

# **Title: Promoting self-directed learning in reading and writing**

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## **Introduction**

Developing students' competency to become self-directed and independent learners has been identified as an important goal in the updated English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1- Secondary 6) (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Self-directed learning (SDL) is an umbrella concept which “*may be interpreted as self-regulated learning, self-learning or independent learning, in other contexts.*” (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, Glossary). It encompasses strategies that students use to regulate their ‘mind and actions’ for learning. This includes processes such as setting goals, selecting appropriate cognitive learning strategies; and, using appropriate knowledge, skills and resources to direct, regulate and monitor learning.

### ***Promoting SDL amongst primary students***

Unlike the past when research on SDL focused primarily on teenage learners, an increasing number of studies have begun to explore the development of SDL amongst young children. These research findings have provided teachers with relevant insights. The following has been used as the premises of this study:

- A student who can regulate his/her learning in certain subject such as English may not be able to regulate his/her learning in other contexts such as Mathematics or General Studies. To promote the transfer of SDL from one learning context to another, teachers of various subjects have a role to play in promoting SDL in student learning (Boekaerts, 1999);
- Students need learning strategies that are subject-specific and task-specific. That means that strategies students need to read and write are different from that they use to solve mathematical problems. Learning effective strategies is an important early step to support students' long term development of SDL

(Paris & Paris, 2001);

- The goal of SDL cannot be achieved by one learning event. It needs to be acquired and practised over a period of time. Teachers may need to teach strategy instruction explicitly and integrate it into their teaching regularly (Zimmerman, 1989);
- Teachers need to model, direct and scaffold students in their learning path towards the goal of SDL. They need to prepare different scaffoldings according to individual students' diversity in SDL capacity (Xu & Ko, 2019).

## **Background of this study**

Students at T.W.G.Hs Sin Chu Wan Primary School were positive about learning and were motivated to succeed. However, they lacked skills and strategies for independent learning; and relied very much on teachers' help. To cater for students' needs and in response to the direction of ongoing curriculum development stated in English Language Education: Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 6) (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), teachers decided to develop their students' capabilities for self-directed learning in Key Stage 2. To promote SDL regularly and effectively in the classroom, teachers adopted the following strategies in their teaching:

- (i) Learning strategies were targeted and modelled explicitly in class. In reading, these skills involved summarizing (self-review), questioning, clarifying and predicting (Palinesar & Brown, 1984) whereas in writing, they included brainstorming, note-taking, writing technique, peer discussion, self-editing and post-writing reflection. These skills are subject-specific and are considered pivotal in promoting literacy development.
- (ii) To integrate the above-mentioned skills into daily teaching, teachers adapted the textbook to create curriculum space. They distinguished language items that occurred more frequently in verbal communication (e.g. *Shall we...*, *Let's...*, *I'd like...*) from those that occurred in written form. The former would then receive less attention in terms of writing practice than the latter. This could release attention and tighten the focus on literacy training.
- (iii) To facilitate language learning as well as to promote students' development of SDL, some reading comprehension passages or writing tasks in the textbook were replaced by other instructional materials. This was particularly obvious in the design of the school-based writing curriculum. Instead of covering a wide range of genres such as letters, stories, leaflets,

menus, posters, notices, reports, advertisements or expository writing, teachers focused mainly on a few text types. In this way, students could practise and get familiar with the target skills before they tackled other text types.

- (iv) Teachers used an incremental approach in terms of skill training. At first, these skills were modelled and treated as discrete practice; then gradually they were integrated and practised repeatedly in subsequent tasks. The principle of recycling was implemented in the overall curriculum design.

## **Literacy Strategies within an SDL Framework:**

### **Promoting SDL in reading**

Teachers used *reciprocal teaching* to promote SDL in the reading lessons. They aimed at using this strategy to help improve students' comprehension power and develop their pivotal ability to read to learn independently. Reciprocal teaching, an instructional activity developed by Palincsar and Brown's (1984), involves four important skills, they are: making predictions about the text, asking questions based on the text, clarifying difficulties with the text and summarizing the text.

### ***Teaching approach***

With reciprocal teaching, teachers adopted the traditional apprenticeship approach (Collins, Brown & Holum, 1991) in classroom teaching. It involved four steps: modeling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching. In modeling, teachers used the think-aloud method to demonstrate how and when these four skills happened in the reading process. Then students practiced these skills separately and took up these roles (i.e. predictor, questioners, clarifier and summarizer) in subsequent lessons. Scaffolding strategies such as collaborative learning (i.e. students work in groups), shorter reading texts, hints for predictions and cue cards (Figure 1) were used to support students in the learning process. Gradually when students were able to take up these roles with confidence, teachers began to withdraw their support. In coaching, teachers monitored the process through activities such as selecting appropriate texts for practice, providing hints if needed, prompting students to ask high order questions, challenging them, offering encouragement and giving feedback.

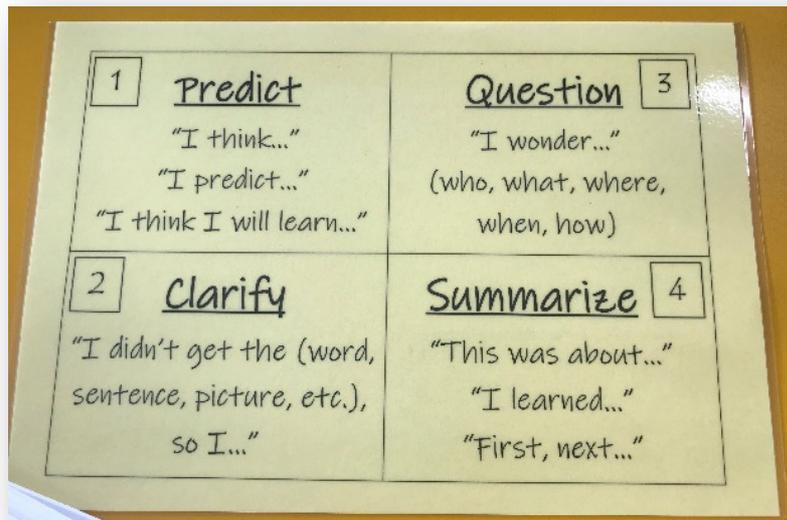


Figure 1: Cue cards were used to scaffold students taking up different roles in reciprocal teaching

***Students' performance in the reading lessons***

Teachers observed that students' reading confidence had improved greatly. They developed a new way of reading. It was no longer a tedious mental process of decoding, but an active cognitive process in which they needed to regulate and monitor to enhance comprehension. This change was captured in the reading lessons videotaped at the end of the school term.

In the videotaped reading lessons, students were asked to read the first page of the story titled *School picnic*. Since teachers did not want students to do any home preparation, the passage was taken from another textbook "English to Enjoy". With the hints given (pictures of raw chicken wings and a football), students worked in groups to guess what problems the children had on the picnic day. They then read silently to prove or disprove their predictions. After that, each group formulated a question about the text and shared in class. These questions were found to be of high quality. They ranged from basic comprehension questions: *What does 'giggles' mean?* to questions that involved connection between ideas: *Why did Patrick say 'We can get off the bus at last'?* After collecting all the questions, students then took up the role of clarifiers. They had the autonomy to choose the questions they wanted to answer. Finally, students were able to answer all the questions by themselves. When working in groups, students coached one another to evaluate their own questions and summaries. Teachers observed that summarizing the story was a challenging skill. Only one group was able to use the

connectives ‘first, then, next, after that’ to sum up the story independently without teacher support.

Teachers reflected that reciprocal teaching had taken students to another level of mastering reading skills. It demonstrated explicitly how skill application helped decode the text and, most importantly, it allowed students to assist one another to monitor and to improve their own learning.

### **Promoting SDL in writing**

In writing, teachers promoted SDL by adopting features of a high-SDL classroom, as proposed by Perry (1998). These features include: (1) assigning students tasks that are open ended; (2) providing students with appropriate instructional support, helping students acquire ‘the domain and strategy knowledge they needed to complete the tasks independently’ (Perry, 2000) and lastly (3) offering students choices and involving them in evaluating their own or others’ work.

### ***Teaching approach***

To illustrate how teachers developed writing skills within an SDL framework, the module *Helping our world/Making a difference* was used as an example. In the textbook “Longman Elect”, the reading text composes of a formal letter written by UNICEF Hong Kong and a discussion about what charity events to organize to raise money for UNICEF. The language foci are ‘either...or’, ‘neither ...nor’ and ‘Shall we...?’. The thematic vocabulary is on charity work. They include ‘collect old toys/ books, run a second-hand stall, visit an old people’s home’ etc. The writing task is to write a letter to the principal about raising money for charity.

To maintain the focus on narrative writing, teachers replaced letter writing in the textbook with story writing (Figure 2). The story is about a group of students visiting the old people’s home. They help by feeding the elderly. Then they find that they have forgotten to bring the gifts. They need to think up an idea to solve the problem.

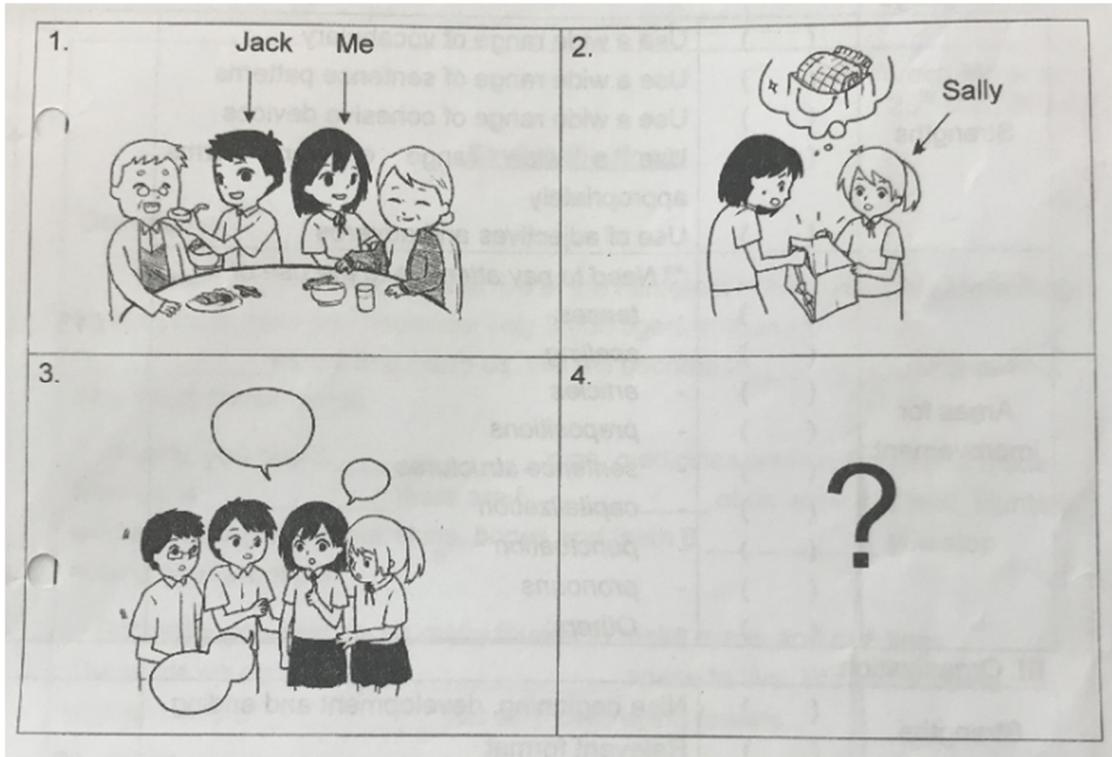


Figure 2: The picture story used to replace the original task in the textbook

Teachers believed that their students would not have difficulty completing the above task. They would be able to produce a story with an ending, but the ideas would be limited and the language would be simple. Teachers decided to provide more input before writing. An additional text (Figure 3) was introduced in class before writing:

Appearance  
What does her mum look like?

**All I remember**

My mother and I were so deeply connected I felt her heart attack in my chest at the moment she died. Day after day I prayed to hear from her, but nothing happened. Night after night I asked for a dream but grief at her loss. I felt like I was a lost child.

One day, while I was sitting in a dark quiet room, a wave of longing for my mother swept over me. I began to wonder if I had been too demanding in asking for a sign from her.

Suddenly my mother's face appeared - my mother, as she was before her sickness had stripped her of her mind, her health and 50 pounds. Her magnificent silver hair crowned her sweet face. She was so real and so close. I felt I could reach out and touch her. She looked peaceful. I even smelled her favourite perfume. She seemed to be waiting and did not speak.

I held her hands and said, 'Oh, mother, I'm so sorry that you had to suffer with that horrible disease.' She <sup>noded</sup> tipped her head to one side, as though to agree with what I said about her suffering. Then she smiled - a beautiful smile - and said very clearly, 'But all I remember is love.' And she disappeared. I began to shiver, and I knew that the love we give and receive is all that matters. Suffering disappears - love remains.

Her words are the most important I have ever heard, and that moment is forever engraved on my heart.

Figure 3: An additional text

Source: <https://www.chickensoup.com/book-story/36160/all-i-remember>

Teachers explained new vocabulary and discussed about the technique and phrases the writer used to express his intense feelings and thoughts. To help students transfer receptive language (i.e. vocabulary learned from reading) to productive one (i.e. vocabulary used to express own ideas), teachers designed a mini-writing task for individual practice. An element of autonomy was introduced into the task design, students were allowed to choose their own level of challenge (Figure 4):

FW (9) Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2019

Read the following phrases and use at least 3 of them to write.

Day after day... Night after night... 一日復一日, 一晚復一晚

grieved for 悲痛 (特指因為所愛的人逝世而)

magnificent 壯麗的

I felt like I was a lost child.

looked peaceful 看起來很平靜

tipped his/her head to one side 使他/她的頭轉向一邊

he/she smiled – a beautiful smile

engraved on my heart

The love we give and receive is all that matters.

**Challenge Yourself!**

Level 1:  
Use the phrases to write sentences

Level 2:  
Use the phrases to write a short paragraph

Level 3:  
Use the phrases to write a short story

Figure 4: The guideline for the mini-writing task

The following is an average piece of work (Figure 5). This student (Student A) met the minimum requirement of the task and used 3 target phrases (underlined) to compose a short paragraph:

<p>FW(9)</p> <p>22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2019</p> <p>Once upon a time, there was a man named Pam. He went to London by a luxurious ocean liner. He walk on the deck and saw the sea. He said, 'It looked peaceful.' Suddenly the ocean liner crashed a stone. Then the ocean liner sinked in the sea! Pam took a tiny and escaped. He floated on the current day after day, night after night. One day, he saw a magnificent island.</p>	<p>Student A:</p> <p>Once upon a time, There was a man named Pam. He went to London by a luxurious ocean liner. He walk on the deck and saw the sea. He said, 'It looked <u>peaceful</u>.' Suddenly, the ocean liner crashed a stone. Then the ocean liner sinked in the sea! Pam took a tiny and escaped. He floated on the current <u>day after day, night after night</u>. One day, he saw a <u>magnificent</u> island.</p>
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Figure 5: A sample of student work at Level 2

Below is an outstanding piece of work. This student (Student B) was able to use a number of target phrases to compose a story:

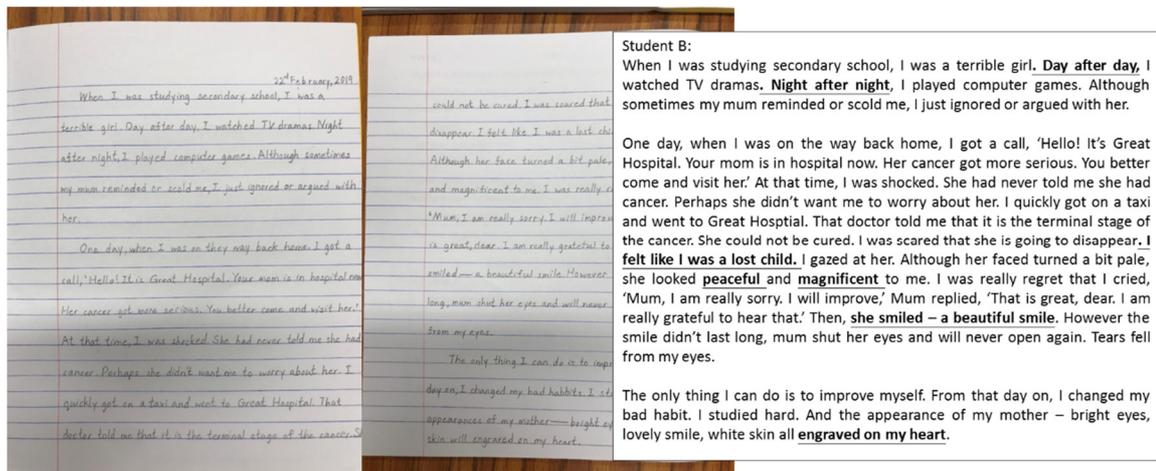


Figure 6: A sample of student work at Level 3

The next step was to enable the students to forge a connection between the additional text (Figure 3) and the final writing task. The writing task was introduced to the students before the lessons and they were asked to prepare for the task by entering relevant words from the reading text and other sources in the preparatory notebook. Figure 7 shows a sample of student work. This student had chopped marks next to No.3, No. 7 and No. 15 entries in the preparatory notebook. Students understood the relevancy of the reading text, the mini-writing and the writing task. Most of them put down sentences or phrases instead of words in the preparatory notebook. Interesting ideas were embedded in these sentences.

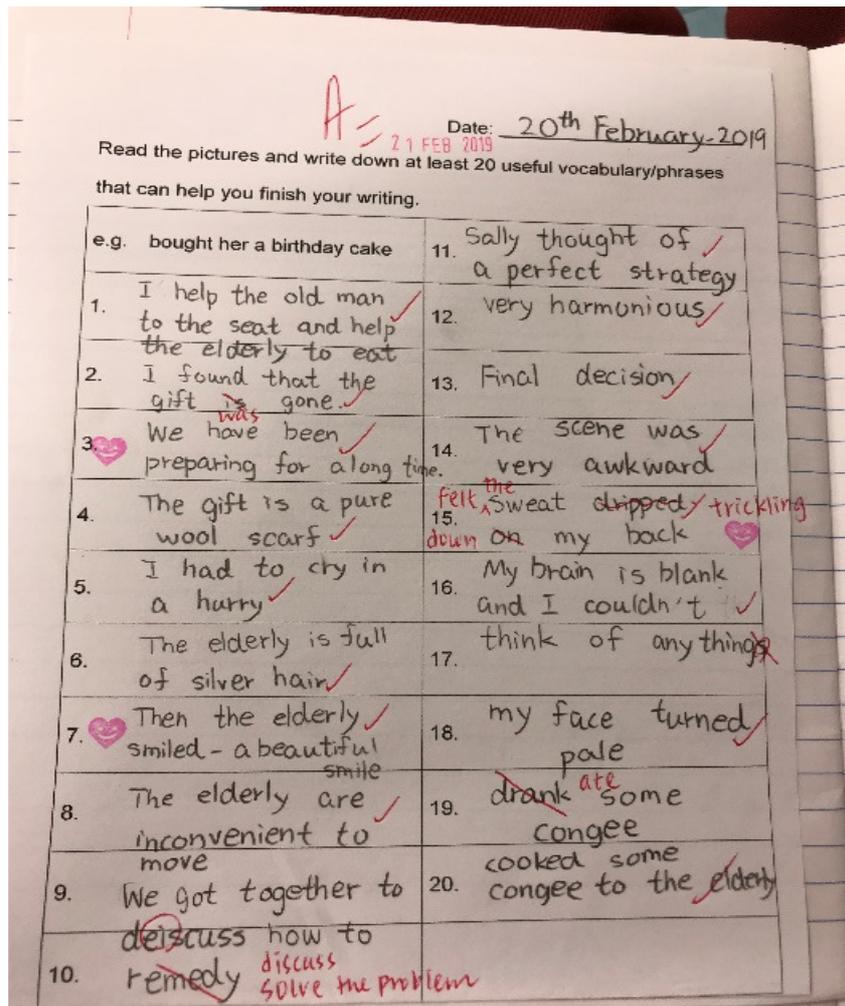


Figure 7: A sample of student work in the preparatory notebook

In the writing lessons, teachers invited those students with chop marks next to their phrases/sentences to share in class. As depicted in Figure 8, the seemingly ‘disorganized’ sentences or phrases were organized under 4 headings: appearance, feelings, movement and others.

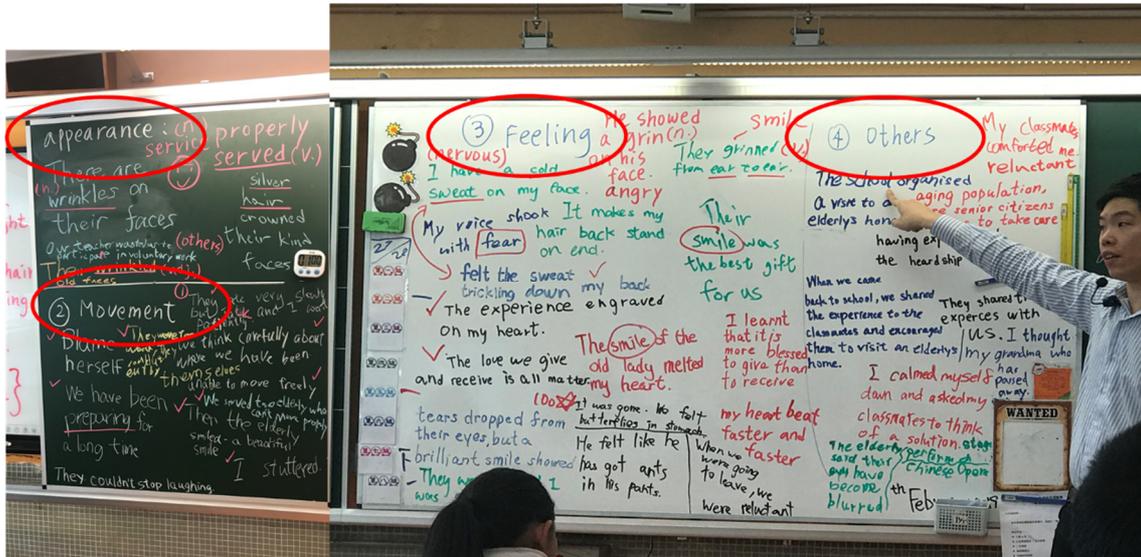


Figure 8: Grouping students' ideas under the headings: appearance, movement, feelings and others

Teachers then discussed these phrases one by one. Students were encouraged to choose words they wanted to learn and copied them into their notebook. Figure 9 shows two students' notebooks. These samples of work show that students followed the way in which teachers categorized the expressions, but they have different choice of words.

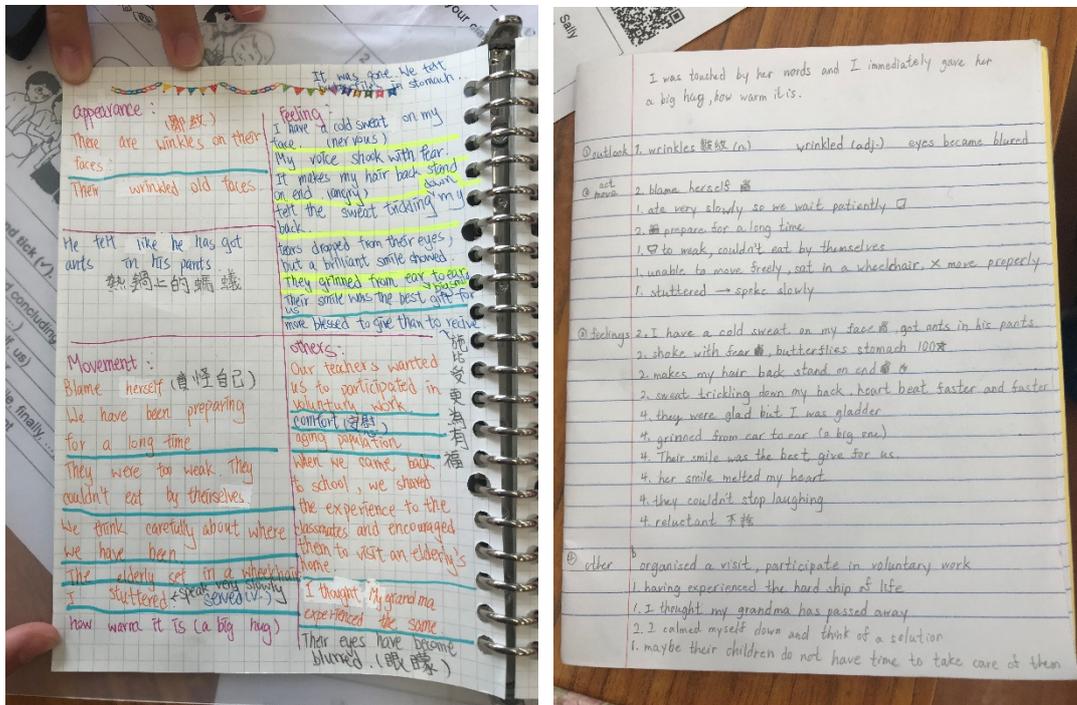


Figure 9: Samples of student work with different choice of words

After students finished their writing, they used the checklist (Figure 10) to evaluate

their own work. The checklist was designed to be task-specific, focusing on the target writing skills taught in the writing lessons. Given that, at the input stage, teachers had focused on the techniques and language of expressing personal feelings and thoughts, students evaluated their work against one of these criteria. Finally, good pieces of work were published and appreciated in class.

Check your writing and tick (✓).

Writing Checklist	
• Introduction, main body and concluding paragraph	✓
• Past tense (liked, loved, went, ...)	
• First person (I, my, me, we, myself, us)	
• The events are in chronological order	
• Time connectives (firstly, later, meanwhile, finally, ...)	
• Personal thoughts / feelings / a lesson learnt	

Figure 10: The task-specific writing checklist

### ***Students' writing performance***

Most students showed much confidence in writing. With input from the reading text, mini-writing and peer discussions, students wrote more than the minimum requirement (i.e. 100 words). The following work (Figure 11) illustrates how this student made use of the class discussion about Hong Kong's aging population to provide the story background. He also used phrases learned in the reading text and practised in the mini-writing in the writing. Moreover, he depicted in detail the appearance and movement of the elderly. Most importantly, he added emotion and thoughts to the character, and ended the story with a lesson learned: it is more blessed to give than to receive.

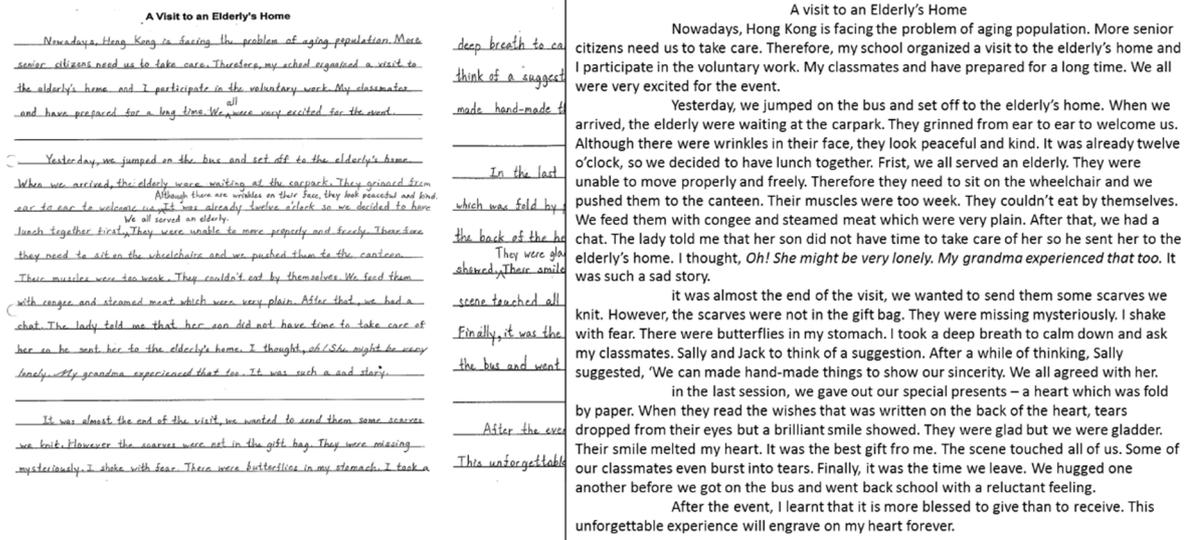


Figure 11: A sample of student writing

*What would happen if teachers withdrew all scaffolding?* With this question in mind, teachers decided to examine students' performance in a controlled setting where prompts, discussions and checklist were absent. In the Final Examination, students were asked to write a picture story titled: The Princess and the Witch (the actual exam paper is not shown here because of copyright concerns). Teachers observed that most students wrote more than required, they were able to produce stories with lots of ideas and details. The example here (Figure 12) is the work of a high achiever. The student was able to transfer the target writing skills to another context, and to provide a background to the story. He added thoughts and feelings to both the witch and the princess. He even ended the story with a message: a kind heart is more important than a pretty face. Most importantly, the student was able to use a lot of key phrases or expressions learned in the writing lessons, though in some cases they looked more contrived than natural and there were a number of careless grammatical mistakes.

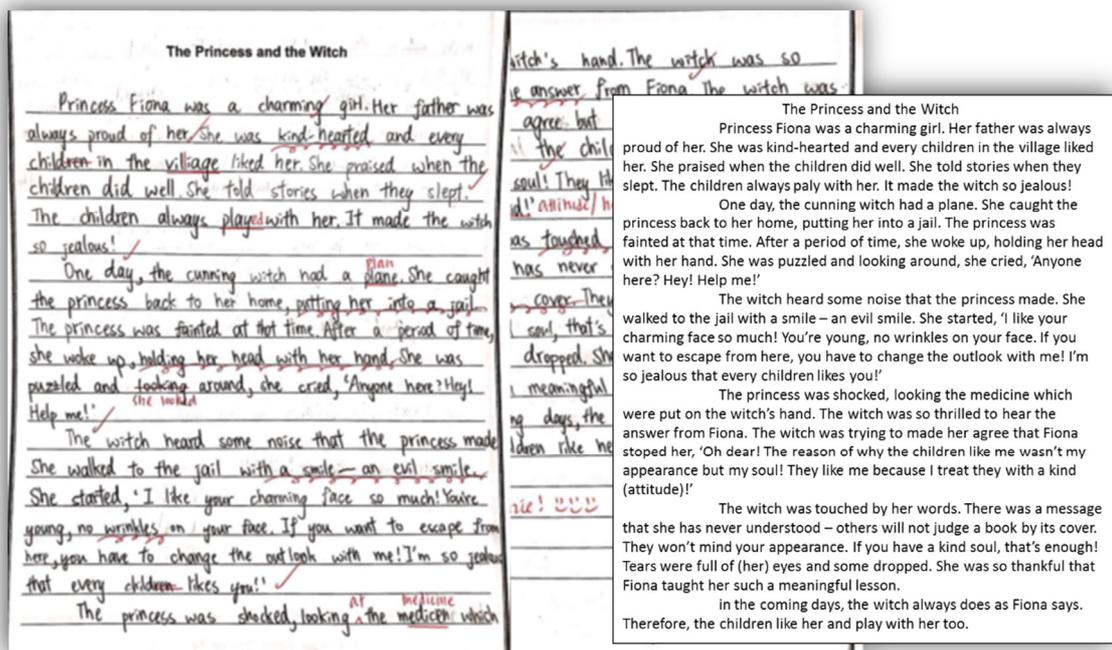


Figure 12: The work of a high achiever

## Conclusion

Teachers had the following observations at the end of the study. Firstly, teachers believed that helping students become self-directed learners is a long-term process. It took almost two years before positive results could be obtained in this study. Students demonstrated certain levels of metacognition in reading and writing. They were able to use appropriate skills and strategies to improve their own performance; monitor the learning process and evaluate the progress. Most evidently, students' improvement in writing is more significant than that in reading. This could be best explained by the similarity of the tasks in writing (i.e. story writing) which facilitates the transfer of skill application to another setting. Secondly, teachers did not have to devise many strategies to address motivational issues. This group of students had strong intrinsic motivation to learn. Their personal belief in hard work and high value on personal progress had provided an ideal environment to promote SDL. Their individual variations in SDL abilities were catered for by collaborative learning and other scaffoldings means. Lastly, if time allowed, teachers believed that they should integrate other elements of SDL such as planning strategies (e.g. setting learning goals) and resource management strategies (e.g. controlling the time and study environment) into the school-based literacy programme.

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