Meeting Challenges of eLearning, Learner Differences and Learner Autonomy: Exploring the Use of WLTS Resources to Enhance Learning

Patsy Leung

Yaumati Catholic Primary School

The advent of the 21st Century is closely associated with important changes in learning, in particular language learning inside and beyond the classroom. Both students and teachers need to be empowered and become more resourceful in meeting new challenges.

New Challenges and Resourceful Solutions

In our school, we aim to enable every learner to prepare for the changing socio-economic demands resulting from advances in information technology; these demands include the interpretation, use and production of materials for pleasure, study and work in the English medium. Our vision is to help all students develop into conscientious individuals who think independently, learn autonomously and work collaboratively with others.

While we are engaging both teachers and students in renewing approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, we believe we are on the right track by focusing our effort on interactive learning, questioning techniques that promote higher order thinking, effective feedback that informs strengths and weaknesses, and meaningful tasks that cater for individual differences.

In addressing the needs, it is very challenging for teachers to produce a wide range of resource materials, especially when time and skills are concerned. What would you do if you know a resource bank which offers focused learning and teaching materials to help teachers provide timely assistance to students? What would you do if you can adapt the ready-to-use tasks for different learning

needs as informed by assessment data? What would you do if the web-based resource could cope with the e-learning development of the school?

The Web-based Learning and Teaching Support (WLTS) platform provides a solution which inspires us and supports us to incorporate interactive learning materials into the teaching programme. There are possible learning problems identified and research-based learning and teaching tasks which help us work towards new goals such as developing learner autonomy, utilizing technologies and promoting metalinguistic awareness to enhance learning. Having explored this resource, we found quite a few units of work addressing our needs.

A. WLTS & e-learning

Task Name	KS	Skills	Features
Sight Word Park	1	L/R/W/S	E-learning occurs in most of the WLTS learning units. Among them, these tasks involve the use of multimedia to allow flexible and self-paced learning.
Saving Princess Nancy	1	L/R/W	
Discover Hong Kong 1-4	2	R/W/S	
Finding Poemland	3	L/R/S	

B. WLTS & learner autonomy

Task Name	KS	Skills	Features
Saving Princess Nancy	1	L/R/W	Instant prompts are provided to facilitate self-learning.
Discover Hong Kong 1-4	2	R/W/S	By getting familiarized with the concepts of word formation and word association in a fun way, learners can equip themselves with basic vocabulary building skills which are essential for them to become autonomous learners.
Super Word Kid	2	R/W/S	

Interviewing Teachers	3	L/S	Learners can acquire skills like making predictions, making connection between ideas and extracting specific information.
Step It Up	3	L/R/S	Learners have the opportunities to learn and then use some note-taking skills in the unit.
Looking Up Words in Dictionaries	3	R	Dictionary skills are vital for learners to become autonomous.
Note-Taking	3	R/W	Learners get engaged to use abbreviations in note-taking.
Reading for Main Ideas	3	R/W	Learners learn how to find out important words and main ideas by finding answers to 'what', 'where', 'who' questions and how to use such skills in a task that involves different text types.

C.   WLTS & learner diversity

Task Name	KS	Skills	Features
Saving Princess Nancy	1	L/R/W	The task is pretty challenging and thus is suitable for gifted learners.
Sight Word Park	1	L/R/W/S	The unit is designed to diagnose and support learners to recognize sight words / high-frequency words instantly so that they can progress well in reading. Teachers can tailor the questions to cater for learner diversity.
Detective Academy	3	R/W	The series help develop learners' inferencing and decoding skills through interesting tasks.
Spotting the Offenders	3	R/W	

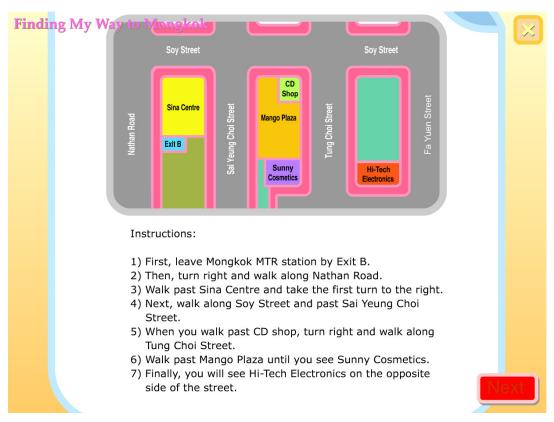## D.   WLTS & metalinguistic awareness

Task Name	KS	Skills	Features
Saving Princess Nancy	1	L/R/W	The introduction of the proper order of adjectives before a noun can promote learners' sensitivity to the sentence structure and thus raise their metalinguistic awareness.
Sight Word Park	1	L/R/W/S	Sight word instruction builds a foundation for reading new, more complex words, which is essential for successful readers.
Discover Hong Kong 1-4	2	R/W/S	The teaching of word formation skills helps develop learners' metalinguistic awareness and skills.
Super Word Kid	2	R/W/S	The tutorials in the games can serve as the input prior to in-class sessions for a flipped classroom.
Mind Your Own Words	3	L/R/W	Learners understand when and how to use euphemistic expressions. They also learn to comprehend the implied meaning and understand that words have multiple meanings.
Detective Academy	3	R/W	Learners get actively engaged in decoding secret messages and spotting criminals in alibi activities, through which they develop metalinguistic skills and problem solving skills.
Spotting the Offenders	3	R/W	

To Enhance Interactivity and E-learning

Many tasks are cognitively challenging. They engage students in learning, allow students to pick up the learning features on their own and motivate students to explore language on their own. These quality tasks help the teacher make a difference. They also help the teachers adopt a more interactive mode of teaching.

Example 1:   Finding My Way to Mongkok

Instructions:

1) First, leave Mongkok MTR station by Exit B.
2) Then, turn right and walk along Nathan Road.
3) Walk past Sina Centre and take the first turn to the right.
4) Next, walk along Soy Street and past Sai Yeung Choi Street.
5) When you walk past CD shop, turn right and walk along Tung Choi Street.
6) Walk past Mango Plaza until you see Sunny Cosmetics.
7) Finally, you will see Hi-Tech Electronics on the opposite side of the street.

124

An interactive activity: Finding My Way to Mongkok

Students learn to follow directions by reading the sentences in sequence and to identify the key words to extract meaning. They also learn to understand prepositions / prepositional phrases e.g. walk along, walk past and adverbials e.g. turn left, take the first turn to the right to show directions.

This interactive task is authentic and interesting. Students worked with kind of 3-D street maps, which enabled them to have a much better understanding in turning left and right. The concept of direction became a lot clearer to them. They were highly engaged in the activity. The classroom atmosphere became lively and students were all very attentive. The task design maximized spoken interaction and the use of thinking skills by means of problem-solving group discussion.

To Cater for Learner Differences

The way we can teach best may not be the way all students can learn best. Learners' preferences and strengths do count for how well they learn. Some may be very receptive to visual forms of information while some benefit greater from dynamic e-learning. In the cluster of units on vocabulary building skills, the online games (which are actually disguised practice) and visual explanation may engage some learners better than the teacher's chalk and talk.

Since we have witnessed some gradual increase in learning differences among students, teachers have to spend more time in designing learning tasks at different ability levels within a class. WLTS provides good support in catering for learner diversity. We have used Sight Word Park in Key Stage 1 for diagnosis and intervention. The sight word cards (both electronic and printed) and the board games proved to be particularly useful for less able students. The feedback from the parents and students was very encouraging.

To give greater challenge to more able students, sometimes we took materials from KS 3 for use in some KS 2 classrooms. The following Example 2 from WLTS KS 3 resource was found to be suitable for our primary six students. The students participated and performed well in the task.

Example 2: Spotting the Offenders

Interactive Activity: The X-Files

Students are asked to investigate three different cases and solve the problems or mysteries (e.g. Who's the owner? Who's the trouble-maker? Who threw objects from a height?) by relating to facts or evidence in the clues or statements made by the suspects and witnesses.

This task helps promote learners' metalinguistic awareness and skills by asking students to think aloud and talk about their inferring/decoding process. Writing riddles require students to understand multiple meanings, metaphors, idioms and detect ambiguity.

Teachers found that the students are highly motivated by the interesting and authentic context of the task. Students had to make use of higher-order thinking skills to solve problems. Through the decoding process, students seemed to be more interested in language and became metalinguistically aware.

Important Ingredients and Convenient Resources

Students' positive feedback in language lessons has convinced us that the WLTS interactive tasks help develop students' metalinguistic awareness which is an important ingredient in learning to read, spell and understand words.

As Dr Paul Sze brought to our attention in a professional development workshop, metalinguistic awareness helps students become autonomous learner by making explicit salient aspects of the targeted linguistic concept – for example, the logic behind understanding multiple-meaning words, drawing an inference, or grasping how compound words convey meaning morphologically. With a view to developing metacogitively aware learners, we would continue to make use of a wider range of resources to enrich our teaching programmes.

Conclusion

To support us in working towards new targets and addressing a greater range of needs, Web-based learning and Teaching Support (WLTS) provides quality task plans, learning and teaching materials which relate to our coursebook modules. We like the idea that it provides suggestions for addressing learning difficulties, ideas for focused and timely remediation or enhancement of learning. Indeed, we are pleased that the web-based PowerPoint tutorials, online games for class teaching or student self-access are always available for very flexible use inside or beyond the classroom.

We hope teachers in Hong Kong **w**ould **l**ike **t**o **s**ee (wlts) and use support materials that help them build a more resourceful 21st Century language classroom.

Author's e-mail:　patsyleung04@yahoo.com.hk