

Learning Language Through Literature
in Primary Schools
Resource Book
for Teachers of English

EDITED BY
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1 CHAPTER

Working with the 'Experiential Dimension' in Primary Schools

Peter Kennedy and Peter Falvey

'In Hong Kong, people only learn English for work and study.'

How often have we heard this said? Even if it were true, it is not much help to teachers trying to motivate pupils in the intervening years. It is most unlikely that primary school pupils will want to learn English because one day it may help them get good jobs! Learning English has to connect directly with their own lives.

Learning Language through Literature: A Sourcebook for English Language Teachers (1997), grew out of a shared conviction that literary texts (small 'l') and literature-based techniques can help make language learning in Hong Kong more meaningful and memorable. The book put forward arguments for this, together with examples of interesting texts and tasks likely to engage students more actively in the language learning process. Teachers have welcomed the book but have asked for yet more practical help with the day-to-day planning and execution of English lessons. This book has been written in response to those requests. The need for support has emerged, in part, because of the demands placed on teachers by the introduction of the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) into the primary classrooms of Hong Kong.

TARGET ORIENTED CURRICULUM

TOC has been described as: '... the most significant landmark in the post-Second World War history of curriculum reform within school in Hong Kong

... /a/ fundamental attempt to reform the key elements of the curriculum especially the forms of assessment and the styles of teaching used, and the learning styles promoted.’ (Morris et al. 1996: 4)

Learning and Teaching

The new curriculum is based on a ‘constructivist’ theory of learning whereby new bits of knowledge and experience are added to existing knowledge and experience. This is done through careful presentation of learning and assessment tasks that enable pupils to construct knowledge by formulating questions, making connections and gaining insights for themselves. Classes are collections of individuals; when groups of children are routinely regarded as identical they are less likely to make genuine personal progress. This recognition entails the adoption of a more learner-centred approach in the classroom and the development of group work tasks instead of the traditional teacher-led and textbook-dominated lesson.

Assessment

TOC also calls for new approaches to assessment. All too often, Hong Kong teachers, under pressure from parents and Principals to ‘get good results’, have felt it necessary to adopt a ‘model answers’ approach to teaching. Exams have had a bad ‘backwash’ effect on teaching. TOC puts much more emphasis on formative assessment — giving continuous feedback on what pupils can do and how they can do it — rather than (just) putting them into rank order in a class. Teachers assess the progress of learners by matching their performance against a sequence of broad-graded attainment targets for each of the four Key Stages. (see Appendix 1)

Three Dimensions

In the TOC English curriculum three main *dimensions* are to be covered. They are the *cognitive* dimension (knowledge about English), the *interpersonal* dimension (communicating with people in English) and the *experience* (or *experiential*) dimension.

As teachers, we are very familiar with the cognitive dimension and the books that are produced to help us with our teaching of knowledge about language (such things as the choice of appropriate vocabulary items, subject-verb agreement, and the formation of conditional sentences). Much of our teaching and teacher education in the past has focused on this dimension.

As Hong Kong has moved from a manufacturing to a service economy, the demand for employees who are proficient in spoken English has increased. Employers stress that the emphasis should not be on *knowledge about* language but the ability to *use* language for vocational, commercial and business purposes.

We have witnessed, in Hong Kong, the creation of the Hong Kong Language Campaign, when major banks and other leading industrial and commercial enterprises got involved in promoting effective communication in English. This shift of attention from learning about language to using it is consonant with the 'communicative approach' which has dominated second language teaching worldwide for the last two decades. English language courses for adults in Hong Kong are mainly concerned with improving spoken English but in secondary schools, this has not been the case. To some extent, the interpersonal dimension has begun to feature at the higher levels of the secondary education system with the incorporation of oral tests in the HKCEE and the Use of English exams. However, much more attention needs to be paid to this element. It is a requirement of the TOC English curriculum that interpersonal communication must now be addressed even in the early years of language learning because, among other things, it is there that pupils are at their least inhibited and can acquire good pronunciation skills.

'Authentic' Texts

At Key Stages 1 and 2, the learning target for the Experiential Dimension is 'to develop an ever-improving capability to use English to respond and give expression to real and imaginative experience.' (TOC, 1998: E25) Pupils are encouraged to read, write and talk about their own ideas and observations in the English class. They are to be exposed to a variety of text types in different genres. The use of stories, poems, songs and plays to stimulate pupils' imaginations is advocated.

Such texts had virtually disappeared from language classrooms until recently. The focus on functional English, for work and further education, fostered the spurious notion that students only needed to be exposed to the kinds of 'authentic' texts they might later encounter in work. Textbooks were full of tax forms, business letters, hotel bills, and so on. The Hong Kong language and literature syllabuses had diverged. The former was concerned with (grammar) drills and (four) skills training, the latter with individual responses, thoughts and feelings. Literary texts — 'non-instrumental, non-utilitarian' — were marginalized, consigned to Friday afternoons where they might, at the end of the week, provide a little light relief from the deadly serious business of language learning.

This confusion of the goals of language learning with the process, the ends with the means, is now being rectified and literary texts are once again finding their way into the language classroom. As Erica Laine says in Chapter 2, 'Children learn to read and write by reading and writing many different kinds of texts'. Literary texts provide this wider exposure which, we believe, has been missing in the textbooks that are currently used. In addition, as stated earlier, at primary level, the motivation for second language learning must come through pleasure and enjoyment since learning English for work is too distant a goal.

For some teachers, the word 'Literature' (big 'L') may conjure up an image of dusty texts, revered museum pieces put on pedestals. Even children's literature is sometimes talked of as though the texts were moral tracts whose purpose is to teach worthy lesson about 'life'. This is NOT what we mean here by 'literature' (small 'l')! The use of literary texts as a resource in language learning calls for quite different teaching strategies and approaches to texts than those traditionally adopted in the 'literature' class. What sorts of texts and tasks *are* appropriate then for Hong Kong primary schoolchildren?

TEXTS

Oral Literature

Nursery rhymes (*Humpty Dumpty*, *Jack and Jill* and *Old King Cole*), folk tales (*Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*), animal fables (such as Aesop's *The Hare and the Tortoise*), lullabies (*Hush a-bye baby*), riddles and jokes ('*Why did the little boy throw the clock out of the window?*' '*To see time fly*') offer a rich source of material for pupils at Key Stage 1. Bettelheim (1975), in *The Uses of Enchantment*, stresses how important fairy tales are for a child's emotional development and sense of security. The characters in fairy tales, such as *Snow White* or *Cinderella*, usually have one outstanding characteristic; they are weak/strong, big/small, proud/modest, beautiful/ugly, and so on. Fairy stories are accessible and easy for small children at lower primary levels to understand. These tales of wishes and challenges, journeys and magic, heroes and happy endings not only capture children's interests and stir their imaginations but also introduce them to the rudiments of narrative and help them understand how stories work. Tony Mahon, in Chapter 3, demonstrates how a well-known children's tale, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, can be used effectively with a Key Stage 2 class.

Stories

Stories help children make sense of the world. Erica Laine in Chapter 2 takes a traditional folk tale, *The Great Big Enormous Turnip*, and adapts it for storytelling purposes with a P2 class. Listening to someone tell a story is much more vivid and compelling than listening to it on a tape. Erica shows just how engaging it can be for children when they are encouraged to join in. Storytelling also provides an opportunity for everyone in the class to speak and to use the words and structures they have stored away.

At upper-primary level the stories likely to engage children's attention are not desiccated class 'Readers' but stories of adventure, mystery and humour with strong plots and lots of action. Reading is a two-way process. Good stories can open up new worlds of experience but it is also important that children can

bring their experiences to the texts and make connections between the characters and their own lives.

It helps if the characters are fully rounded individuals, close in age to the children. Good examples are Jim in *Treasure Island*, Tom, Becky and Huck in *Tom Sawyer*, Edmund in C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. Language and social relations are interconnected. The greater the variety of human relationships and situations children encounter in stories, the more enriched will be their sense of themselves and their roles within a network of social relations.

Verse

Poems pattern language. Patterns of rhyme and rhythm that help to make poems memorable can be harnessed to make language learning memorable too. Through shared enjoyment of poems, songs and rhymes, primary schoolchildren are introduced to the sounds of English. Rhymes are best read by the teacher first. The children can then join in, chanting or singing the repeated lines. A rhyme such as *This is the House that Jack Built* is easy to remember. Asking children to repeat a few simple phrases encourages them to participate and boosts their confidence in using the language. It is, in fact, a covert language drill which alerts them to English stress and intonation patterns and makes them aware of certain sound-symbol relationships but in a lively and memorable way.

Animal verse, poems about the strange and the fantastic or (humorous) accounts of childhood experiences are popular with children. Verses that have a strong rhythm such as: tongue twisters (*Peter Piper*), verse to accompany clapping or skipping games (*Here we go round the Mulberry bush*, *Ring-a-ring o'roses*), memory rhymes (*Thirty Days Have September*), counting or alphabet rhymes (*Hickory Dickory Dock*, *Three Blind Mice*), songs and limericks.

Drama

In Chapter 5, Marie Yu Hing-yin and Bob Adamson show how a familiar story and some well-known songs can be adapted slightly and, with the addition of a few simple props, what emerges is a lively musical drama suitable for a P3 class. They demonstrate that as well as being fun, the playlet also provides a context for consolidating language learning; woven into the text are adjectives (*happy, selfish, red, green*), 'present continuous' verbs, wh-question forms, and so on. Drama activities need not be complex; the starting point can be a modified textbook dialogue or a familiar tale to which gesture, music and movement are added.

HONG KONG CULTURE

Mike Murphy reminds us, in Chapter 6, that it is necessary for primary pupils to see their own, familiar Hong Kong world reflected in some of the texts they encounter. It is important not only because they then see their own culture valued in the English lesson but also because it is reassuring, when they first start learning the language, to read about people like themselves. People who live in flats in Tai Koo Shing, eat noodles, travel on the MTR, like to receive lai-see packets and so on.

CLASSROOMS OF THE FUTURE

In Chapter 7, Peter Falvey shows how ETV (Educational Television) programmes produced by the Hong Kong government's Education Department can be used as a supplement to written texts in order to exploit the Experiential Dimension of TOC with pupils. This chapter demonstrates the difference between paper 'text' and other forms of 'text'. Preceding chapters of this book have mainly discussed the use of 'paper texts' but the age of the electronic classroom is upon us. Not too long ago, schools had to arrange their classroom schedules around TV broadcasts where there was no opportunity for going back and exploiting what later became much more common — the video replay. Videos in the classroom are now quite commonplace.

Soon, however, videos will be replaced by the computer in the classroom. The Personal Computer (PC), able to use CD ROMS and interactive games has made electronic media much more accessible to the average teacher. The IT (information technology) revolution is about to happen in Hong Kong classrooms as the government drives home its intention of equipping every classroom with electronic facilities which will allow children access to a wide range of exciting and interesting and relevant stimuli. Just as live ETV broadcasts gave way to videos, so videos, in turn, will eventually be replaced by CD-ROMS and 'video-on-request' from a central government server.

It is common knowledge that multi-media sources provide rich databases for the extension of knowledge. This is true. It is, however, equally important to realize that the stimuli provided by the electronic media can also be used for developmental purposes of the experiential kind. Such material can be a rich source of imaginative, stimulating and interesting material that will soon be available to serve as a motivating force for our children to learn English.

TASKS

In Appendix 2 there is a series of exchanges that took place between a three-year-old child and some adults. These are light-hearted dialogues but they also

serve to remind us of an important point: *creativity in language learning is natural*. All children like to play with words, use familiar structures in unusual ways, invent new words. A child learns the 'rules' of a language by experimenting, by breaking the rules. Such 'deformation' is a necessary stage in language formation. This creativity and enjoyment can be deployed for second language learning too.

All too often primary school pupils have been asked to engage in language routines, drills and practice exercises that leave no room for creativity. Such activities may actually inhibit (second) language development. If teachers can capture children's imaginations, they will hold their attention. Any grammar or vocabulary that needs to be taught can easily be incorporated into activities using stories, poems and plays, but in ways that will make learning these things much more enjoyable and memorable. Indeed, the new primary syllabus calls for task-based learning that is '... experiential rather than instructional, since learners learn best through activities that demand active involvement.' Good tasks are those that '... appeal to the imagination, provide challenge /help/, develop confidence, provide a sense of achievement, expand interests, provide enjoyment and opportunities /for pupils/ to take responsibility for their own learning.' (Syllabus, 1997: 50)

Picture Books

At lower primary level picture books are an important aid to reading. In Chapter 4, eight local teachers produced their own Big Books on the topic of food. Each page has a large picture with only a few lines of text. The teacher reads the Big Book aloud and the children follow the story, joining in sometimes with actions, choral reading in unison, a song or a rhyme. This 'shared reading' is an important stage in the progressive approximation to adult reading as the children gradually come to read texts for themselves.

Young readers can show comprehension of the story through mime or by holding up picture cards at an appropriate point in the story. They can demonstrate a more detailed understanding by, for instance, putting pictures in sequence, labelling characters or objects, drawing, adding thought-bubbles, and making a collage of magazine pictures to illustrate the text.

Diana Lo shows very clearly how she used pictures to build up an understanding of the story, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, as she is telling it, the pictures not only aid comprehension but also introduce food vocabulary, the days of the week, and so on.

Repetition

In stories things often happen in threes (three wishes, three pigs, bears and so on). The repetition inherent in traditional stories — '*I'll huff and puff and blow the house down*'; '*Who has been sitting in my chair?*' — can be exploited. As

indicated earlier, the repeated phrases are, in fact, a language drill but without the distortion that drilling usually entails.

The patterning helps young readers make predictions about the story and, in chanting a few lines learnt by heart, boosts their confidence for when they read these lines subsequently. In this way, they are getting acquainted with the rhythms and structures of the written language and vicariously extending the range of their experiences beyond their immediate surroundings.

As Ho Wai Chu says of the poem, *New Friends*, it not only helps pupils to introduce themselves in English and to express their likes and dislikes but '... the repetitive language patterns enable pupils to repeat words and structures in an enjoyable manner'.

Scaffolding

'Scaffolding' is a term Bruner (1978) uses for the strategies an adult adopts in accepting and interpreting a child's incomplete responses as (s)he 'learns how to mean' in English. Based on shared understandings, a teacher can encourage the child by expanding, clarifying and extending what (s)he has said. This not only provides support for early reading but also shows, by example, how to initiate comments, ask questions and become an active, interpretative reader.

Mahon demonstrates how story frames and story charts can be used to help children understand the ways in which meaning is made in written English while, at the same time, allowing room for their individual responses. Such tasks make children aware that '... the reader is in league with the author' (Meek, 1988: 10) in the creation of meaning. The teacher, Leung Tik Wai, who carried out the lesson, found that story frames provided the necessary degree of support for his pupils but also helped '... develop their creativity and critical thinking.' (See pp. 39–42)

Drama Activities

Marie Yu Hing-yin and Bob Adamson convey the pleasure and sense of achievement a primary class can get from putting on a play.

Learning lines, moves and songs takes them far beyond the usual ritualized classroom routines. Yet there is a considerable amount of language practice going on as they memorize their lines, think about appropriate body language, enunciation, and so on. Every child is involved and has a chance to develop confidence in speaking English. A musical score is just meaningless black marks on a page until it is performed. Texts which children explore through mime, role-play or dramatization cease to be just classroom language — the words come alive and get up off the page. Such activities can be introduced in stages, starting with the retelling of a story using glove puppets through to a full, dramatized reading with such things as wigs, costumes and face paints. In her lesson plan for *The Great Big Enormous Turnip*, Erica Laine shows just

how memorable learning past tense verbs can be if they are associated with the actions of characters brought to life by mime and a few props.

Personal Engagement

If the children can link up their own perceptions and experiences with the characters or events in the stories, plays and poems used in class, then there will be greater personal engagement in language learning. Variety of pace and activity throughout the lesson and tasks which enable the children to raise questions at each stage will help ensure that this occurs.

Before reading they may be asked to make predictions based on the book cover, the title or stories they already know on this topic. Using pictures, sound effects, poems, and songs will also arouse interest. While the teacher is reading, she can maintain interest by inviting comments on the illustrations, asking questions, putting the children in the shoes of the characters (*How would you feel if . . . ? What would you do . . . ? Why did she do that, do you think? What do you think he is going to do next?*). After reading, the children may be asked to recreate the story using story-webs or cloze versions, and to label the characters, write speech or thought balloons. They may also be asked to retell the story from the point of view of another character, think of an alternative ending, illustrate it, share their feelings about the characters in the story, take part in a dance, a drama, a musical presentation, a radio play based on the story, and so on. It also helps to individualize learning if the children's own ideas and opinions are taken seriously. Where possible, let the children help choose the reading material, talk about other books they have read, be allowed to say whether they found the unit boring or interesting, difficult or easy.

Their Own Stories

As Mahon says ' . . . it is very motivating for children to see that their work is valued'. When children write and illustrate their own stories for little hand-made booklets, they take great pride in their achievement. Imaginative follow-up activities, such as the 'Troll Wanted Posters' and the 'Letters to a Troll' which Leung Tik Wai's pupils did, show how engaging writing tasks can be. When children can write out versions of their own experience the result is the 'authentic' text and lovely drawings of the New Territories that arose out of *The Old Man and the Onion* lesson. (See pp. 19–24)

Using ETV as a Stimulus: A Foretaste of the Future

Chapter 6 shows various tasks that can be carried out while and after watching an ETV programme. This reminds us of the need for activities and tasks which will be associated with the use of multi-media sources of input in the primary classroom. It is *not* necessary for software producers to reinvent the wheel by

creating specialized materials for the primary English classroom. Such sources of stimuli already exist in commercial form and on the internet. What is important is not the programmes themselves but what teachers do with them. The programmes should be seen as the stimulus for the students, but the tasks should be designed by the teachers to suit their individual classes.

What do these stimuli bring to the classroom? There is colour, mixtures of words and pictures, cartoons and music, animated screens and, of course, colourful graphics which the pupils can exploit to embellish the stories they write or tell in reaction to the stimuli they have encountered.

The PCs, with spell-check and newly-developed grammar-check facilities, will allow pupils to write their stories and revise them without too much correction (the bane of both pupils and teachers lives). When children are empowered to write (*Falvey 1997*), they do not mind revising — they are in charge — they ‘own’ the text. Such revision and exposure to different text types provides opportunities for language learning and acquisition that were not hitherto available. It is now possible for children to form stories using a computer keyboard before they can manually write letter or characters. This can provide them with a motivation to write while they are still in kindergarten and the lower forms of primary school. Access to the Internet provides a wealth of different information and text types to enhance their learning and Internet pen-pals are now becoming very common. This can provide an easy way of communicating in English without the hassle of writing out by hand laborious letters, taking them to the post office and then waiting ages for a reply. Instant communication is now available — the Interpersonal Dimension of TOC can thus be exploited.

One argument constantly levelled at the use of multi-media is that it is not real language — that pupils are not really ‘learning’ anything and that pupils’ development will be hindered. Similar arguments were advanced when calculators became both cheap and available and replaced the slide rule!

A more valid concern is that students will work in isolation around a screen and shut themselves off from the rest of the class. This is the concern that all the students will become computer nerds locking themselves away from society and failing to learn how to socialize. There is possibly little that the schools can do about this in the students’ home but the effective exploitation of multi-media lies in students sharing the stimuli. Two or three students around a screen will lead to interaction. If they are provided with useful, stimulating and motivating tasks and accompanying worksheets, that will produce the kind of work that both teachers and parents hope for.

SUMMARY

We aim to show that these activities can be done by Hong Kong teachers in Hong Kong primary classrooms. That is why we have included lesson plans

that have been tried out and reacted to by practising teachers. In each chapter, the authors discuss the activity to be presented, show the materials they used, and provide a lesson plan and a commentary on how the lesson went. What is presented here is feasible and realistic in Hong Kong primary schools. We would encourage teachers to try out these activities in their own classes and to send us comments on how they worked or how they might be improved.

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