

EL Classroom *inquiry*

It is about what works in the English Language classroom





ISSUE

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An Inquiry into Reading Instruction

Teachers' professional learning is intended to bring about improvements in teaching and student learning. There is general consensus in the literature that teacher professional development practices are effective when teachers engage in inquiry, experimentation, and reflection on the processes of student learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

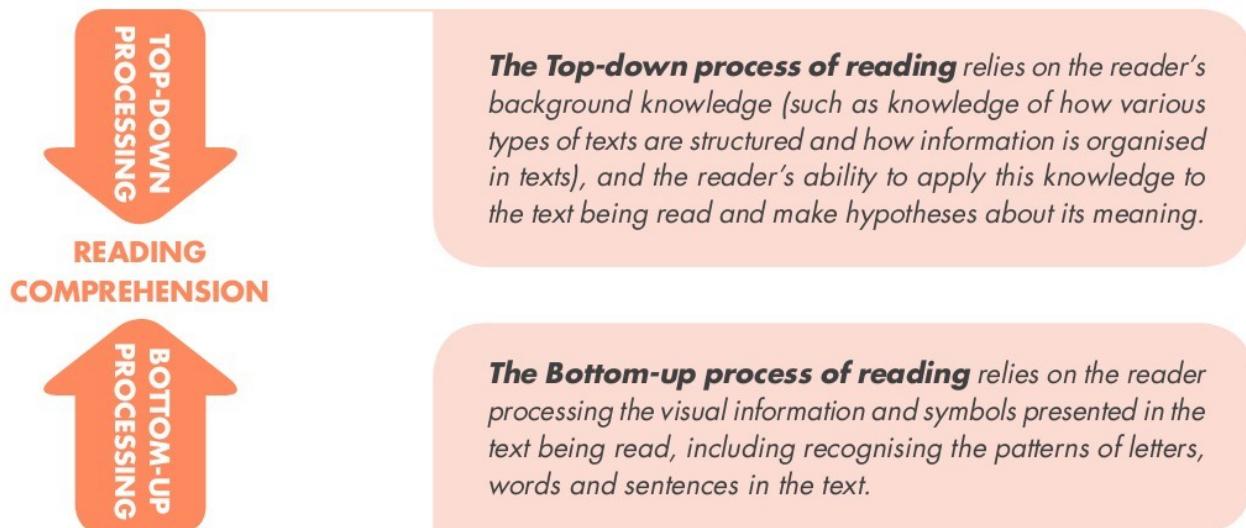
This issue of the EL Classroom Inquiry reports on the professional learning of teachers in three schools who had focused on the interrogation of their reading instruction, with the support of Master Teachers/ English Language (EL). The first article describes how a team of three teachers from Gongshang Primary School (GPS) explicitly taught reading skills to Primary 5 and 6 classes and the impact of this on their students' reading comprehension. The second article reports how two teachers from North Vista Secondary School (NVSS) inquired into the value of

equipping Secondary Four students with the ability to ask questions of the texts they were reading. The last article documents the reflections of a teacher from Assumption English School (AES) as she embarked on a journey of questioning herself as a reader and a teacher in a Secondary Five classroom.

Literature Review

In all three learning experiences, the teachers began their inquiry by taking stock of their current methods of teaching reading comprehension and looking to the literature to consider other choices regarding instructional practice. Their reading of the literature confirmed their understanding of reading as an interactive psycholinguistic process in which readers make use of both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processing to make sense of a text (Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977; Garner, 1987).

Figure 1: Interactive Process of Making Sense of Texts



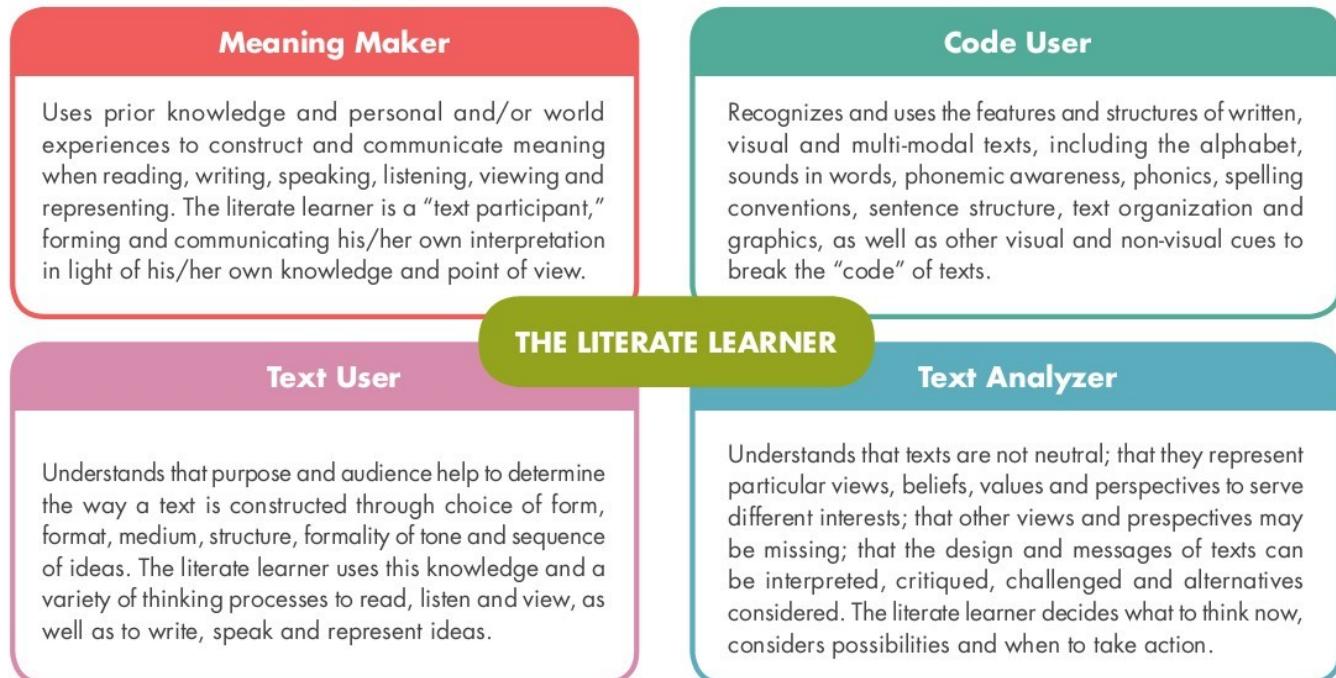
As depicted in Figure 1, this interactive process, in which readers simultaneously make use of both their own background knowledge and skills (the top-down process) as well as information from texts (the bottom-up process), requires readers to be actively engaged in constructing meaning when reading. Good readers actively participate in reading by:

- making connections between what they read and their prior knowledge and points of view

- using their understanding of the language and the thinking processes of reading to arrive at a deeper appreciation of what they read
- critiquing, challenging and considering alternatives to what is presented to them.

Active readers, according to Freebody and Luke (1990), are "literate learners" who utilise their resources as reader-learners and adopt various reader roles as they engage with texts. The Four Reader Roles of such "literate learners" are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Four Reader Roles of the Literate Learner



Adapted from *Literacy for Learning: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario* (2004, pp. 9) and based on Freebody & Luke's 'Four Resources Model' (1990)

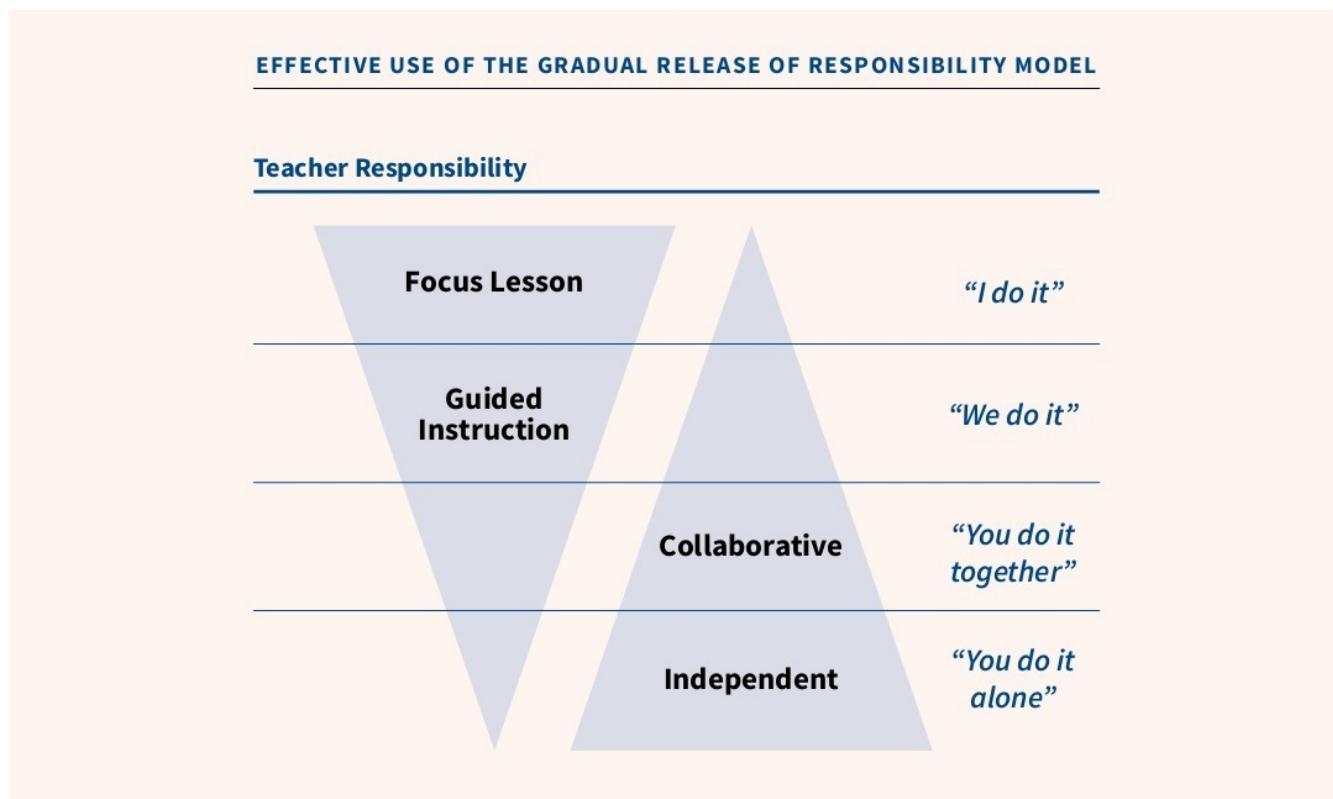
In their roles as active readers, such learners also "spontaneously generate questions at different points in the reading process" (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 433).

- **As code users**, learners 'stand outside a text' and may ask questions about how the text is organised, which words in the text have similar or different meanings, what visuals are used in the text and why.
- **As meaning makers**, learners experience a text as a participant and may compare their own feelings with those of a character in the text and wonder whether the character would respond differently from themselves.
- **As text users**, learners are purposeful readers who may ask how they can use and represent the information or arguments in a text to provide support for their own ideas in a speech or piece of writing.
- **As text analysts**, learners may step back from a text and interrogate it, asking questions about the author's motive and what strategies the author uses to shape meaning and advocate particular points of view.

In reviewing their teaching of reading comprehension, the teachers also learnt the importance of moving away from the traditional teacher-centred instructional model towards more learner-centred instruction. 'The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model' (GRR) (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) informed the teachers' deliberations on how to effect this change, in moving from assuming "all responsibility for performing a task" to a situation in which "the students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, pp. 211). The four phases of the GRR model are shown in Figure 3.

As a result of reading relevant literature, engaging in collaborative learning with their peers and drawing on the experience and expertise of Master Teachers who partnered them on their inquiry journeys, the teachers in all three of the studies presented here have approached their reading instruction with new lenses. While the effect on students' reading comprehension was not measured in quantifiable terms, all three studies reported a positive impact on students' engagement and cognition. It was clear that the inquiry experience had helped the teachers get a new handle on approaching the teaching of reading, and more importantly, they had developed as reflective practitioners.

Figure 3: The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model



Source: Fisher & Frey (2008)

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A photograph of a woman with shoulder-length brown hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue sleeveless dress with a large pink rose and white floral print. She is standing outdoors, surrounded by green foliage and a wooden structure.

An Inquiry into the Explicit Teaching of Reading Comprehension Skills

**BY JANNIE LOH, MELISSA CHAN,
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(GONGSHANG PRIMARY SCHOOL)
AND EMELYN KUAN (ELIS)**

A team of English Language (EL) teachers from Gongshang Primary School comprising Jannie Loh (Head of Department/ EL), Melissa Chan (Level Head/ EL) and Alvinna Alphonso, formed a Special Interest Group (SIG) to inquire into their practice of teaching reading and comprehension. The team worked with Master Teacher/ EL, Emelyn Kuan, to explore how the explicit teaching of reading comprehension skills and learner strategies would impact the reading comprehension of 119 students of whom 79 were from Primary 5 and 40 from Primary 6.

The teachers found that the explicit teaching of reading comprehension skills and learner strategies enabled their students to unpack texts on their own. In addition, some students were able to extend the application of these skills and strategies to other aspects of language learning such as speaking and writing.

An Inquiry into the Explicit Teaching of Comprehension Skills



Introduction

As Primary 5 and 6 teachers, our main focus was to prepare our students to be ready for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Thus, we closely monitored and analysed the progress of our students to look for gaps in their EL learning. Our analysis of data from school examinations and the daily work of students indicated that there was room for improvement in our Primary 5 and 6 students' abilities in reading comprehension. Mainly, our students struggled with inference questions, often providing answers that were incomplete or inaccurate.

Our initial plan was to provide our students with more practice in answering higher order thinking questions as we thought that this would help them be better equipped to handle similar questions. We thought that the work of the SIG could be focused on setting more higher order thinking questions for comprehension texts.

However, Emelyn advised us to consider examining our practice of teaching reading as well. She explained that it was necessary that we first equip our students with reading skills to understand texts before providing them with more practice in answering comprehension questions, in particular the ones that required higher order thinking.

Our Practice-based Professional Learning Journey

Uncovering beliefs

Our professional conversations, which began in February 2016, centred on surfacing the beliefs that underpinned our teaching approach. Emelyn asked probing questions which caused us to reflect deeply on our practice and enabled us to uncover a number of beliefs that had influenced the way we taught reading comprehension. One strong belief we had held was that our students needed practice in order to perform better in the examinations. Thus the texts we used to teach reading comprehension were similar to those set in summative assessments, and after reading each passage, students had to answer ten questions just as they would be required to do in an examination.

We also realised that we had encouraged our students to read the passages with the sole aim of looking for answers to the questions set rather than for comprehension. Our lessons frequently began with the students reviewing the questions prior to reading the text. The guiding questions we posed to the students while they were reading the comprehension text were also very much aimed at directing them to where the answers to the questions could be found.

In addition, we held the view that it was the teacher's responsibility to unpack the text for the students if they did not understand the text fully. Hence we took it upon ourselves to explain unfamiliar vocabulary as well as the sections of the text which we thought the students would have difficulty in comprehending.

In essence, our main focus was to ensure that our students understood the text well enough to correctly and accurately answer the questions that were set.

Identifying the problem

Uncovering the beliefs that guided our instructional approach helped us realise that we had not explicitly taught our students reading skills nor had we taught them how to apply the skills to new contexts. It became apparent to us that it was not enough to teach reading comprehension by focusing only on preparing our students to answer the set comprehension questions.

Reviewing the literature

To explore a different approach to teaching reading comprehension, we reviewed the relevant literature. We were guided in our inquiry by the taxonomy of Reader Roles (Luke and Freebody, 1990). Aside from reading about Fisher and Frey's (2008) 'Gradual Release of Responsibility Model' (GRR), we also familiarised ourselves with the skills, strategies, attitudes and behaviour (SSAB) for the teaching of Reading and Viewing as spelt out in the EL Syllabus 2010. In addition, Emelyn guided us through the principles of EL teaching and learning (CLLIPS) and the teaching processes (ACoLADE) found in the EL Syllabus 2010 (refer to Tables 1 and 2 below).

Table 1
Principles of EL Teaching and Learning

C	ontextualisation
L	earner-centredness
L	earning-focused interaction
I	ntegration
P	rocess orientation
S	piral progression

Table 2
Teaching Processes

A	Raising Awareness
Co	Structuring Consolidation
L	Facilitating Assessment for Learning
A	Enabling Application
D	Guiding Discovery
E	Instructing Explicitly

Making the paradigm shift

The literature we read caused a paradigm shift in the way we approached teaching reading comprehension. Instead of focusing on helping students understand the text so that they could answer the comprehension questions, we decided to focus on explicitly teaching students the skills and learner strategies they needed for close and critical reading. We adopted the GRR model to scaffold students' learning and to gradually shift the responsibility of understanding the text from the teacher to the students.

We referred to the Primary Reading and Viewing charts in the EL Syllabus to identify the skills we needed to teach. We decided that for a start, we would teach our students to:

- identify main ideas and supporting details
- provide evidence to support points stated
- make inferences based on prior knowledge, visual clues and contextual clues
- compare and contrast ideas/ concepts.

Below is a sample lesson plan of how we explicitly taught inference skills to our Primary 5 and 6 students using the GRR model to scaffold their learning.

Lesson Duration: 1 h	
Learning Objective: Students will use contextual clues in the text and their prior knowledge to answer inferential questions.	
Activity	Rationale
INTRODUCTION	
1. Teacher writes on the board the WALT (We are learning to ...) statement: We are learning to make inferences today. Teacher asks students for their understanding of inference. 2. Teacher informs students that they will be watching a video clip on making inferences https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=to30AJm2epQ Teacher instructs students to ask themselves these questions while watching the clip: - What is an inference? - How does one make an inference?	Set clear learning focus. Engage students and help them understand what the skill of 'inferencing' is.
3. Teacher gathers from students their understanding of what an inference is and what they can infer from the text. Key point for students to note : <u>When we make an inference, we base our conclusion on evidence in the text and use contextual clues and prior knowledge.</u>	Assess students' listening and viewing skills and their understanding of the skill of 'inferencing'.
4. Teacher asks students why it is important to learn to make inferences. Key point for students to note: <u>Being able to make inferences helps us understand the 'hidden meaning' in the text because writers do not always state what they want to say directly.</u>	Raise awareness of the purpose of learning the skill of inference and its application.
DEVELOPMENT	
(Making Inferences Using 4 Visual Texts)	
5. Teacher demonstrates through 'Think Aloud' how she infers information from Visual Text 1.	Teach explicitly how to make inferences using a visual text (I Do).

6. Teacher guides students through questioning to infer information from Visual Text 2.	Guide application (We Do).
7. Students work in pairs to infer information from Visual Text 3. Teacher monitors students and gets a few pairs to share their inferences with the class.	Enable collaboration (You Do Together).
8. Students work on individually inferring information from Visual Text 4.	Provide independent application (You do it alone).
9. Teacher checks students' understanding using mini-whiteboards before proceeding to the written texts.	Assess students' understanding and application of inference skill.

(Making Inferences Using 4 Short Written Texts)

10. Teacher reads aloud Text 1 and demonstrates how she makes inferences using contextual clues. Teacher explains that <u>contextual evidence, which is specific information found in the text, is needed to support the inferences made.</u>	Teach explicitly how to make inferences in a text (I Do).
11. Teacher guides students in identifying contextual evidence in Text 2 to help them make inferences. Students are to use the information given and their own experiences to make inferences.	Guide Application through questioning (We Do).
12. Students work in pairs to infer information from Text 3. Teacher gets a few students to share before she explains how the inferences can be made.	Enable collaboration (You Do Together).
13. Students make their own inferences for Text 4.	Provide independent application(You do it alone).
14. Teacher gets students to recap what they need to do to make inferences.	Consolidate learning.

CONCLUSION

15. Teacher gets students to reflect and write on post-its what they have learnt about making inferences as well as one question they might still have.	Provide students with opportunity to reflect on their learning.
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Discussion of Lesson on Making Inferences

When the lesson was taught in Class A, we realised that we needed more than an hour to complete the lesson if we wanted meaningful rich class discussion and peer interaction to take place. We therefore decided to reduce the number of visual texts and inferential questions asked so that we could keep to the one hour time slot and still provide sufficient time for learning-focused interaction when the lesson was taught in Class B. We felt that the learning-focused interaction time contributed most to the students' learning because students could clarify their doubts, support their inferences and have their questions answered.

For instance in Text 2 (see below), Student A argued that the statement "Ryan was allergic to cats" was not a complete answer to Question 1 (Why did Ryan want to call his mother?), as it did not fully explain why Ryan should call his mother. The teacher reiterated that good inferences had to be supported with evidence from the text and proceeded to ask the class what they thought of Student A's argument.

Another student suggested that "and he wanted to go home" should be added since Ryan's eyes were itchy and he was sneezing and added that "cats" was inaccurate as there was only one cat mentioned. Yet another said that it should be "and he wanted his mother to take him home" because Ryan's mother dropped him off at Robert's house. The teacher then asked the students to consider what the best response was. The class came

to the consensus that the statement "Ryan wanted his mother to take him home because he was allergic to the cat in Robert's house" was the best inferred response as it used many of the contextual clues in the passage.

Giving students time for such discussions and deliberation helped them develop a clearer understanding of how to make valid inferences. Hence we decided to allocate sufficient time for students' learning-focused interactions when planning our lessons.

As teaching using 'Think Aloud' was not something we teachers were used to, we had to rehearse so that we did not end up questioning the students in the process. We consciously worked on being precise, succinct and systematic in our 'Think Aloud's so that students could follow our train of thought easily. The students had to be told that when we teachers asked a question during our 'Think Aloud's, we were simply verbalising a question that was in our heads and they should not raise their hands to answer it. In subsequent lessons, to signal to students that we were doing a 'Think Aloud', we placed two fingers on our temples to indicate that we were voicing our own thoughts and questions.

To provide equal opportunities to every student in the collaborative learning stage (Stage 3) to share and show their application of learning, we used cooperative structures such as Rally Robin (two students taking turns to talk) and Round Robin (four students taking turns to talk).

Text 2

Ryan was looking forward to sleeping over at his friend Robert's house. Though they had been classmates for a while, the two had only recently become good friends. Ryan packed up his sleeping bag, a pillow, and a few of his favourite toys and games, and then his mother dropped him off at Robert's.

Robert met Ryan on the porch and the two did their secret handshake and started playing right away. First they played pirates in Robert's tree fort. Next they played ninjas in the driveway. Then it started getting dark and they went inside Robert's house. As soon as they walked in the house, Ryan's eyes starting getting red and itchy. He saw a big orange cat sitting on the couch. Then he started sneezing uncontrollably. "I'm sorry, Robert. It's been a lot of fun, but I have to call my mom."

1. Why did Ryan want to call his mother?

Student Outcomes

We observed that the students were more engaged when we taught them how to make inferences by using GRR. By virtue of the structure of GRR, the students had more time to engage in learning-focused discussions, thus resulting in richer learning. Most of our students had greater clarity and understanding of the skill because we taught it explicitly. We noted that many students were reading the texts more closely to look for contextual clues. In addition, they put in more thought when answering the questions.

A few students were interested to know if the skill could be used in other areas. This signalled to us that they were not able to see the connection between making inferences to oral conversations. Even though we had used visual texts, they could only connect their learning to making inferences from written texts. One reason for this could be that we did not make the links clear enough for them when we were demonstrating making inferences using visual texts. That said, we also had a few students who could see the links not only to oral conversation but also to writing as evidenced by the comments some of them made that the skill of making inferences reminded them of the writing strategy 'Show Not Tell' because they had to look for clues in the text.

A sample of student work

Text 3

Kyle ran into his house, slamming the door behind him. He threw his bag on the floor and plopped onto the couch. After six hours of playing Grand Larceny VII, he ate some pizza and fell asleep with a slice on his stomach and his feet on his bag.

When Kyle came home from school the next day, he was noticeably upset. He got bad results for the test (he got / balled up his test paper and placed it inside a soup can in the garbage bin.) He then flipped the soup can upside down in the garbage and arranged loose pieces of trash over it. As he plopped down on the couch, he let out a sigh and picked up his game controller. he did not want anyone to see/find his test paper

1. Why did Kyle put the test paper in a soup can?

He was upset with his test results and did not want anyone to see his test paper and know that he did badly in it.

How do you know this?

played on his computer the night before / he was upset when he came back / balled his test paper / flipped the can upside down in the garage / arranged loose pieces of trash over it.

Text 4

"Tommy!" Mom called out as she walked in through the front door. "Tommy," she continued shouting, "I sure could use some help with these groceries!" There was still no reply. Mom walked into the kitchen to put the grocery bags down on the counter when she noticed a shattered window. There was glass all over the living room floor and a baseball nearby. "I'm going to spank you, Tommy!" Mom yelled. At that moment, she realized that Tommy's shoes were gone.

1. Why was Tommy not in the house?

He ran away as he was scared his mother would scold him.

He ran away because he was scared that his mother would punish him for breaking the window while playing baseball.

How do you know this?

shattered window / baseball / glass in the living room

Students' Reflections on their Learning Experience



“ I have learnt that inference is making an educated guess based on the contextual clues in text that is right in front of us, combined with our own experience. My question is: How do you write a composition with inferences? ”

“ I personally think that the ‘Think Aloud’ by my teacher helped me tremendously. The reason is I can think like her and get the answers. ”

“ I have learnt that to infer, I must use my prior knowledge and the information in the text. One question I have about inference is: if our prior knowledge is wrong, what do we do? ”

“ I like the sharing as we can compare our answers and check if we did it correctly, so we can finish the question with a face like that: ☺ ”

“ It was great that the teacher shared her thoughts with us. I can follow how she thinks. ”

“ I think that sharing time is very effective. We usually do our answers alone or copy down the answers aimlessly. (Sharing) can get us to communicate with our peers and get us to learn from one another. ”

Teachers' Reflections

Alvinna's reflections

This SIG proved to be a really enriching experience. I have gained a greater awareness of the various comprehension skills that are listed in the EL Syllabus 2010. Being involved in the SIG has sharpened my ability to effectively deliver comprehension lessons which focus on the explicit teaching of skills.

Melissa's reflections

Being part of the SIG has made me more reflective as a practitioner and to question the 'why' of my teaching. The SIG pushed me into the stretch zone of growth because I had to think about how to explicitly teach the skill. Modelling the '*Think Aloud*' was not easy and I found myself lapsing into questioning the students on occasions. However,

having seen that my students were more engaged and learnt better when I could explicitly model my own thinking, I will continue to persevere.

Jannie's reflections

This SIG has deepened my knowledge of designing, planning and facilitating lessons which focus on equipping my students with reading and comprehension skills. Using GRR as a structured approach to teaching comprehension is far more beneficial, purposeful and rewarding to both the teachers and students than our former way of teaching students to answer the questions which accompanied the text. We have shared our learning with other teachers in our department because we want to bring about improved student outcomes.

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An Inquiry into the Use of Questioning ⁱⁿ Reading Comprehension

BY ANNA MATHEW, DAPHNE HUANG,
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AND CEDRIC LEONG (ELIS)

When readers themselves ask questions about texts they read, they engage with the texts in ways that improve their comprehension and understanding, and promote a personal response to the texts. In classrooms where the teacher refers students only to comprehension questions set on the given texts, students are not provided with opportunities to ask their own questions. The focus of such classrooms falls inevitably on ensuring that students understand the set questions and provide the right answers, instead of encouraging and enabling them to engage personally in close and critical reading of the texts themselves. English Language (EL) teachers Anna Mathew and Daphne Huang, from North Vista Secondary School, formed a Special Interest Group (SIG) with Cedric Leong, Master Teacher/EL, to look at how teachers could build their students' ability to pose questions that would reflect their curiosity as readers and engender more thoughtful and critical reading of texts.

How can EL teachers develop students' ability to pose their own questions about texts?



Our Initial Discussion

In our first analysis of our students' learning needs in the area of reading and viewing, we identified a usual suspect for why the students were not doing well in reading comprehension assessments – their lack of understanding of question types and demands, and how to write clear and accurate responses to any given question set on a text. Hence, we considered teaching question analysis skills to our Secondary One (Express) and Secondary Four (Normal Academic) students. We thought that through that, they would learn that the different types of questions placed specific requirements on how they should respond to the questions.

We discussed our proposal with Cedric and, through our conversations with him, we came to understand that it would be more worthwhile to take a longer term view of how we could meet the needs of our students. Instead of just helping students respond to questions that assessed their comprehension of texts, we began to consider

building their ability to formulate and pose their own questions about the texts they read. We reasoned that:

- if students were provided with texts on topics and themes that were compelling and interesting to them, their natural curiosity would prompt them to ask questions of their own about the texts.
- questions that students themselves posed would motivate them to think and search the text for the best responses to their questions, and in the process develop a clear, accurate and complete understanding of the text as they could manage.
- as students developed the habit of posing and responding to a variety of questions – including examination-type questions – and teachers responded to students' learning needs as these arose over time, students would build more than just an ability to analyse questions and construct correct answers to them. They would also develop a range of close and critical reading skills and learner strategies, engage with what they read not only intellectually but also at a personal level, and nurture their inquiring minds and capacity for learning.

Learning from the Literature Review

The literature review we did as part of the work of this SIG showed us that successful reading is not simply a mechanical process but, rather, a process of active inquiry in which readers approach a text with questions of their own. In their roles as active readers, learners also "spontaneously generate questions at different points in the reading process" (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 433).

In addition, our readings (Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977; Garner, 1987) showed us that the ability to comprehend and understand what is read is an interactive psycholinguistic process in which active readers make use of both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processing to make sense of a text. Active readers are also "literate learners" who utilise their resources as reader-learners and adopt various reader roles as they engage with texts (Freebody & Luke, 1990). (Please see pp. 5 for a more detailed explanation of the interactive process of making sense of texts and the Four Reader Roles.)

Planning the Lessons

We decided to apply what we were learning to Anna's Secondary Four (Normal Academic) class first. Given that these students were more familiar with questions that were set to assess their comprehension of texts, we wanted to find out whether teaching them to pose their own questions about texts and their reading practices would have a positive impact on their comprehension and engagement with texts.

We considered beginning a series of lessons with explicit teaching of the various types of questions associated with the Four Reader Roles. Through our discussions, we realised that such an explicit focus on question types at the start might be premature since we wanted to encourage students to ask their own questions, out of their own curiosity, about the texts they were encountering or were presented with. So we decided to begin instead by presenting the students with a text that was sufficiently

compelling so that the students' inquisitiveness would drive them to ask their own questions. The students' encounter with this text would provide the context for their learning about the types of questions they and their teacher would ask.

Anna selected an excerpt (see sample paragraph below) from 'A Captain's Duty', the biographical account of Captain Richard Phillips whose cargo ship, the unarmed MV Maersk Alabama, was attacked by armed Somali pirates in 2009. The true story of how a quick-thinking captain made a series of decisions that preserved his life and the lives of his crew in the face of ruthless and dangerous pirates should prompt the students to ask many questions.

In our discussions, we also anticipated challenges in the teaching and learning process. Initially, our plan was for the students to work independently in pairs to pose questions about the paragraphs they would be assigned to read closely. We discussed this and came to the conclusion that, while the text was compelling in itself, it was likely that the students would require more than a nudge to feel comfortable allowing their own questions

Sample Paragraph Adapted from the Original Text

With multiple rooms, thousands of square feet of space, passageways and service corridors to hide in, a container ship like the Maersk Alabama could be likened to a horizontal skyscraper. Fortunately, the knowledge I had of the ship itself was my trump card. Therefore, the immediate task for me was to think of how to keep my crew - the sixteen men hiding below me and the three remaining men on the bridge - away from the Somalian pirates who had boarded the ship fifteen minutes ago and how to get those three remaining men into one of those rooms and to safety. I just had to figure out the pirates' strategy before they figured out mine.

to surface in place of the examination-type questions that they had been used to. Hence we decided that the teacher would model the reading-thinking-questioning processes using a section of the first paragraph of the text. She would ask questions based on the Four Reader Roles. Following this, she would invite the students to participate in these processes and co-construct questions with them before they applied the same processes to paragraph 2.

To ensure that we could provide the students with helpful examples of the kinds of the questions they could pose, we took extra care to formulate a range of questions that Anna could ask on paragraph 1. Some examples of these questions were:

- Did the captain make an SOS call? Was help on its way?
- At this point in time – 15 minutes after the pirates had boarded his ship – what could be the “strategy” that had already formed in the captain’s mind?
- Is it possible that, in his biography, Captain Phillips might be presenting a romanticised version of what actually happened in 2009?

Another challenge we anticipated was that the students might question the learning objective. In their graduating year, should they not be paying attention to how to correctly answer questions printed on examination papers

instead of posing their own questions? We knew we had to demonstrate that the questions they posed would help them develop a better understanding of the text they were reading, and eventually enable them to come to their own, better-informed, answers to the questions typically found in examination papers.

We also recognised that a small number of the students would require additional support in working with the text. Based on her observations of her class, Anna managed the formation of groups in a way that would enable her to pay closer attention to those students who needed more help. She also decided to use the official trailer for Captain Phillips, the movie inspired by the true story, to pique the interest of her students before they were presented with the print version of the story.

Following this first lesson, Anna explicitly taught her students the types of questions associated with the Four Reader Roles. In a subsequent unit of learning on expositions, she invited the students to pose their own questions on the topic, ‘Extreme Sports’, before reading and making sense of a selection of print and non-print articles on the topic. As part of the process of reading these articles, the students looked for answers to their questions. To consolidate the students’ learning of the use of questions in the reading process, Anna asked them to produce posters on each extreme sport, based on the questions they posed and the answers they found.



Observations and Learning Outcomes

In the first lesson, we were pleasantly surprised by our students' response to this new approach to 'doing' reading comprehension. Most of the students were very enthusiastic about the opportunity to pose their own questions and were on task.

The group of five students Anna had identified as requiring additional support worked well together at a pace comfortable to them, and with her guidance, they posed questions that were no less valid and interesting than those posed by their peers in the class.

On the whole, the students asked a variety of questions (see Figure 1). The use of the movie trailer also worked for them. They were visibly more at ease asking their own questions as they responded to the movie trailer.

As we had predicted, quite a few of the questions the students posed in the first lesson looked suspiciously like those they were familiar with in examination papers. For example:

- *If you were the captain would you take the "golden opportunity"?*
- *Which phrase is an example of a simile?*
- *Which sentence in the passage states that the captain does not know what to do next?*

We also noted that a number of the students regarded the lesson – erroneously – as an exercise in asking "creative questions".

Figure 1: Samples of Students' Questions in the First Lesson



However, in the lesson following the explicit teaching of reader roles and the associated question types, when the students were invited to comment on questions posed by other groups, the students' responses were quite encouraging. We observed that, with teacher guidance, the students demonstrated metacognition, were able to critically examine the types of questions asked and give suggestions on other questions and question types that could be asked.

In their reflections, some students said that posing questions helped them think more deeply and learn more about the text they were reading. Others pointed out that they learnt to be more specific in posing their questions.

Subsequently, students showed much enthusiasm in posing their own questions, when we built an authentic opportunity for them to ask questions that they wanted answers to about the topic, 'Extreme Sports'. The questions raised by the students included:

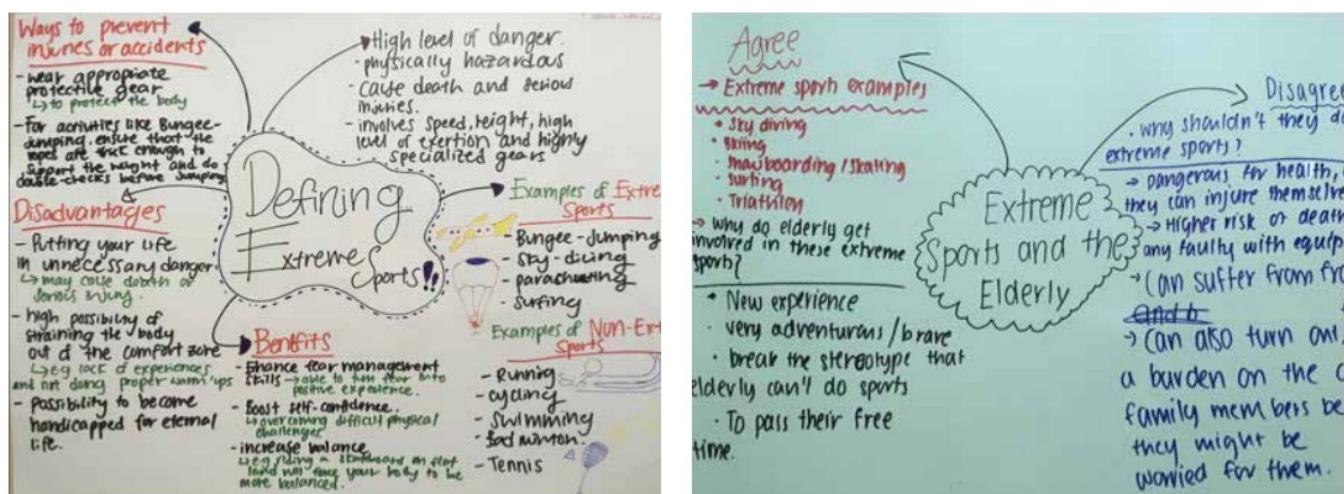
- What are the defining criteria for classifying a sport as an extreme sport?
- Are extreme sports really dangerous?

- Who would be the best judge of the nature and level of danger in a sport?
- What are the benefits of participating in an extreme sport?
- How do the benefits and dangers differ for different people, such as the physically active, the elderly, women and children?

The students collaborated in their groups to create posters that represented their questions and the answers they found through reading various articles and viewing videos on the topic (see Figure 2).

Our observations and the artefacts of learning from Anna's Secondary Four (Normal Academic) class suggest that the students have taken their first steps towards active reading, personally responding to reading and learning from reading. There remains a tendency among the students to ask questions that are focused on assessing comprehension of a text. However, with teacher guidance and the use of compelling texts, the students can be encouraged to pose questions that drive their inquiry through reading and engaging with texts.

Figure 2: Students' Application of Learning through Creating Posters



Teachers' Reflections



Anna:

It is wonderful that I can shift my attention from a singular focus on teaching examination strategies to empowering my students to ask questions that enhance their learning experience. I feel a sense of pride when I see my students growing in confidence as they pose questions not just about the texts they are reading but also about topics and issues related to the texts.

My participation in this SIG has been an eye-opening experience for me as I have learnt to regard reading comprehension from a fresh perspective. It has also enabled me to review my practice of teaching through reflecting on the learning outcomes that matter to students in the longer term.

I have shared what I have learnt with my colleagues in the EL Department. I intend to apply my learning in my other classes and extend application to the teaching of oral communication skills.

Daphne:

It gives me satisfaction and pleasure to observe how the students have become more involved with texts and developed their thinking skills. It has always saddened me whenever I see students mechanically memorising content and practising skills that are formally tested. I hope to nurture thinkers and enquirers, and I would like to convince my students and their parents that this will enable students to do well beyond the examinations.

Working in teams to plan lessons is always worthwhile as we can tap the expertise and experience of others. To apply what I have learnt through this SIG, I would like to review the Secondary One scheme of work and materials and share what I have learnt with the other teachers in the level. I hope that, together, we can develop better learning experiences for our students through enabling them to pose questions that encourage inquiry and learning. In this way, we can build a stronger foundation in EL learning for our Secondary One students.



Cedric:

It has been such a pleasure learning together with Anna and Daphne. They have approached our professional conversations and work with a view to critiquing practice while always remaining supportive of one another. I am glad to have observed some positive outcomes in students' engagement with texts, and I look forward to continuing this learning journey with Anna and Daphne. In particular, I would like to collaborate with Daphne to incorporate the use of questioning more intentionally into the teaching and learning processes in her lower secondary EL

classroom. With practice, we should also be able to observe the kinds of sustained learning and learner outcomes we envisaged earlier:

- the ability to analyse questions and construct correct answers to them
- the development of a range of close and critical reading skills and learner strategies
- engagement with texts not only intellectually but also at a personal level
- the development of inquiring minds and the capacity for learning together.

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Questioning the Self as Reader and Teacher

BY KATHRYN LEE
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AND AUDREY LEE (ELIS)

Kathryn Lee, Level Head at Assumption English School, was interested in exploring the nature of reading and uncovering the skills of good readers so that she could assist students to unlock meaning independently. Together with Audrey Lee, Master Teacher/EL, Kathryn explored the teaching of reading and the use of the 'Think Aloud' strategy to model what readers do as they process texts as readers.

Is Assessment the Problem?

How does one teach reading comprehension? Are there students who "can read" and those who "can't"? How can I help those who "can't read"?

These were some of the many questions in my mind as I began to work with Ms Audrey Lee, Master Teacher/EL, who was attached to Assumption English School, from 2015-2017.

In 2015, I had two classes of Secondary 5 Normal Academic (NA) students who found the 'O' Level English Comprehension paper particularly challenging. As their English Language (EL) teacher, I found it difficult to help them bridge the gap between the 'N' Level paper and the 'O' level paper. I had taught the same batch of students from Secondary 1 in 2011 to Secondary 4 in 2014. I was comfortable with the NA syllabus and examination papers, able to adjust my instruction even when there was a change in the format of the examination paper in 2013. Having 100% of the 4NA students achieve a pass in the 1190 EL paper seemed to affirm the work that I had been doing. However, when I moved with the same batch of students from 4NA to 5NA to take them through the 'O' Levels, I was shocked at the increased difficulty of the reading comprehension paper. Besides the texts being more difficult, the type of questions asked varied largely as well.

In a conversation with Audrey, I mentioned that my students were having a lot of difficulty with the comprehension paper, in particular, the narrative text. In response, Audrey posed some questions that made me reflect on my personal journey and experiences first as an EL learner, and subsequently, as a teacher. I realised that I had not thought about my skills as a reader and how I was making meaning as I read.

To better understand my students' struggles, I conducted a reading skills survey which revealed that the students had a shallow understanding of reading comprehension skills. These are some examples of my students' descriptions of how they read:

"Read slowly, break up the sentence and try to understand word by word as it helps me understand the passage better"

"Read sentence by sentence because I have to answer the questions; if not no marks will be awarded."

"Read the passage over again so I will understand better and will not miss out key points."

"I re-read the passage again by going paragraph by paragraph. I make sure I understand at least a little bit of the paragraph before moving on. Reading slowly and repeatedly helps me".

The students' comments showed me that the main strategy they employed was re-reading and re-examining the words and sentences within paragraphs to make meaning. This was what Rumelhart & Ortony (1977) and Garner (1987) described as the bottom-up approach (Please see pp. 5 for an explanation of the 'Interactive Process of Making Sense of Texts'). The students did not, however, appear to be drawing on their prior knowledge and experiences to decode meaning or connecting meaning between paragraphs to form an understanding of the overall discourse. My students' focus was mainly to answer the questions set in the examination paper and they were not practising, or not familiar with, strategies such as having a 'dialogue' with the author or asking questions of themselves and of the author and his intentions.



My Current Practice

After considering what my students had said in the survey, I reflected on how I taught reading comprehension. I realised that I generally approached the teaching of reading comprehension in the same way I myself had been taught. I would give students the passage, 'go through' the passage with them, clarify their doubts, and subsequently help them answer the accompanying questions. I was aware of the profile of my students, took pains to scaffold their learning as I had learnt to do at the National Institute of Education (NIE). I also used reading strategies such as the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) and the KWL (Know, Want to know, Learnt).

Applying these strategies, I would unpack the reading passage, paragraph by paragraph with the students, and ask questions along the way to guide their thinking. If they did not understand what they were reading, I would provide them with definitions, pictures and videos to help them understand. Sometimes I would have students go through the reading passage first, with the intent of having students understand the passage before giving out the set of questions, and at other times, I would give the students both the passage and questions together.

I realised that any reading I required of my students was with the aim of them answering the questions that were set at the end of the given passage. This meant that reading comprehension lessons usually revolved around completing a past-year examination paper as practice. Reading comprehension lessons sometimes appeared to be rather dull, as they were always associated with assessment.



My Inquiry Project

When I discussed my concerns with Audrey, she pointed me to the practices and qualities of good readers and asked me to consider whether my students were aware of how good readers made meaning of what they read. She suggested using the 'Think-Aloud' strategy to make my thinking as a reader visible, as expounded by Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison (2011), so that my students could understand how I grappled with meaning making when reading a text. This would be the start to improving their reading and metacognitive skills.

I observed Audrey as she demonstrated the 'Think-Aloud' strategy to my class using a narrative text. As she spoke her thoughts out loud during her reading process, she showed the students how she processed texts by highlighting the reading skills and strategies she used such as questioning the text to make predictions and making inferences based on textual evidence, checking and revising assumptions, evaluating the impact of the author's choice of words, and suggesting authorial intention (EL Syllabus 2010, p. 28). Her demonstration of the 'Think Aloud' strategy helped me understand how students could benefit from hearing and seeing the teacher apply reading skills.

Before attempting the 'Think-Aloud' with my class for the first time myself, I rehearsed my reading. I also consciously rehearsed making a mistake so that I could demonstrate the skill of checking for meaning against the rest of the passage. Conditioned by the format of the comprehension paper, my students tend to predict and process meaning only at sentence level, seldom activating prior knowledge and contextual information. I wanted to demonstrate that they needed to make predictions, check to see if the context supported their initial thoughts and then revise their predictions, if necessary, based on the weight of evidence from the text. When I tried the 'Think-Aloud' with my class, I felt rather self-conscious about speaking my thoughts out aloud. I kept wondering what my students would think of me if I made mistakes as a teacher. However, as I worked on honing close reading skills with the 'Think-Aloud' strategy, I began to have a deeper understanding of the reading processes, and what I, in my role as a teacher, should be doing

to teach students how to read. I realised that even modelling making mistakes, monitoring my reading and, self-correcting were valuable learning opportunities for my students.

In addition to the 'Think-Aloud' strategy, I was also introduced to the Four Reader Roles (Freebody and Luke, 1990) which explains the four roles readers adopt when reading and comprehending a text (Please see pp. 5 for an explanation of the Four Reader Roles). Finding out that an effective reader actually adopts these four roles was quite overwhelming as I realised that there were many areas which my students were struggling with. However, this new knowledge emphasised the need for me to ensure that my students could eventually take on these roles as a reader. The Four Reader Roles model also aligns with the Skills, Strategies, Attributes and Behaviours (SSABs) identified in the EL syllabus, thus affirming that these were valuable skills students had to be equipped with.

In the first lesson that Audrey observed, I showed the students all the skills a good reader should practise. Subsequently I had a lesson focused on helping the students develop surface-level and deep-level questions, and another lesson focused on helping them identify the authorial intent. These lessons helped me understand the needs of my students, and where the gaps in their learning were. These lessons also showed me that the 'Think-Aloud' was but one strategy that had to be accompanied by good questioning and guided lessons to facilitate the students' use and development of the reading skills and behaviours they needed.



Teacher's Reflections



Having engaged in this inquiry into my practice, I have grown in my understanding of teaching reading skills. One main issue that the 5NA students had with reading comprehension was that the texts used were less accessible to them. More difficult vocabulary and longer sentence structures meant that many of the students ended up skimming through the text or skipping difficult words in their reading. With more difficult comprehension texts, therefore, students would have to be explicitly taught how to employ close reading skills, vocabulary strategies and grammatical knowledge in order to understand the text.

My second key takeaway was learning how I should teach these close reading skills, strategies and behaviours. I learnt that I had been using teacher-led strategies to teach reading, instead of equipping my students with learner strategies. I had been providing them with the questions, inferences and connections required to understand the text better. However, this meant that learning was not transferred to them. They did not learn how to come up with questions, inferences and connections by themselves. The 'Think-Aloud' strategy allowed me to show them how to read the text themselves instead of me explaining the text to my students. Through demonstrating my own reading skills and strategies, I encouraged them to practise the same behaviours, which include but are not limited to:

- drawing on prior knowledge
- asking questions
- making connections
- making predictions
- checking on the predictions made
- identifying the purpose, audience and context
- annotating, and
- visualising.

This inquiry project has highlighted the need for the teachers in my department to re-examine how we teach reading skills across the four to five years that students spend in our school. We should consider, for example, the need to conduct focused lessons on reading skills and behaviours. Though this appears to be a daunting task, we can spread the teaching of these skills and learner strategies across the four levels of all streams, thus ensuring that our students will be equipped with these valuable reading skills and 21st Century Competencies by the time they graduate.

I would like to explore the area of teaching vocabulary as my next area of inquiry. Students need to learn to use contextual clues as well as clues present in words - such as the prefixes and suffixes - to better understand a text. I plan to explore the use of the 'Think-Aloud' in this area to show students how good readers decipher contextual clues and make connections to and within the text.



Moving Forward

This journey of inquiry has definitely changed the way I view and teach reading. This project has even changed me as a reader as when I read I am now more aware of what I am doing and think of the skills and behaviours I should be exhibiting if I wanted to study a text in detail. If I regularly practise asking questions, tapping on prior knowledge, making connections and predictions, and checking those predictions, these behaviours will come more naturally to me when I have to model them for students in class. Of course, I also understand now that I only need to employ these skills very deliberately for texts students have difficulty with.

I must also ensure that I show students what I do when I read, thus allowing them to see an example of what a good reader does. I now have a better understanding of why some students have difficulties with reading, and why some of them simply could not “get it” before. Besides helping students dispel the myth that there are some “naturally good readers”, this professional growth journey dispelled my own belief that “naturally good readers” exist. Instead of feeling helpless with poor readers, I am confident that I will be able to equip my students with good reading skills and behaviours, as I now know what these are, and how to do so.

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