



Pointers for developing a communicative English instructional program in Macau primary schools

by Chiu Siu Miu

I have been working with primary English teachers for two and half years in Macau and I always admire their hard work and devotion towards their teaching in school. Somehow, I find that the teaching methods they use do not usually yield fruitful results they have always been expecting. I strongly argue that the teachers could teach more effectively if they were to adopt the communicative approach to teaching English. Three pointers are essential if teachers plan to incorporate such an approach to develop an effective English instructional program in the classroom.

“What’s going on in the English classrooms?” – My observation

Most of the classes I observed emphasize heavily the teaching of grammar and vocabulary items. Choral chanting of the vocabulary is frequently heard. The teachers help students memorize the vocabulary items by instructing them

to read aloud not only the vocabulary and the spelling of the word, but also its equivalent Chinese translation a number of times. Drilling forms and memorizing rules are the regular practice in the classroom. Students receive little instruction in any language skills.

These classes are usually teacher-centered, with the teacher doing most of the talking.

The role of the students is passive. Even at the upper primary levels, the student-talk merely consists of yes/no answers to questions as well as one or two words or phrasal answers to WH-questions which are mainly factual or literal. Some answers are basically fill-in-the-blanks in sentences already framed by the teacher’s question. The students rarely ask questions or make comments or requests, nor are they seldom encouraged to do so.

In some of the schools I observed, the English lessons are arranged in segmented periods of reading, grammar, dictation and composition. Different teachers are assigned to teach different aspects of English, leaving no connection between and among English lessons in a week.

Teachers are always pressured by school administrators and parents to cover the entire syllabus (which is usually the entire textbook) and all the exercises in the workbook. They are also pressured by constantly assessing students with tests/quizzes and examinations. The effectiveness of such an assessment, which measures only discrete skills and forms the only means of assessing student learning and the quality of instruction, has never been questioned.

The teaching method used by the teachers in Macau relies heavily on one end of the spectrum of teaching methods i.e. the grammar translation method and the direct method; and fewer teachers use the communicative approach, the another end of the spectrum, to teaching English. Quite a few of these teachers, however, continue to use the traditional way to teach even though they have adopted the latest commercially produced textbooks which are mainly designed based on the communicative approach to teaching English; this is simply "putting old wine in the new bottle".

Change is timely in Macau as English has become important economically and politically after the return of its sovereignty to China in 1999. I will argue that the primary teachers take an easier ride than their counterparts in the neighboring countries which have gone through similar post colonial era. I reiterate my stance by stating that:

1. The teachers in Macau do not have to experiment various language teaching approaches laboriously in order to develop the most relevant and

effective English instructional program. Given the tremendous improvement of English proficiency in some of the neighboring Asian countries, like Singapore, Malaysia, Brunie, and to some degree, Hong Kong, I would make a stance that Macau can strive for making tremendous improvement should we adopt a communicative approach to language teaching.

2. I do not suggest that we should adopt fully the communicative approach and wipe out completely the conventional/traditional teaching methods used by most of the teachers in Macau. I would go for reshuffling the teaching focus and re-orienting the teaching methods and yet retain some of the usual teaching practice the local teachers find effective.

Proposed pointers

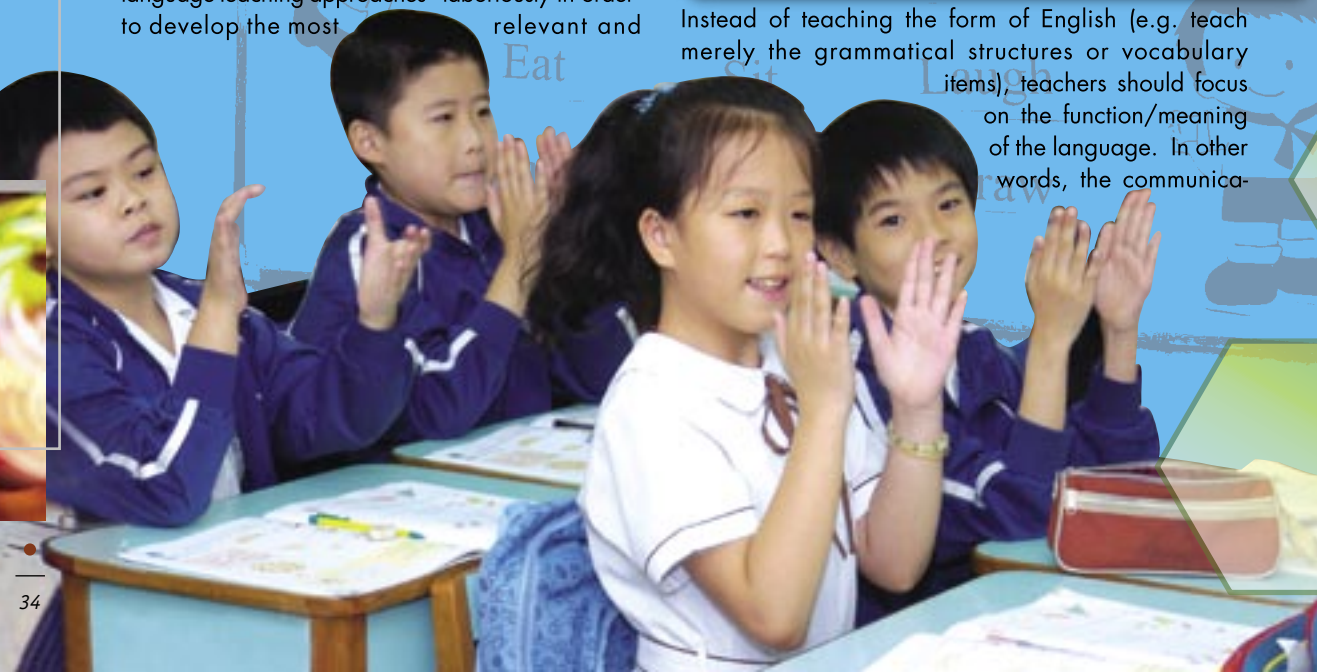
I will propose three pointers for developing a communicative English instructional program in the primary schools:

1. Shifting the teaching focus from "form" to "meaning" and "drilling" to "communicating";
2. Setting focus by emphasizing "learning to read" from P1-P3; "reading to learn" from P4-P6; and
3. Using the integrative approach to develop unit plans.

I will illustrate these points by citing examples from my teaching practice observations and propose instructional strategies for teaching various language skills.

Pointer 1: Shifting the teaching focus from "form" to "meaning" and "drilling" to "communicating"

Instead of teaching the form of English (e.g. teach merely the grammatical structures or vocabulary items), teachers should focus on the function/meaning of the language. In other words, the communica-



tive nature of English should be highlighted.

Let me illustrate this point by citing the following example.

One of the stated specific instructional objectives of a P.3 lesson suggested by a teacher is as follows:

"By the end of the lesson, my students are able to read and spell the words correctly. For example rectangle, triangle, circle, square, above, under, next, on the right."

The teaching point indicated in the lesson plan is obvious as this teacher merely focuses on the reading aloud and the spelling of a string of vocabulary items. My argument is that reading aloud without highlighting the functions and the meaning of the vocabulary or grammar items in a context, is not effective learning as the teacher only helps her students memorize the items. Memorization enables students to store the newly learned items in the short term memory which will be wiped out easily once the purpose of memorizing the items, such as taking the test, quiz or the examination, is achieved. No wonder many of our Macau students have memorized vigorously approximately a total of 17,280 English vocabulary items after they finish twelve years of study (30 items x 48 weeks x 12 years), and yet they are not able to write properly, nor are they able to speak fluently when they start the undergraduate studies at the university.

I would counter propose the specific instructional objectives listed by the teacher earlier as follows:

"By the end of the lesson, my students are able to

1. identify different shapes e.g. rectangle, triangle, circle, square
2. describe the position of various shapes by using preposition of place e.g. above, under, below, next, on the right, on the left"

Based on the above instructional objectives, the teacher teaches her students how to describe (i.e. the function) various shapes and to demonstrate (i.e. the meaning) the "where about" of things by using preposition of place. The teacher may use the follow-up exercise prescribed in the chapter by instructing the students to place various shapes in certain position to construct an animal figure (i.e. the context). English learning will then become lively.

By emphasizing the "meaning" and the "communicative" nature of the English language (vocabulary or grammar items), the teacher is able to engage students to see how these items work in a context. By understanding the

functions of these items, the students are able to store this newly acquired information in the long-term memory. By continually utilizing the new information in different situations, they are able to finally make this information their own knowledge. This is what I mean by effective teaching and learning.

Pointer 2: Setting focus by emphasizing "learning to read" from P1-P3; "reading to learn" from P4-P6

The latest trend for helping students improve English in Macau is to have activities organized at the school level. Activities include the English Week, choral or poetry recitation competition, spelling bee competition or dictionary speed-check competition. I don't deny the benefits of having these activities and we should acknowledge the tremendous efforts made by the teachers. My argument is that these activities are only for complementing the learning of the language, making the acquisition of English fun and challenging. Basic language skills, however, must be taught in the classroom. Among all the language skills, reading skills are the most fundamental skills to be taught in class, aiming at developing literacy. The following suggestions are based on the lecture inputs made by my team of former colleagues at the National Institute of Education/Nanyang Technological University, Singapore:

Lower primary: The focus skills emphasize teaching students "learning to read"

The skills for developing English language competence include the teaching of:

1. Concepts of prints
 - print is read from left to right and top to bottom
 - Spacing between words
 - Capitalization
 - Differences between letters, words and sentences
 - Punctuation marks
2. Phonemic awareness instruction
 - blend sounds of consonants and vowels to make words
 - identify and produce rhyming words
 - match spoken words to printed words
 - understand that as letters of words change, so do the sounds
 - read common, irregular sight words e.g. the, have, said
 - read aloud to check pronunciation
3. Reading strategies to construct meaning

- relate words to illustrations
- use knowledge of cohesive device: connectors to do with time, sequence
- use contextual clues: illustrations, title
- use prior knowledge: familiar words, word association
- engage in rhymes and in playing with words and word patterns
- recognize text types
- make predictions about content/storyline
- ask questions about the texts studied
- identify gist/main ideas
- identify the beginning, middle and ending of e.g. stories
- describe characters, setting, events
- recall details

The Big Book Approach or Shared Reading (see Holdaway, 1979) is recommended to help students master the basic reading skills. Narrative texts (like fairy tales, fables, myths and legends) should be read aloud to students more often. Students are encouraged to recall, talk and write about books read. They should enjoy the creative use of language in e.g. poems and jokes. Teachers should provide them opportunities to respond creatively and imaginatively e.g. act out a story. By constantly exposing the students in lower primary to effective English learning, we could help them develop a positive attitude towards reading and the language.

Upper primary: The focus skills emphasize teaching students “reading to learn”

The skills for helping students acquire knowledge from reading include:

Reading strategies to construct meaning

Before reading

- Use appropriate terms relating to books, text types from print to electronic sources e.g.
- Book: cover, title, author, illustrator, page number, content page, chapter, headings, sub-headings
- Media: news story, headlines, caption
- Software: word processing
- Use the text type approach (see Wong, 2002) to understand how the purpose of various texts is achieved through text organization, grammar and vocabulary

During reading

- Construct meaning from visuals e.g. pictures, charts, diagrams, symbols, and graphs
- Skim for gist
- Scan for details

- Monitor and confirm understanding of texts read e.g. read aloud, re-read, read on
- Use cohesive devices e.g. connectors to do with time, sequence, comparison, contrast, reason, choice, place, condition, cause-and-effect, purpose
- Use contextual clues e.g. visual, headings, word formation, punctuation
- Activate prior knowledge e.g. familiar words, word association, knowledge of topics
- Make predictions about content and development of ideas
- Infer and draw conclusions

After reading

- Recall information/details
- Organize and summarize information using a variety of organizational patterns: list, sequence, comparison, contrast, classification, cause-and-effect
- Explain own views
- Give reason to support a response/an opinion
- Evaluate main points in text by expressing opinions
- Participate in discussion
- Solve problems imaginatively and creatively
- Gather information using search options in website e.g. subject, key words, author, title

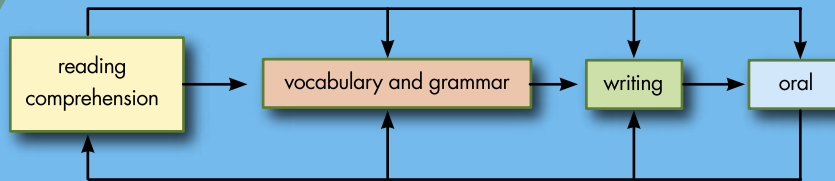
Reading instructional strategies, such as the Directed Reading and Thinking Approach (DRTA) (see Nessel, 1989) for teaching fictions and the Know-What You Want to Know-Learnt Plus (KWL+) (see Carr & Ogle, 1987) or KWLQ (see Schmidt, 1999) for teaching non-fictions, are recommended.

Pointer 3: Using the integrative approach to develop a unit plan of lessons

“The interrelatedness of the language arts makes them best developed together in the context of learning that is meaningful.” (Bromley, 1998:433)

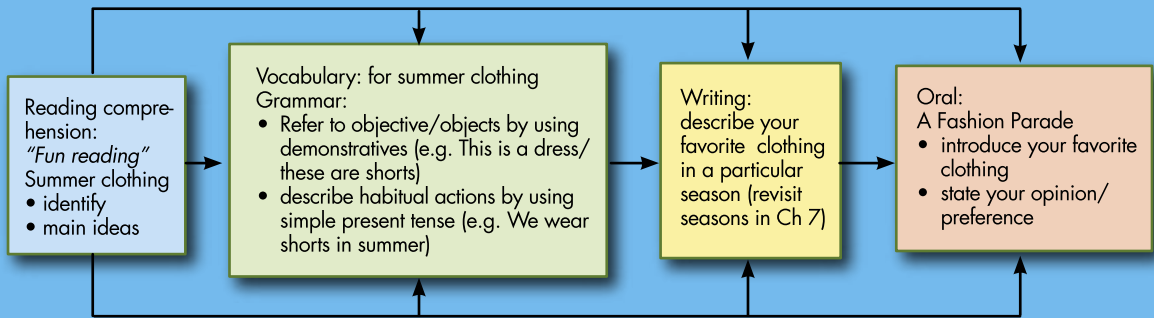
The integrative way means integrating various skills when we develop a unit plan. I strongly advise to start of by teaching a meaningful or interesting text. In other words, reading comprehension should be taught first as the text provides a meaningful context for not only developing the reading skills but also the learning of the vocabulary and grammar items. Below is a framework to show an integrative way to teach various language skills.

When a new vocabulary is encountered during reading, the teacher should guide the students to guess the meaning from the passage by inferring the word to the information before or after it. Students are not only able to get hold



of the meaning from the context of the passage but they also understand the new word better as they see how it relates to the text.

Let me illustrate how a unit plan is designed by using the integrative way. The sample chapter is taken from *New Welcome to English*, published by Longman, 2B, Chapter 8 "Seasons and Clothes".



The teaching of reading, writing, and oral communication can be conducted in an integrative manner. A teacher may integrate reading with writing by asking students to write a few sentences describing the students' favorite clothing using the information they gather from the reading passage after they finish a reading comprehension lesson. If she doesn't think that her class is ready for writing and a grammar lesson would be best to prepare the students to write later, she could follow the reading comprehension lesson up with a grammar lesson, integrating reading with grammar instruction.

Traditions die hard and change comes slowly. But the schools in Macau are ready for change. Even though we are still a "new kid on the block" in the arena of English language teaching, I am positive that the primary school teachers, with the full support from school, can make a difference by adopting the communicative approach to develop an effective English instructional program. 🍵
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By integrating various skills when planning for a unit of lessons and by using appropriate instructional strategies, the teachers are able to show their students how the learning of one skill supports the learning of the other, and hence make her instruction effective.

Conclusion

Teachers often need tremendous support from the school management to implement changes. Support can be in many forms. These can be in the form of organizing teacher development workshops, providing funds to purchase resources for class and school libraries, and educating students' homes to support different ways of learning. Lack of such support is a key reason why many teachers at schools have remained reluctant to initiate changes in their own classrooms.

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