

Implementation of the New English Curriculum in China: Using Big Books and Shared Reading

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English has been replacing Russian as the most important foreign language in China since around 1960, a facilitating factor being the growing perception that knowing English can increase one's economic and social mobility (Adamson, 2004; Lam, 2005). As China opens up with the four modernisations in the 1980s (i.e., in the fields of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology, announced in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping), entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, and the hosting of the Olympics in 2008, learning English has become more important and popular in many parts of China.

Rote-learning, central to traditional Chinese pedagogy, is characterized by teachers' authoritative teaching and students' passive acceptance of that teaching. This kind of learning, however, is undergoing change in China nowadays, with the introduction of the new basic education curriculum system for the 21st century by the Ministry of Education (2001). (Basic education in China includes preschool, primary, and secondary education.) The underlying philosophy of the new curriculum is to transform the traditional teacher-centred approach to a learner-oriented approach that is based on the development of children. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on English language knowledge including grammar and vocabulary, the present curriculum focuses on the ability to use the target language for communication, which is based on the development of (a) language skills, (b) English language knowledge, (c) students' affective attitudes (d) students' learning strategies, and (e) cultural awareness.

Successful implementation of the new curriculum needs to be accompanied by a number of changes. The first necessary change relates to the innovation and availability of teaching materials and aids. In the past, the communist government of China tightly controlled the content of the textbooks; only the central government had the authority to compile, publish and distribute textbooks, which were teacher-oriented and overlooked students' learning needs. According to Boyle (2000), over 80% of the junior middle schools in China used the same textbook, *Junior English for China*, developed by the People's Education Press in collaboration with Longman. Under the

new curriculum system, the central government or local governments are responsible for examining and approving textbooks to be used nationwide or in a local area. Individuals and private enterprises are authorized to produce textbooks which, if approved nationally or locally, can be selected and used by schools. The decentralization of the textbook market will create an incentive for innovation—the development of materials to supplement the textbooks such as teachers' guides, multimedia resources, Internet materials, wall charts, and maps. Such changes will undoubtedly be conducive to more effective teaching and learning.

Another important change that needs to be implemented for the success of the curriculum reform is the introduction of a more learner-centred approach to learning. Instead of unidirectional transfer of knowledge from teachers to students, teachers have to become organizers, advisers and facilitators, while students have to turn into active participants and masters of their own learning. The hierarchical structure with teachers as authoritative figures needs to be replaced by a more democratic, equal, and cooperative relationship between teachers and learners.

The third important necessary change is the provision of teachers' professional development. As mentioned above, enthusiasm for English learning in China has been growing at a fast pace in recent years. Now children start to learn English as a foreign language in Primary 3 in most cities and towns. With 456,900 primary schools having an enrolment of 121,567,100 students in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2003), there is now an urgent demand for English language teachers. Apart from encouraging foreign teachers to teach English in China, the Ministry of Education also encourages in-service teachers who have some English foundation to switch to teaching English after training. All teachers' colleges and universities, and teaching and research offices have to help with the professional development of primary English language teachers, who are facing the challenge of how to cope with the various demands of curriculum reform, especially when they themselves learnt English in a traditional manner and are not yet ready to implement the reforms.

The Present Project

A collaborative training project was organized jointly by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) and the Guangdong Education Bureau, to provide professional training for mainland teachers. The training took place in two cities in northeastern Guangdong, Heyuan and Meizhou, and lasted for four days. For this project, two tutors from HKIEd conducted seminars on teaching reading (using e-books, big books, and small books) to over 400 primary English teachers in the two cities, with a view to introducing the teachers to some current ELT methodologies and expanding their

repertoire of teaching strategies. Five HKIEd bachelor of education students also took part in the project. Working closely with the tutors, they prepared and taught some reading lessons to classes of Primary 3 children in the two cities. Some of these lessons were observed by mainland teachers, and this was followed by a feedback session. These lessons served to stimulate discussion among mainland teachers, who could see how the teaching methods presented in the seminars were practised in real classrooms.

Many mainland teachers are not aware of the value of using authentic materials although this is recognised by many teachers and ESL/EFL experts these days (e.g., see Allen, Bernhardt, Berry, & Demel, 1988; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Lee, 1995; Lee, 2003). In the project, the participants were introduced to the use of one kind of authentic materials—big books, and the accompanying teaching strategy—shared reading. Big books are enlarged texts which allow children to see and respond to the printed page as it is being read aloud. Various language teaching experts (e.g., see Bradbury, 2003; Fisher & Medvic, 2003) have put forward the advantages of using big books and shared reading with young learners. The accompanying illustrations in big books help children understand new words and develop their interest in reading. Big books provide a rich English learning environment as they expose children to different types of settings, stories, and genres. Folktales, fairy tales, myths, legends, and stories help develop children's experiences and imagination, and provide opportunities for them to appreciate the history and culture of other countries; information books contain factual texts which can enrich children's world knowledge; nursery rhymes, songs, and poems allow children to hear and imitate the sounds, articulation of words, and basic sound and language patterns. According to Morrow (1990), patterned and predictable language found in many big books enables young learners to understand and remember not only the language pattern but also the vocabulary. In Morrow's words, "Once students 'catch on' to the patterns, the book is theirs" (p. 342). Further, activities with big books help young children to understand and experience what it means to be a reader. At times, children may simply read the texts in unison and enjoy the pleasure of interacting with the characters by reading aloud. At other times, the young learners may participate actively in various activities (e.g., predicting how the story develops; changing the ending of the story) in a joyful learning environment.

During the seminars, several reading texts were selected for the trainers to demonstrate how they could be used with young learners, including "The Father Who Has Ten Children" (Guettier, 1999), "Little Red Riding Hood," and "I'm a Seed" (Marzollo, 1996). The following illustrates how "I'm a Seed" could be used with primary pupils. The training ideas, following Marzollo's (1996) approach, were to help transform a teacher-centred classroom into a more learner-centred communicative

classroom. English learning, moreover, is not only confined to the classroom and the English lesson, but can be related to children’s daily activities and other disciplines.

Pre-reading Activities

The aim is to arouse children’s interest in the text. Teachers can activate children’s previous knowledge of and experience with seeds, growing plants, and plant life cycles by asking them to talk about seeds: Can they name food that comes from seeds? Have they ever planted seeds and watched them grow? How do they grow? Teachers can bring different kinds of seeds to class and ask students to identify them. Then tell them the text that they are going to read is about two very different seeds. Ask students to find out what they are and how they are different from each other.

While-reading Activities

The present author worked with a student teacher and read aloud “I’m a Seed” (see Appendix A). One acted as the marigold seed and the other as the pumpkin seed. Some suggested procedures were presented to the participants:

1. After listening to the text once, children need to identify the two kinds of seeds.
2. Then they are given the text and listen to the reading again. This time children have to find out how the two seeds and plants are different from each other based on the categories given. Ask the children to list the differences, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Listening and Listing Differences

	Marigolds	Pumpkins
Stem:	The stem goes up	The stem goes sideways
Leaves:	Leaves are small	Leaves are big
	Leaves are perky	Leaves are hairy
Flowers:	Flowers reach up to the sky	Flowers are hiding under leaves
Petals:	Petals are yellow and orange and frilly	Petals die
Number:	Twenty flowers	Six pumpkins

3. The teacher and the whole class take turns to be the marigold and the pumpkin to practise reading aloud the dialogue. Alternatively, the class can be divided into halves, and take up the two roles to practise reading.
4. Selected pairs of students are invited to do the reading demonstration in class. Some other students are invited to do the action to add fun. They are asked to imagine that they are all tiny seeds. They begin by curling themselves into a tiny ball on the floor. Then they begin to grow and sprout up out of the soil. Next come their leaves and branches. Finally, they are a grown plant, standing tall.

One problem faced by mainland teachers is the lack of teaching resources. In many schools they do not have access to story books or big books. One solution is that teachers can find relevant pictures from the Internet or from pamphlets and produce their own big books. Publishing big books with children allows young learners to collaborate to create texts and pictures.

Post-reading Activities

Class Surveys

1. In groups pupils have to interview other classmates about what their five kinds of favourite foods are. They have to record their partner's responses in a table (see Table 2), and decide whether the food comes from seeds or not. After collecting all the findings, the pupils need to work out the top ten favourite foods for the whole class and report whether these foods come from seeds.

Table 2

Interview Activity

Name	Favourite food	Does it / Do they come from seeds?
Jane	chicken	X
	water melons	√
	corns	√
	ice cream	X
	potatoes	X

2. Encourage children to imagine that they are seeds. Ask them to think about what kind of seed they would like to be; where they would grow; whether they would be beautiful flowers, fruits, big trees, or dried fruits; and the reasons. Tell children to write a description and draw pictures. Then in pairs they interview each other about what they have imagined. Finally, some selected students are invited to report their partner's dream orally to the whole class. Students' written descriptions and drawings could be posted on the notice board, or be compiled to form a "Dream Book." This activity, apart from developing students' integrated English skills, is also conducive to their imagination development.

Gardening

Encourage children to learn how a seed grows. Ask each of them to get a seed, a bottle, and a paper towel/cotton. Tell the children to line the bottle with a wet paper towel/cotton and place the seed on it. They should then place the bottles near windows for the sunshine. Remind children to add water to the bottles every day to keep the towels wet. Encourage children to observe the seeds over a week. When the seeds grow into little plants, ask children to put them in soil, and observe their growth. Encourage children to draw pictures and write descriptions to record the progress of the seeds and plants.

Accompanying the gardening activity, teachers can further cultivate children's interest in reading. Poems on seeds can easily be found on the Internet. Through reading the poem, "What Makes a Garden Grow, Grow, Grow" (see Appendix B), children can learn some useful vocabulary on plant growing (e.g., ask the children to find out the important elements which make a seed grow), and learn some sounds (e.g., encourage the children to find the words that rhyme).

Arithmetic—How Many Seeds are There?

Knowledge of other disciplines can also be built up through the fun activities in the English class. The teacher can bring in different kinds of fruit such as apples, pears, oranges, tomatoes, plums, mangos, and avocados. The teacher cuts each piece of fruit open and asks children to count the seeds inside. Record the number on the blackboard. Then ask children to answer questions similar to the following:

1. Which kind(s) of fruit has/have the most/least seeds?
2. What is the ascending/descending order of the fruits according to the number of seeds they have?
3. How many seeds are in the apple and the orange added together?

4. How many more seeds does the orange have than the plum?
5. What is the total number of seeds in all the pieces of fruit?

Science

In addition to the arithmetic activity mentioned above, teachers can use the same materials to help children understand some science concepts. For example, children can be guided to understand that different kinds of plants have different numbers of seeds: some plants form only a few seeds, while others form many seeds. Teachers can show children one-half of each of the fruits, and help them observe and identify the placement of the seeds in each of them. Then ask students to categorise the fruits according to how the seeds are enclosed. The aim of this activity is to help students realize that some fruits have only one seed enclosed in a hard case surrounded by flesh (e.g., mangos, avocados). Another kind of fruit has several seeds enclosed in a core surrounded by flesh (e.g., apples, pears). The third kind has their seeds embedded in the flesh of the fruit (e.g., oranges, grapes). Children are then asked to list more fruit names under each of the three categories by bringing in some fruits from home and recording their observations.

Benefits to Teachers and Students

At the end of the seminar, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, with questions eliciting their views on the effectiveness of the training programme. Over 95% of all the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had learnt how to use big books and shared reading through this programme. A similar percentage of informants felt that the programme was valuable to their professional development, and had enhanced their skills in the teaching of English. They found the talk on shared reading, teaching try-outs by HKIEd students, and the group discussions after the try-outs useful in enhancing their teaching skills. Pleasingly, nearly all the informants indicated that they would try out shared reading in class after joining this training programme.

The written comments also indicate that many mainland teachers realized the values of using big books and shared reading in enhancing students' English learning:

1. [Shared reading] can develop students' interests and concentration; students learn more things through stories.
2. [I will try out shared reading] because it is very useful, and it encourages the students to share their feelings. Encourage students to read.
3. Big books can let students become more active in the learning process, enhance students' listening, speaking and reading abilities. Reading can help students remember.

4. Could increase students' vocabulary, enhance students' active learning. Shared reading can develop the pupils' imagination and other abilities very well, and this method can arouse the learners' interest easily as well.
5. Shared reading allows students to participate more actively. It can help implement the new curriculum: "teacher as the guide, students as the centre". It emphasizes the use of English among students.
6. Big books are more interesting than textbooks. And children can learn more knowledge.
7. [I will try out shared reading] because it will make students understand knowledge more easily. They can know other countries' cultural background. At the same time I can learn something from students. It will let me go on with students well.

Shared reading is a useful means for implementing the new curriculum in China, which puts greater emphasis on reading and nurturing the creativity of pupils. The five major curriculum components designed to develop learners' abilities to use the target language—language skills, English language knowledge, affective attitudes, learning strategies, and cultural awareness—are all catered to through shared reading. Among all the benefits to students, one advantage cannot be overlooked—teachers can share their enthusiasm for reading and encourage students to learn English beyond the classroom by further reading.

Apart from the gains to students, the methodologies introduced during the training programme were beneficial to the mainland teachers. The project helped expand their repertoire of teaching strategies. On the other hand, the try-outs stimulated discussions among participants about the feasibility of the suggested teaching strategies. This exchange between Hong Kong and mainland teachers helped both parties to understand the differences in the two educational systems. The following are some comments about how teachers benefited from the programme:

1. The training encourages teachers to innovate. Better teaching skills will increase students' interest in learning.
2. Through this very meaningful training, I have learnt the importance of shared reading, through which we can teach vocabulary, phrases and sentence structures more appropriately.
3. Through this training, I have learnt current teaching methods. Through lesson observation, I could learn from other teachers' good teaching methods, which could enhance my teaching skills.

4. Organising this kind of teaching activities is very meaningful to me. Through the exchange between Hong Kong and mainland teachers, we can learn more about the teaching situations in different places and the latest teaching theories. This is extremely useful for our own teaching.
5. I have a better understanding of English teaching through this programme. I have learnt how to conduct a good lesson, how to combine activities in a lesson, how to enliven classroom atmosphere. Most importantly, it has opened my mind and stimulated my creativity.

Concerns

Gaps between practice and theory are sometimes found between what is learnt in a professional development course and actual teaching in schools. Some concerns were raised about the feasibility of the techniques described above. The first concern is related to the open-endedness of the approach, which assumes a certain level of teacher and student English proficiency. As for the class survey on favourite food, both mainland teachers and students may not have the vocabulary required. To facilitate understanding, some use of Chinese to supplement the communication in class is therefore inevitable. This, however, should not be regarded as a problem. Instead, it should be considered an opportunity to extend learning outside class as students feel the need to find out the English equivalents of their favourite foods after the lesson. The progression from naming items to using the English vocabulary for communication in subsequent activities allows students to recycle and consolidate learning.

Another concern relates to large class sizes, and the availability of teaching materials and aids. Some reservations about using big books and shared reading in the mainland classroom were expressed by several participants:

1. Can't use this method—too many students, not practical, lack of teaching facilities.
2. This method may not be feasible in primitive areas.
3. Because of the shortage of teaching materials and exam requirements, there are few opportunities to use this method.
4. Big books are not good for my big class.

The concerns raised by some teachers are understandable. Mere teacher training without easy access to teaching resources and favourable conditions can hardly allow teachers to carry out innovative teaching strategies in the classroom. The current problems of large class sizes, and a shortage of library books, audio-visual and computing equipment, and photocopying facilities, especially in village schools, are

obstacles to successful implementation of curriculum reform in China. As mentioned by Leng (1997) and Liu (1998), English language teachers in China are facing the constraints of large class sizes (often more than 50 students in one class) and limited educational resources, which make it difficult to carry out interactive activities in class. Nevertheless, the mainland teachers in Li and Siu's (2007) study reported that interactive and entertaining activities are frequently conducted in their classrooms nowadays. Teachers' determination to provide a good and relaxing learning atmosphere through the design of collaborative learning activities in groups enables students to interact with one another actively. This suggests that the physical barriers can, to some extent, be overcome by a change in teachers' attitudes and strategies. Whether the new curriculum can be implemented successfully or not, therefore, depends not so much on the availability of educational resources but on the willingness of teachers to adopt a more learner-centred approach, as seen in the following remark made by a participant in the present project:

This training enables me to have a better understanding of being an English teacher. I've learnt a lot of teaching methods and skills. Although some methods can't be used in our village schools, I will skillfully share the new, interesting teaching methods with my students.

Conclusion

Both teachers and learners can reap many benefits from using big books and shared reading in the classroom. For students, the benefit is that they are no longer passive recipients of knowledge, but active participants and language/knowledge discoverers. Through the texts they read, they acquire knowledge about foreign cultures and the world. Through the activities they are engaged in and the personal experience involved, their imagination develops, and their interest in the English language and confidence are greatly enhanced. For teachers, this collaborative training programme on big books and shared reading enabled the participants to be exposed to new and inspiring teaching approaches. They began to realize the importance of shifting a teacher-centred classroom to a learner-centred one, and the change of teacher role from knowledge transmitter to facilitator, lesson organizer, and adviser. To implement the new curriculum successfully, continuing support must be given to practising teachers on the mainland so that their teaching beliefs and skills can be refined.

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About the Author

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Appendix A

I'm a Seed by Jean Marzollo

I'm a seed.

I'm a seed, too!

I'm going to be a marigold when I grow up.

Me, too!

No, you're not.

Why not?

Because you're a different kind of seed.

What kind of seed am I?

How should I know? Wait and see.

Wait how long?

Not too long. See? We're growing. My stem goes up, up, up.

My stem goes sideways.

My leaves are small and perky.

My leaves are big and hairy.

My flowers reach up to the sky.

My flowers are hiding under my leaves.

My petals are yellow and orange and frilly.

My petals died. Now I have green balls!

I have twenty flowers!

My green balls turned orange. What in the world am I?

A pumpkin plant! You grew six pumpkins! They're beautiful!

Thank you. I am very proud.

Know what's inside of us?

What?

Seeds. When my seeds are planted, they will become new marigolds.

When my seeds are planted, they will become new pumpkins. There should be a name for it.

There is. It's called life.

I'm a seed.

I'm a seed, too!

Appendix B

What Makes a Garden Grow, Grow, Grow by Patricia Elizabeth Garner

What makes a garden grow, grow, grow?

Lots of work with a rake and hoe,

Seeds gently planted in a row --

That makes a garden grow, grow, grow.

What brings the seedlings up from the ground?

Rain from the sky coming down, down,

Bright yellow sunbeams shining round.

Help bring the seedlings up from the ground.