Title: Taking KS2 students a step further onto the pathway to become self-directed writers

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Why taking students a step further?

For many years, teachers of Hoi Ping Chamber of Commerce Primary School have tried their very best to enhance students' writing. They have incorporated different text types and writing skills into the curriculum. They have accorded importance to self-revising and self-editing in the process of writing for the purpose of increasing students' ownership of their writing. In these two years, they would like to do more. They want their students to take charge of their own learning further in the hopes that they would become self-directed writers. Hoi Ping teachers have decided to focus more on the learner's experience when charting the course of self-directed learning (SDL). They believe only by focusing on learners and providing them with authentic experience of SDL, students can gradually grow up to be confident learning decision makers.

Policy and literature review

Taking into consideration the changes in the society, the Education Bureau (2018) recommends that learning goals of primary schools should focus on further promoting the whole-person development of students. Self-directed learning is part of the important process to promote whole-person development, which includes strengthening their self-directed learning skills. It also states some key elements of SDL are self-management, learners' reflection, personal autonomy and self-learning. Different scholars and research told us the different dimensions of SDL are one's thoughts, feelings, behaviours and strategies. Zimmerman (2002) points out that

> *Self-regulation refers to self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are oriented to attaining goals. These learners are proactive in their efforts to learn because they are aware of their strengths and limitations and because they are guided by personally set goals and task-related strategies…*

There is also evidence suggesting that SDL does not mean that students should be left alone to learn on their own. Conversely, students can learn the related mind-set, skill-set and task-related skills with teachers' guidance. Most importantly, all the research and theories point to the fact that for self-directed learning 'SELF' is the KEY. The related skills and process are playing a supportive role to facilitate students to be drivers of their learning.

From goal-setting to reflection

Problem-based goal-setting

Goal-setting is an essential process of self-directed learning. It guides students to identify focuses and maintains their momentum for learning. Achieving goals give students a strong sense of self-mastery or self-efficacy.   For writing skill development, goal-setting stage means teachers let students understand that there is an urgency and a genuine need to write good English.

Hoi Ping teachers came up with four very practical reasons for their students: English is the language for study, for communication with people all over the world, for communication on the Internet and for the workplace. The sharing of the practical needs to learn English was a wake-up call to the Key Stage 2 students who have already developed the metacognition to understand what these needs mean to them at present and for future. They have to learn English NOT because their teachers want them to, but because English language is a survival skill for their future. Teachers helped them set their own goals for writing at the beginning of the academic year. Teachers advised students that the goals they set should be specific, attainable, relevant and time-bound. Different levels would have different goals.

Teachers also believe that students need to remain positive on the challenging journey of self-directed learning. Research shows that private speeches or internal thoughts of students were very important elements for positive self-regulation of learning and problem-solving especially when there are set-backs on learning. The use of positive language, no matter if it is internal or external, might be critical in helping children to achieve their own goals. Wigfield, Klauda and Cambria (2011) have pointed out the importance of positive self-talk in helping students to define their goals.

> *On the whole, the development of private speech and its evolution into internal thought appear to be important components of a growing capacity for self-regulation of learning and problem-solving activities. In the planning phase, the use of language, whether external or internal, may be critical in helping children define their goals...*

Teachers told their students that after they set their goals, they might feel frustrated on their way to achieve their goals. When this happens, they need to have positive self-talk, instead of negative ones. Teachers incorporated various resources and ideas about "Positive Self-talk" into the curriculum with a view to inspiring students that positive thinking can affect their achievement. In lessons, students learned from positive self-talk ideas such as "My brain is amazing and can do amazing things.", "The more I practice, the easier it gets, and my brain becomes stronger." "It's ok to make mistakes! When I learn from my mistakes, my brain makes more connections."

Teachers then facilitated students to connect the positive thinking ideas with the learning of writing. Students reflected on their previous writing problems, such as tenses, careless mistakes or flimsy content, before they employed positive self-talk to address their problems. Students would tell themselves "I will try to know when to use that (tenses)", "I can't give up" and "I believe I can do it".   In the next stage, students planned the positive actions they would do as follow-up actions. Figure 1 shows students' reflection on their writing problems and the related positive actions they could came up with, including, "I am going to learn a lot from classmates' writing", "After I wrote my writing, I need to read it carefully again and find the mistakes" and "I need to be imaginative in my writing".

Figure 1: Students set their goals with reference to their problems

The cycle of self-directed learning

The teachers are of the view that self-directed learners cannot be nurtured through one-off tasks or in a short period of time. It takes time for students to master a range of related skills, develop the right mind and reflect on how their efforts pay off through completing a number of tasks. Bearing this concept in mind, the school set a number of milestones at different time of the year. In September and October 2020, teachers helped students set goals. The process involved developing students' metacognition of WHY English is important for them. Then in Dec and February, they did their 1st and 2nd reflection. Students would review their goals, learn SDL skill-set and mind-set and writing skills. In the 3rd reflection, students would review their learning with a view to building the efficacy of their learning before they set sight on the next target.

The deep reflection in the process of writing

Reflection in learning is the most essential part of SDL. Deep reflection links up goals and progress of learning, making modifications towards the goals set timely and focused. Hoi Ping teachers have facilitated deep reflection through the incorporation of reflection journals. After completing two to three writing tasks, students needed to write an entry in the reflection journal. They had to find evidence about the areas they had done better than before and what areas they needed to improve. Through the deep reflection, students went through careful analysis of their own work which increased the ownership of their learning. Figure 2 below shows a student's reflection after writing a few tasks. The student reflected that compared with the past, she can now use more adjectives and more words and her writing is more interesting as friends and teachers said that her writing is fun. Teachers believe that the reflection has deep and enduring effects compared with the self-editing check-boxes they did for individual writing tasks. With deep reflection and analysis of their several pieces of writing over a short period of time, students could see how they have made a step further towards their goal. This is where self-efficacy sparks off.

Figure 2: Students' reflection after writing

Three writing tasks with different focuses of SDL

The following part will elucidate how students used different self-directed learning strategies to complete their writing My Dream Job (P.6), A New Fable (P.6) and A Recount to the Reptile House (P.5).

My Dream Job: A personal choice as motivation to write

When P.6 students needed to write an article about their dream jobs, Hoi Ping teachers did not want students to write about the jobs from their textbook. To broaden and deepen students' knowledge about different jobs, students needed to research about more jobs, the related job natures, the job requirements and some adjectives people use to talk about their dream careers. Students made records in their notebooks about their dream jobs using pictures, words and phrases. The choices given to students about their research together with the availability of multitudes of videos on the Internet of people in different jobs enabled students to understand their dream jobs from real people, the technical terms used in the jobs and learn useful and job-related vocabulary. Students were able to note down phrases like 'fabric sourcing' and 'stitching' for jobs of the fashion designer and students learned related words such as 'inspiring', 'ever-changing', 'talented' and 'creative'. And to be athletes, students wrote 'aggressive', 'competitive' and 'hard-working'. Giving students the choice to choose career-related videos was motivating to students as they were exposed to a wide range of trendy, interesting and creative possibilities. With the help of mind-maps, input from insiders of the careers and wisdom from famous people about the importance having dreams, students showed enthusiasm to write about their dream jobs with rich details of actual jobs people do and the attitudes people should have. Figure 3 below shows the content of a students' writing. With some self-directed research, the student showed genuine interest in understanding the dream job of being a Youtuber with detailed description of the job nature and resources required.

Stephen Chow said, 'If you have no dreams or targets, your life is like a salted fish.' He let me know that I need to have my dream and target. My dream job is to be a Youtuber. My target is to make everyone laugh.

Youtubers are very busy. They need to upload videos. If Youtubers want to be famous, the need to create searchable videos. Also, sharing the channel to others is a way to be famous too. Youtubers are clever. They have to learn graphic design, camera work and branding. I think learning these things are very hard but important.

Youtubers need to be outgoing. Although they only need to talk to the camera, many people will see their videos when they have been uploaded. Youtubers are funny too. If a video is rigid, nobody will like it.
Being a Youtuber is interesting and fun. I hope I will be a Youtuber.

Figure 3: Student writing-My dream job

A New Fable: Giving students transferrable writing skills

Reading the fable is a new challenge to some students. Writing a fable is even more challenging. To help students write creative fables, students were introduced the SCAMPER skills. SCAMPER is the acronym for Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify (also Magnify and Minify), Put to another use, Eliminate, and Reverse. Students learned to use SCAMPER through teachers' modelling of how a simple story, such as 'A greedy dog' who wants to have another bone from his image in the river. The following are some ideas of rewriting the story of using SCAMPER.

SCAMPER (Substitute)

The Greedy Dog saw an interesting small ball. The ball was very colourful. It was yellow, blue, orange and red. When he dropped the ball, the ball bounced. The ball was a very fun toy. He enjoyed playing with the ball very much. Then a boy came. He talked to the dog, 'Hi little dog, do you want to play fetch?' The dog wiggled his tail and answered, 'Whoof!' The dog was happy that he could play with a boy. The boy thought the dog was cute and smart. He took him home and kept the dog as a pet.

SCAMPER (Combine)

When the greedy dog was looking at his image in the river, the Ugly Duckling came along. The Ugly Duckling cried in a very sad way and told the greedy dog how lonely he was because no one shared food or played with him. Seeing how lonely and bony the Ugly Duckling was, the greedy dog became sympathetic towards the Ugly Duckling. He gave the duckling his bone and started playing with him.

SCAMPER (Adapt_new purposes)

The Greedy Dog had a bone in his mouth. He thought to himself, 'I have been looking for food for my puppies for almost a day! I hope that I can have more bones to feed my babies. When he walked past a river and looked at his image in the river. He said to himself, 'Oh ! That dog has a bigger bone. I should tell him how much I need the bone!'. When he started talking, he dropped the bone. He then realized that the dog in the river was his own image. But the river washed away his only bone. Then mother dog came with some good news, 'A kind woman will adopt our family! We will no longer be hungry again!'.

SCAMPER (Modify/ Magnify/ Minify)

The Greedy Dog saw another dog in a little puddle. He wanted to get the bone from the other dog. He barked, barked and barked. Of course, he dropped his bone. The water spilt everywhere. He then realized that the dog in the puddle was actually himself. He then reminded himself, 'I have a bone already. I should not be too greedy!' Since then, he was no longer a greedy dog.

SCAMPER (Put to another use)

On his way to enjoy his bone, the greedy dog met an old woman who was making soup. The woman said her 'stone soup' was the most delicious soup in the world. The woman said, 'I have put snakes, bats, stones and lizards into the soup! All I needed is a bone to finish the soup !' Thinking that he could drink the most delicious soup, the dog gave the bone to the old woman. At the end, the woman and the greedy dog enjoyed the soup together and became good friends.

SCAMPER (Eliminate)

The Greedy dog was hungry and after some time, he finally found a bone. Then he walked past a river and wanted to drink some water. But the river was dry. He said to himself, 'Food and water are very precious this summer because of the drought. I should keep my bone well.' Later on, he enjoyed his bone in a forest. He licked every bit of the bone carefully and did not waste any part of the bone.

SCAMPER (Reverse/ Re-arrange)

The Greedy dog was hungry and wanted to find some meat. When he walked past a river and looked at his image in the river, he said to himself, 'I can see myself in the river! Oh ! I am too fat. I should start doing some exercise and eat less meat.' Then he gave up the idea of looking for meat. He promised himself not to eat too much every day. He also told himself to run 30 minutes per day. Three months later, he turned from a 'Greedy dog' to a 'Fit dog'.

Figure 4: SCAMPER for the fable 'A greedy dog'

In the process of writing the new fable, teachers and students faced the unprecedented challenge of promoting creativity. Using the SCAMPER, students were given a framework to structure their thinking. Teachers reported that students were able to produce work with greater creativity when they could think with reference to a framework. For example, students were able to produce the new boy who cried wolf, the new ugly duckling and the new tortoise and the hare. Most importantly, the SCAMPER techniques are transferrable to other writing.

An experiential learning to the Reptile House: Self-directed learning to support life-wide learning

Self-directed learning can weave very well with life-wide learning. Students' proactive engagement before and after the life-wide learning can make learning more rewarding and meaningful. P.5 students in Hoi Ping completed a visit to the Reptile House which is situated in Tuen Mun. To facilitate self-directed learning, some pre-visit tasks were carefully designed to help students understand reptiles. Students were asked to find pictures, read materials and watch YouTube videos of different reptiles to find their common characteristics. For example, students understood reptiles are cold-blooded. They have backbones. The exposure to and study of rich resources from the Internet and reading materials during the pre-visit stage did arouse students' strong interest in the visit and widened and deepened students' knowledge of the animals. During the visit, students could use the related knowledge to observe, understand and analyze the animals. They also read authentic information of each type of reptiles and wrote notes of their distribution, habitat and diet. After the visit, two extended tasks were given to students to let students explore animals of their interest. Students were encouraged to choose 1 or 2 reptiles in the hope that they could further explore the reptiles that they were interested in and write a recount of the visit.

Figure 5 below shows a student's writing in which the student was able to integrate the knowledge in the recount to talk about habitat, life-styles and food of different reptiles on top of naming different reptiles.

Recount of the Trip to the Reptile House

Today, my classmates, my teacher and I went to Reptile House in Tuen Mun at 8:10 to 11:00. I felt scared before the trip because I am afraid of crocodiles. Usually, when I see crocodile, I will go away or close an eye.

When I headed to the hall, I saw tortoises, turtles, pythons and more reptiles. My favourite reptiles are **Green Tree Python** and **Northern Snake-necked turtles**. The Green Tree Python **is distributed** in New Guinea and Northern Australia. Its **habitat** is **tropical rainforest. It usually feeds on lizards, birds, small mammals and bats.** Northern snake-necked turtles' **distribution is in Australia and New Guinea.** Its habitat is in river and lagoon. **It is omnivorous. It eats a variety of plants and animals.** I like it because it is very special.

I felt happy after the trip because Reptile house's animals let me know more about reptiles. Now I am not scared anymore. I hope I will go there again.

Figure 5: Student writing- A recount to the Reptile House

Enriching self-directed learning experience:

Learning from peers

Self-directed learning is not a lonely learning process. Students can learn a lot in the process of collaborating, sharing and exchange ideas with peers. Zimmerman (2002) point out: "Each self-regulatory process or belief, such as goal setting, strategy use, and self-evaluation, can be learned from instruction and modeling by parents, teachers, coaches, and peers. In fact, self-regulated students seek out help from others to improve their learning." During the school suspension period last year, teachers kept using IT to support students to learn from their peers. Students had group sharing and group reflection via Zoom and discussed the strengths of their friend's writing. In these zoom lesson discussion lessons, students showed the meta-cognitive understanding of how and when they could use SCAMPER and other writing skills such as the use of dialogues, similes and cohesive devices. Teachers reported that students looked forward to these kinds of exchanges. They were highly engaged and found these sharing tasks highly useful.

Developing positive attitudes towards mistakes

Additionally, to further nurture a positive attitude towards writing, starting from last year, the School changed the usual practice of doing corrections. Students did not need to copy the whole writing as the corrections. Instead, they could play an active role to choose 3 sentences which they thought they could write better and came up with strategies to improve the sentences. Also to further encourage students to inquire through partnership and sharing and to get inspired, teachers have encouraged students to select 3 sentences written by their classmates, be it vocabulary, phrases or sentences. Teachers reported that students looked forward to this kind of sharing very much. Writers felt proud that their sentences, ideas or vocabulary items were appreciated by classmates. On the other hand, other students reviewed that reading their classmates' work has been an eye-opening experience. The good work from their classmates has been a stimulation for their coming writing. Teachers reported that students took the tasks seriously. They witnessed that many students used highlighters and red pens to make notes of their new learning.

Equipping students with a range of enabling skills

To further equip students to be self-directed learners, the School has also incorporated a good range of enabling skills into the KS2 curriculum for different writing tasks: dictionary skills, the use of thesaurus, note-taking skills, vocabulary building skills, graphic organizer and research skills. These skills support the learning of students at word level, sentence level, paragraph level and overall ideas' planning and organization.

Figure 6 shows the mind-set, skill-set and writing-specific skills the School has employed in the school-based curriculum. For mind-set, apart from setting goals, students were guided to develop positive attitudes towards mistakes, conduct positive self-talks and do self-reflection. For SDL skill-set, the School has incorporated dictionary skills, note-taking skills, research skill, information literacy and the opportunities of learning from peers. KS2 students have to write different text types and as such a number of writing skills are taught. SCAMPER and CELS skills are for generating ideas. They are especially good for writing stories and fables. There are other writing skills such as the use of dialogues, monologues and interjections. Teachers believe that a well-planned vertical curriculum with multiples of enabling skills would smoothen out students' jo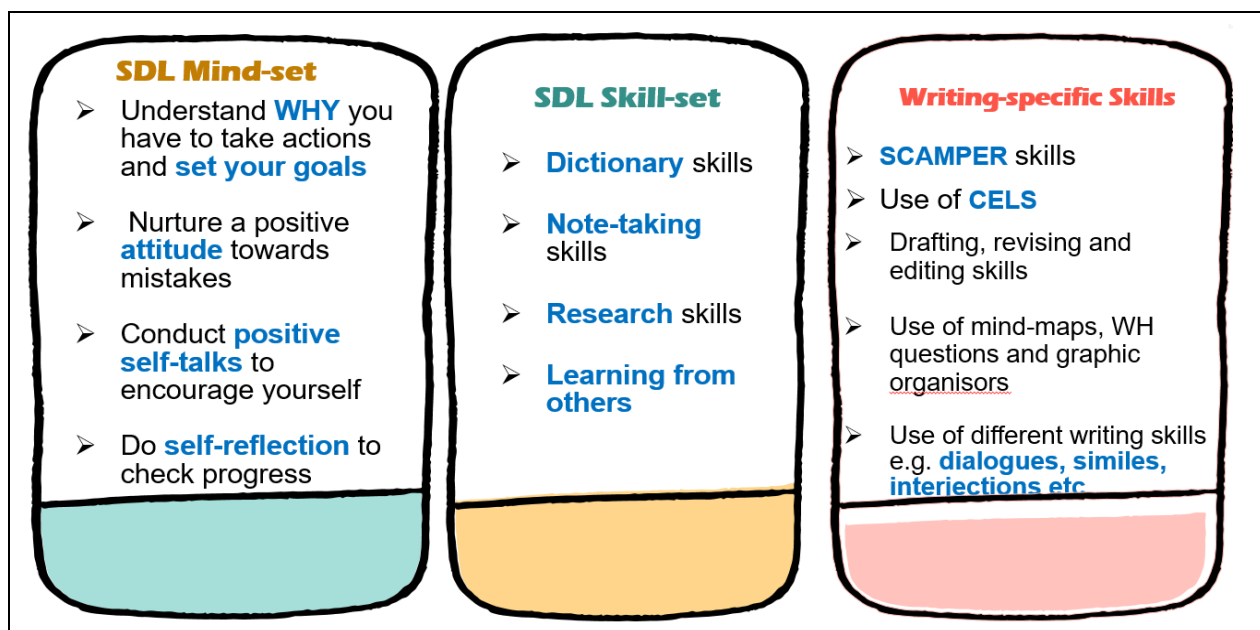urney of self-directed learning. Teachers believe that a well-planned vertical curriculum with multiples of enabling skills would smoothen out students' journey of self-directed learning.

Figure 6: List of SDL mind-set, skill-set and writing skills incorporated in the school-based curriculum

Conclusion

To lead our students to be self-directed writers, we need to equip them with not just the writing skills, but the SDL mind-set and skill-set. Regarding English Language writing, students need to understand why English is important to them. Also, they need to know how they can stay positive on the challenging journey of learning. Hoi Ping's experience let us know that learning from peers and deep reflection are crucial for heightening self-efficacy which can sustain the momentum for learning or even fuel the passion for learning. A vertical curriculum with a wealth of enabling skills would further support students on their pathways to become self-directed learners. We believe that helping students to develop an SDL mindset and skillset are valuable for a lifetime! We are hoping that Hoi Ping students are better equipped to be real lifelong learners through their SDL experiences in school.

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