun.
I like the programmes very much. Elmo is very lovely.
I would like to watch more English programmes at school.
I like watching the programmes at school with teachers and pupils.

Raised awareness towards differences between different culture

I noticed differences between Hong Kong and different parts of the world. For example, in Portugal people celebrated New Year with a “punada” (a breakable DIY container filled with sweets).

I noticed differences between English that we speak and American English in the DVDs.
The mail box in the USA is different from ours. There is a little flag attached to the mailbox.

Improved self-perception of English language proficiency

My listening skills and vocabulary are improved.
I learn more English.
The subtitles really help me understand the English.
The programme improved my writing skills. I didn’t write that much in the past.
The programme improved my listening skills.
The programme improved my speaking skills.
Feedback from teachers:

The following is some written feedback drawn from five teachers’ diaries.

Students showed interest in English language authentic videos
Students are interested in the cartoon characters.
Students are so excited when watching films.
Students tried to read the subtitles.
They seemed to be concentrated and involved. This may be related to their past experience (Festival)
They loved the programmes.
The video is funny and students like it.

Students were motivated to do tasks related to the audio-visual programmes
Students are eager to finish the worksheets.
Students have quite good writing pieces.
Students enjoy writing a greeting card.

Students noticed cultural differences from videos
Students are attracted by the customs of different countries.
Students learnt special American word “lick” and they discussed this manner in class. They find that it’s not clean or suitable to do that.

Experience generated from using authentic audio-visual materials in the primary school

Teachers need to be sensitive to students’ understanding of the video. When half of the students do not understand the content of the videos, teachers have to pause and explain. Overlooking students’ problems and keeping on showing the video could undermine students’ interest in further watching.

Part of the video needs to be played a few times. Since the videos are not produced for second language learners and are mixed with some culture specific knowledge, students need to watch some parts repeatedly with teachers’ help.

Students are very interested in comparing cultural differences. They are very aware that they watch videos made in another country and therefore there are customs and behaviors which are different from their local experience. Students like teachers’ explicit teaching of these new
knowledge and behaviors and are more ready to accept them. Teachers could make use of this opportunity to initiate discussions among students. This is the moment when the language is taught in a cultural context.

Bibliography:


Some sample work:

Ching Chung Hau Po Woon Primary School

Primary 4 English Language

Module: Writing an email to Elmo about Chinese New Year

Write to me about Chinese New Year!
Sesame Street-Mail

Watch Elmo’s show on “mail” and finish the following tasks.

Task 1
Tell what Mr. Noodle should do when mailing a letter.

You can’t mail a letter in a garbage can. It is for gar_____.

You can’t mail a letter in a basketball net.

You mail a letter into the _________ box.

Task 2
Steps for mailing a letter.

1. Put the letter into the en__________.

2. Then I li______ it closed.

3. Put a st_______ on the envelope.

4. Put the _________ into the mail box.

Task 3
Discuss with your classmates four examples of mail.

1._______________ 2._______________

3._______________ 4._______________
To: chanyw@cchpwpws.mysch.net
From: Elmo <elmo@sesamestreet.com>
Subject: How do you celebrate Chinese New year?

Dear P.4 students in Hau Pa Woon Primary School,

How are you? I hope you enjoyed celebrating the coming of 2005 on 1st January, 2005. I had a big party with my Sesame Street friends such as Big Bird, Cookie Monster and Ernie. We counted down together on the New Year eve and shared a lot of food like chicken wings, potato chips, cheese cakes and soft drinks. Each of us made wishes for the coming year.

I know that Chinese people celebrate the Chinese New year in February. Tell me more about what you do in the Chinese New year.

Please write back soon, because I really want to know the answer!

Regards

Elmo
**Task 4**  Write an email to Elmo

Read Elmo’s email and write back to him. Before you write the reply, finish the following tasks which may help you to write the reply.

**Task 5**

You can write a paragraph in your reply about what you do in the Chinese New Year. The following record may help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I do for Chinese New Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Received (1) ________ money from parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) ____________ relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had (3) ___________ reunion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said “Gong Hei Fat (4) __________” to relatives and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) ____________ lion (6) ____________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped mother to cook (7) _________ meal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) _________________ fireworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) _________ _______ new clothes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Task 6

You can also write a paragraph about what you eat during the Chinese New Year. In groups of four to five, tell your classmates your favourite food for Chinese New Year. Finally, find a group representative to report to your teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you like red/black melons?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like dumpkins?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like tu cakes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like swallows?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like dried coconut meat?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like glutinous rice cake?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you like lotus seeds?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Task 4
Write an email to Elmo about Chinese New year.

To:
Subject:
A Reply to Elmo's E-mail

Dear Elmo,

How are you?

Happy New Year, Elmo! On New Year's Day, I ate many sweets and red melon seeds. And I put on my new clothes and said "Happy New Year" to my parents.

In the afternoon we had a family reunion. My Uncle and Auntie came to our flat. They gave me red packets.

In the evening we all visited Grandma and Grandpa. My mother cooked a wonderful dinner. We have roast chicken, potatoes and mushrooms for dinner.

On the second day, I went to Ocean Park.

In the evening, I watched some fireworks. They were beautiful very much.

I enjoyed the holiday. Write back soon. Tell me you news.

Yours,

Rose
A Reply to Elmo’s E-mail

Dear Elmo,

Thank you for your letter. I am sorry that you had to return home earlier than expected due to family reasons. I am glad that you had a good time in China and met many interesting people.

During the New Year’s Eve celebration, I went to a party with friends and we had a great time. We danced and sang to the music. It was a wonderful experience.

Christmas in China is very different from the Western Christmas. We usually have a big dinner with family and friends. We exchange gifts and enjoy each other’s company.

On the New Year’s Day, we went to the temple to pray for the new year. It was a peaceful and spiritual experience.

I hope you have a happy and successful year ahead. Let’s keep in touch and see you next time.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted]