

# Assessment for Learning: Collaborative Research and Professional Development Projects in School Context

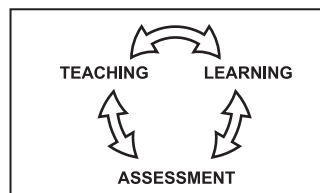
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## Introduction

Effective use of assessment can be powerful in enhancing learning. In Hong Kong, some teachers tend to equate assessment with testing. Some believe giving more tests can motivate students to learn better. These are the two common fallacies about assessment. Having gained insights from research projects conducted in the context of our school, we believe students' learning performance can be advanced if assessment works hand in hand with learning and teaching in a triad relationship, and in this way the learning experience can be deepened and broadened as well. In this paper, the school team shares reflections on its learning journey through a series of projects on “assessment for learning”.



St. Anthony's School has been putting great emphasis on both assessment and learning. Since the early 2000s, our collaborative efforts with the University of Hong Kong have helped to reform literacy teaching in the Chinese Language curriculum by introducing vocabulary building skills. To enhance the effectiveness of the project, the question types, items and modes of assessment were adjusted with reference to Professor Zhu Xin-hua's six types of assessment items and eighteen kinds of questioning techniques. To help our students become bilingual, equal weight of attention was paid to the curriculum development of the English literacy programme with particular focus on phonics, reading, writing and vocabulary building skills. Three years down the road, the confidence of our students in reading and writing English has

improved tremendously. Alongside developments in the curriculum, we have been working collaboratively with the Education Bureau's Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) team for four years to promote the learning-teaching-assessment triad, which is central to "assessment for learning" and teachers' professional development.

### **Professional Development in "Assessment for Learning"**

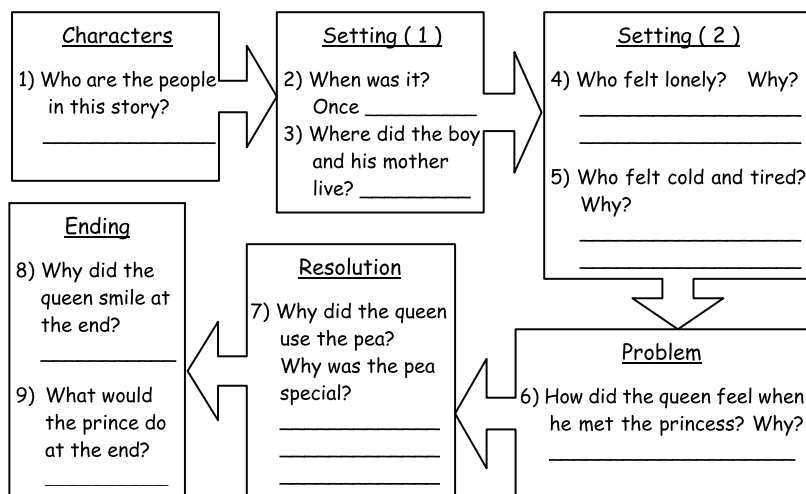
Promoting "assessment for learning" has been a key element in our school development plan. By analyzing the data, we aim to find the clues to improve our teaching and learning. External and internal assessment results, as well as feedback from students, teachers and parents have become vital sources of data collection. It is also thought that collaborative research with experts might significantly enhance the ability of teachers to handle data analysis tools and interpret data. In English Language, for example, significant improvements have resulted from the different phases of a topical study conducted in collaboration with the BCA team and the Principal Investigator Dr Anthony K.K. Tong from the University of Hong Kong (HKU). Our teachers' professional ability to use assessment data has been significantly enhanced. Moreover, a spectrum effect has been observed as the modes of collaboration have shifted from being expert-led to being teacher-initiated. Useful findings have been obtained, which can be generalized and disseminated. That has resulted in a win-win situation as both parties gained what they were hoping for from the collaboration.

#### *Expert-initiated expert-led: Story structure teaching*

At the beginning phase, the professional team provided expert advice for our teachers to identify possible causes of prospective learning problems in our students. After studying 2008 P.3 TSA Reading papers and students' performance data, some school-based diagnostic assessment tasks were developed by modifying the TSA papers. The results of diagnostic tests showed that many P.3 students were not able to manage information from comics accompanying the text, e.g. *The Three Frogs* and *Frogs and the Princess*. One

possible cause was that the students did not understand the common features in the story structure of a fairy tale. After being made aware of this, P.3 teachers adjusted their teaching approaches for a learning task in the textbook unit, *The Princess and the Pea*, focusing on explicit teaching of the story structure – the orientation, conflict, resolution and a coda.

The teachers began with the well-known fairy tale *The Three Little Pigs*, because it was easier for students to recognize the elements of character, setting, problem, resolution and ending. Once the students had grasped this basic concept of story structure, the teachers then explicitly taught the structure of the fairy tale in the textbook unit *The Princess and the Pea*. This story involved many characters and a more complex story plot. So the teachers attempted to enhance and at the same time assess students' understanding through asking different levels of questions relating to the story structure, as illustrated in the flowchart below.



The teacher also asked the following questions to strengthen and assess students' understanding of the story: 1. Do you think the princess is a real princess? Why? Are you sure? 2. If the princess was not real, would the queen smile? Why? 3. If the princess was not real, what would the prince do? Why?

#### 4. If the princess was not real, what would the princess do? Why?

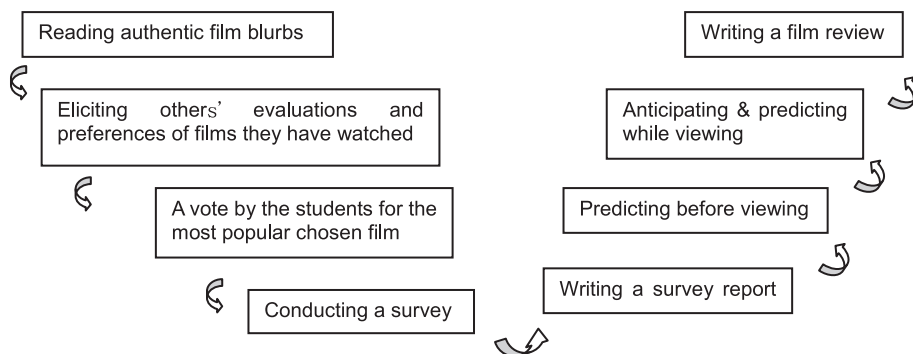
All these questions helped students consolidate the story structure concept, and also invoked their creativity by asking them to create a new ending. If students could answer the questions based on their own thoughts and creativity, this meant they had acquired the concept of story structure of a fairy tale. If they could not, there should be some useful data to help teachers rethink instructional scaffolding in their teaching activities, supporting questions and feedback to students. These questions did not just fulfill the purpose of consolidating the story structure concept but also invoked the students' creative thinking to generate a new ending. They required students to take on a more active role during the reading process and the students' responses reflected their value judgments, world knowledge and personal experiences.

Reflecting on the research process, teachers found that, developing the ability to identify the structural elements of a story is not the only thing that is vital for students to comprehend a story text. Understanding how to identify the learning difficulties is equally crucial for effective teaching. Encouraged by this success, we extended the collaborative research to the next phase with a view to addressing the learning needs of our P.6 students as indicated by the TSA data.

#### *Teacher-initiated expert-led: Films & Film Review*

In the next phase, our P.6 teachers explored, together with the HKU team, the use of a range of reading strategies through several stages of the Learning Study cycle, including needs analysis, identifying objects of learning, co-planning, implementation, lesson observation and reflection. A reading strategy survey conducted by the teachers revealed that there were two reading strategies least deployed by the students, particularly, by the lower achievers: (i) understanding the organization of the information in text and (ii) predicting information. The theme of the learning task was a textbook unit called *Film Review*. The teaching team also found that the big range of text-types and unfamiliar lexical items posed a great challenge in the learning and teaching of this unit.

To address the identified learning needs and pedagogical concerns, the teaching team took bold steps to reorganize the learner activities, as illustrated below:



Based on the foundations established by the previous collaboration, the teachers became more confident in the way they conducted the Learning Study. They showed more active involvement in terms of meeting times, contributing ideas and giving feedback. They discovered new ways of varying teaching for more effective learning, as well as modifying and extending textbook units into highly interactive and skills-integrated activities. Some have become particularly good at helping boost the confidence of the weaker students. This enhanced unit of work has become a “quality task” which is adopted with updates year after year in the school. One of the products of this joint effort, the complete set of *Films and Film Reviews* resource materials, has been uploaded to WLTS for all schools to share.

### *Teacher-initiated expert-supported: Sight word learning*

Besides insufficient reading skills and text-type knowledge, limited vocabulary size was also one of our concerns, so this became a priority in our collaboration with the professional team. An action research on sight word learning at P.3 level was initiated by our teachers to address the question of how to help students learn the sight words more effectively. This step is particularly important as building up a sight word bank can help young learners in developing reading fluency.

For Key Stage One students, there are a number of recommended sight words that they should know before they can proceed to Key Stage Two. The P3 teachers conducted a sight word diagnostic test on all our P3 students. Then they concluded there were 13 sight words of which the meanings and pronunciations had not been grasped by students. The teachers integrated these 13 words into a textbook unit by slightly modifying the content.

The teachers were interested in the stimulating teaching ideas and hands-on teaching materials from the website of the Web-based Learning and Teaching Support (WLTS). Adopting some of these they tailor-made three activities and prepared 13 sight word cards. The activities, namely “Paired Flash Reading”, “Sight Word Slap”, “Bang, Zap, Pow!”, were able to engage the students very well. They seemed to enjoy the activities and they were eager to read out the sight words. If they read incorrectly, they were willing to let their friends help them get it right. They were also cautious about their friends’ pronunciations as they needed to check to make sure they were correct, while wanting to learn from them.

One revealing example was the pair work in “Paired Flash Reading”. One student showed the sight word card and the other read it. After reading all word cards, they switched roles. If he/she couldn’t read it, the partner would help out. If both couldn’t read it, they would ask the teacher, and then the teacher would assist. The activity itself is a learning activity as well as an assessment activity since students know immediately whether they know the word or not. Then they will learn from their partner. Accordingly, the learners’ sense of ownership increased because the learning process is led by students while the teacher’s assistance is passive and comes only at the end.

The learning results were encouraging as there were higher improvement rates shown in the test group as compared with the control group.

*Teacher-initiated teacher-led: Vocabulary building skills*

To make the most of the ripple effect, the teaching of vocabulary building skills was extended to Key Stage 2 in the following year. Word formation was the key focus. The theme-related teaching ideas on prefixes, suffixes and compound words in WLTS were integrated into the teaching of different units of P.4, P.5 and P.6.

The teachers decided to take word compounding as the key vocabulary building skill at P4 level. The theme was *Discover Hong Kong*. To broaden the learning experiences of our students, a visit to Stanley – a famous tourist spot in Hong Kong – was arranged and a leaflet about Stanley was designed afterwards. With the help of the WLTS resources, teachers collected a theme-related list of compound words which students would probably use to write the leaflet, and adapted some suggested activities for the learning of compound words. Reflecting on the teaching process, teachers felt that it was very productive as the students were highly engaged and actively applied the words they had learned in writing their own leaflets.

According to the teachers' observations, there were four points of particular interest about this way of learning. First, students were willing to help and challenge each other at the same time. They might immediately notice their friend's mistake and rectify it without hesitation. Second, when the whole group was uncertain about a meaning or pronunciation, they instantly sought a teacher's help. Third, they played the games purely for the sake of enjoyment and not for any kind of reward. They just loved playing the word card games which integrated and reinforced the compound words learning. Lastly, when a group had finished playing with the first set of compound words, they knew whether they should play it again or signal that they were ready to play with the second set. Allowing learners' choice here was meant to be a small but useful step towards learners' autonomy.

## Conclusion

Through the various projects, more desirable learning outcomes gradually shown in both internal and external assessments definitely fuel our future endeavours in “assessment for learning”. According to our observations, it has to be under the condition that assessment, learning and teaching are working in a triad relationship. Not only have our students gained a lot, our teachers have also benefited.

A positive and very encouraging observation is that the projects shifted from being expert-initiated expert-led, to being teacher-initiated teacher-led. Our teaching team becomes more and more proactive in utilizing the assessment findings efficiently and responding promptly to learning and teaching with appropriate strategies. Moreover, we have gained much more than we were expecting – not just at the macro level but also at micro levels.

We are most thankful for all the experts’ inspirational ideas and patient guidance. We have learned the way to work out the whole process of the action research from setting up a research question by means of analyzing diagnostic data to drawing up an evaluation to inform teaching and learning. In addition, fine-tuning each of the steps taken throughout the implementation process has proved a valuable training experience for our teachers. Small incremental changes can create large results. Finally, we would like to say that a remarkable key to enhancing the effectiveness of learning and teaching is both the sustainability of the teaching strategies which teachers have developed and the retainability of the knowledge and skills which students have learned.

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