

School-based critical literacy programme in a Hong Kong secondary school

校本讀寫思維計劃

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Abstract

In the 2005/2006 academic year, TWGHs Mr and Mrs Kwong Sik Kwan College received a Quality Education Fund (QEF) grant to research ways to develop the critical literacy skills of Hong Kong junior secondary students. The paper describes the programme, which was implemented across the Chinese and English key learning areas, using the Four Resources Model (Freebody and Luke, 1990) as a planning schema. The paper identifies the incidental benefits of developing the critical reader response skills in which students required in the new senior secondary English and Chinese curriculum.

Keywords

critical thinking skills, curriculum reform, Chinese language teaching, English language teaching

摘要

東華三院鄺錫坤伉儷中學於二零零五 / 二零零六年度獲優質教育基金撥款，在校內推行「校本讀寫思維計劃」，旨在探討和發展有效的教學策略和資源，以助初中學生發展閱讀、寫作和批判性思維的能力。本文旨在報告這計劃之進度，並討論語文教師在面對課程改革時，應如何適應課程中的新元素，並指出學校需從初中開始培養學生批判性思考能力，以迎接未來新高中課程的需求與改變。

關鍵詞

批判性思考能力，課程改革，中國語文教學，英國語文教學

Introduction

How to implement the proposed changes in English and Chinese curriculum in 2007 is both a necessity and a challenge for all secondary schools in Hong Kong. In this paper, we argue that these changes emphasise the need for students to demonstrate a critical response to a range of texts, such as narratives, advertisements. In 2005/2006, TWGHs Mr and Mrs Kwong Sik Kwan College received a Quality Education Fund (QEF) grant to run a literacy programme, which aimed to enhance the reading proficiency of junior secondary students across the key learning areas of Chinese and English and to teach them critical reading skills. Based on the Four Resources Model of literacy (Freebody and Luke, 1990), the programme specifically emphasised teaching students to "take on" each of the four reader roles identified in the model, i.e. code-breaker, text-participant, text-user and text-analyst. We found this model applicable to our aim of teaching students to critically respond to a range of Chinese and English texts. The incidental benefits of this early intervention approach have been the explicit development in the junior years of the critical skills that students will need to apply in the HKCEE in the senior years.

The school

We begin with a brief description of the school. TWGHs Mr and Mrs Kwong Sik Kwan College is an aided Hong Kong secondary school in a small district located in the New Territories of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The small district has several large public housing estates, a large population of new immigrants from Mainland China (Ng and Liu, 1999) and in general the population is from a low socio-economic background. The school enrolls junior students from Form 1 (12yrs) to Form 3 (14yrs) and

senior students from Form 4 (15yrs) to Form 5 (16-17yrs). The students who enrol at the school can be described as low proficiency learners. Many of them have a history of school failure and some form of learning disability, particularly in language learning (Firkins, 2004; Firkins, et al., forthcoming 2007). Although this particular school is unusual in having a large concentration of students who experience in learning problem, we suggest that learning problem represents a small, but significant pedagogical problem in all lower banding secondary schools in Hong Kong.

The term learning problem has also been used as an umbrella term, which embraces different levels of exceptionality (Lo, 1998:26) and those viewed as academically less able (Chan, 1988:137). Essentially, students with learning problems are often bunched together with low proficiency students, with no pedagogical distinction between the two groups. This poses the first obstacle to any attempt to enhance literacy learning with this population of students, simply do not know the extent of the problem, or where the difficulties student experience in language learning actually stem from. We first attempted to introduce a genre-based approach to teach writing to these students in a pilot programme conducted at the school in collaboration with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2003/2004 (see Firkins et al., forthcoming). We assumed that these students would have difficulty in reading and writing English, however, this pilot programme revealed that our junior students also experienced significant difficulties in reading and writing Chinese as well.

The pedagogical problem

We purposefully wanted to start with a social view rather than a deficit view of literacy (Baynam, 1995; Barton, 1994). We therefore began our project from the

pedagogical problem at hand, essentially how we prepare our low proficiency students for the demands of the new language curriculum proposed for Hong Kong secondary schools in 2007 (Curriculum Development Council, 2005). In the proposed changes, students would have to engage with such things as reading a large range of texts, analysing the plot of the narrative, profiling characters and giving individual and group presentations to name a few skills (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2005).

The current teaching approaches used in our Chinese and English classrooms did not appear to accommodate for these new skills for a number of historical and cultural reasons. For instance, there have been difficulties reconciling traditional language pedagogical approaches used in Hong Kong with imported approaches used mainly in the West (Maley, 1985; Luke, et al., 2005; Kramer-Dahl, 2001). In general, reading and writing in Hong Kong have commonly been associated with decoding texts, pronouncing words, retrieving information (Lin, 2001) from texts and an instrumental view of literacy (Street, 1998). There have also been difficulties pinning down exactly where these so-called "traditional" approaches have come from and how they have come to be so embedded in pedagogical practice. We suggest that it has been a combination of historical and cultural forces that has predisposed language education to occur in particular ways in certain schools.

As a result, learning the genre of the public examination continue to constitute the most important factor of success in schools in Hong Kong and although it is tempting to criticize this orientation, mastery of school literacies in this context translates into success in the public examination structure, which in turn provides access to further educational opportunities and

forms of employment (Cheng, 1997; Mee, 1998). The examination structure, we argue, is an integral part of secondary schooling and needs to be accounted for in any process of pedagogical change. In addition, because of the key place occupied by examinations in the education system, it is reasonable to expect that a significant amount of time would be spent preparing students to be successful in sitting for them.

Yet despite this predominance of public examinations, Hong Kong language education policy continues to orientate to new economic and social demands and to interpret what the "new communicative order" might look like for Hong Kong (Street, 1998). So, in difference to previous policy, the new language curriculum appears to promote critical engagement with a wide variety of texts, and introduces a new subject called "Liberal Studies" which has a broad critical agenda across all key learning areas and will be situated at the core of the curriculum: "Liberal Studies provides opportunities for students to make explicit connections among different disciplines, examine issues from multiple perspectives and construct personal knowledge" (Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council, 2005:2).

Engaging the "critical" in the context of Hong Kong

The notion of the "critical" is and will remain a contested issue in Asian education systems (see Cervetti et al., 2001; Cheah, 2001; Lin, 2001). Although "critical literacy", as a pedagogical approach, has its origins in western educational context, where, in recent years, there is a move to understand literacy in holistic terms where literacy is seen as "a social, critical and interpretive process rather than a skill or a set of skills" (Wallace, 2003:4). For students in a secondary school

in the West, critical literacy involves students reading a text, positioning their reading of that text, in relation to making meaning of the social systems, power, i.e. dominant modes of information and the means of production represented in the text (Luke and Carrington, 2003). We argue that given the opportunity, Hong Kong students are more than capable of approaching texts from critical perspectives and that classroom pedagogy needs to address what critical means in the context of language education.

In Asian education systems, being critical does not seem to have the same currency as being critical in say an Australian context where critical literacy approaches begin from an assumption about social power in texts and goes beyond individual skills acquisition to engage students in the analysis and recognition of social fields (Luke, 2000). Cheah (2000) suggests that in Singapore, a country with broad similarities to Hong Kong, there is no well-established tradition of critiquing and challenging the order of doing things in language teaching. Being critical in the context of Hong Kong seems to refer predominately to thinking about the text a process of active cognitive engagement with the text or in other words some forms of higher order understanding, but not necessarily critical engagement at a broader social/political level. For example, looking comparatively across the English and Chinese Language Curriculum Guides (CDC, 2002) we can find similarities and differences in the conceptualization of critical. The English curriculum makes reference to critical thinking skills and proposes the inclusion of such skills through the English programme.

"Critical thinking is drawing out meaning from given data or statements. It is concerned with accuracy of given statements. It aims at generating and evaluating arguments. Critical

thinking is the questioning and enquiry we engage in to judge what to believe and what not." (CDC, 2002 English)

In contrast the Chinese Curriculum Guide suggests that the aims of language learning are:

- * to enhance reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities, as well as thinking, aesthetic and self-learning abilities;
- * to enhance the reading abilities in comprehension, making analysis, feeling, and appreciation;
- * to master reading strategies;
- * to be eager to read; be industrious to read; be serious in reading; enhance the quantity they read and widen the range of reading. (CDC and HKEA, 2005)

However, although they advocate critical thinking skills, both curriculum documents fall short of introducing critical literacy pedagogy. Therefore, the implementation of a critical literacy programme, such as ours, needs to consider the meaning of "critical" in the context of literacy practice in Hong Kong.

The critical literacy programme

There is an expectation explicit in the curriculum that students will simultaneously acquire two different literacies, Chinese and English (CDC, 2000). Therefore Hong Kong secondary schools can be said to have a bi-literate orientation, but can't be said to follow the goals of bi-literacy (Kenner, et al., 2004; Wiese, 2004). Bi-literacy can be defined as the learning of more than one writing system at the same time (Kenner, et al., 2004, Wiese, 2004). Acknowledging this orientation, in designing our programme we wanted to introduce an

element of critical engagement with texts as a pedagogical platform across the two language areas, not simply as an adjunct to the Chinese and English curriculum. We were also aware in planning the programme that Chinese was the students L1 and English L2.

The point of departure for our approach was therefore to identify the barriers, which are pedagogically put in place between Chinese and English key learning areas. These curriculum boundaries mark points in the school system of disjunction between two areas of knowledge. We identified certain commonality in aims between these two curriculum areas that required students to adopt similar literacy practices and skills and strategies common across both learning areas. For example, the skills for research, presentation and discussion had common communicative goals, although in two different language codes. In designing a programme we were interested in identifying the points of conjunction, not an easy task, but one in which continues to be ongoing and which the QEF will greatly assist. For us this meant implementing a model of literacy, which could be used as a planning schema across both in Chinese and English. We also wanted to build a pedagogy, which could be specifically adapted to suit the needs of our students and our school, which also incorporated teaching approaches already being used in the school.

As a vehicle for pedagogical change we decided to use the Four Resources Model of Literacy as outlined by Freebody and Luke (1990) and further elaborated in Luke and Freebody (1999). Our immediate goal of using the Four Resources Model (FRM) was to raise teacher's consciousness of what literacy is and can be, outside of the dominant view of literacy as a functional or instrumental set of skills (Street, 1988).

The model provides a useful template for the teachers in weighing up and questioning the emphasis of both the school's programme and current classroom practice (Luke, 2000).

The FRM model is therefore simply a schema or framework with which to develop a programme, plan lessons and develop materials. It is not meant to be an instructional panacea (Freebody and Luke, 1999). It also gave teachers a method of reflecting on the emphasis of the current programme. Freebody and Luke (1990) identify four necessary but not sufficient sets of social practices requisite for a critical approach to literacy. These are:

- * coding practices, i.e. where the student develops resources as a "code-breaker";
- * text meaning practices, i.e. where the student develops resources as a "text-participant";
- * pragmatic practices, i.e. where the student develops resources as a "text-user";
- * critical practices, i.e. where the student develops resources as a "text-analyst".

In a baseline exercise, we analysed the emphasis of our current Chinese and English programmes at the school, and found a predominant instructional concentrate on the "code-breaker" role. The Four Resources Model to date has only been considered for literacy teaching in English. It therefore is necessary to ask what being a "code-breaker", "text-participant", "text-user" and "text-analyst" for the Chinese language and what literacy strategies students need to take on each of these roles in response to Chinese texts. In addition Chinese pedagogy as approached in our school concentrated primarily on narrative texts and we wanted to introduce a range of other genres to students.

Freebody and Luke have also been at pains to avoid the prescriptive detailing of a "programme" suggesting instead "Choices regarding instructional practice should be made by teachers, and we would argue that this kind of classroom decision-making needs to be defended zealously as part of teacher's work" (Luke and Freebody, 1999). However, here lay the biggest problem for our school's teachers who were used to prescriptive teaching methods supported by commercial available textbooks and have not previously been asked to develop a school-based curriculum. These were no commercially available resources designed specifically for this programme and teachers were asked to use a range of texts from available sources, including newspaper, and develop teaching materials that supported their class. This in turn impacted on their teaching workload.

From a logistical perspective, the literacy programme is run for thirty-five minutes each school day, incorporating three sessions of English and three sessions of Chinese in a six-day cycle. The programme targets for all junior high school students, capturing one hundred and twenty one students. The students are divided into six class groups from Form 1 to Form 3. We ask each class teacher to develop a programme using the FRM as a schema and incorporating each of the four reader roles into the lessons. At this point we need to emphasise that the model as envisaged by Freebody and Luke is in no way hierarchical in nature and all four roles are taught simultaneously. For example, a lesson may place emphasis on a particular role or skills, or alternatively may incorporate all of four resource roles.

We stress that the development of the programme has been both teacher initiated and school lead from the beginning, using an action research approach (Burns, 1999). The programme has therefore been from the

very beginning teacher owned, with decision-making in the hands of the teacher, in relation to their group. To support this approach we collaborated with academics from Faculty of Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, in an approach to research which is known as collaborative research. The principle benefit of such a relationship is that teachers are apprenticed and mentored into the research process and gain access to expertise and resources not generally available to a school (Firkins and Wong, 2005).

In the first year of the programme, each teacher developed a programme for his or her own group, using the FRM as a planning template. In 2005/2006, with the aid of the QEF we have been able to employ a teaching assistant to aid in the development of material to support the programme. In addition we are now able to research the literacy strategies that are important for students to engage Chinese and English text from essentially critical perspectives. In the final part of this paper we outline the aims of the QEF project and identify how the programme has incidental benefits for junior student who will eventually sit for the HKCEE.

The quality education fund goals

The QEF project we are implementing at the school aims to build on the literacy programme implemented in 2004/2005. Specifically we aim to investigate the literacy practices of low proficiency junior secondary students in a Hong Kong secondary school through a detailed analysis of their engagement with different types of texts both in English and Chinese at home and at school. In addition, we will develop support materials and assessment tools that will support the FRM based. Below we outline our core aims:

1. to investigate and establish an understanding of the literacy practices of junior secondary students

at school and home and how teachers and parents support these practices;

2. to support a school-based literacy programme for all students and assess the effects of the programme on students' literacy practices by collecting data related to literacy prior to, during and after the introduction of the literacy programme;
3. to provide language teachers with a framework with which to conceptualise literacy pedagogy and reflect on their literacy instruction through action research;
4. to develop strategies to facilitate and scaffold student's literacy practices by adapting the Four Resource levels suggested by Freebody and Luke (1990);
5. to develop resources that will support the implementation of the FRM in the Hong Kong contexts including teaching resources, assessment tools, teaching strategies, lesson plans and training materials.

Essentially the funding will allow us to address the implementation problems we have discussed in this paper, including assessment procedures, strategies and materials. This is an ambitious agenda and we hope to be able to report on the progress of this project to teachers in Hong Kong through 2006/2007. The QEF project is being undertaken in collaboration with the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, in which Dr Gail Forey (Assistant Professor) has been playing a central part in supporting and mentoring language teachers at the school to use the FRM in their classrooms.

Early intervention and the new curriculum

The literacy programme we are implementing has several broad goals, which incidentally support the literacy demands of the HKCEE in Chinese and English

syllabus. At the end of the 2004/2005 school year we recognised that building students' literacy skills in junior forms using a wide range of genres and texts, including multi-media texts, such as films, movies and web-based materials better prepares them for the new analytical components contained within the new assessment structure. We call this an early intervention approach, where we have not only put in place a programme which will support change prior to the introduction of the new curriculum, but we have anticipated our students' difficulty in being able to engage with texts critically. The literacy programme has the following aims which are oriented to build the skills students will need in the Chinese and English HKCEE:

1. to increase exposure to a wide range of genres in the junior years;
2. to build background knowledge surrounding the purpose of the text;
3. to develop strategies that will enable students to be code-breakers, text participants, text users and text analysts;
4. to increase students' confidence in presenting an analysis of a text to a group;
5. to increase students' confidence in discussing a range of texts.

Finally, to illustrate how this can be worked in a school, we provide two cases of units taken from the school programme which are structured using the FRM for English and Chinese.

Case 1: Peter Pan

In Form 1, we decided to concentrate eight teaching sessions on the story "Peter Pan" by J.M. Barrie. In addition students viewed and analysed the film "Peter Pan" (Columbia pictures) and the cartoon "Peter Pan" (Disney pictures). The text we used is actually a

shortened version available in a commercially produced reader (Must Read Classic Stories, Whitman, Level 1). The goal of reading this text was to scaffold the students towards being able to develop a range of critical responses to the story. In order to do this, we clustered activities around each of the four resource levels. We provide some examples of activities below.

Code-Breaker: We asked students to work out the meaning of unknown words from the context or from the dictionary. We also used phonics in the sounding out of difficult words. In addition, we spent time talking about difficult concepts, or words and locations peculiar to the story. We also undertook associated activities surrounding the meaning of pirates and fairies, including drawing pirate flags.

Text-Participant: We asked students to situate the story as a genre type, i.e. a narrative and think about what the story was written for. We also asked students to develop character profiles and to compare the text with other text types.

Text-User: We asked students to develop a profile of their favourite character and present it to the class. We also asked them to rewrite the story from "Captain Hooks" perspective. A very popular activity was the scripting and acting out of the story in small groups.

Text-Analyst: We asked the students to identify the major theme of the story and to think about what J. M. Barrie is trying to convey through the story. We also asked students to think about the morality of the characters and the gender roles they were assigned.

There are of course many other activities which can be designed around Peter Pan and the programme leaves scope for teacher and students to negotiate the type of activities which can be undertaken, based on the literacy strategies they developed.

Case 2: Chinese newspaper reports

In Chinese literacy lessons, we adopted the materials developed by The Chinese University of Hong Kong and followed the teaching flow outlined in the resources book. We focused on explicit teaching of literacy strategies, followed by application of the strategies through classroom activities and oral presentation as well. Each reading strategy was taught in three teaching sessions, containing aspects of the FRM approach and a range of activities. In the first session, we introduced particular reading strategies to students they might need when reading the particular Chinese text. In the second session, we provided students with the opportunities to try out the strategy they had learnt in the previous lesson. This was then followed by oral presentation in the third session. An example of such a reading strategy was to recognize the "generic features" when tackling a text. Activities were taken place in class could be categorized into the FRM in the following way.

Code-Breaker: We asked students to read a newspaper report from the local Chinese press and focus on generic features, such as title, visual images, captions and slogan.

Text-Participant: We then raised students' awareness to the specific features of a newspaper article, which carried the essential meanings of the text.

Text-User: We tried to situate students as consumers and exposed them to the reading of a selection of newspaper advertisements through which they could apply the strategy they have learnt in the first session. Students then were asked to discuss the purposes of the advertisements with their peers.

Text-Analyst: We asked students to compare the perspectives of the different advertisements and prepared to talk about the advertisements. This was then followed by a critical critique of what the articles

were trying to say intensive reading between lines and the discussion of the general themes and concepts of the article. At the end of the lesson, students were asked to give an oral presentation of the advertisement they were assigned to read. They needed to talk about purposes of the advertisement and gave their own comments or critique after reading.

The tasks we ask students to engage in broadly mirror the types of assessment tasks students will be asked to undertake in Form 5, particularly the School Based Assessment (SBA) of the English paper (HKEAA, 2005).

Findings

Although we have some way to go in assessing the effectiveness of this approach, the results of our initial

student evaluation questionnaire (N=110) indicate that the majority of the students perceive having improved in terms of reading and writing abilities (mean score about or more than 3). This questionnaire was a basic assessment of the students' perception of the programme. When we compare the students' perception of their improvement across the two language areas, the mean scores for Chinese language are higher. This is to be expected considering Chinese is students' first language. While students also think that they are more confident of reading in both languages (Significance $P>0.05$). This shows that students share a similar level of confidence in reading across the two languages. In addition, students perceive some confidence in Level 3 and 4 of the FRM as reflected by question 6, 7 and 8.

Table 1: Findings from the Student Questionnaire (N=110)

Question	Mean score on Chinese Language	Mean score on English Language	Significance (2 tailed)
1. My reading ability has improved.	3.2957	3.0000	$P<0.05$
2. My writing ability has improved.	3.2368	2.9237	$P<0.05$
3. I have become more confident of reading.	3.5766	3.0000	$P>0.05$
4. The class activities were useful for my learning.	3.5614	2.9068	$P<0.05$
5. I found the programme interesting.	3.1892	2.9583	$P<0.05$
6. I understand writer's point of view.	3.0000	2.6068	$P<0.05$
7. After reading a text, I could express my comments on the text.	3.0439	2.7373	$P<0.05$
8. I can tell the main ideas of a text after reading.	2.9478	2.6667	$P<0.05$

1=Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree 4= Strongly Agree

These are interesting results, as it has generally been believed that many Hong Kong students would have more difficulty tackling Level 3 and Level 4 (the critical levels) of the FRM. These initial questions indicate that students were developing and trying out some of the critical reader strategies developed during the lessons.

Conclusion

In enhancing students' language proficiency, we need to provide Hong Kong students with skills and strategies to critically approach texts, not simply to decode and comprehend them. Our experience in introducing this critically oriented literacy programme for junior students suggests that the students at our school appear

capable of demonstrating the skills of text-users and text-analysts through regular engagement in a wide variety of literacy practices, from reading cookery books in Chinese to chatting in English in chat-rooms. Given the opportunity through a different approach and different materials rather than the normal textbook oriented methods, students will engage with the text

from essentially a critical perspective. From the teacher's perspective, the use of the FRM as a schema has provided a platform from which to plan a comprehensive programme and identify skills and strategies students need to take on each of the four reader roles and to expand their critical responses.

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