Developing students’ critical thinking skills in reading lessons

In the traditional story reading lesson, students are always asked to do an event sequencing activity after they finish reading the entire story. As students are familiar with the contents of story, they simply use a literal explicit level of comprehension to put the events which are presented in simple sentences in their right order. For some advanced practice, students would be asked to explain how these events are arranged with their linguistic knowledge such as referring to cohesive devices and identifying the key words as signposts in the text (Hedge 2000).

To further develop students’ critical thinking skill in story reading, teachers can guide students to understand the concept of story, i.e. the setting of the story, the major characters, an action that starts the story, the problem emerged and the solutions. Such elements of defining stories may strengthen students’ comprehension of stories. However, how can teachers realize that their students are able to use those story elements to predict the development of the story and make inferences about characters and events? One possible way is to adopt the Scrambled Story strategy.

Implementing the Scrambled Story strategy

In implementing the Scrambled Story strategy, students are provided with several parts of an unfamiliar story and are required to use their critical thinking skill to determine how these parts fit together to make up the story. In this respect, the story should have a distinct beginning, middle and ending.

Aims of using the Scramble Story strategy:

The activity is best for group work because

- students have the opportunity to read, talk and think their way through a new story
- students can learn and practise new strategies for making sense of a story
- students may take control of the first reading to give a critical response, and to talk about messages and meaning in the text

The process of this strategy is as follows:

- Select a story unfamiliar to students.
- Cut up the story so that each paragraph is on a separate piece of paper.
• Shuffle the order of the story pieces and put them in an envelope.
• Ask students to work in groups and arrange the paragraphs to make a coherent text using content knowledge, linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world

Understanding the story:
meaning, feelings,
attitudes and values

Developing critical thinking skills
The activity is not merely for encouraging interaction among students as what group work always targets for. It is intended to develop students’ critical thinking skills through a reading task. As the English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-6) highlights, there are several ways to develop students’ critical thinking, e.g. making reasonable predictions and inferences about characters and events, formulating questions and draw logical conclusions based on evidence. In this connection, teachers of Tai Po Old Market Public Primary School (Plover Cove) tried to incorporate such elements while implementing the Scrambled Story strategy.

Variation 1
The story ‘A Very Special Critter’ for the module ‘Caring for others’ at P 4 level was used. In preparation, the teacher divided the story between paragraphs into four parts of similar length. Evidence of page numbers was removed so that students could hardly know which part of the story it was. Then the order of the story pieces was shuffled before they were used. When the lesson started, the teacher introduced the book cover of the story and asked the students to predict what the story was about. Having got the setting ready, the teacher asked the students to form groups of four, each got an envelope with the separate reading pieces of the story. Students of each group skimmed the reading pieces. They decided the sequence of the events basing on the contextual meaning. By asking questions on each part of the reading pieces that were sequenced in the right order of the events, the teacher checked the students’ understanding of the story. Then each group formulated two questions about the story for the other groups to answer.
Examples of questions formulated by students:

Did Alex like his friends at first? Why?
Did Alex have many friends? How do you know?
Why was Alex unhappy at first?
What could Alex do on the wheelchair?
What did Alex do when his wheelchair could not go upstairs?
Where did the story take place?
Why did Alex need to sit on the wheelchair?
How did Alex feel when sitting on the wheelchair? Why?
Why was critter’s Dad right about Alex?
Why does the writer think Alex is a good classmate?

The student work revealed that the students had quite good understanding of the story. They did not set factual questions. Instead, the questions required answers through students’ careful analysis and evaluation on the events and characters of the story.

Variation 2
In the module of ‘Caring for others’ for P6 level, students learnt about the problems that people are facing in the poor areas of the world. Students were asked to identify the problems and suggested some solutions. The small reader ‘Get in a fight’ served as supporting materials. In this story, the students are expected to understand human relationship in a more touching way and find out how problems can be solved if people are considerate and loving one another. The story was divided between paragraphs into five parts of similar length. After studying and predicting what the story was about with the students, the teacher asked the students to form 4 groups, each got only one piece of the story. Students read their reading piece and considered the following points:

a. what the gist of the reading piece was
b. whether the reading piece sounded like the beginning, the end, or the middle of the story
c. what happened before and after the event mentioned in the reading piece

Basing on these points, the students of each group had a discussion and noted down their ideas. Meanwhile, the students underlined the difficult words/phrases and sought out the meaning from the group members. In whole class discussion, the group who thought that they had the first part of the story had to explain the reason to the class. Then the group who thought that they had the second piece had to explain their reason
to the class. This continued until all the groups put the story together.

These P 6 students took active part in the activity when they sequenced the story ‘Get in a fight’. It was found that the students in the weak class made some sensible discussion in their own group. Regarding the gist of the paragraph they studied, they had the following dialogues:

S1: It’s about the bear sister and brother …
S2: 咪 argue.
S1: Yes. Er…they …because they…
S3: (speaking while writing on the worksheet) The story is about the sister….
S4: B-E-A-R bear
S3: and brother bear…
S4: have a argue
S3: A-…
S1: A-R-G…. I don’t know.

The students could use a single word ‘argue’ to summarize what happened between Sister and Brother Bear. It showed that they could infer the meaning from the text. Although they were not sure about the spelling of ‘argue’, they made an effort to recall it.

Another group of the weak class got a different reading piece. When they answered the question regarding what would happened next, they expressed their opinion:

S5: This question… you do not find the answer in this paragraph…you need to think about it.
S6: (pointing to the last part of the given paragraph) What do you …. They are naughty so they had a fight.

The students used the information in the last part of the paragraph to understand the conflict between Brother Bear and Sister Bear. Besides, they got some hint from the title of the book that they drew the conclusion of a fight ahead.

In the able class, the discussion extended between the groups. They expressed their different ideas about the relationship of the characters basing on their own interpretation of the contents:

Group 1: (reporting) We think this paragraph is about Sister Bear and Brother Bear…are friendly. They always play and work together.
Teacher: (bringing up a question) How do you know they play together?
S in another group: I don’t think they play… I think they just stay together for most of the time.
The student in another group read a different part of the story which showed a quarrel between the brother and sister. So he knew that they were not on friendly terms. Therefore, he argued about their relationship.

Impact on student learning
The teachers had positive comments on the students’ performance. They considered that the students were able to:
- read for meaning on their own
- read with understanding, fluency, accuracy and enjoyment
- adopt different skills: re-reading to confirm meaning, predicting the development of the story, summarizing the reading contents
- engage themselves in discussion and contribute ideas/express their own feelings toward the events and characters of the story

Conclusion
Through adopting the Scrambled Story strategy, students have the opportunity to read, discuss and understand the story in collaboration instead of solely depending on the teacher’s guidance. It was discovered that the students in the weak class did well as the able class in expressing their opinions verbally although they could not write down their ideas properly.

This strategy is just one of the many strategies that the teachers can adopt to help develop students’ reading skills and critical thinking. Following that, teachers will need to plan more thought-provoking tasks to further strengthen students’ critical thinking skills.

**Teacher tips**
It is advisable for teachers to attempt the scrambled story strategy after the following training practices of tracing the sequence of thought have been conducted in class:

*Practice 1:* To choose the opening/closing paragraph that best fits the reading text from several given paragraphs

*Practice 2:* To choose, from several given paragraphs, the one that best fits the reading text with an omitted paragraph

*Practice 3:* To study a text with several paragraphs and find out which paragraph is out of place and where it ought to be

(Nuttall: ‘Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language’, page110)
References: