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, SBCD(P) 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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Sharing the Reading
Sharing the Joy

Using Shared Reading to Develop Students’ Competence
and Enhance Their Interest in Reading

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SHARING THE READING
SHARING THE JOY
USING SHARED READING TO DEVELOP STUDENTS’ COMPETENCE AND ENHANCE THEIR INTEREST IN READING

ABSTRACT

This is a collaborative action research conducted by two Primary 2 English teachers and a Curriculum Development Officer in the academic year 2000-2001. The objectives are to find out how teachers could equip students with basic reading skills in the process of shared reading so that they have more confidence and interest in reading. It also aims at exploring how shared reading can arouse and encourage students’ interest in reading. This is basically a qualitative research, supplemented with quantitative measurements aiming at developing insights and implications from a few students regarding their change in competence, confidence and interest in reading. Nine students from one P.2 class were chosen as the target group. Instruments including semi-structured interviews, students’ self-reflection questionnaires, a questionnaire for parents and reading tests were used to collect information on students’ interest and confidence in reading and assess their competence in reading.

As revealed by the research findings, effects of shared reading are affirmative and all students have definitely benefited from it. The first objective has been achieved quite successfully. However, although students have cultivated more interest in reading English books after going through the experience of shared reading in class, they still have not developed their own reading habit. The success of shared reading will not naturally lead to independent good reading habit on the students’ part. From this research, teachers have achieved success in conducting shared reading and better understanding of reading. They also see deeper into the problems and what the children are experiencing. Based on the initial achievements in shared reading activities, they conclude that it is more important to provide students with more reading opportunities and develop further from shared reading to independent reading.
I. BACKGROUND

A. Why We Started This Research

After teaching for some years, we are still frustrated with our students’ low reading interest and poor reading habit. Our school is in Hung Hom with students largely from the neighborhood and most of them have very little family and language support. For various reasons, our students do not really read on their own. We keep asking ourselves what we can do to enhance our students’ reading interest.

We started developing our school-based English curriculum jointly with a Curriculum Development Officer from the Curriculum Development Institute in the 1999-2000 academic year. The most exciting thing was we began to build in shared reading in the English lessons to expose students to stories and let them experience the joy of reading different kinds of stories in a comfortable atmosphere. We were thrilled to see how students enjoyed shared reading and learnt from storybooks.

However, enjoyment was not enough. We wanted to go deeper into the learning effectiveness brought about by shared reading and how we could help our students tackle problems in reading so that they had more confidence. From last year’s experience, we discerned that our students still had great problems in reading. At the most basic level, they did not have the skills to read for meaning. Many students did not have a positive attitude towards and a good habit in reading. This was also one of the main reasons why students failed to
develop competence and interest in learning English. “It is not enough simply to provide children with ‘reading’ and expect them to learn as a result” (Hutchison, 1991). As teachers, how we could make good use of learning and teaching opportunities to help children learn to read was a question worth pursuing. As a result, we decided to set clear learning / teaching objectives and explored effective teaching strategies. In order to find out if these strategies could enhance students’ competence and interest in reading, we decided to embark on this research.

In this research project, we hoped that students could learn and enjoy at the same time. It was essential to equip them with the basic reading skills so that they had the ability and therefore confidence to tackle the texts they encountered. We hoped that through the enjoyable learning process in shared reading, students could develop basic reading competence, confidence and interest in reading. We also hoped that our students not only enjoyed reading in class, but also applied their skills and read on their own in their free time.

**B. Our Objectives**

The project focuses on finding out how teachers can equip students with basic reading skills in the process of shared reading so that they have more confidence and interest in reading. It also aims at exploring how shared reading can arouse and encourage students’ interest in reading.
To sum up, the objectives of this project are twofold:

- students will develop greater competence and confidence in reading after learning some basic reading skills;
- students will cultivate more interest in reading English books after going through the experience of shared reading in class; and have some positive change in their reading habit.
II. THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

A. Data Collection Methods

This was basically a qualitative research, supplemented with quantitative data, aiming at developing insights and implications from a few selected students regarding their change in competence, confidence and interest in reading. The processes of students’ learning and their change were as important as the outcome of learning.

For this research, nine students from one P.2 class were chosen as the target group. Out of the nine students, there were three top students, three average ones and three weak ones. (One left the school in the second term and eight stayed through to the end.) We conducted interviews, reading test and post-interview with the target group only. As for the questionnaires and the reading self-evaluation forms, all students in the class gave their responses and so we could get a general picture and comparison could be made.

For data collection, the following methods were used. To collect information on students’ interest and confidence in reading, a semi-structured interview was used at the beginning of the term. A pilot interview was conducted on 15 September 2000. With some amendments made to the questions, we conducted the interviews with the target group from mid to late September. In addition to some structured questions, a number of probing questions were prepared to allow for flexibility to get more details or in-depth feelings of the students. These questions intended to elicit students’ open response towards learning English; their competence and confidence in reading;
their time spent in reading and their confidence in learning English. We also noted down comments on students’ responses during the interview. Teaching of shared reading started after the interview.

Besides the interview, students’ self-reflection questionnaire was also used to collect students’ own feedback on their learning. Students reflected on their attitude towards learning English; competence and confidence in reading and their time spent and effort made in reading. Students completed the questionnaire in October 2000. For better triangulation, a similar questionnaire for parents was set. Parents completed the questionnaire in September 2000 commenting on their own children’s attitude towards reading. The questionnaire was correlated with the students’ self-reflection so that it was easier to compare the data collected. Students completed the same self-reflection form again in February 2001 to see if there was any significant change. As a summing up, a simple reading self-evaluation form was sent to all students in June to elicit their attitude towards and also their understanding of reading. Students also handed in their reading records so that we had better understanding of the students’ reading habit.

A reading test was designed to assess students’ competence in reading and their application of reading skills. A tryout of the test was held on 10 Oct 2000 and we needed to reconsider the strategy used. Students’ performance in the tryout was better than expected. So we decided not to give any hints to the students in the process. We modified some questions and prepared a procedure for teachers’ reference. It was more important to let the students express themselves freely. Besides marking down students’ correct responses to the
questions, we also jotted down our observation of the students’ attitude/interest in reading and their confidence in making attempts to answer the questions. It was felt that another story without so much picture support should be added to elicit more information on students’ ability to guess word meaning and also their ability to understand the story by context. The reading test was modified after tryout and was administered to students on 26 and 27 October. The students were asked questions on the meaning of vocabulary based on picture or context clues and they were to articulate the skills they had used during the test. Besides students’ ability in applying reading skills, teachers observed students’ reading attitude and noted down their response. It was important that the students could tell what strategies, whether guessing meaning from pictures or from context, or a combination of both, they had used in the interview. They were encouraged to tell what they were thinking and what strategies they were using in the reading test.

During the second term on 25 April 2001, a post-interview with a reading skills assessment component was conducted. The students were asked more in-depth questions on shared reading as well as reading skills. The test on skills was not as structured as the first reading test but it served the purpose of finding out the students’ progress in applying reading skills. Besides asking the students to talk about shared reading in class, we asked the students to choose one book out of four choices (four storybooks of different levels of difficulty) and explained the reasons. They were allowed time to read the story they had chosen and talked about it. They were also invited to state the skill they used in the process of reading. The students’ performance and their understanding were recorded and compared. The students’ feelings were also noted down in both
tests to see if there was any change in their attitude.

Teachers conducted class observation during the whole process of teaching to check and note down students’ progress, as well as their problems. These observation lessons also helped teachers evaluate instructional strategies. Peer observations and follow up meetings were arranged to facilitate experience sharing and developing good practices in shared reading.

‘Peer observations and sharing are very helpful. Watching others’ teaching is like looking of a mirror. Besides spotting my colleague’s strengths and problems, I keep asking myself: ‘Do I do that too?’, ‘Am I like that too sometimes?’ Also, we may sometimes find out solutions to some of the difficulties that we face every day in our teaching. It really helps.’

--- from the teacher’s reflection
B. Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 2000</td>
<td>- do literature review, explore materials and discuss focuses;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2000</td>
<td>- set learning targets and focuses of teaching, decide on the aims of research;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2000</td>
<td>- decide on the research methodology and target group, design the research instruments;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- conduct first interview with target group after pilot, send out questionnaire to parents;</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2000</td>
<td>- students complete a self-reflection questionnaire;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October – November 2000</td>
<td>- conduct reading test on target group after pilot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- plan teaching schedule;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- discuss and start shared reading;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- teachers conduct observations during the course of teaching;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2000</td>
<td>- first phase analysis;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2000 – January 2001</td>
<td>- plan teaching focuses and schedule;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- try teaching strategies;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- develop shared reading further and reinforce the teaching of skills;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2001</td>
<td>- conduct second interview with reading skills assessment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2001</td>
<td>- students complete reading self-reflection form;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July – September 2001</td>
<td>- data analysis &amp; report drafting</td>
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C. Literature Review on Shared Reading (from July – September 2000)

We did not know too much about shared reading and so we read up different reference materials from July to September 2000 during our preparation period. We learnt more about shared reading experiences in different countries and this helped us have a better idea of what we could do further with shared reading in our local context.
‘Shared reading’ is attributed to Don Holdaway (1979), an innovative Auckland teacher and researcher, who recognized the important language benefits of listening to a good story. Shared reading is an extension of the bedtime story to the classroom. The teacher selects a suitable book (or poem), generally a ‘Big Book’ with text and illustrations enlarged, so that all students can see it clearly. Teacher and class discuss the cover, the title, the illustrations and the story. The teacher reads the story to the class, re-reads when necessary and the children join-in the re-readings so that they feel they are really sharing the book. Children are encouraged to predict upcoming words or phrases, guess at what might happen next in the story or participate in activities such as performing the story or drawing a favourite part.

According to Holdaway, these reading aloud sessions provide the ideal setting for positive, satisfying exchanges between individuals. Teachers can recreate the comfortable and relaxing atmosphere of bedtime story with the whole class. With these reading aloud sessions, concrete learning experiences can be developed to help children build on their previous knowledge to become proficient language users. Each child is allowed to participate and progress at their own pace and also be part of a group.

The shared reading approach has been experimented in countries like New Zealand (The Book Flood Strategy, 1963), Singapore (REAP Program 1985-89) and Sri Lanka (Books in Schools Program 1995-96). Though there are variations among these projects, the basic idea is similar: to ‘flood’ the classroom with high-interest illustrated storybooks in the target language and to help students
develop language competence through various activities. All projects report success in making their students more fluent readers and confident users of English. Some research findings of the above projects include the following: students show more positive attitude towards reading; can expand their vocabularies; perform better in reading and writing tests; and shared reading provides good language models and creates enjoyment (Elley & Mangubhai, 1996).

According to the article ‘What children need to learn and how teachers can help them’ (Dombey, 1999), besides pleasure and satisfaction, children need to learn confidence, ‘a firm belief that they will learn to read. Children need to see learning to read as something normal and themselves as capable of achieving it’. Related to this is their toleration of uncertainty. Children ‘must be prepared to put up with not knowing exactly what is going on, what a word means ..and be prepared to find the answer by reading on’. So, to help children become readers and have confidence in their own potentials becoming readers, some strategies are proposed (Hutchison, 1991). Some of these strategies are teachers’ employment of picture cues (the visual explanation and reinforcement of the text); semantic cues (the use of the child’s own knowledge and experience to read for sense and predict what the next word must be) and syntactic cues (the expectation that the text will follow accepted speech patterns, thus allowing the reader to identify words correctly) to help children understand the stories. All these are essential reading skills which enable students to turn print into meaning and achieve the goals of comprehension, fluency and independence and build confidence.
“Reading unknown words is a prediction exercise for all readers; for the young ‘early reader’ it is an exciting guessing game in which they use their experience, their language, the cues from the book and the encouragement of their teacher, relative or friend to guess at the most likely meanings. By providing books which tell good stories in natural language, teachers offer children the best possible chance of making correct predictions. Their pleasure at their success provides the stimulus to proceed with the guessing game and this in turn brings enjoyment, motivation and further success. This is the reality of learning to read by reading (Hutchison, 1991).”

Since we are dealing with very young children, we strongly feel the need to find out their reading needs and equip them with the basic reading skills. We would like to start from the very basic word attack and comprehension skills: reading unknown words, guessing word meanings using picture cues and contextual clues and predict the next word or phrase to speed recognition. We hope that this project on shared reading and the teaching of reading skills can provide us with more evidence on how to help children learn to read through reading, and enhance their confidence as well as interest in reading.

D. The Development Process

1. Planning-Acting-Reflecting Cycle (Phase 1)

   We selected suitable big books and small readers to fit into the restructured modules before the beginning of the term (Appendix I: overall plan). The content, language and whether the stories could enrich our students’
experiences were taken into consideration in the process of selection. After the first interview and reading skills test, we started the teaching of shared reading in class. Since we realized that our students lacked the basic skills and confidence in reading, we decided to start from the basic reading skills. Shared reading was a starting point. Based on last year’s experience, we explored further the different teaching strategies. Because our focus for the first term was to help students master the basic reading skill of guessing word meanings from picture clues, we made use of different opportunities to let students acquire and demonstrate such learning in class, particularly during shared reading. The atmosphere of shared reading in class was much more relaxing and most students were willing to try. Students were able to get reassurance and felt much safer in class. Strategies like inviting students to make guesses based on picture clues, confirming students’ achievement and understanding of the stories, encouraging students to try and verbalize the skills used were adopted. We insisted that reading strategies had to be vocalized and explicitly conveyed to the students. Students were also trained to articulate the way they were learning and the strategies they were using.

2. Planning-Acting-Reflecting Cycle (Phase 2)

After the first term and based on the data collected, we had further development in our teaching strategies. Students’ confidence was still a problem. Not all students felt comfortable about guessing word meanings from picture clues and such skill training required reinforcement. Our students needed more encouragement and opportunities in applying the skills. So, besides sharing in class, we felt the need of confirming students’ achievement in their individual consolidation work after reading. We hoped to help students
have more substantial learning from shared reading and enhance their sense of achievement. Based on such considerations, we explored the different learning objectives of shared reading and related strategies. Then, we started by differentiating the learning focuses of big books and small readers. For the big books, the beauty of them was that students had no pressure during shared reading and they did not need to worry about work or assessment on them. Besides, we did not have too much time for follow-up activities after all shared reading sessions. We decided that big books were just used for enjoyment and enrichment and there were no worksheets on them. As for the small readers, we hoped that students could learn the language and the ideas from them and learning was reinforced with different worksheets. With the different purposes of small readers and big books in mind, we decided to give students follow-up activities on the small readers only. Students were given confirmation about their learning as well as achievement from time to time.

With the objectives set, we designed different activities for the small readers. There were different focuses for the small readers. For example, for ‘Fruit Salad’ and ‘Baking a cake’, the focus would be on vocabulary and language as well as personal response respectively. Students could make use of the input they had got from all sources and drafted their output. For other readers, the focus would be on vocabulary, language, content or ideas, and reading aloud. We tried to ensure that a good range of focuses was covered.

The chief objective for us in the first stage was to teach and reinforce students’ vocabulary skills on guessing word meanings from picture clues and strengthen their awareness of this. We always made use of the shared reading
sessions to teach students the skills of guessing word meanings from pictures. We confirmed students’ achievement if they made the correct guesses and told them that it was a natural thing to do during extensive reading. It took quite a long time for this skill to take root. Students still felt very insecure and we needed to reassure them and build up their confidence from time to time. During the second term, we decided that our students should be helped to progress from reading to more writing activities. It was hoped that students could write more freely and confidently and apply what they had learnt. Two projects were designed based on the inputs students had from different resources. For the first module, students were asked to design a ‘Super X’ and they had to think of different ingredients / food or other items they needed for making it. They wrote about the steps of making this ‘Super X’ with the language input from the readers. They could also talk about what this ‘Super X’ could do, recycling what they had learnt in the previous units concerning ability and activities. The students were encouraged to make use of the various inputs including small readers and big books and work out their own creative ideas. There were brainstorming sessions to help the students develop ideas and different ways of presentation. For instance, we invited students to think of things they wanted to make most. Then taking one object as an example, we asked students to suggest what they expected this thing could do and how they could make it. We demonstrated different ways like flow-charts or webs in presenting the ideas and procedure. We kept inviting students to contribute their own ideas and reminding them that they could use their own way in presentation. For the second module, the students did a diary recording what happened in one day or during a week. They made use of the vocabulary items and language learnt from the related materials. Students were encouraged to
write about what they really wanted to write and we helped them improve and enrich their work in the process.

‘It is certainly a waste if we cannot maintain the exciting atmosphere among the students. Therefore, a well-designed post-reading activity is extremely important, both for rounding up the shared-reading session meaningfully and interestingly, as well as consolidating the new knowledge learnt from the readers.’

--- from the teacher’s reflection

As we felt that most students had mastered the basic reading skills of guessing word meanings from picture clues, we tried to turn to the use of contextual clues towards the end of the second term. Besides, we wanted to help students gradually build up their own reading habit based on what they had learnt from shared reading sessions. So, in the second term, we also encouraged students to read books on their own, do some book reports and make records on them.

The impact on students’ learning could not be actualized without our own development in teaching. We kept improving our teaching in shared reading through reading different reference materials, peer observations and reflections. We had three series of lesson observations on shared reading altogether. There was sharing among ourselves and we gave comments on various important points related to shared reading to find out strengths and suggestions for further improvement. We focused our observation on the learning/teaching objectives,
teaching strategies particularly related to the teachers’ role and students’ involvement, and differences between big books and small readers.

During the observations, we could all see the impact on students’ learning. Students’ response was very good and they enjoyed the lessons very much. All students demonstrated great interest and the ability to follow the teacher. They were willing to read after the teacher. The students were involved through doing the actions and different activities. For the small readers, all students demonstrated understanding and the ability in doing the task sheets. Even the weakest students showed interest and good effort in completing the tasks. There was great difference between this and their work in other supplementary exercises.

Based on the sharing after lesson observations among us, we made some improvement to our teaching strategies. We had better linkage among the different (usually three) shared reading sessions on a book. Different objectives for each session were set and made clear. A variety of methods in achieving the objectives and involving students were used. For example, we used a lot of demonstrations and concrete examples to show the meanings to our students when necessary. Different strategies including helping students to recall what had happened, asking how students found out the words from pictures and increase their awareness, involving students in actions and really giving them real tasks were also used. Interesting worksheets were designed to consolidate and enhance students’ learning. There were always interactive exchanges and sharing between the teacher and the students. We knew how to raise a lot of different questions related to the book to elicit different responses and achieve
better learning effects. For instance, besides textual questions about students’ understanding, we had questions to help students draw upon their previous knowledge and experience, use pictures and other hints to guess meaning, predict what would happen next, reason, give personal responses and apply phonic skills. We made sure that there were ample opportunities for students to listen, respond and read aloud. Students were actively involved in the reading activities all the time. (Appendix II: some snapshots from the shared reading sessions on ‘What’s the time?’)

‘Even I myself feel very excited when it comes to the shared reading part of the lesson. There is so much to share.’

--- from the teacher’s reflection

With such improvement in our teaching strategies, a lot of learning took place during the shared reading sessions, other than just enjoyment. All books turned out to be very rich materials for sharing and effective learning. The pictures in particular were very good sources for discussion and the teaching of reading skills. We observed that our students were obviously improving and their reading ability was enhanced.
E. Findings

1. Students’ Competence and Confidence in Reading (as reflected from students’ self-reflection questionnaire, parents’ questionnaire, lesson observations, interviews and reading tests with the target group)

a. Phase 1

i. Results of the Whole Class

The whole class responded to the self-reflection questionnaire (Appendix III) in October 2000 and the data provided us with information on students’ reading confidence and competence in general. The great majority of the class had difficulty in reading and they needed help from others. Out of the whole class, around 15% replied that they would use the picture or contextual clues to guess word meanings whereas about 28% would ask the others. So, these students did not have the basic skills to tackle problems and read on their own. They tended to rely on external assistance. Despite these problems, the students were still positive since half of them said they would not ignore the problem.

ii. Results of the Target Group

The class data were very general and we had other instruments with the target group (nine students) to elicit more specific information and useful details. We held an interview (Appendix IV) at the beginning of the first term with our target group to find out students’ competence in reading and whether they had any effective reading skills. Information about the students’ use of reading strategies was gathered and analyzed. We found that when the
students came across words they did not know, their first response was to ask the others. Only one replied immediately that she would look at the picture and try to guess the meaning of the words. Two other students mentioned guessing word meaning by picture clues when they were asked if there were any other methods. So, very few of them were aware of the skill in guessing word meaning from picture or contextual clues. Most students did not have the basic reading skills. They also demonstrated very low confidence in themselves as only three thought they were good at English.

However, in the students’ self-reflection questionnaire, all of them answered that they would use picture clues or contextual clues to guess the meaning when they came across words they did not know. Most of them would look up the dictionary or other references. Four would ask the others and only one of them said he would ignore them. Despite this discrepancy between the students’ response in the interview and the questionnaire, the parents’ questionnaire (Appendix V) offered yet another perspective. Contrary to the children’s own answers, four parents out of nine thought that their children would not use picture or context clues to guess word meanings whereas most children (eight out of nine) tended to ask others instead. So, in their parents’ opinion, the children did not have the skills and they were very dependent on others.

When comparing the data between the interview and the two questionnaires, we felt that the ones from the interview should be
more reliable as those were the students’ immediate response without any prompts. The design of the students’ questionnaire might have some limitations and we were not sure whether students understood the questions well enough. The data from the interview were more revealing as more details were elicited and we made sure that the students understood the questions. Besides, the parents’ response was close to the data from the interview. They showed some understanding of their children and reflected the problem. The students did not have effective reading skills and they were dependent on external assistance. So, we could conclude from the various data that the target group was very immature in their development of reading skills and we had to start from the basics.

As regards students’ actual ability and performance in reading, the reading test (Appendix VI) in October 2000 had provided a lot of important data. During the reading test, most students pointed out that the book ‘Monster catches a cold’ was difficult and they did not understand it after the first reading. When they saw a new word, they just said they did not know. Many of them did not attempt to make guesses and they had to be encouraged all the time. For those who did try in the end, they spent a long time in making guesses. ‘Monster catches a cold’ contains a lot of difficult words which students did not know: ‘headache’, ‘fever’, ‘running nose’, ‘medicine’, ‘dream’ and ‘faster’. However, the majority of them could make at least five to six correct guesses since the pictures were clear. Even the weaker and less confident students were willing to make many guesses.
eventually. The overall performance was better than expected. Eight students got five correct guesses out of seven for this book. Even though the students were not confident in using the picture clues to make sense of the story, they were actually using the skills after encouragement and they could get many correct answers.

Despite the high rate of correct guesses, only one of the students showed confidence in telling the meaning of words by using the picture clues. The students in general did not demonstrate enough confidence and many of them needed a lot of encouragement in the process. A few students could tell the story accurately but still insisted that they did not understand the story or the vocabulary. After the test, most students found the book easier and they understood more. When asked why, most of them were able to point out that it was because of the pictures. One student said that she would not read books without pictures and the other still felt that she did not understand the book because she was just reading the pictures.

Besides using picture clues, some other skills were employed by the target group. In the process, a few students were able to make reference to previous knowledge e.g. ‘I learnt this word before’, ‘I saw something similar before’; use contextual clues e.g. ‘The monster is sick, so he sleeps, then he dreams’; and semantic clues e.g. they knew the word ‘nose’ and attempted to link it with ‘running’.

So, the students’ performance on the first book ‘Monster catches
a cold’ was quite good. With the help of all the pictures, most students were able to understand and tell the story. They could make a lot of correct guesses of the difficult vocabulary. The students were able to use the skill but they felt very uncomfortable about using it and they were unwilling to take risks at the beginning. Most of them had to be encouraged from time to time.

The test result of the second book ‘Dirty Dog’ was disastrous although its level of difficulty was similar to that of ‘Monster catches a cold’. Since we wanted to test how far students could read based on the contextual clues, only one picture from the cover was provided. Students had to read the story as a continuous text. All of them failed to guess the meaning of the story as well as the vocabulary. Without a picture on every page, the students could not make any guesses and they did not understand the story at all. Eight students got zero marks. Only one student made a correct guess at the word ‘dirty’ and told the story very roughly. The others could not understand anything. When asked about the difference between the two books ‘Monster catches a cold’ and ‘Dirty Dog’, most of them replied ‘pictures’. So, we could conclude that pictures were the most significant hints for students and they helped them to read for meaning. Making guesses based on the contextual clues was a more advanced skill and it should come after picture clues. In this reading test on the two stories of similar level, most guesses were made based on the pictures. When there were not enough picture clues, students were very frustrated and they experienced great difficulty in reading for meaning.
b. Phase 2

i. Results of the Whole Class

The whole class’s response to the reading self-reflection form (Appendix VII) towards the end of the term was more encouraging. When the students responded to the skills they would use when they came across words they did not know in reading, using picture clues to guess word meanings had the highest percentage (70.8%) (Fig. 3), followed by looking up the dictionary (57.9%) (Fig. 1) and asking the others (47.1%) (Fig. 2). So, the students had improved in their own reading skills and fewer of them depended on the others. Just like our observations in class, students began to use picture clues more often in the second term after our teaching and continuous confirmation of the students’ attempts. They were also more willing to use different methods to solve problems.
Around half of the students (48.4%) (Fig. 4) pointed out that they would not read books without pictures. Most students (64.5%) (Fig. 5) still thought that they had to know how to read and spell all the words in the book before they thought they had finished reading the book. The students still regarded extensive reading as intensive reading and they had a lot of worries in independent reading.

![Fig. 4 Q6. If I am given an English storybook without pictures, I will not read it.](image)

![Fig. 5 Q7. When I finish reading a book, think I have to understand every word, know how to read and spell them.](image)

**ii) Students’ Application of What They Had Learnt from Reading in Writing**

As students were provided with the opportunity to apply what they had learnt from various reading inputs in writing in the second term, we saw that they had great potentials to develop further. For instance, in a very simple task where students had to write about what they could do with their feet and hands, we were glad to see how the diversity of inputs led to more free expression and creativity on the students’ part. Students were able to learn from different resources and choose to write things that impressed them most. Some students,
with free space provided through the more personal ‘hand’ and ‘foot’,
could even write about their own ideas in their own words (Appendix
VIII). Such diversity in students’ outputs was very impressive and it
demonstrated that the students could really apply what they had learnt.
They showed the genuine desire to seek words to express themselves
when they were given the chance.

In the first project ‘My Super X’ on the module ‘Food’, all
students enjoyed working on it very much and showed a serious
attitude. They actively sought ways to look for words they needed in
the brainstorming sessions. With our different inputs on language for
expression and ideas and various brainstorming methods like
mind-maps, the students were able to produce their first project. We
were happy to see that students made use of the inputs from various
reading materials in their own ways. They used language like ‘put in’,
‘chop up’, ‘stir’ from the readers and develop ideas from them. They
did demonstrate the ability in expressing themselves with creativity
and organization power although they were still not too willing to
take risks in the use of language. Students' imaginative ideas were
immense. They could really express what they thought and apply
what they had learnt. There was great variation in the students’
projects. Although it was the first time students did a project, they
demonstrated the ability to develop from the reading materials and
apply them in their own writing process. It was a very promising start
(Appendix IX).
In the second task ‘My diary’ related to the module ‘Connecting with the Natural World’, the students were also able to apply what they had learnt in the lessons. They could master the phrases from the textbook and small readers and use them in their timetable. Some of them could also express their feelings well like ‘These things make me happy’ or ‘I feel happy because I can go BBQ with my family’. There was variation in their expressions. Since we had done some brainstorming with them, particularly on the dream timetable and the different activities they wanted to do, the students could come up with interesting things like ‘catch butterflies’ or ‘fly in the sky’, stimulated by the contents of the readers. Since opportunities of sharing, giving feedback in the process and exposure to classmates’ work were provided, the students were able to make improvement. The students expressed their genuine feelings in the diaries and their work was very authentic. They also showed great enjoyment in it (Appendix X).

iii. Results of the Target Group

During the second interview and reading skills test (Appendix XI) in April, the target group was able to describe and give details about the learning-teaching process of shared reading. The great majority of the target group thought that the teacher had taught them how to read in class and some of them could describe the teaching process explicitly. One student specifically pointed out that the teacher had taught her to guess word meanings from picture clues and she did use this method herself sometimes. The students reflected a
lot of learning from the shared reading process including acquiring vocabulary, reading skills and enjoying the stories with the whole class.

The students demonstrated better ability in talking about reading and the use of reading skills. Besides using picture clues, one student said that she would recall past experience when guessing word meanings. One student even commented on the skill and pointed out that using picture clues to guess word meanings might not work if there were two or more words he did not understand on one page. He had to use methods like context or semantic clues. Some students mentioned the advantages of using picture clues on their own, including the fact that they need not bother others and would not be refused by others. One other student explained clearly that he could understand the whole story because he used pictures to guess the meanings although there were words he did not know. So, the students described and began to evaluate their reading process and strategies. Although not all students used the reading skill taught by the teacher consciously and many still did not feel comfortable with the use of the picture clues, we were happy to see that they had become more mature readers in the sense that they could talk about reading and evaluate the pros and cons of different strategies.

During the reading skills assessment on students’ competence and confidence, the target group demonstrated great variation. We did not set quantitative questions in this assessment but observed the
students’ performance and solicited more general responses. In general, there was progress when compared with students’ performance in the first reading test. As for the skills, three out of eight students would use guessing word meanings from picture clues when they saw a word they did not know as their first method, while the rest took it as the second method. Half said that they would ask others including parents, teachers and classmates first when they saw a word they did not know. When compared with phase 1, students had gained more independent reading skills and they were not as dependent as before.

The teaching of the basic reading skills was quite effective. Three out of eight students pointed out that the teacher had taught them the skill of guessing word meaning by picture clues. Most of them would not read books without pictures. So, using picture clues to guess word meanings was important to the students and all of them were applying this skill in the reading process, although some of them were still quite uncomfortable and felt insecure about this method. One student insisted that he would not feel happy if he did not know all the words when he was reading. With the skills taught explicitly throughout the year, most students were able to articulate this in their response, even though this might not be the first method they used. Students’ awareness of the skill was higher.

From the target group’s response to the reading self-reflection form, the skill of using picture clues to guess word meanings was the
most important one when compared with the other methods. (Five students said they would use this skill and one said he would not). So, the teaching of this skill throughout the whole year had taken effect. Half of them would not read books without pictures. As for their perception of extensive reading, half of them still thought they had to know how to read and spell all the words before they thought they had finished reading the book. We realized that students had great burden in reading and we had to do more and explore more effective ways to help them. We still needed to give students more opportunities to apply the skill and reassure them so that they were more confident in using it.

2. Students’ Interest in Reading / Reading Habit

a. Phase 1

i. Results of the Whole Class

The whole class P.2A had responded to the students’ self-reflection questionnaire. Less than one-third of the students showed interest in reading. When asked why they had no interest, most said they had no assistance from others and they did not know how to read. The class reading habit was very poor. Only 3.13% said they would always read English books and 40.63% replied that they would not read, mainly because they had no interest or there was no help from others. So, the data from the whole class indicated that our students’ reading interest on their own was still very low.

ii. Results of the Target Group
Similar to the responses of the whole class, most students said that they did not have great interest in English itself during the first interview. However, the majority of them indicated that they liked the English lessons, either because they thought they could learn more (and communicate with foreigners) or the teachers had used games/story books/songs in teaching. In the interview, most of them expressed difficulty in learning English, including the fact that they did not understand what the teacher said in the lessons and the vocabulary was difficult. So, these students had problems in learning English although they enjoyed the lessons. The great majority of the students expressed positive attitude towards reading. Many said they sometimes read English books and they read books with pictures. Most of the students welcomed English books as presents. However, most of them did not have a good reading habit and they did not read often in their free time.

From the students’ self-reflection questionnaire, students indicated lower interest in reading. The parents also agreed that their children enjoyed the English lessons but indicated that their children’s attitude towards reading was quite negative because they found the vocabulary difficult and there was no support for them.

However, in the lessons particularly during shared reading sessions, we observed that students were really interested in reading stories. They really liked the stories and they enjoyed reading together. We also observed that students did have interest in reading
storybooks in the reading skills test. For the first storybook ‘Monster catches a cold’, most students did read the storybook carefully with some interest. All liked the story although they found it difficult.

b. Phase 2

i. Results of the Whole Class

In the final reading self-evaluation form, most of the students (96.8%) (Fig. 6) said they liked shared reading in class. However, a very high percentage of the students (61.3%) (Fig. 7) agreed that their reading interest did not increase and not many students (22.6%) (Fig. 8) often read English storybooks on their own. Around half (54.8%) (Fig. 9) said that they would read the storybook immediately when they got one. So, students’ reading interest was still regarded as low on the whole.
ii. Results of the Target Group

During the second interview and the reading skills assessment, we probed into the target group’s attitude towards shared reading in class again to see if there was any significant change. All students from the target group enjoyed the teacher using big books and small readers in class. The reasons were they found the books interesting/funny and they liked the stories. Some explained that they understood the stories and the teacher had taught them well.

All students enjoyed reading with the whole class. Most explained that they were happier when reading together. One pointed out that she had ‘a sense of warmth’. Another student explicitly said that he could follow the others if he did not know how to read the words. One student also explained that he would be afraid and shy when reading alone. When reading together as a whole class, he need not worry if he did not know how to read certain words. Students generally enjoyed listening to and reading the stories and having games on them. So, shared reading in class was overwhelmingly welcomed by all students and they enjoyed reading together in such a safe and comfortable environment.

‘Students particularly enjoy speaking out the ‘repetition part’ together. I can see that they really put themselves into the characters and feel for them.’

-- from the teacher’s reflection
Concerning students’ involvement in shared reading sessions, most students replied that they would answer the teacher’s questions in class. However, most students would not share their ideas with others. They did not like to share with others or they did not know how to talk about their ideas. They were not confident in expressing themselves and they were afraid of making mistakes or losing face in front of their classmates.

As observed from the reading skills assessment process, most students had real interest in reading. Six of the students really read the stories and showed some interest. They read both the pictures and words carefully. However, all students said they rarely read English books on their own. They still found English books more difficult than Chinese ones. They felt they did not have a habit of reading books and they found reading English books still difficult.

The target group’s response in the reading self-reflection form confirmed the same result. All of them enjoyed shared reading in class but the majority of them (six out of eight students) did not increase interest in their reading. Only two said they always read English storybooks. However, seven of them said that they would read immediately when they were given an English storybook. So, students would read when they were given the chance but their interest in independent reading was very low.
In conclusion, from all the data collected, although the students did enjoy shared reading in class tremendously and have some interest in reading, their independent reading interest was not really enhanced. After a whole year’s effort, this skill of guessing word meanings by picture clues had begun to take root in the students’ reading process. However, students’ perception of extensive reading was still very much similar to intensive reading. They confused extensive reading with intensive reading and their sense of insecurity was quite strong.
III. DISCUSSION AND NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

A. Importance of Picture Books for Young Children

From the process, we see that students rely a lot on pictures for reading and understanding the stories. Using picture books (big books and small readers in our case) to arouse students’ interest and enhance their understanding of the stories is therefore our first task for beginning readers. In our experience, students’ response towards shared reading in lessons using big books or stories with pictures is very positive. They show tremendous interest and they are always looking forward to reading the big books with the whole class. So it is essential to use interesting picture books for young learners. How to choose suitable books with well-illustrated pictures is the very first step in our process of shared reading in class.

‘Good pictures definitely help a lot. Even the weaker ones can manage to follow and wouldn’t feel left out.’

--- from the teacher’s reflection

B. Importance of Developing Students’ Basic Reading Skills and Their Awareness of It

At the beginning of the term when we conducted the reading test, all students, even the weakest ones, could make guesses on the meaning based on the picture clues and their result was very encouraging. However, despite students’ heavy reliance on picture clues, they were not aware of this process and failed to apply it with confidence. So, we saw the need to teach students the skills explicitly. During all the shared reading sessions in the first stage, students were taught to develop the habit and skill of using picture clues to
guess word meanings and work out the meaning of the whole story. We also
consciously drew students’ attention to the skill, and helped them articulate the
strategy they were using as far as possible. We commended students’ success in
using the skills when they made the correct attempt. Since we taught the skill of
guessing word meanings explicitly and told students that this was the correct
and useful strategy to use when reading storybooks alone, students
demonstrated better understanding and ability in applying such skill in reading.
Some of them could also articulate it and talk about its pros and cons. For the
students who could apply the skill, they had better competence and confidence
in reading. Other skills like guessing word meanings from contextual clues
could be included after that.

However, despite much encouragement and explicit teaching, half of them
still felt that it was not the right thing to do and insisted that they did not
understand the story in the end, as reflected from the reading self-evaluation
form and post-interview. This in turn had some negative washback effect on the
students’ own reading interest. If students felt that they had to know every word
before they could read, understand and enjoy a book, they would not be able to
read many books. It is more important that they can be equipped with some
essential strategies so that they can handle reading more effectively and
confidently. We still need to continue with this strategy in teaching.

C. Perception of Extensive Reading and Implications on Teaching

During the process, there are some questions that we have to address.
What does it mean by reading with understanding? How do we teachers and
students perceive the process of reading and understanding stories? What are
the teachers and students’ expectations of reading (intensive and extensive) and is there any gap to bridge?

We see that some existing assessment on extensive reading is very knowledge- and language-based, focusing mainly on vocabulary and content. For instance, students are given worksheets or a quiz or dictation after reading a story. They are expected to remember the story lines and memorize the words. So, they learn the story as if they are learning the comprehension passages in the textbooks. Both students and their parents therefore treat extensive reading as intensive reading like studying the textbook. Students think that they have to know all the words, including their meaning, pronunciation and spelling if they are to finish reading a book and understand it. So, they can hardly start reading on their own and they feel insecure when they come across words they do not know in their leisure reading. Their confidence and enjoyment in reading is undermined. This is also one reason why many students do not want to read on their own.

From the reading tests, most students could understand the content or development of the story by using the picture clues. However, they still thought that they did not know the words and they felt uncomfortable about it. To them, understanding the story means knowing all the words, not just the meaning, but also how to say them and spell them. However, the distinction between intensive reading (like studying textbooks) and extensive reading has to be explored. What is the main purpose of extensive reading and shared reading? Where is the place of vocabulary learning in such activities? Do we expect students to learn all the vocabulary during shared reading? If not, what should
be the focus of shared reading and extensive leisure reading? We come to understand that it is more important to encourage students enjoy reading, read aloud with the teacher and classmates, apply phonic skills and sound out words, work out the meaning of words as well as the story, and give personal response in the shared reading process. Similarly, students should be helped to transfer these skills to independent reading and enjoy reading on their own in the end. Through our attempts this year, we have helped our students develop enjoyment, then skills and confidence in shared reading sessions. However, we still fail to see students applying the skills confidently in their own reading. And some of them still feel insecure about making guesses of the word meanings with the clues. We have to see the problem more from the children’s point of view and try to resolve their anxieties with more encouragement and reassurance. It really takes a long time to help students see the difference between intensive and extensive reading and let them enjoy the reading process on their own.

D. From Shared Reading to Independent Reading

Students’ interest in the English lessons or the big books is not the same as their interest in English, the language itself. Though most students enjoy the English lessons, they still find English a very difficult subject to learn. So, interest in the English lessons is only a starting point. Besides, although all students enjoy shared reading and they genuinely like reading interesting stories, they still do not increase interest in their own reading. Therefore, we cannot assume that there is a natural linkage between shared reading and independent reading. From the research data, we can clearly see that given the opportunities (including the safe environment in shared reading sessions and
interesting storybooks), children will read and they do enjoy reading. We have a belief that children have genuine interest in reading and it depends on how we motivate them and provide them with the chances. However, expecting them to read on their own after shared reading is just wishful thinking.

From the research, we see that our children have a lot of hurdles to overcome before they can read on their own. According to them, there are a lot of practical constraints, e.g., they have no access to storybooks, it is difficult for them to find suitable books and there is no support or suitable environment for them to read. Psychologically, they find English books really difficult and they have a misconception that they have to understand every word even in extensive reading. They do not have effective independent reading skills and they are reliant on external assistance, which might not be available all the time. We have a better understanding of these practical and psychological constraints and we know we have to address them.

Equipping our students with the basic reading skills including guessing word meanings from picture context and enhancing their reading confidence is the objective of our teaching this year. This basic skill is fundamental to independent reading. With the learning and reinforcement of this skill, we hope that students’ worries and misconception of extensive reading can be rectified. The data do confirm that students need training and confirmation of their achievement and such learning does help them feel more secure and confident in reading.
Besides, students need to be helped to transfer what they have learnt in the English lessons to their own reading. We can’t assume that they can apply what they have learnt in shared reading in the lessons to reading on their own. Although they have interest in shared reading, it does not mean that they will naturally develop independent reading interest. We have to do something to bridge the gap. Just like what we have done to shared reading, we may have to bring independent reading into the classroom as well. For our students who are deprived and had very little support from the family and elsewhere, we may have to provide them with the opportunities, the resources and the reassuring environment for independent reading as a start. Both the practical constraints and psychological burden to independent reading have to be addressed before students can really start reading on their own, thereby develop a good reading habit. So, with shared reading taking root in our teaching and achievement of the basic objectives like enjoyment and learning of basic skills, how to help students develop their own reading interest and habit is our next major task.
IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Effects of shared reading are affirmative and all students have definitely benefited from it. Our direction is unquestionable. Students are also aware of the skill and they are actually applying it in the reading process although they tend to rely on external help when it is available. So, our first objective has been achieved quite successfully. However, although students have cultivated more interest in reading English books after going through the experience of shared reading in class, they still have not developed their own reading habit and applied their skills effectively. Their family support or language environment is very inadequate. The successes of shared reading will not naturally lead to an independent good reading habit, which is our ultimate goal. Shared reading in class is a means for us to motivate our students to read and teach the useful reading skills. But ultimately students need to apply the skills and read on their own. How to make use of what students have learnt from shared reading to help students develop their own interest is very important. From this research, we have achieved successes in shared reading and better understanding of reading. We also see deeper into the problems and what the children are experiencing. How to develop further from shared reading to independent reading and provide students with more opportunities will be our next research focus.
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**Packages**


**Websites**


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