Enhancing Teacher Professionalism in Teaching and Learning through Learning Study

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Abstract

Students in our school are weak in the area of reading and one of the reasons is that they find difficulties in understanding unfamiliar words in the passage. This action research focuses on how to help students to find clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words so as to boost their reading competence as well as their confidence in reading.

Lessons are built on teaching the contextual clues. An unfamiliar word would be shown to students to guess at first and a sentence containing this unfamiliar word (without any contextual clues) would be shown. The same sentence with contextual clues would be given and students would be asked whether they could understand or guess the meaning of the word. This was to show students the importance of using contextual clues to help them understand what they were reading although they might not understand every word they read.

Students’ reading skills in guessing word meaning has developed. Students were more confident that they could learn English well and more students said that they like reading.

1. Introduction
1.1 Background

The Hong Kong Government launched the English Enhancement Grant Scheme for Primary Schools in 2009. The Scheme provides a time-limited grant to help primary schools develop their school-based English enhancement measures to strengthen English Language
teaching and learning and to achieve sustainable effects after the completion of the Scheme (Education Bureau Circular Memorandum No. 162/2009).

Our school was granted the funding to help our students to enhance their English proficiency in 2010-12. From the data of the external and internal examinations, it was found that among the four language skills reading, writing, listening and speaking, our students were weakest in the area of reading. Moreover, some students lacked confidence in reading English texts. Therefore, it was decided to use the funding to enhance students’ performance in reading and it was hoped that their successful reading experiences would enhance their confidence in learning and using English. We adopted Learning Study in the year 2010-11 in the hope of identifying the fundamental problems of our students and finding effective solutions to cope with them. The participant teachers were teaching primary 6 at the time of the project.

This report includes three sections. Section one briefly introduces the background of the research project and reviews the literature related to Learning Study. Section two reports the entire Learning Study project in the year 2010-11 from the planning and implementation stages to the analysis and reflection stages. It shows how teachers addressed students’ needs and adjusted their teaching in order to cater for students’ learning diversity. Section three ends the report with a brief conclusion and some implications on further research in the area and the research project in 2011-12.

1.2 Learning Study and the Theory of Variation

Learning Study is a form of action research that focuses on learning difficulties and judges the effectiveness of teaching based on learning outcomes. It provides teachers with a structured cyclical procedure revolving around collaborative planning, delivery and review of a Research Lesson. Participants are generally a group of teachers who teach the same subject and/or year group, and a team of experienced researchers. Through detailed and scientific diagnostic pre- and post-tests and pre- and post-lesson interviews, teachers’ understanding of their students’ learning is greatly enhanced. Though only one research lesson is involved, teachers need to examine, adapt and improve their curriculum, including content, teaching strategies and teaching materials. Learning Study provides a platform for teachers to develop their school-based curriculum and their professionalism in teaching and learning in the long
run (Zhang, 2009; 2010).

Learning Study in Hong Kong is inspired by the development of Teaching Study in mainland China and Lesson Study in Japan (Li & Ko, 2007; Lo, Pong & Chik, 2005), which embrace the tradition of systematic and in-depth investigation into lessons for teachers’ professional development. In mainland China, there has been a centralized system, known as Teaching Study, since 1949. Lectures and workshops are conducted regularly to disseminate educational reforms and policies, organise demonstration lessons taught by excellent teachers to train teachers and to promote effective teaching methods and strategies. Lesson Study (jugyou kenkyuu) in Japan dates back over fifty years. Japanese teachers regard it as an integral part of their jobs and a great opportunity for their professional development (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Almost every teacher in primary and secondary schools participates in at least one Lesson Study each year. Teachers form groups based on their grade levels, subject matter or special themes, and meet for weeks, months or even a year to work on a lesson or set of lessons.

Learning Study was launched in Hong Kong in 2000 by a group of academics led by Professor Lo Mun Ling and Dr. Pong Wing Yan in a government-funded project aiming to help improve Hong Kong schools’ capacity to deal with student diversity. The Hong Kong Learning Study is distinguished from the Mainland teaching study and Japanese Lesson Study in that it is underpinned by the learning theory of variation. According to this theory, teaching is a continuous process of changing students’ ways of seeing. Marton & Booth (1997) argue that learning is always directed to something to be learned, i.e., the object of learning, and learning arises from learners’ discerning the critical features of the object of learning highlighted by variation. Knowing is a way of seeing, and learning is changing the way of seeing that ‘something’ in a more meaningful and powerful way. Learning is discernment and discernment can be best achieved through experienced variation. The effectiveness of a lesson lies in whether students have acquired a more powerful way of seeing the object of learning. Therefore, the primary focus of Learning Study is on an object of learning, not on teaching methods. It starts from finding out students’ prior knowledge and their existing ways of seeing in order to identify the most appropriate and worthwhile object of learning and the way to improve students’ ways of seeing. Inspired by the theory of variation, the Hong Kong team developed a pedagogical theory that includes three types of variation (V1, V2 and V3):
V1: Variation in students’ ways of seeing the object of learning

Different students experience different ways of seeing the same object of learning. It is valuable for teachers to continuously track students’ ways of seeing by questioning, classroom observation or tests, so as to establish a basis for teachers to tailor their teaching practice to suit students’ needs and learning styles. In particular, there may be occasions when students fail to pay attention to and discern the most critical features of the object of learning. This may hinder or even counteract their development of new ways of seeing unless teachers specifically highlight and direct attention to these critical features.

V2: Variation in teachers’ ways of dealing with the object of learning

Different teachers deal with the same object of learning in different ways. Therefore, it is necessary to provide an appropriate platform for teachers of different backgrounds to contribute their professional knowledge and discover the most effective ways to teach the object of learning.

V3: Using variation as a guiding principle of pedagogical design

Variation can be used to draw students’ attention to the object of learning and its critical features, in which students’ discernment is most likely to happen. Therefore, patterns of variation provide opportunities for students to develop more powerful ways of seeing through activities of contrasting, generalizing, separating or fusing (Lo, Pong & Chik, 2005: 21).

It is believed that effective use of the above variation theory can help teachers to effectively enhance their students’ learning, to achieve their professional development, and to build a collaborative learning community. Underpinned by the Variation Theory, Learning Study is divided into a number of steps (Figure 1) that are followed over a period of three to four months. At the beginning of the process, a topic and an object of learning are tentatively identified for the Research Lesson, based on teachers’ understanding of students’ existing ways of seeing (i.e. their prior knowledge), the requirements of the curriculum, the available resources, the existing theories or research in the area, and the beliefs of the teachers involved (V2). Then a pre-test involving all the students in the class and pre-lesson interviews with a
focus group of students are conducted to find out their prior knowledge in order to diagnose their learning difficulties (V1).

Based on these empirical data, teachers and researchers finalize the object of learning and devise variation patterns and teaching activities for the Research Lesson (V2 and V3). Next, one teacher enacts the collaborative lesson plan, while the other teachers and researchers observe teaching and learning in the classroom (V1, V2 and V3). The observers focus on how students are learning and what is making their learning happen (V2). After the Research Lesson, the team conducts post-lesson interviews, questionnaires and a post-test with the students to find out about their learning and their views of the Research Lesson (V1). Based on these discussions, the Research Lesson is redesigned and delivered, usually by a different teacher with a different class. The process is repeated until the predetermined number of teaching cycles has been conducted.

Figure 1  Steps in a Learning Study
The above procedure of Learning Study shows that learning about learning plays a crucial role and occurs throughout the entire process. During the Learning Study, a variety of research methods are used to learn about students’ learning, including pre-test, post-test, interviews, classroom observation and questionnaires. Data are collected from both teachers and students. Such data and triangulation are used to ensure the validity of the learning about students’ learning. Teachers and researchers observe every cycle of the Research Lesson, make field notes and videotape the lesson. Learning about learning helps teachers and researchers to discover learning problems in relation to certain objects of learning and to find ways to tackle these problems. In the Learning Study, therefore, teachers and researchers attempt to improve learning by bettering their own understanding of learning and by improving the condition-setting for students’ learning.

2. The Learning Study Case

2.1 Teachers’ sharing of students’ learning difficulties

At the beginning of the project, Primary 6 teachers shared their experiences of teaching students. Based on the analysis of daily practice and examinations, it was found that students’ performance in reading was not satisfactory. Although a lot of exercises were given and some techniques such as reading topic sentences were taught to them, it seemed that there was no significant improvement in performance; students still had difficulties in understanding English texts and their motivation in reading was low. Some of them did not even have any confidence in reading and they tended to give up or rely on teachers for explanation.

One of the reasons behind the above-mentioned situation could be the lack of vocabulary. As a result, they often encountered so many unfamiliar words that they were unable to understand what they were reading. In addition, they lacked reading skills such as scanning, skimming, and using contextual clues. Thus after a series of unsuccessful reading experiences, students lost interest and confidence in reading English texts.

Teachers normally introduced some reading strategies when they explained how to do reading comprehension questions. However, the selection and teaching of reading strategies was seldom organized in a systematic and focused manner. As the consultants suggested, the teachers decided to focus on a specific reading strategy in this project. Since understanding
words is fundamental in reading, teachers decided to teach the reading skill of “using contextual clues to guess the meaning of difficult words” as the research focus. Teachers aimed at helping students to find clues for guessing the meaning of the unfamiliar words so as to boost their reading competence as well as confidence in reading.

2.2 Diagnosing students’ learning difficulties with tests

The teachers designed a pre-test (Appendix I) to diagnose students’ problems in the selected area. The students were given an English text in which eight difficult words were highlighted. For each target word, students were required to choose one option from the three given choices: they have learned the word (Choice A); they do not know the word but make an attempt to guess the meaning of the word (Choice B) or they do not know the word and make no attempt to guess the meaning (Choice C). In the case of Choice A, students were also required to provide the meaning of the word and for Choice B, they had to give the reason for their guess. As shown in graph 1, 33% of students did not know the words and made no attempt to guess the meaning. Among 53% of students who chose B, only 36% of them made use of contextual clues to guess the meaning of difficult words. The remaining 64% of students guessed the meaning based on their feelings or intuition. Overall speaking, only 37% of the meanings provided by students choosing A and B were correct.

Figure 2  Students’ performance in the pre-test
(a) Students’ choice
Pre-lesson interviews were also conducted with six students (two high-achieving students, two intermediate students and two low-achieving students). It was found that most of the students did not have the habit of guessing the meaning of difficult words on their own. They preferred to turn to teachers, classmates, parents and the dictionary for help. When asked to guess the meaning of a difficult word, most of the students only looked at the words before and after the difficult word for clues.
2.3 Identifying the object of learning and critical features

Based on the findings from the pre-test and the pre-lesson interviews, the object of learning for the Research Lesson was identified as the ability to guess the meaning of difficult words with the help of contextual clues. The critical features include:

1. contextual clues can help students guess the meaning of words they do not know;
2. connectives can help students to guess the meaning of words they do not understand;
3. students can guess the meaning of words they do not understand by referring to other words within the same sentence (intra-sentence contextual clues);
4. students can guess the meaning of words they do not understand by referring to other words beyond the sentence (inter-sentence contextual clues).

2.4 Planning the research lesson

Our team built the lesson on teaching the contextual clues into three lessons (see Appendix II for details). In Lesson One, the teacher would show students a word that they were not familiar with and ask them whether they knew the meaning of the word. Then the teacher would show students a sentence containing the unfamiliar word (without any contextual clues) and ask them whether they could understand/guess the meaning of the sentence. After that, the teacher would show students the same sentence with contextual clues
and ask them whether they were able to understand/guess the meaning of the sentence. This was to show students the importance of using contextual clues to help them understand what they were reading although they might not understand every word they read. Samples of sentences would also be used to illustrate how connectives (like, such as, for example, etc.) and referring to other words within the same sentence could help the guessing of unfamiliar words.

In Lesson Two, the teacher would first do a brief revision of what was done in Lesson One. Then the teacher would show samples of sentences with contextual clues in adjacent sentences to highlight the importance of making use of relevant words in adjacent sentences to increase the accuracy of guessing the meaning of difficult words. After doing a few examples with the help of the teacher, students would then be given exercises to do in the form of pair/group work or individual work. At the end, the teacher would go over the answers with the students and summarize the critical features covered in Lesson 1 and Lesson 2.

In Lesson Three, students would be asked to guess the meaning of some difficult words in a selected passage. This was to enable them to consolidate the use of contextual clues within a sentence and in adjacent sentences to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.

2.5 Implementing the research lessons

The three Research Lessons were conducted in three cycles with a different class in each cycle:
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1. the initial implementation of the three lessons in Class 6B, together with pre-lesson interviews and post-lesson interviews, post-test, reflection and adjustment;
2. the second implementation of the three lessons in Class 6C, together with pre-lesson interviews and post-lesson interviews, post-test, reflection and adjustment;
3. the third implementation of the three lessons in Class 6A, together with post-test and reflection.

2.5 The first cycle

In the first lesson, the teacher first showed students a sentence containing an unfamiliar word (without any contextual clues). The teacher asked students whether they could guess the meaning. The students could not get the meaning. Then the teacher showed the sentence with a phrase containing the connective ‘for example’. The students were then able to guess the meaning of the word. The teacher continued to illustrate with more examples how connectives and other words within the same sentence could help students guess the meaning. He/she also asked students to give examples of the connectives they had learned before.

Students would then work in pairs to guess the meaning of some unfamiliar words. During the pair work, they used highlighters to mark the clues that they found within the same sentences. Finally, they presented how they guessed the meaning.

After the first lesson, the team suggested that teachers needed to focus on the use of
contextual clues as a reading strategy rather than placing emphasis on the connectives. The differences between guessing meaning with and without the use of contextual clues should also be made clearer to the students. Moreover, more time should be given to students for discussion.

The second and the third lessons were a double lesson. First, the teacher briefly revised what the students had learnt in Lesson 1. This was followed by a guessing game for students, which was divided into three rounds. In the first round, the teacher showed an unfamiliar word ‘dumbbells’ for students to guess and put the guesses on the board. Most of the guesses were not related to the meaning of ‘dumbbells’. In the second round, the teacher showed a sentence with this unfamiliar word and wrote down all the students’ guesses. With the prompting of the teacher, their guesses were narrowed down to more relevant answers. In the third round, the teacher showed all the three sentences and students’ guesses were more accurate. During the process, the teacher asked students how they made those guesses and why they changed their mind when more contextual clues were given. Some of the students were able to see that the more contextual clues they referred to, the more accurate their meaning became.

The teacher then illustrated with examples how connectives and other words within the same sentence could help the guessing of unfamiliar words. He/she also illustrated with examples how helping words in adjacent sentences could help the guessing of unfamiliar words. Finally, students worked in pairs to practise guessing the meaning of difficult words in a passage. The teacher gave them more time to discuss and asked them to present their work to the whole class.
On the whole, students took the initiative in these lessons and tried hard to guess those difficult words in the passage. During the post-lesson conference, it was suggested that more visual aids such as arrows and lines should be used to further highlight the trend that the more contextual clues they referred to, the more accurate their guesses would become. The teacher also stated clearly which meaning was correct after students provided their guesses.

2.5.2 The second cycle

In the second cycle, some adaptations were made to cater to the ability of 6C students, who were weaker than 6B students, and to improve the effectiveness of teaching. Chalk and board were frequently used rather than just PowerPoint slides so that students’ guesses could be recorded and they could see the changes in their thinking. Examples shown were simpler and the final text used in the first cycle was adapted so that the function of contextual clues was more significant. Arrows were also used to show how all the contextual clues contributed to the understanding of difficult words. In addition, to keep students' interest, they were given strips of paper instead of the entire worksheet.

It is worth noting that students were extremely nervous in the first lesson as they were not used to being video-recorded and having so many teachers sitting at the back of the classroom. Many students kept silent when the teacher asked them questions. However, when the strategy of reading aloud was added and more praises and prompting were given, students changed their attitude in the second and third lessons. They were more willing to make
guesses and answer questions. Besides, a short conclusion at the end of each lesson also helped students’ learning.

To further improve the teaching in Cycle Two, it was decided that during pair work, each student should be given a worksheet rather than letting them share one. They could even form groups of four after discussing with their neighbours. Although students were able to find clues to guess the meaning of unknown words in sentences and short paragraphs, they had difficulties when they came across a long passage in Lesson Three. This may be due to their lack of vocabulary since they did not even understand the words in the clues. Exercises could be given after each lesson and the second and third lessons could be conducted on separate days so that students could have more time to digest what they had learnt from each lesson.

2.5.3 The third cycle

Based on the suggestions in the evaluation meeting, the third teacher adapted the lesson plans used in the second cycle of teaching. She conducted one single lesson and one double lesson for 6A, the elite class of the school, within the same week in the third cycle of teaching.

In the first lesson, the teacher gave the students a riddle to guess in order to stimulate their learning interest as well as to motivate them to speak up. This was successful as the students were already actively involved in the guessing game. The teacher then taught students to get the meaning of the unfamiliar words by asking them to guess the meaning of some unfamiliar words. The teacher wrote down all their guesses on the whiteboard and the students had to think aloud to explain how those guesses were made in different rounds.

Generally speaking, the first lesson went smoothly as the students were able to locate all the contextual clues and get the correct meaning of the unfamiliar words during the activities. Their performances and responses were satisfactory and the objectives of the first lesson were achieved. However, the teacher found that some students were very smart and the unfamiliar words were too simple for them.
Therefore, in the second and third lessons, the teacher changed her lesson plans and prepared some more difficult words for the students to guess. Also, in order to teach them how to use the contextual clues, the teacher designed a worksheet and each student had to write down their guesses in each round. Then they had to “think aloud” to explain their answers in front of the class and they also had to explain why they changed their guesses. The outcome was very impressive as the students could understand the contextual clues and did that part well.

Even after three cycles of implementation, the research lessons can still be further improved. In order to obtain accurate findings which could reflect the effectiveness of the teaching without parental support at home, the teachers had decided not to provide students with any extended activities such as worksheets. However, the teachers should give the students extended activities at the end of each lesson so that the students can have more chances to consolidate what they have learnt.

Timing is another concern. If the teachers can have more lessons instead of only three lessons in a cycle of teaching, they can have more time to review procedures and materials after each lesson and students can have more time to digest what they have learnt.
2.6 Students’ learning outcome

Students were given the post-test (the same as the pre-test) two days after the research lessons in order to find out the learning outcome of this action research. Based on the findings from the pre- and the post-tests, the effectiveness of teaching during the action research was impressive. The findings indicated that many students had learnt the strategies taught in the research lessons as the percentage of students using strategies in the post-test was significantly increased by more than 34% when compared with the percentage of the pre-test. As a result, more students (from 53% students in the pre-test to 81% in the post-test) took the initiative to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar words and fewer students (from 33% students in the pre-test to 3% in the post-test) not attempting to guess the meaning of the word after the research lessons. More importantly, the rate of accuracy in guessing the meaning was increased too. It might be due to the fact that students had been able to learn how to use contextual clues to help them to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words more accurately.

Figure 5  Students’ performance in the pre- & post-tests
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In addition, findings of the pre- & post- lesson surveys also showed very positive results. As shown in Figure 5, students were more confident that they could learn English well and more students said that they liked reading. Also more students believed that reading English texts was easy and that they could get the meaning of unknown words. The six students participating in the pre-lesson interviews were interviewed immediately after their cycle of research lessons. All of them said that during the research lessons, they had learned how to guess the meaning of difficult words in English texts by referring to contextual clues.
In conclusion, the results of the above analysis strongly supported the fact that the outcome of the teaching was effective and that the objectives of the action research were remarkably achieved.

2.7 Teachers’ reflection

After the project, the three teachers who taught the three cycles of research lessons reflected on their learning from the action research.

The reflection of Miss Cheung (6A):

Overall, I believe that this research was beneficial to students’ learning. Based on the findings after the post-test, the objectives that were set at the beginning of the research were generally achieved. Students were able to use the contextual clues to find out the meaning of unfamiliar words. When they were able to get the meaning of the unfamiliar words, their reading ability was enhanced.

Also, students’ motivation and interest in learning English were raised during the lessons. Students were given the opportunity to think aloud and it helped them to understand as well as consolidate what they had learned during the lessons. Students were provided with
the chance to work in pairs and it was good to develop their generic skills. They learnt how to respect others, appreciate others’ work and co-operate with others. They enjoyed a great sense of achievement when they found out the correct answers. Furthermore, the practice of thinking aloud effectively raised the self-confidence of the students and gave them a chance to express themselves in front of the class.

Last but not least, teachers’ own pedagogical knowledge was enhanced because the implementation of the research provided opportunities for the teachers to engage in peer observation and exchange views on their teaching in the evaluation meetings after each cycle of teaching. The evaluation meetings were effective and had a great positive impact on teaching and learning. Teachers did grow professionally in using questioning skills, using reading strategies and the teaching of reading strategies. They became more skillful in adapting materials to cater for the learning diversity of our students. It was obvious that teachers became more familiar with the practice of co-planning. Teachers are now more prepared to develop further extended reading programs for students in order to strengthen their reading ability. Overall, this action research has effectively helped the implementation of other reading projects in future. It is evidently beneficial to both the teachers and the students.

The reflection of Miss Mak (6B):

I am glad that I had an opportunity to join this intensive and valuable project. It focused on using contextual clues to help students to guess the meaning of unknown words. Originally, when some students came across unfamiliar words, they simply guessed the meaning by thinking about other words which they had learnt before. They usually based their guesses on some similarities in spelling or pronunciation and in some cases students based their meaning by focusing only on a part of the word or just made wild guesses. Some of them might try to look at the adjacent sentences to find out the meaning of unknown words, but they usually could not get the exact meaning. This project provided an effective way for them to guess the meaning of the word and get the exact meaning in a logical way.

Before this project, I usually only knew whether answers were correct or not. I have learnt a lot from the project and adjusted my teaching methods to help my students in guessing the meaning of difficult words. I have also learnt different teaching strategies to
cater for the different needs of students from the two experts and my colleagues. It has fostered my personal professional development. The most important thing is that I now have a deeper understanding of how to use research for improving our teaching. From the study, we have found that some of our students are weak in vocabulary and do not know how to use strategies when reading. In future lessons, I will try my best to help students to form the habit of using contextual clues in reading.

The reflection of Miss Liu (6C):

I had no idea what action research was and obviously had not given much thought to it. However, my attitude has changed after participating in the project. This action research intrigued me to ask questions about daily teaching practices, gave me a chance to think about students’ ways of thinking and learn how to address their needs.

During the process of designing, implementing and evaluating the lessons, I looked at different texts, explored and tested different teaching strategies. I found that teaching was quite subjective and there were a lot of ways to reach a goal. Working with my colleagues helped me to think more about the ways of my students’ learning and my own teaching practices. For example, I found that the reading skills I had taught them before were not specific enough. I discovered that my students tended to read passages from the beginning to the end when they came across unknown words. They did not know how to use contextual clues such as looking at the sentences before and after as well as finding relevant words in other sentences. They need to learn more vocabulary and be familiar with prefixes and suffixes.

Apart from teaching, I have gained knowledge on how to carry out an action research project, for example, the ways of finding or developing suitable materials for testing students, conducting a pilot test, pretest and post test as well as the ways of interviewing students. I have a clearer picture of my students and know that teaching them the use of contextual clues is only a starting point. They still need to learn a lot of reading skills in order to become competent readers. I would like to be involved in more action researches not only because I can address my students’ problems but because it can develop my professional and personal growth.
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Furthermore, conducting the action research gave me an opportunity to refine myself as a panel chair. I learned an immense amount of knowledge that was relevant and important to me. First, there was a need for a close relationship between researchers, superiors and colleagues. In this research, I had to work closely with another panel chair as we were responsible for a different grade respectively. We had to communicate regularly so that we could understand each other’s progress. I also had to work closely with the researchers because they were the people who were guiding us through all the processes. Besides, I had to explain to colleagues the reason for doing the research, share experiences with them and serve as a bridge between different parties. Secondly, there was a need for me to be responsible and systematic. Dealing with the administration work such as arranging workshops, conducting prior and follow up meetings, planning schedules for all classes as well as supervising the whole process required well-organized arrangement and planning. Thirdly, as the panel chair, I needed to act as a guide and be familiar with the subject matter. I not only needed to be well-prepared for my lessons. I also had to provide guidance for my fellows when choosing materials and advise them to modify the developed curriculum so as to cater for individual needs.

Apart from the above, I felt that my leadership was enhanced. I tried to arouse colleagues’ interest and enthusiasm and to help their professional growth. However, I need to be more straightforward when evaluating lessons that I have observed and be more specific when pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of a lesson. I am glad that I have organized this action research for my team members. I hope I can be more skillful when we have another research topic.

3. Conclusion

The aims of this research have been remarkably achieved and have enhanced students’ reading skills in guessing word meaning through contextual clues. Curriculum leaders who have participated in the project have gained professional growth through designing, implementing and evaluating the plan. All participant teachers have further developed their teaching professionalism and agreed that consolidation exercises should be given after classes and each teaching cycle could be prolonged in order to break down the number of lessons.
They also thought that it is beneficial to encourage the whole English team to participate in research so as to enhance learning and teaching.

The team has set the target for the next action research, that is, to teach students more reading skills such as skimming and scanning. At the same time, teachers should pay attention to enriching students’ word bank and assist them to develop a reading aloud habit in their daily teaching.

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Appendix I The pre-test

CHING CHUNG HAU PO WOON PRIMARY SCHOOL
2010-2011 English Subject
Pre-test

Name: ___________________________ Class: 6 ____________ ( )

Read the passage.

Every Sunday, Kate and her parents always do something together. Last Sunday, they decided to go hiking. Mother prepared sandwiches and snacks, while Father packed their bags with other supplies, like water and a map. Kate decided they should go hiking in Tai Tam Country Park. She wanted to go and see the reservoirs!

When they arrived, they walked leisurely around the reservoir. As they had a lot of time, they did not have to hurry along. The water in the reservoirs was very clear and the sun was shining brightly. It was a very pleasant walk. Kate looked around and saw many different flowers and trees. Whenever she saw a bird, she would quickly point it out to Father so he could tell her the name. She finally knew what a robin looks like!

“Look! What's that?” Kate said suddenly. Kate saw something brown sitting in a tree, but it was not a bird. She took a few steps closer to take a look. “I have never seen this before!” Kate whispered because she did not want to frighten the frog. “It's a brown frog… but what is it doing sitting in a tree? I thought frogs live in water!” Kate said. She was puzzled because she could not understand why the frog could live in a tree. “There are many different kinds of frogs,” Father explained. “Some types of frogs do live in trees!”

At around five o'clock, they finished their walk. Kate was exhausted but happy.

What’s the meaning of the following words? Choose the best answer by blackening the circle. Write down your answers in the blank if needed. (你是否知道下列字的意思？請將最佳答案前面的圓圈塗黑。如有需要，請將答案寫在橫線上。)

1. supplies (line 3)
   ○ A. 我知道，因為我學過或見過，它的意思是 ___________________________.
   ○ B. 我不知道，但我猜它的意思是 ___________________________.
       因為 ___________________________.
   ○ C. 我不知道，因為我沒學過。
Appendix II The lesson plan

Lesson 1

Objectives:
1. To make students aware that contextual clues can help them to guess the meaning of words they do not know.
2. To make students aware that they can use connectives to help them to guess the meaning of words they do not understand.
3. To make students aware that they can guess the meaning of words they do not understand by referring to other words within the same sentence.

Procedure:
Step 1:
- Show Ss a word that they are not familiar with. Ask them whether they know the meaning of the word.
- Show Ss a sentence containing the unfamiliar word (without any contextual clues). Ask Ss whether they can understand/guess the meaning of the sentence.
- Show them the same sentence with contextual clues. Ask Ss whether they are able to understand/guess the meaning of the sentence.
- Do a few more sentences with the Ss.
- Summarize what has been done and explain to the Ss the importance of using contextual clues to help them understand what they are reading although they may not understand every word they read.

Step 2:
- Illustrate with examples how connectives (like, such as, for example, etc.) can help the guessing of unfamiliar words.
- Ask Ss to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words with the help of connectives. In each case Ss must be asked to verbalize how they are able to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar words. If Ss are unable to guess the meaning, T should ask guiding questions to help Ss guess the meaning by drawing their attention to the connectives.
- T should reiterate how connectives can help the guessing of meaning of unfamiliar words.

Appendix I The pre-test (cont.)
Lesson 1

Objectives:

1. To make students aware that contextual clues can help them to guess the meaning of words they do not know.
2. To make students aware that they can use connectives to help them to guess the meaning of words they do not understand.
3. To make students aware that they can guess the meaning of words they do not understand by referring to other words within the same sentence.

Procedure:

Step 1: Show Ss a word that they are not familiar with. Ask them whether they know the meaning of the word.

Show Ss a sentence containing the unfamiliar word (without any contextual clues). Ask Ss whether they can understand/guess the meaning of the sentence.

Show them the same sentence with contextual clues. Ask Ss whether they are able to understand/guess the meaning of the sentence.

Do a few more sentences with the Ss.

Summarize what has been done and explain to the Ss the importance of using contextual clues to help them understand what they are reading although they may not understand every word they read.

Step 2: Illustrate with examples how connectives (like, such as, for example, etc.) can help the guessing of unfamiliar words.

Ask Ss to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words with the help of connectives. In each case Ss must be asked to verbalize how they are able to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar words. If Ss are unable to guess the meaning, T should ask guiding questions to help Ss guess the meaning by drawing their attention to the connectives.

T should reiterate how connectives can help the guessing of meaning of unfamiliar words.
Step 3: Samples of sentences which illustrate the use of referring to other words within the same sentence should be shown to the Ss.

Demonstrate how other words within the same sentence can help the guessing of unfamiliar words.

Give a few examples to the Ss to check whether they understand. Ss must be asked to verbalize how they guess the meaning.

T should summarize how connectives and other words help the guessing of unfamiliar words.

Step 4: Ss should be given an opportunity to practice what has just been learnt. This can be done either in the form of pair/group work or individual work.

When checking the answers, the emphasis should be on the verbalization of the guessing process.

A worksheet could be given to Ss for homework as consolidation. (optional)

Step 5: A brief summary of the lesson with emphasis on the objectives.

Lesson 2

Objective:

1. To make students aware that contextual clues can be found in adjacent sentences,

Procedure:

Step 1: Do a brief revision of what was done in Lesson 1.

If homework was given in the first lesson, summarize the major mistakes that were noticed. If necessary, reinforce what had been taught.

Step 2: Show samples of sentences with contextual clues in adjacent sentences. Show the sentence with the difficult word first and ask Ss to guess its meaning. Then show the other sentence(s) and ask Ss to guess its meaning again. Ask Ss to compare the effect of guessing meaning when looking at different clues. Highlight the importance of
making use of the relevant words in adjacent sentences to increase the accuracy of guessing meaning of difficult words. Do a few examples with the Ss, making sure that Ss know which words can help them guess the meaning of the unfamiliar words.

Step 3: Let Ss practise what they have just learnt either in the form of pair/group work or individual work.

Go over the answers with the students. Ss must be able to state the relevant words which helped them to guess the meaning of the unfamiliar word in each case.

Step 4: Summarize what has been taught in Lesson 1 and Lesson 2.

Lesson 3

Objective:

1. To enable students to consolidate the use of contextual clues within a sentence and in adjacent sentences to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Procedure:

Step 1: Distribute the selected passage to the Ss.

Step 2: Remind Ss that they have to guess the meaning of the underlined unfamiliar words. Remind them that they have to use contextual clues in the same sentence or in adjacent sentences to help them. With weaker ability classes, it would be a good idea to do the first two paragraphs together before Ss start working on their own.

Step 3: Go over the answers with the Ss. Make sure Ss are able to verbalize how they obtained the answers.