Case 3

Formative Assessment: A Blended Approach to Support Learning and Teaching

Tin Shui Wai Methodist Primary School

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School

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Background

Tin Shui Wai Methodist Primary School is an aided school in Tin Shui Wai. Students have a satisfactory level of English language proficiency. Taking the students to the next level is the aim of the English Language Department. Based on an analysis of students' performance in their recent external and internal assessments, the P4 English teachers came to the conclusion that honing and polishing students' writing skills was one of their top priorities. Based on the data collected, students' marks in content were relatively low due to lacking elaboration of ideas. Moreover, students' performance in language would have been more satisfactory if they had used a wider range of vocabulary. To address the needs of students, the teachers introduced a series of strategies to improve students' writing skills. This case report presents the trial strategies and looks closely at how blended learning can be used to enhance learning and teaching.

Level

Primary 4

Strategies Used

Learning to write is a challenge for primary school students. Lack of elaboration and lack of vocabulary are common challenges among students. However, it is impossible for students to achieve good performance if they are unable to provide ideas with plenty of supporting details and a wide range of vocabulary in their writing. Therefore, motivating and teaching students to elaborate their ideas and increasing their vocabulary have become English teachers' major concerns. To help students make improvements, both relevant input strategies and classroom assessment are needed.

The strategies used by the teachers are summarised as follows:

1. Flipped Classroom Approach

Many teachers began to adopt blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, combining classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences. A flipped classroom is a type of blended learning where students are introduced to the learning content at home and practise working through it at school. This approach can save a lot of the time that is spent on teaching and ensure that more class time is used for student practice; moreover, it makes learners more responsible for their learning and enhances their independent learning skills (Yang & Chen, 2020).

Figure 1 shows the video that students were assigned to watch before the lesson. The video was created by the teachers, introducing the content of the writing topic, 'A Story about Places to Visit in Tsim Sha Tsui'. Students then had to finish a pre-lesson worksheet as illustrated in Figure 2. According to Heiner and Rieger (2016), by looking at the average responses to pre-reading quiz questions, teachers can gain insights into which topics their students find difficult and react to these data by adjusting instructions for the next class.

Through the flipped classroom approach, students obtained the background knowledge for the writing task independently, at home, allowing them to learn at their own pace and be ready for the lesson. The pre-lesson task helped the teachers gauge students' understanding and better plan their instruction. In addition, instead of spending much time on direct teaching, the teachers had more class time to carry out different formative assessments in the classroom.

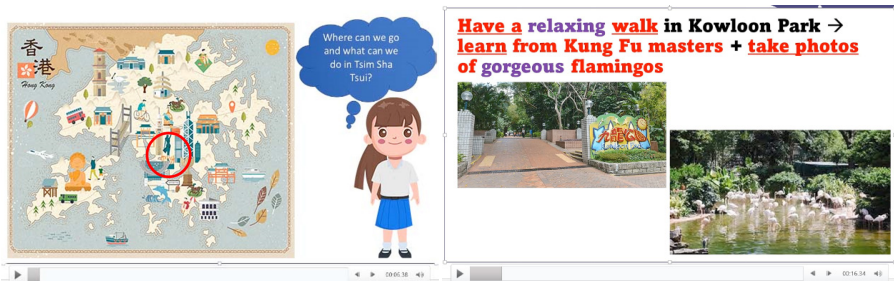Figure 1: Video that students were assigned to watch before the lesson

Figure 2: Pre-lesson worksheet

	A. Tsim Sha Tsui is one of the most popular places in Hong Kong. What do you know about this place? Brainstorm your ideas below:	
① Location	Where is Tsim Sha Tsui? ○ Hong Kong Island ○ Kowloon ○ New Territories	
② Transportation	We can go to Tsim Sha Tsui by _____. (You can choose more than one answer.)	
	○ bus ○ minibus ○ taxi ○ MTR ○ LRT ○ cable car ○ tram ○ the Peak tram ○ ferry	

③ Places to go and things to do	Which place in Tsim Sha Tsui do you want to go to? What can you do there?
	e.g., Hong Kong Museum of History ➡ look at the displays
	1. _____
	   _____
	2. _____
	   _____	

2. Using Graphic Organisers to Help Organise Writing

Planning is one of the most crucial parts of the writing process, and it poses a challenge for many primary students. Culham (2005) states that teachers need to spend time helping students figure out what they want to say and helping them learn how to organise their ideas into a written story as organisation helps structure information so that the writing makes sense to the reader.

To address this problem, Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009) promote using graphic organisers to enhance the organisation and generation of ideas in student writing. Graphic organisers provide visual and graphic displays for students. They not only demonstrate relationships between different parts of the story but also show students the steps that they can follow in their work.

Figure 3 illustrates the sequence chart that the teachers used in the lesson. Students were asked to match the pictures in the five-picture story with the corresponding parts of the story, clarifying the relationship between the problem and the solution and showing the order of events. By having the concept visualised and broken down into manageable parts, students were encouraged to organise their story with a beginning, middle and end. This prewriting activity served as part of the formative classroom assessment, ensuring that students could master the concepts and understand the flow of the story.

Figure 3: Sequence chart of the story

Part		What are the 3 parts of a story?	
1	Beginning	Introduce • Characters (who?) • Setting (When & Where?) • Problem (What?) – sometimes	tourist information counter/ staff/ suggest
2	Middle	• Describe the events that happened	take photos/ museum/ look at the displays — go out of / straight / turn / opposite — get lost / worried
3	Ending	• Describe how the problem was solved • Share feelings of the experience • Share lesson(s) learned	?

3. Using Wh-Questions to Elaborate Ideas

A major problem faced by the teachers in teaching second language writing was that students failed to write with details. They often struggled to write a few sentences based on the prompts given. Helping the students elaborate their ideas and enrich their writing became teachers' concern. According to Rahim et al. (2017), students do not organise their ideas properly but just write what is on their mind without planning. Therefore, students must learn pre-writing skills such as the use of wh-questions to organise their ideas so that they can produce longer and more detailed writing. Sharing the same belief, the P4 English teachers decided to use the wh-questions as a guide to enable students to generate ideas. Figures 4 and 5 show how they put the theory into practice in different classes.

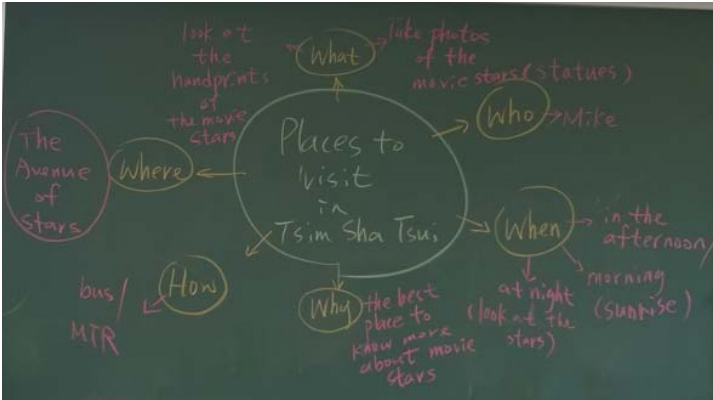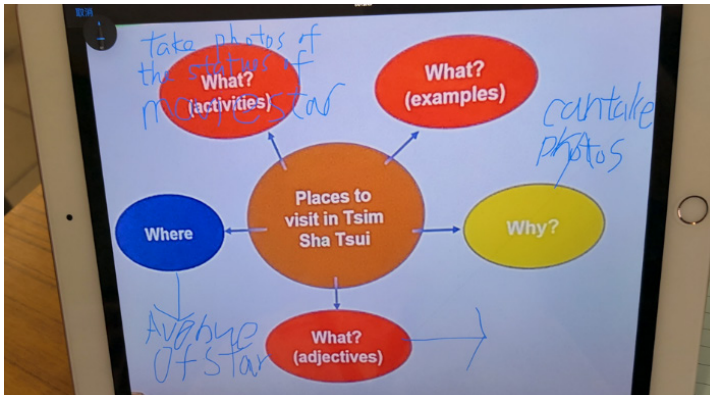Figure 4: Using wh-questions to elaborate ideas

Figure 5: Using wh-questions to elaborate ideas

During the face-to-face lesson, wh-question words highlighted in a mind map were used to help students elicit details for their writing. To equip students with the target skills, students wrote the beginning of their stories by writing about the first scenic spot, the Hong Kong Museum of History, under the guidance of the teacher. After providing necessary input, the teacher checked if students understood the materials shared. Less able students were asked to refer to the mind map on the blackboard to generate ideas together with their classmates for writing about the next place, the Avenue of Stars. For more able groups, students were required to work out their ideas individually on their iPads. By utilising the benefits of blended learning, (i.e., making use of students' prior knowledge gained in the video and the writing skills acquired in the lesson), students were able to give more supporting details and put things together to form a meaningful paragraph.

The teachers reflected on how the wh-questions help students improve their narrative writing. They served well as a tool for students to generate details, develop ideas and enrich their content, as they required elaboration from the students who were being asked. Students formed paragraphs with more detailed and relevant answers by answering the wh-questions. Figure 6 below is a sample of student work that illustrates this impact. This was particularly helpful for less able students who found it difficult to generate ideas and express what they wanted to write. The teachers kept applying this technique as input and formative assessment in their writing classes.

Figure 6: Student elicited details in their writing with the help of wh-questions

4. Using 'Juicy' Words to Replace 'Tiring' Words

The teachers all agreed that having a good vocabulary helps students communicate in a more engaging way. Depending on just one or two words to describe an idea leads to repetitive and unconvincing writing. With the aim of helping students write more effectively by having a richer vocabulary to draw from, students received their own juicy word anchor chart, in which synonyms of boring words were introduced, followed by teacher demonstrations in which they replaced some of the verbs and adjectives that students overused in their writing with juicy words. Students were then asked to review their original work and make changes as suggested. This formative assessment helped students identify the target areas that they needed to improve. Improving vocabulary is essential for English learners, especially those who want to make progress and advance. Figures 7 and 8 demonstrate how this strategy was adopted and how students made improvements respectively.
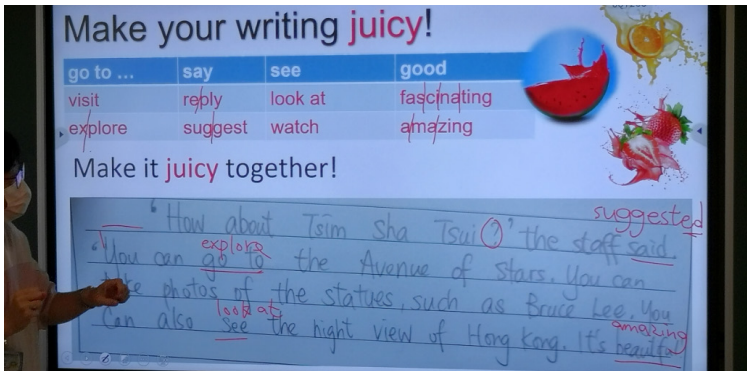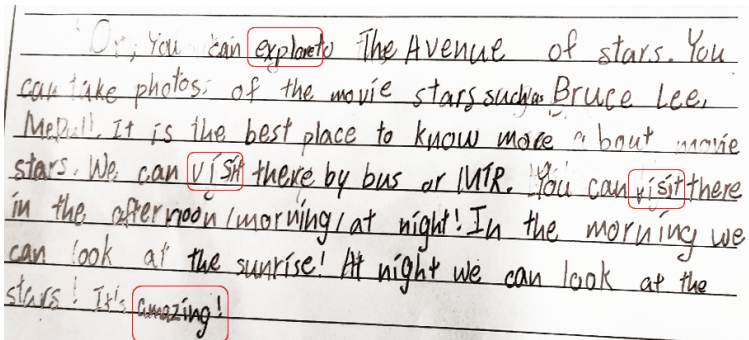
Figure 7: Introducing juicy words

Figure 8: Sample student work

5. Practising Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is important because it allows students to review their strengths and weaknesses. Self-assessment in writing includes activities that lead students not only to evaluate their writing, but also develop writing skills and habits for further improvement. To enable them to know their own performance and be aware of the improvements that they need to make, students should be taught to monitor their self-evaluation process by going over their own performance against a set of explicit criteria. In this lesson, students were given a writing checklist (Figure 9) to conduct self-assessment, self-checking their work step by step based on the guidelines (Figure 10). To cater for individual differences, less able students were asked to fill out a simpler writing check-list (Figure 11).

Figure 9: Writing checklist for self-assessment

|			**For more able students**
		Self-assessment	
	Follow the instructions below to self-check your work		
1	My second paragraph has many details.	- wrote about at least 2 places with one activity each	Put 'P' near each place and 'A' near each activity
2		- added at least one elaboration e.g.,(Where? When? Who? What? Why?)	Underline the elaborations
3	My second paragraph has adjectives and descriptive words.	- used different adjectives to describe the activities/ things/ feelings	Circle the adjectives
4		- used at least one 'juicy word' on the list	Put a ✓ near the 'juicy word'

Figure 10: Sample of student work
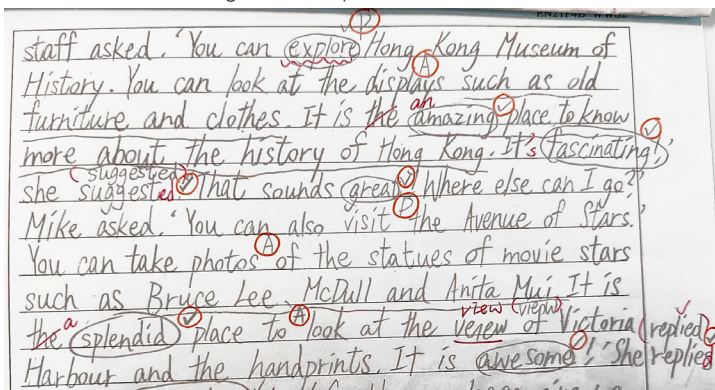
Figure 11: Writing checklist for self-assessment for less able students

		For less able students
	Self-assessment	
No.	Writing Checklist	Put a ✓ if it is properly done
1	I wrote about 1 place in paragraph 2.	
2	I wrote about at least 1 activity in paragraph 2.	
3	I added at least one elaboration to each activity.	
4	I used different adjectives to describe the activities/ things/ feelings	

Actions Taken

At the beginning of the academic year, the School Development Officer (SDO) of the QSIP-CEAL team had a meeting with core group members of the school to discuss the focus of the collaboration. Following this, the SDO paid a courtesy visit to a P4 class to get a general idea of the learning and teaching at the school.

Aiming at encouraging the school to adopt a whole school approach to enhance teachers' assessment literacy, two workshops were held. The first was held in late August, introducing assessment literacy to all teaching staff. The second was a needs analysis workshop for English language teachers, which was held in mid-November.

Collaborative lesson planning meetings with the English teachers were also arranged on a regular basis to discuss teaching strategies and develop learning materials. To try out the strategies discussed and evaluate their effectiveness, lesson observations and post-observation feedback sessions were conducted in December 2021 and May 2022. At the end of the collaboration, an evaluation meeting was held to enable reflection and assist in the planning of future development. Finally, the P4 English teachers shared their experiences and insights gained from the QSIP-CEAL project with other teaching staff in a within school dissemination session and a territory-wide dissemination in July 2022.

Impact

1. Student Level

The impacts of assessment literacy on student learning were noticeable. Students participated in a variety of learning activities and classroom assessments, which provided them with opportunities to realise the importance of and gain skills in organising a narrative story, elaborating ideas and putting tired words to bed. Students were also empowered to monitor and self-evaluate their own learning from the process of writing. By following

explicit instructions, students were able to check their own writing to see if it met the criteria in order to identify areas in which they could improve. Thanks to their improved skills and confidence in expanding their ideas, as well as their use of self-evaluation, students' follow-up writing tasks showed satisfactory improvements in terms of both content and language.

2. Teacher Level

At the teacher level, the teachers' capacity for assessment literacy has been strengthened. The teachers have gained knowledge of and skills in assessment literacy, using effective formative assessments to enhance the teaching of writing. They have also become more aware of the importance of the alignment of learning, teaching and assessment. This was demonstrated by their instructions for the writing lesson, in which the learning activities and assessment tasks for enriching both content and language were closely linked with each other. After confirming the learning objectives, a series of learning activities and assessment tasks, including a pre-lesson task, formative classroom assessment, self-editing and a follow-up assignment, were given to students, ensuring that each of the critical elements of instruction interacted effectively with one another and supported the learning outcomes.

The teachers have also paid more attention to the use of student performance data. They acknowledged that making use of the analysis reports based on the formative assessments in the classroom helped them understand students' learning difficulties in a more objective way. Based on the learning feedback received, the teachers could make adjustments to their teaching so that no students were left behind.

3. Curriculum Level

The collaboration has had positive impacts on curriculum planning. The English panel head has decided to establish a juicy word list with students of different levels to expand students' vocabulary. Moreover, using student work as an effective data point to evaluate the effectiveness of assessment design and make corresponding modifications will be another change made by the department.

Way Forward

The development of formative assessment through a blended learning approach has had a good start. The efforts of the P4 teachers have paid off. Based on the fruitful experiences gained in this project, the teachers will keep exploring other strategies of blended learning to improve learning, teaching and assessment.

In addition, the planning of writing lessons will be further reviewed and modified. As students take time to form a habit, the teachers will create opportunities for students to use the target skills intentionally and constantly in their learning processes, including in assessments. The use of graphic organisers, mind maps and wh-questions to help students write in a more organised way with more details will definitely be continued in writing lessons. The teachers will also try to teach other elements one at a time and in depth, such as having an appropriate ending and coherent links within paragraphs.

The teachers will also pay more attention to the validity of assessments, ensuring that each task measures what it was designed to measure. For example, if giving relevant ideas with supporting details is the expected learning outcome, students should be given a topic with which they are familiar to write on.

Promoting peer-assessment is another aspect that the teachers will consider. The teachers believe that it is essential to equip students with lifelong skills in assessing and providing feedback to others. In the coming year, on top of checking their own work, students will also be required to comment on the work of their peers based on prompts from the teacher.

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