CASE 6

Using Assessment Data and Different Assessment Modes to Inform and Improve Instruction and Student Learning: A Case in Writing

Tin Shui Wai Methodist College

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School
Tin Shui Wai Methodist College

Background
Having focused on improving the teaching and assessment of reading skills in the first year as a project school of CEAL, the proficient team of teachers at Tin Shui Wai Methodist College moved on to explore different classroom assessment tools to tackle difficulties faced by students in writing. The different tools served the function of helping teachers more accurately diagnose students' difficulties, informed teachers on the kind of feedback to provide to students' learning and how to direct efforts at curriculum and instructional adaptations (Earl, 2013). Teachers grasped the opportunities presented in the process of school-based curriculum refinement to plan the text types and language features to be taught and assessed with an aim to implement formative assessment practices and encourage knowledge transfer.

Level
Secondary 3

Strategies Used
1. **Refinement of the Existing Curriculum to Create Opportunities for Formative Assessments and Skill Transfer**
    Teachers reviewed the existing writing curriculum by analysing the text type features and language features required in each piece of writing. They then revised some of the writing questions so that students could have two consecutive practices on writing genres having a similar function (giving advice) that involves similar language features (language for giving advice or making recommendations). This not only provided a chance for students to recycle the knowledge and transfer the skills that they had acquired, but also encouraged formative assessment practices – learning from the mistakes and comments in the first piece to set targets of improvement for the second piece.

2. Collecting and Analysing Formative Assessment Data to Inform Learning and Teaching

Once the target learning objectives had been identified, difficulties faced by students of different ability levels were predicted. Teachers then collected formative assessment data on a focused area from the first piece of writing. The data was grouped according to students' performance in that particular piece of writing and analysed to inform teachers and students of the follow-up actions to take and the goal(s) to set for the second piece of writing.

3. Guiding Students to Conduct Assessment as Learning Tasks to Deepen Their Understanding of Their Own Learning Progress and the Task Requirements
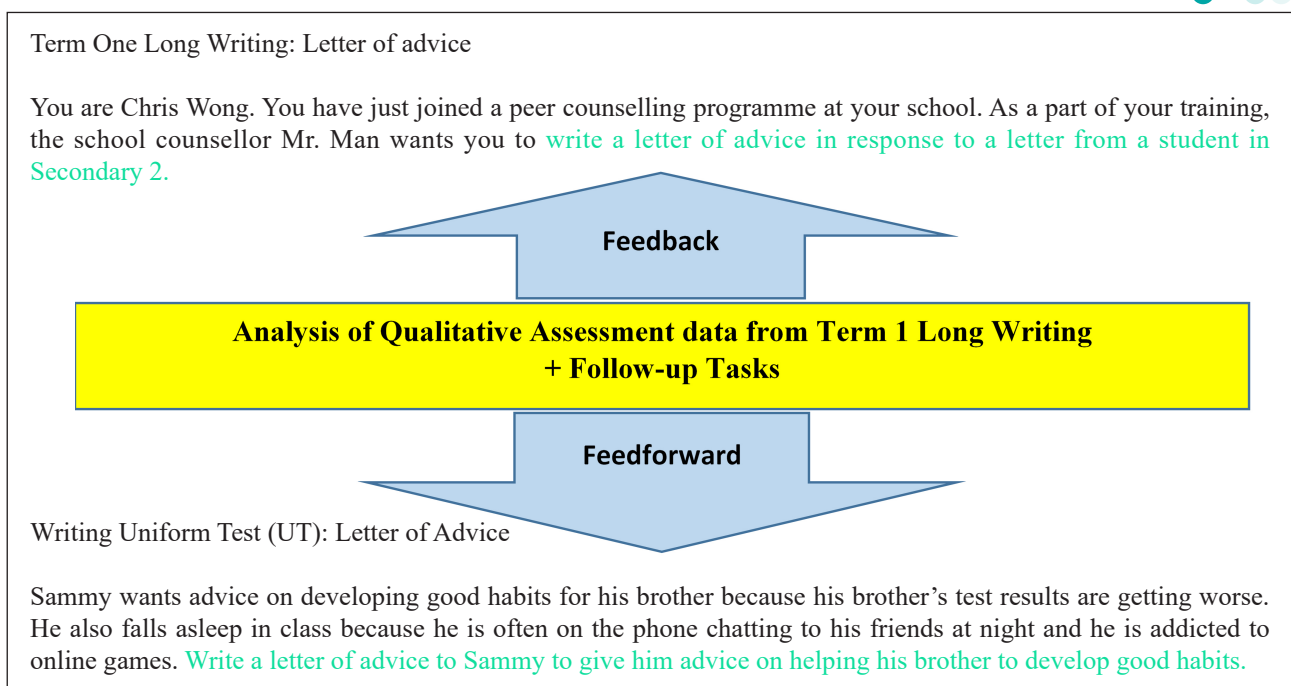
Post-writing self- and peer evaluation tasks were designed to help students reflect on their own performance, doing focused practices on weaknesses diagnosed and learning from reading and critiquing the production of their peers.

Actions Taken

1. Review and Refine the Existing Writing Curriculum to Align Teaching and Assessment

To create opportunities for the recycling of knowledge and skills, the writing curriculum was adjusted to ensure the target language features could be employed in two or more consecutive pieces of writing for knowledge transfer.

Figure 1

Term One Long Writing: Letter of advice

You are Chris Wong. You have just joined a peer counselling programme at your school. As a part of your training, the school counsellor Mr. Man wants you to write a letter of advice in response to a letter from a student in Secondary 2.

Feedback

**Analysis of Qualitative Assessment data from Term 1 Long Writing
+ Follow-up Tasks**

Feedforward

Writing Uniform Test (UT): Letter of Advice

Sammy wants advice on developing good habits for his brother because his brother's test results are getting worse. He also falls asleep in class because he is often on the phone chatting to his friends at night and he is addicted to online games. Write a letter of advice to Sammy to give him advice on helping his brother to develop good habits.

As seen in Figure 1, in Term One, letter of advice (informal) was set as one of the target genres to be taught and assessed. Teachers identified language for giving advice such as conditional sentences type 1, 2 as well as 'It is (adj) to (v)…' as the target teaching point and designed input worksheets (Figure 2) to help students write the patterns grammatically.

Figure 2

Use of conditional sentences

2a	If	Pronoun	Verb [simple present tense]	Noun,	Clause
Example	If	you	follow	the workout videos,	you will learn how to enjoy sports alone.
Your try					

2b	If	Pronoun	Verb [simple past tense]	Pronoun,	I would	Main Clause
Example	if	I	were	you,	I would	try some healthy snacks.
Your try						

2. **Collecting and Analysing Qualitative Assessment Data in Students' Writing**
   To aid teachers in making data-driven decisions, the analysis of assessment data must be done in a way that allows for the identification of gaps for remedial measures or advancement (Dial, 2016). While collecting quantitative data like marks that students gained in the content, language and organisation domain in a writing task may give teachers a general picture of students' performance and in which domain(s) student need more guidance, it may not help teachers to identify the wide variety of mistakes and challenges present in individual students' work. To accurately judge whether students could use the target language patterns taught and diagnose other problems, teachers collected qualitative data by inputting sentences each student had written to give advice on a spreadsheet (Figure 3) while marking their compositions. The teacher of each class then grouped them according to 'High', 'Mediocre' and 'Low' level according to the students' performance in the writing. The sentences were then analysed to see whether students could use the target patterns and whether there are other problems reflected.

Figure 3: Teachers collected qualitative data with the focus on 'language for giving advice' on a spreadsheet to help themselves clearly visualise and categorise data

	Class number	Student Name	Marks	Basic structures (e.g. modal verbs)
High	23		10	You ought to help yourself to less your stres; I think you should try to running and swimming.
	20		11	I suggest that you could eat healthier snacks; Besides, WHO says, 'we ought to have 400g of healthy snacks day.'; I think you should listen to music before
	26		10	I suggest you can have healthier snacks; I suggest you can do individual sports.
Mid	2		8	I suggest you can study more at home; I suggest you be brave.
	7		8	I suggest that you could try to eat healthier snacks; I suggest that you could find a private tutor to help her individually.
	12		8	I suggest that you could try to eat more fruit; I suggest that you can do individual sports.
Low	3		4	I would suggest she should eat more vegetables and do more individual sports.
	10		3	
	15		6	I suggest that you could eat healthier snacks, such as eating some nuts or some cereals; I suggest that you should try to do individual sports, such as runn
All	1		8	you should take your friend's advice. You can try running, swimming or playing tennis.
	2		8	I suggest you can study more at home; I suggest you be brave.
	3		4	I would suggest she should eat more vegetables and do more individual sports.
	4		5	I suggest that you could have healthier snacks.
	5		9	I suggest that you could try to eat some healthier snacks, for example, nuts; I suggest that you could try to do some own sports, such as running or yoga.
	6		8	
	7		8	I suggest that you could try to eat healthier snacks; I suggest that you could find a private tutor to help her individually.
	8		9	I suggest that you could go running and do individual sports.
	9		8	I suggest you can try to do individual sports, like swimming, running or rope skipping.
	10		3	
	11		9	I suggest that you can do individual sports.
	12		8	I suggest that you could try to eat more fruit; I suggest that you can do individual sports.

3A 3B 3C 3D 3S +

The data collected showed that most students, except for a few less able ones, were able to use conditional sentences and 'It is (adj) to (v)…' grammatically to give suggestions. However, the data revealed a challenge that had not been anticipated: students, especially those of 'mediocre' and 'low' ability, gave advice that were either illogical or irrelevant to the causes of the problems mentioned in the letter seeking advice. This discovery informed teachers that most students were ready to move on from language (practices in forming grammatical conditional sentences) to content (understanding keywords in the question and coming up with logical advice in response).

Figure 4: Letter seeking advice: one of the problems students needed to tackle was their friend's failure in understanding what teachers talked about on the lesson despite paying attention

Also, I struggle with studying. I never passed any of my tests. The teachers gave me too much homework that I can't handle. And I can hardly understand what the teachers are talking about in the lessons. But I am too scared of asking silly questions and getting scolded by others. I've also been sleeping very badly for the last two weeks. I always wake up in the middle of the night because of nightmares. Then, I can't get back to sleep. I always dream about failing my tests and quizzes. My friends say that I should not be upset, but that makes me even more frustrated.

Figure 5: The qualitative data (advice given by students) revealed that some students were unable to give logical advice to the problems mentioned

	Marks	Basic structures (e.g., modal verbs)	If-conditionals type 1	If-conditionals type 2	Advanced structures (questions, adj. patterns)
High	14	I suggest that you ought to try your best to do more individual sports such as yoga, running and swimming .	If you do more indiviudal sports, you will find the advantages of doing sports easily.	If I were you, I would eat more healthy snacks like oranges, apples, cereals and yoghurts.	It is useful to find a private tutor so you can try to find a private tutor in the internet.
Mid	7	In terms of learning, you should pay attention to the teacher's teachings in class.	If you don't like strenuous exercise, you can do some relaxing exercises.		
Low	3			If I will you, I will try to do some healthy diet, such as running and swimming.	

3. **Guiding Students to Engage in Assessment as Learning Tasks to Help Reflect on Their Own Writing, Learn from Their Peers and Understand How to Give 'Good Advice'**

Based on the qualitative data and various types of problems identified in individual students' writing, teachers refined the (a) self-evaluation checklist and (b) follow-up worksheets to encourage students to read and identify from their own work their strengths and areas of improvement. They were also given time to read their peer's work and then rewrote a part that they thought improvements could be made.

a. Revised self-evaluation checklist that guides students to conduct self-reflection

Russell et al. (2012) believe that self-assessment is a tool that can empower students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Teachers at the school had long adopted the approach, but they also saw the need to make refinement. The original design of the self-reflection checklist (Figure 6a) only required students to tick boxes on the items that they could complete. Students might have different interpretations on whether they have achieved an item or not, especially for items with adjectives like 'relevant and readable'. The revised self-reflection checklist (Figure 6b) required students to do counting in the content and language domains and then decide whether they were satisfied with their work or wanted to seek improvement. This helped students clearly visualise the areas

they can do well on and the areas they need to work hard on and kept them well-informed when they set new goals for the new piece of writing that includes similar items.

Figure 6a: The original post-writing self-reflection checklist

Figure 7 & 8: Students were given individual reading time to re-read their work and complete a self-reflection checklist with quantifiable items

Figure 6b: The revised self-reflection checklist
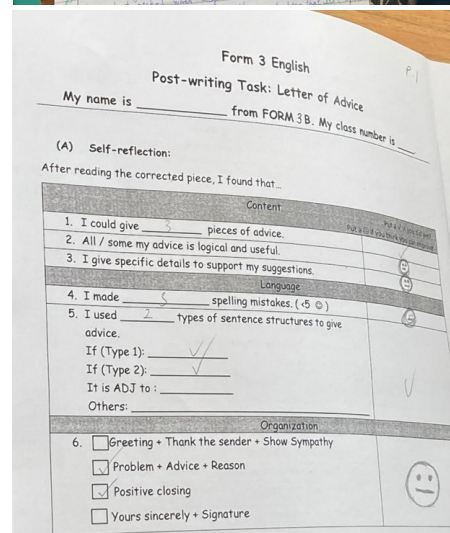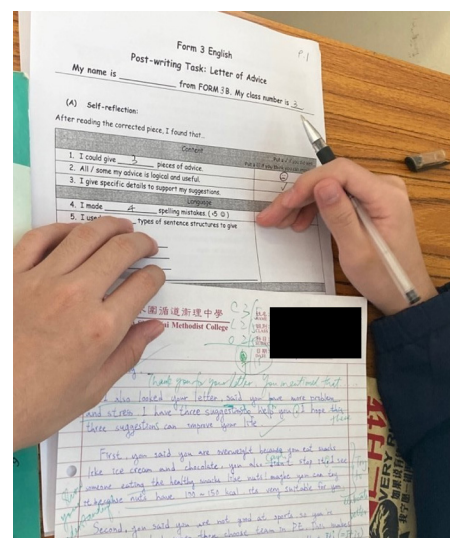
b. Follow-up Tasks that Facilitate Peer Learning

Task 1: Analysing samples of advice to understand what makes a feasible advice

Teachers selected pieces of advice that represented common problems diagnosed in students' work (Figure 9, circled in red) and thought aloud to students what makes good advice and illogical advice.

Figure 9: Teachers used students' work to analyse with them what makes an advice good or illogical

☹	I am overweight. I really love eating junk food and I eat at Fast Food Shop A 4 days a week. My friends say the food at Fast Food Shop A are very unhealthy but I think they are delicious. *(Highlight the* problem *+* cause*)*	Who gives illogical / unreasonable advice? Write down WHY the advice is illogical/unreasonable in the box below.
A	You should eat less if you want to lose weight.	☹ But she loves junk food!
B	You should not go to Fast Food Shop A. Maybe you can visit Fast Food Shop B instead?	☹ Fast Food Shop B food is also fatty.
C	I know snacks are really delicious. If you want to have snacks, you may try some healthy snacks like banana with dark chocolate, berry smoothie and mixed nuts. Slowly reduce the number of times you visit Fast Food Shop A.	☺ He can still have snacks but they are healthier! ☺ Change bad habit **slowly**

Task 2: Peer assessment

After learning what constitute good or illogical advice, students read scenarios of problems and causes and gave advice by typing them on e-platforms. They were then assigned to read the advice given by their peers and evaluate whether the advice is a feasible one, an illogical one or more detailed elaboration was needed by filling in the column on the right. By engaging students in the analysis of their peer's work, students had a clearer understanding of what constitute quality work (Vagle, 2015).

Figure 10: Students read and evaluate each other's advice on an e-platform

Problems + causes	Advice	:) / :| / :(Why?
A. 1st Term Writing UT		
Sammy wants advice on developing good habits for his brother: His test results are getting worse. He falls asleep in class because he is often on the phone chatting to his friends at night and he is addicted to online games.	a)You can just more study (study more), than the results will be better.	It can make you more know(know more about) the question. : (Because did not actually solve the problem. ▮▮▮▮--Right he still sleeps late

Cater for learner's diversity: Stronger students are pointing out problems for weaker students.

Task 3: Peer learning

Having guided students to understand more on how to provide feasible advice through evaluating their peers' work, teachers then selected samples of good advice given by students to highlight how they used 'personal experience', 'examples' or 'expert's saying' etc. to elaborate on their advice to make it more persuasive (see Figure 11). Students then located an advice that needed improvement from their own writing and tried to rewrite it following their peers' examples. With examples, students had more concrete ideas on how to elaborate on and support the advice they had given and thus made improvements in the content and organisation of their writing.

Figure 11: Peer learning task sheet

Student A

USING 'EXPERIENCE'

Three years ago, I had this problem too, but I successfully overcame the difficulty. Now I'm sharing with you my experience.

Student B

SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

If I were you, I would try to eat some healthy snacks, such as nuts, or some low-sugar and low-fat food, which can satisfy your appetite. There are many other meal replacement products, and they can effectively make you eat more without getting fat.

Student C

SPECIFIC AND MORE CREATIVE EXAMPLE

Why don't you keep a notebook for yourself? Using a notebook makes it easier to learn. You can keep one. Design it beautifully and share with me.

Learn from your classmates!
Choose a point / a sentence in your writing and rewrite it.

I learnt from _____.

My original sentence(s):

_____

My new sentence(s):

_____

_____

Impact

1. **Student Level**

   Students' performance in subsequent writing tasks that demanded giving advice and recommendations showed improvement in coming up with logical advice and some with elaboration that supported it. The self- and peer assessment practices introduced as post-writing reflection activities also introduced a classroom culture of keeping students informed of their own progress and making adjustment by learning from their peers. This helped students recognise how each attempt is not an end product or a destination, but an opportunity to understand oneself and strive for improvements.

2. **Teacher Level**

   Having experimented the process of collecting, analysing and using qualitative assessment data, teachers gained a first-hand experience of how different types of assessment data could be used to adjust the teaching and learning focus. The qualitative assessment data helped teachers discover and pinpoint particular mistakes in students' writing in a more accurate and focused manner and thus informed them on the follow-up tasks and activities to design. Teachers also tried designing post-writing self-reflection checklist and peer assessment that proved to be effective in helping students reflect and seek improvements. Teachers revealed that this experience had led them to move on from designing post-writing task that focused mainly on different grammatical mistakes to tasks that pinpoint mistakes informed by assessment data, making the follow-up work a more effective one that could really help students to reflect and learn.

3. **Curriculum Level**

   As teachers took the opportunity of reviewing and refining the existing writing curriculum to create opportunities for knowledge recycling and skill transfer, teachers showed heightened awareness in not only aligning daily teaching with assessments like quizzes, tests and examinations, but also how the analysis of genre features, language features and formality is key to deciding the types of daily writing tasks to be assigned and how they are interlinked to form a progression.

Way Forward

The proficient team of English teachers at Tin Shui Wai Methodist College were professional, diligent and devoted to improving their assessment strategies and practices to help their students learn best. Having experimented with various assessment strategies and using different types of assessment data, it is believed that the team will continue to reinforce good practices and explore other sound assessment practices. The professional collaborative culture also means teachers will share with each other sound practices and effective strategies for the continuous progression of the English panel.

References

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