

# 10 years of working in the arena of English teaching in Macao primary schools:

## Some reflections and suggestions

Dr. Chiu Siu Miu (趙小苗)

I have been serving in Macao as a primary English teacher educator for a decade and it is a good time for me to make a 10 year reflections on the field of primary English teaching. My comments about the English programs run in schools are mainly based on my classroom observations and interviews with teachers. The focus of this paper is to suggest a viable English program to be used in Macao primary schools.

### English teaching focus in primary schools today

There are two extremes found in most primary English programs in Macao (see Diagram 1). One side of the pendulum is subject-based teaching; while the other is activity-based teaching.



Diagram 1: Two extreme English teaching methods used in primary schools in Macao

Subject-based teaching mainly treats teaching English like teaching a subject. The main teaching focus is merely on drilling vocabulary and grammar rules. The teaching method used is based on the structural approach to teaching English (see Diagram 2).

The teachers help students memorize the vocabulary items by instructing them to chant aloud not only the vocabulary and the spelling of the word, but also its equivalent Chinese translation a number of times. Drilling grammar rules and

memorizing forms are the regular practice in the classroom. These teachers are always exhausted by struggling through the marking of stacks of exercise books. And they make constant remarks that their students have kept forgetting English once the examination is over.

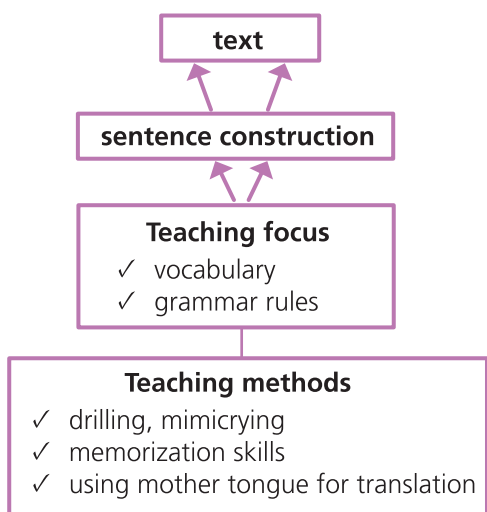


Diagram 2: Structural approach to teaching English

The other side of the pendulum is activity-based teaching treating English teaching as organizing a fun fair. Students are required to take part in a series of fun activities such as singing and playing games in a lesson. These teachers believe that their students are able to learn English as long as learning is fun. They look dazed when they are asked about the focus of their lesson and the language skill they plan to develop. All these hard-working teachers with good intentions are always exhausted after sourcing for numerous activities used in class. They simply do not have time

to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching; not to mention how well their students learn.

I do not deny the benefits of having fun activities conducted in class 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 such as reading, listening and speaking, as well as writing skills must be taught in the class.

### What's wrong with these two ways of teaching ?

Please refer to the three writing samples, in exact wordings, written by my university first year students and the standard of their English proficiency will be gauged (see samples). The students were asked to write about what they wanted to learn in an English proficiency course and the reasons for their preference. A sentence starter "In this English proficiency course, I want to learn...." was given and they were asked to complete the sentence and elaborate on it.

#### Sample one

*"I want to improve my English skill, so, something like listening, speaking or writing ect...But, in first, I would like to commulicaty with other one in English well."*

## Sample two

*"I want to learn correct English發音 and speaking in English, because my English is very bad, first I want to improve that, may be this two skills couldn't not practise well in high school."*

## Sample three

*"The correct (發音) I'm sorry I forget this word. And I expect I can improve my oral and listening skills. I hope I can like English very much."*

Even though these students had spent 12 years learning English, the texts written by them are filled with grammatical mistakes and the use of vocabulary is limited. Some of the English sentences are directly translated from Chinese. All three of them even didn't understand the given instructions as they simply ignored the sentence starter.

## My proposed communicative skill-based primary English program

Vocabulary and grammar instruction are important but they should not be taken as the only teaching focus. They are supporting skills that students should master because without vocabulary and grammar rules, the language cannot be "held" together. Given the understanding of the anchor of these two supporting skills, a framework for developing a communicative skill-based English program is proposed as follows (see Diagram 3).

## Goals of acquiring English proficiency in Macao

"What's English for in Macao?" Such a question demands a series of stringent dialogues among the DSEJ, schools and language educators. A special task force with all the parties concerned should be set up to have the goals finalized.

For the discussion purpose, I would like to propose three main goals to be achieved after completing six years of primary education based on the economic, political and social situation in Macao.

1. Enjoy learning English as a foreign language
2. Elicit information from the English sources, such as books, internets
3. Use English as a communicative tool, for social or occupational purposes

The ultimate goal is to achieve literacy development of the students so that they are able to use English in a meaningful context, and to use it functionally (Yaden, 1987).

## Theoretical concepts for backing up teaching

The teachers must be grounded with some basic concepts and theories about first and second language acquisition. Essential theories such as Skinner's behaviorist theory (1957), Chomsky's nativist theory (1974), Piaget's cognitive theory (1962), Vygotsky's interactionist theory (1978) as well as Halliday's and Bruner's pragmatist theory (1973, 1974) should be well

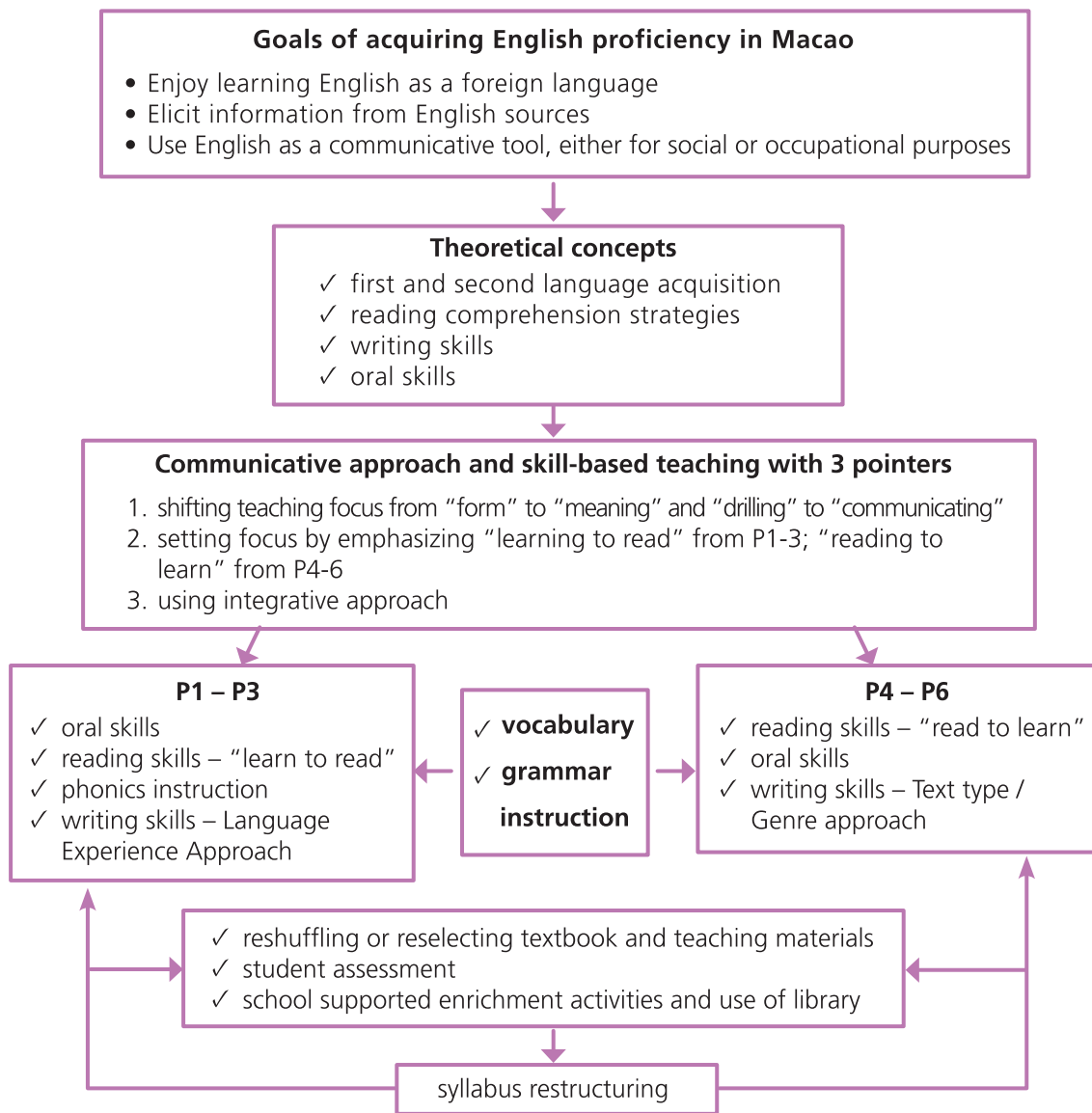


Diagram 3: A communicative skill-based English program used in primary schools

examined by the teachers. These theories provide sound background knowledge of how a language is acquired. More importantly, the teachers should see how some significant teaching meth-

ods are derived from these theories. Methods such as the grammar-translation in the 40s, direct method in the 50s and 60s, cognitive code method in the 70s and 80s and the communica-

tive method in the 90s till present can be traced from the theories from which they are rooted. With such a theoretical backup, the teachers will be able to select appropriate teaching methods when they teach different language skills.

### **Communicative Approach and skill-based teaching**

Among the special features of the approach to developing a communicative and skill-based English program, I specify three pointers for consideration:

1. Shifting the teaching focus from “form” to “meaning” and “drilling” to “communicating”
2. Setting different language teaching emphasis in lower primary (P1-3) and upper primary (P4-6)
3. Using the integrative approach

I wrote an article about these three Pointers published by the *Teachers’ Magazine* in 2006. I would like to elaborate Pointer 2 in this article to illustrate the focused skills to be taught in lower primary and upper primary.

As I mentioned earlier on, vocabulary and grammar instruction are important but they should not be taken as the only teaching focus. Various teaching skills such as reading skills, writing skills, oral skills, phonics instruction, or grammar instruction should be mastered if the teachers want to help their students develop

high language proficiency. In view of all the instructional skills, various foci must be set for lower primary (P1-P3) and upper primary (P4-P6).

### **Lower primary**

In lower primary, oral skills which include both listening and speaking skills must be emphasized. The students should be read aloud to students more often (like fairy tales, fables, myths, or legends). And they are encouraged to recall, talk and write about the books being read to. They should enjoy the creative use of language such as poems or jokes. Teachers should provide them the opportunities to respond creatively and imaginatively e.g. act out a story. By constantly exposing the students to English, we could help them develop a positive attitude towards learning the language.

Reading instruction has a significant role to play in lower primary. Reading is taught in such a way that students must “learn how to read”. The Big Book Approach (or Shared Reading Approach) to teaching lower primary is found to be effective. By using such an approach to teaching reading, several major language skills can be mastered by students (see Holdaway, 1979). Skills such as the recognizing concepts of prints which include reading English from left to right, capitalization and punctuation marks, and basic reading strategies such as relating words to illustrations, using the contextual clues, and

predicting events are important for our students when they learn how to read.

Phonics instruction must be set as an important area to be covered in lower primary. Since English is a grapho-phonetic language, phonemic awareness of the students must be developed. With this awareness, the students should be able to sound out English words when they read aloud the text and spell the words out correctly.

Writing skills can be taught but should not be made the focus of learning in lower primary as oral and reading skills are the emphasis. Some form of writing related to their language experience can be introduced. Language Experience Approach (LEA) can best help young learners develop writing skills as it utilizes their experience when they write.

## Upper primary

In upper primary, reading comprehension plays the leading role as the focus is now shifted from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”. Text type approach to teaching reading and writing is recommended. By analyzing the text structure, the teacher can show the students how a text is organized. The students will be able to predict better the text written by the writer. Since there are different kinds of text types (see Wong, 2002), the DRTA (Directed-Reading-and-Thinking-Approach) (see Nessel, 1989) is appropriate for teaching narrative text; KWL+ (Know-What do

you want to know-What have you learned-following up activities) (see Carr & Ogle, 1987) is good for teaching non-narrative text.

Most important of all, the students must be guided not just to learn new information from reading the text but also apply the newly acquired information to either written or oral work.

## Student Assessment

Assessment should be taken as an integral part of a program (Wong, 2013). It should be treated as a tool which helps the teachers achieve four aims: to determine if the students have achieved the objectives of their teaching; to assess the progress of students’ learning; to select or design new teaching and learning materials and activities; and to adapt old materials to suit the needs and abilities of the students. The two scopes of teaching tabulated for lower primary and upper primary (refer to Diagram 3) should be served as an orientation for setting tests and examinations.

## School support

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’ parents to support different

ways of learning.

## Syllabus restructuring

With all the skills covered in an integrative manner, the syllabus for both lower and upper primary can be restructured accordingly.

## Suggestions and conclusion


This proposed communicative skill-based primary English program has been introduced to several schools. Both the principals and the teachers find that change is timely and they are ready for adopting new ways of teaching English. In one of the schools, the questions set in the most recent examination paper on grammar are not merely set for the memorization of rules (such as the Verb Table) but more on the use of the language. The team of teachers also decided to replace a grammar book published in 1976 with a writing exercise book published more recently. With the change of teaching and learning concepts, the team of teachers is ready to work on a communicative and skill-based English program.

In order to develop an English program favorable to more schools in Macao, I'd like to make the following suggestions:

1. Whether schools should go for a mere textbook syllabus or a common syllabus worked out collaboratively by the DSEJ, schools and the teachers is now a big debate. Teachers, educators and language specialists

and the officials of the DSEJ must have stringent discussion on the need for developing a feasible primary English program in Macao.

2. Schools should encourage teachers to attend enhancement English programs to upgrade their knowledge about the theoretical concepts and teaching methods. The teachers will begin to see the need for the change of the English syllabus. They should be more ready to select appropriate teaching materials, and to use more effective teaching methods.
3. A longitudinal study should be conducted in schools to find out whether this framework can be served as a guiding point for teachers when they develop an English program in their schools.

We still have a long way to go as it involves the changing concepts of the teachers about English teaching and learning. By developing a new insight about English teaching and program development, the teachers and schools in Macao will be more ready to get involved in the process of change. 

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## Dr. Chiu Siu Miu (趙小苗)

Faculty of Education, University of Macau.