

Title: Teaching Vocabulary and Grammar in Context – from theory to practice

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Introduction

It is beyond doubt that learning grammar is an integral part of language learning. Grammar instruction is essential in ESL contexts as learners need to have accurate understanding of language structures so as to fully understand and convey messages in English. Hence, effective grammar instruction is the key to success. All English teachers agree to this but the problem is HOW to teach grammar effectively! From their observation, many primary school students find learning English vocabulary and grammar laborious and tedious. They are poor in recognizing known words in new texts, which results in poor retention of vocabulary and difficulties in comprehending reading texts. Poor spelling is another big problem, which hinders students' expression of ideas in writing tasks.

‘What has gone wrong with my vocabulary and grammar lessons?’ teachers have definitely asked such a question again and again. Therefore, it is high time reflecting on the prevailing practice in the English classrooms. As observed in many lessons over the years, these are some of the common features in grammar teaching:

- adopting a deductive approach
- very teacher-centred
- teaching form only
- heavily focusing on exam practices instead of meaningful and purposeful use of the vocabulary or grammar items

This rings the bell of the English teachers of TWGHs Tsoi Wing Sing Primary School and we work together to optimize the recommendations from the English Language Education KLA Curriculum Guide 2004 and 2017 into vocabulary and grammar teaching in the School.

The School

TWGHs Tsoi Wing Sing Primary School is a new school founded in September 2018. The School management team are young and energetic and so are the English team, which are led by two young and passionate team heads and greatly supported by the Principal and Vice-Principal. Students are from families of various social economic backgrounds and hence receive different family support in English learning. This results in great learner diversity.

The School has been receiving professional support from School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section (SBCDP) since 2019 to develop a school English curriculum and to review teaching methodologies based on the suggestions from the Central Curriculum. We co-developed the *Multiple Reading Approach*, in which the teaching of vocabulary and grammar in context is made an integral part of the school English curriculum. In the actual implementation of the curriculum, we are keen on exploring ways to engage students in the learning process. Students are seen having enhanced motivation and participation in the English lessons and this has been greatly reflected in their improved performance in internal and external assessments.

In order to arouse students' interests in learning English vocabulary and grammar, teachers of TWGHs Tsoi Wing Sing Primary School have been exploring ways to provide meaningful learning experience. They have developed a school-based discovery approach in teaching vocabulary and grammar. With the design of various engaging tasks and learning materials, it is hoped that students can learn in a fun and effective way.

Principles and rationales supporting our renovation of vocabulary and grammar teaching

Vocabulary and grammar learning is undoubtedly an essential component in learning English as a second language. Various schools of thoughts have evolved in the second half of the last Century on effective teaching of grammar. The grammar translation method adopts a deductive approach in grammar teaching and encourages memorization of grammar rules and translation of the second language to first language. The audio-lingual method views language learning a process of habit formation and conditioning. Memorization of grammar patterns and introduction of grammar items one after another are two essential steps in forming the habit. The presentation-practice-production (PPP) model entails a three-stage sequence in organising a grammar lesson. The grammar item is 'presented' in a text. Learners then 'practise' the target structure through repeating, manipulating and reproducing the

grammar form. In the ‘production’ stage, learners are encouraged to use the rules they have learnt more freely and in communicative activities.

What about the situation in Hong Kong? Nunan's (1998) illustration best describes the usual practice adopted in Hong Kong. Learners are taught isolated sentences and are expected to internalise the structures through repetitive exercises which focus solely on formal and declarative mastery instead of functional use. This echoes with the observation we have in schools in Hong Kong.

Since 2004, the Education Bureau has tried every means to alert the English teachers to the undesirable outcomes brought about by the traditional approach of grammar teaching prevailing in the English classrooms and re-iterated the importance of teaching vocabulary and grammar in context. The English Language Education Curriculum Guide (CDI, 2004) states that vocabulary and grammar learning is only meaningful and purposeful if it is used in play or in effective communication, rather than for the mastery of individual language forms. It continues to point out that grammar learning is not a simple linear process, i.e. the mastery of one form after another, nor does memorization of rules guarantee effective communication. Vocabulary and grammar learning is only meaningful when integrating with task-based approach, which stresses the use of contexts to enable students to notice the grammar structures and make use of the grammar knowledge to convey meaning and achieve an outcome.

The Central Curriculum also gives advice on the teaching of grammar rules. The Guide does not object to the introduction of grammar rules but advises teachers to keep this to a minimum. It also discourages the adoption of a deductive approach or relying on decontextualized mechanical drills. Instead, students should be provided with ample opportunities to discover language patterns and rules themselves.

From theory to practice

The Multiple Reading Approach

Bearing in mind the advice and recommendations from the English Language Education KLA Curriculum Guide 2004 and 2017, we commenced the work on renovating the teaching of vocabulary and grammar a couple of years ago. When we translated the suggestions into our school-based English curriculum, the vocabulary and grammar lessons were made an integral part of the holistic teaching plan of a learning module. We co-developed the Multiple

Reading Approach and Figure 1 illustrates how it works and how vocabulary and grammar teaching are integrated in the framework.

Maximise the utilisation of the reading texts in textbooks	Knowledge and skills to be taught
First Reading – help students grasp a general understanding of the text	Prediction Locate specific information
Second Reading – enable a deeper understanding of the text through the use of reading skills / strategies	Locate specific information Decode unknown words Reference skills
Third Reading – introduce vocabulary in context	Meaning, pronunciation, spelling, usage
Fifth Fourth Reading – teach grammar in context	Forms & functions Notice & generate grammar ‘rules’

Figure 1: Multiple Reading Approach

The Multiple Reading Approach is designed to allow reading of the text several times so as to help build language sense among students in the first place while the teaching of reading comprehension, reading skills and vocabulary and grammar are scaffold systematically and carried out in each reading. The knowledge and skills learnt will then be acted as valuable inputs for the final writing task. As seen in the framework, the teaching of vocabulary and grammar comes after the teaching of reading comprehension and reading skills as the text provides contexts for students to notice and understand the meaning of the target vocabulary and grammar items.

To put theory into practice, we devised a structure for both the vocabulary and grammar lessons so that the practice could be sustained and the skills transferred. The two big questions lying ahead our design are WHAT to teach and HOW to teach. For WHAT to teach, both the vocabulary and grammar lessons contain the following 4 components:

- Understand the *meaning / concept* of the vocabulary and grammar items
- Learn the *pronunciation* of the words
- *Spell* the words (mainly for vocabulary lessons)
- *Use / apply* the words / grammar structures in context

We then adapted the Inductive/Discovery Approach suggested by Hedge (2000) and formed our teaching flow in the vocabulary and grammar lessons:

1. Notice the target vocabulary / grammar structures
2. Activate prior knowledge
3. Employ phonics skills to sound out the vocabulary / phrases
4. Engage in spelling games / rules (mainly for vocabulary lessons)
5. Apply vocabulary / grammar structures in meaningful context

The vocabulary lesson

The renovation of the vocabulary lesson began in reflecting on the past practice. Teachers found that they mainly used flash cards for introducing the vocabulary items. The flash cards were shown once or twice hoping that students could get the meaning of the words and then they read aloud the words several times after the teachers. The process lasted for at most 10 to 15 minutes. There was not any device to inform teachers if students attended to the 10-minute teaching, not to mention if students had learnt the vocabulary items.

In this regard, we pay effort in devising a structure with explicit steps in guiding students to learn vocabulary effectively. A Primary 3 vocabulary lesson is deconstructed below to show how the lesson is delivered. The prime objective of the lesson is to enable students to learn adjectives, e.g. gentle and polite, to describe a person's character. The following shows the flow of the lesson:

Step 1: Notice the target vocabulary

Teacher draws students' attention to the focus of the lesson by asking guiding questions, e.g. 'What kind of person is Gopel?' To respond to the questions, students are enabled to notice words like 'gentle' and 'polite'. Teacher asks students to clap hands when they come across these words in reading aloud the passage.

Step 2: Understand the meaning / concept of the target vocabulary

Teacher guides students to work out the meaning of the target words using the contextual clues. For example, teacher asks questions like 'How do you know he is "gentle"? and 'What does he do?' Students then identify the clues and find that 'gentle' means not 'shout(ing) at me or fight(ing) with me.'

Step 3: Pronounce the target vocabulary

Instead of showing flash cards or modelling the pronunciation by teachers, students are allowed sufficient time to work out the pronunciation in pairs or groups using phonics skills and their tacit knowledge. Teacher intervention only comes when students need help. Class discussion then follows to let students compare and contrast their own ways of sounding out

the words.

Step 4: Spell the target vocabulary

Teacher designs spelling games and activities to inject fun to spelling and provide support to students who have difficulties in spelling the words correctly. Teacher sets a target on the number of words students need to spell correctly in class and they are encouraged to set targets for themselves too.

Step 5: Observe the use of the target vocabulary in the text

At this stage, teacher lets students observe and discover the position of the target vocabulary in the sentences. For example, a verb-to-be is always located before an adjective. This step can help students avoid ill-formed sentences like ‘Sam very kind’ or ‘I very smart’.

Step 6: Apply the target vocabulary in context

With the previous scaffolding steps, students are ready to use the target vocabulary in context. They are asked to write about teachers in the School using the adjectives learnt. Figure 2 shows one of the student works on Classkick. Despite some minor mistakes, this student is aware of the use of verbs-to-be before the adjectives.

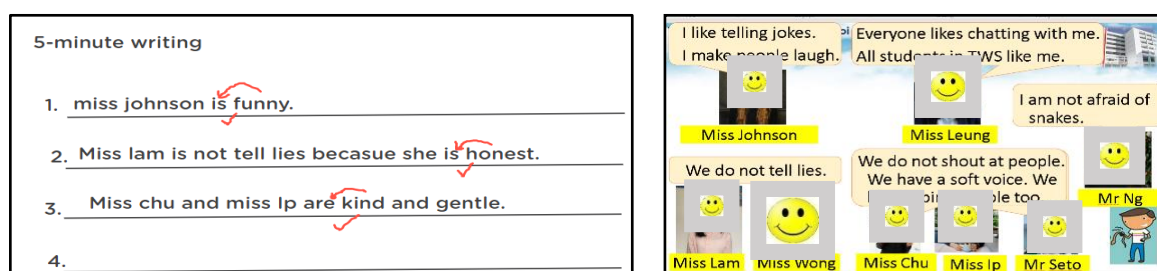


Figure 2: A student wrote sentences on Classkick to describe his favourite teachers at school

The Grammar Lesson

The grammar lesson follows a similar structure as the vocabulary lesson. A Primary 4 lesson is analysed below to show the steps of how a grammar lesson is delivered. The main learning objective is to learn to use comparative and superlative adjectives to describe people.

Step 1: Activate prior knowledge and notice the target grammar item

To activate students' prior knowledge on comparative and superlative adjectives, teachers show student works of the previous Chapter and check if they remember the formation of the comparative and superlative adjectives by adding 'er' and 'est' to the adjectives respectively and that the former is followed by 'than' while the latter has 'the' before the adjectives. This

aims to help students establish connection between what they have already learnt and what they are going to learn and facilitate the transfer of knowledge in forming comparative and superlative adjectives with adjectives that contain more than 2 syllables. Figure 3 shows how teacher makes use of student works of the previous Chapter to activate students' prior knowledge.

Do you remember what **comparative** and **superlative** adjectives are?
How do you know that they are **comparative** and **superlative** adjectives?

1. His eyes are **smaller than** Ivan.
2. He is **shorter than** Jerry but taller than Denny
3. His legs are **shorter than** me.
4. He is **the funniest** in 4E.

1. His eyes are **smaller than** Ivan.

2. He is **shorter than** Jerry but taller than Denny

3. His legs are **shorter than** me.

4. He is **the funniest** in 4E.

Do they look **alike** or **different**?

'Cola is **the most** delicious drink.'

'It's cheaper than orange juice.'

'It's true that orange juice is **more expensive than** cola.'

'It's healthier than cola.'

'The cheapest is \$4.80.'

'It's the **most** popular.'

the most expensive is \$26.70.'

they should buy a healthier snack as well.

'These are better for us than chocolate.'

'We can also get **cheaper** bread.'

Figure 3: using student works of the previous Chapter to enable activation of prior knowledge on comparative and superlative adjectives

When the text is read the fourth time, teacher asks students to find the comparative and superlative adjectives in the text. Here, students are enabled to apply their prior knowledge to complete the task.

Step 2: Generate grammar rules by students

When the target structures are noticed and located, teacher gathers the sentences that contain the target structures on a page and asks students to spot the common features among the sentences. Teacher then asks students to categorise the sentences into groups and a class discussion based on students' contribution follows. This helps students notice that 'more' and 'most' are added to form the comparative and superlative adjectives. Instead of telling the students directly that 'more...than' and 'the most ...' are used for adjectives with 3 or more syllables, teachers ask them to read aloud all the adjectives and generate the rules.

This is a total departure from the past practice that teachers tell students the rules to form the grammar structure directly. In the lesson illustrated above, students are encouraged to think and discover the grammar rules themselves. The Teacher does not use difficult technical terms but employ a simple and manageable task to help students generate the rules on their own. This not only motivates students to learn but also boosts their confidence in learning the language on the whole.



Figure 4: A student is putting the sentences into groups under the guidance of the teacher.

Step 3: Apply the target grammar item in meaningful contexts

To prepare students for the application of the grammar items learnt, students are invited to collect information such as price and taste of the food items they like and share pictures of these food items on Google slide in the pre-task stage. During the lesson, they participate in a task to scan through their classmates' works and draw comparison on prices, popularity and taste in a writing activity. Teacher then shares students' works and conducts class discussion. Here, students are provided with another opportunity to apply the grammar rules in assessing and editing their classmates' works. Figure 5 below shows the pre- and while-task to enable students to apply the grammar items.

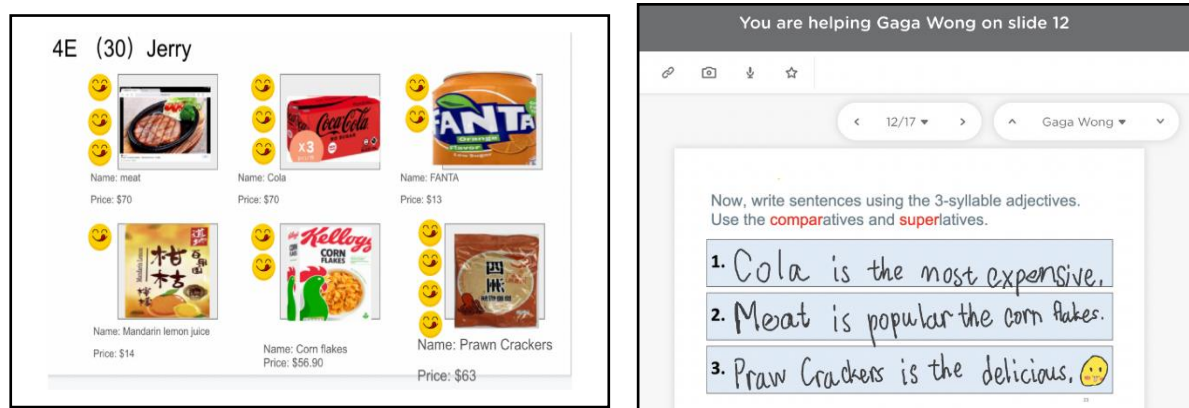


Figure 5: A mini research about food items on Google Slide and a student comparing the food items using the target grammar items in a writing activity

One Size Does Not Fit All

- sharing of various strategies in engaging students in the vocabulary and grammar learning process

Though we follow a similar flow in conducting every vocabulary and grammar lesson, teachers' creativity and wisdom have injected variety to the lessons and this makes the learning process fun and enjoyable. These strategies include fully utilizing the reading aloud activity to help students notice the target structure. In a Primary 1 lesson, the teacher invited students to dramatise the text by allowing them to walk from the back of the classroom to their seats 'carrying heavy shopping bags'. While students were happily reading aloud the text, the teacher asked students, '*Stop. What are you doing?*' and one boy responded, "*I am playing.*' She kept asking several students the same question and in this way, she focused students' attention to the target grammar structure, present continuous tense.

Grammar rules sound intimidating to both teachers and students. Teachers adopting the deductive approach are used to directly telling students the grammar rules hoping that students can apply the rules in the production tasks. This has proved to be ineffective in learning English as a second language. Here in TWGHs Tsoi Wing Sing Primary School, teachers turn the grammar learning process simple and manageable. When students are invited to identify the common features among the sentences, teachers direct some 'magic questions' to help students.

T: What looks similar? What looks different?

T: What words can you find again, again and again?

The process of generation of grammar rules takes time but it is worth spending time on facilitating student collaboration, clarifying and exchanging views and formulating their rules.

Their counterparts in Primary 4 were highly motivated when they were invited to design and write about the neighbourhood of the new school campus in Shui Chuen O Estate. Figure 6 below shows a student's design and writing using the prepositions learnt.

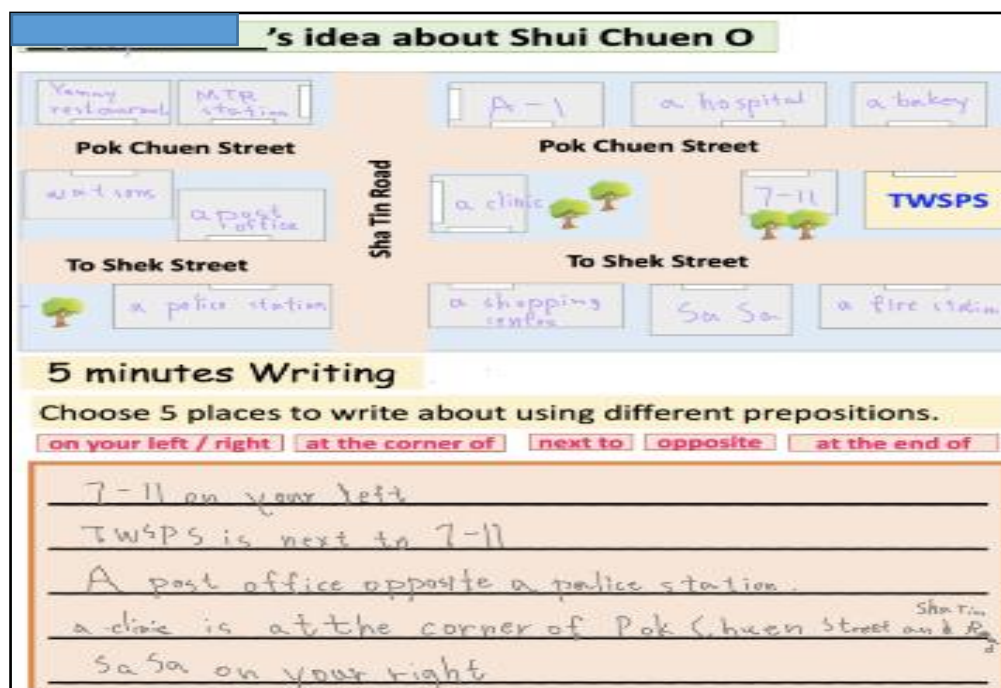


Figure 6: A Primary 4 student's work showing her design of the neighbourhood of the school's new campus

Reflections and the Way Forward

Teaching vocabulary and grammar in context is not something new. Nevertheless, from our observation, the concept is seldom realized in the English classrooms in Hong Kong. The prevailing approach teachers adopt is a deductive one. A large amount of difficult terminologies are used and mechanical drills are resorted to be the usual, if not only, way of learning vocabulary and grammar items.

As reflected by teachers, teaching vocabulary and grammar in context is easier said than done. The concept is self-explanatory but translating the concept into tangible steps in the delivery process depends on teachers' immense creativity and wisdom. Infusing meaning and fun in the learning process puts even greater demand on teachers. We deem the trials in TWGHs Tsoi Wing Sing Primary School the beginning of renovating the teaching of vocabulary and grammar in the School. To sustain what we did and leverage the related practices to other classes will mean even greater effort and determination. We hope our work can inspire you to share your views, comments and suggestions and we can progress together to facilitate more effective learning of vocabulary and grammar.

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