
Tackling Issues Among Remedial Class Students: A Problem-based Approach

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Many schools have a streaming system; students are assigned to classes where the stronger ones learn at a faster pace, while the weaker ones are busy trying to catch up. More often than not, students in the remedial classes have to take the same internal and external examinations. This is the most puzzling part: How can the weaker students meet an approved standard within a period of time equal to that of the more able students? The answer perhaps lies in the training of remedial class teachers who apply different teaching approaches. With different approaches, students may be able to learn in more diverse ways. Teachers need to explore learning opportunities in both textbooks and authentic materials, so as to link up the classroom and the real world use of the language.

Not only do weaker students have problems in academic work, but they may also have motivational and disciplinary issues. Some students are assigned to a language remedial class because of their overall discipline problems. In their cases, they are weak in almost all subjects. They lack learning motivation and some have low self-esteem. In such cases, language teachers play an important role as both mentors and guardian angels. There teachers often have students voice their frustrations through activities that allow students to practice the use of English language in authentic situations.

The aim of this paper is to review how effective small class remedial teaching has been through a letter-writing activity. The activity, incorporating different learning styles and strategies, allows students to solve real-life problems on their own. They posed problems, provided solutions, and balanced resolutions through discussion, research on the Internet, and writing to the newspaper. Remedial students come to see that their voices were heard, that their worries were acknowledged, and that their language proficiency was improved. But added to this, these students have shown a marked improvement in their self-esteem. It is hoped that this paper will provide insights for language education on how classroom technologies and daily issues can be combined to promote effective learning in remedial classes.

Review

It is evident that people learn differently and at different paces because of their biological and psychological differences (Reiff, 1992). Clearly, learning styles include not only the cognitive domain, but also the affective and physiological domains (Oxford, Hollaway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992). But even one learning style is multidimensional (Kinsella, 1996), and a particular learning style may be founded on assumption. Assumption research on learning styles is based on the premise that learners receive information through their senses and prefer some senses to others in specific situations (O'Brien, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993; Kroonenberg, 1995).

Students learn more effectively when they learn through their own initiatives. When their learning styles are matched with appropriate approaches in teaching, then their motivation, performances, and achievements will increase and be enhanced (Brown, 1994). In various situations, teachers employ different strategies and instruments in class. Although these strategies and instruments differ, they share the goal of identifying the nature of human differences in learning and of improving the effectiveness of teaching/learning by providing criteria for individualizing instruction (Ketchum, 1987).

Research has shown that matching learning styles have a positive impact on students' achievements, interests, and motivation (Smith & Renzulli, 1984). Dunn, Dunn, and Price (1979), Wesche (1981), and Sein and Robey (1991) found that the potential interaction between learning styles and teaching approaches indicates that students' performances can be enhanced by adapting the instructional methods to individual differences in learning styles.

Kinsella (1996) argued that students who have stronger verbal/analytical faculties may have access to the traditional teaching model—listening to lectures, reading textbooks, and completing writing assignments. But they are not necessarily developing the right-brain strengths that are crucial for problem solving and creativity. Therefore, it has been pointed out that lessons should be presented both visually and verbally and reinforced through various motivating language activities such as reflective reading and writing. In this way, students can learn in ways that best suit their styles and develop their modality strengths (Kroonenberg, 1995).

Oxford (1990) posited that while presenting materials, teachers should provide colorful and motivating activities, personalized self-reflection tasks, some form of cooperative learning, and powerful learning strategies to encourage self-direction in learning. However, it is generally agreed that it is difficult for teachers to keep all the learners' activity tasks focused on the learning process while they learn at the same pace (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Method

This paper presents an activity carried out in a well-respected middle school in Hong Kong. The school celebrated its 115th anniversary in 2004. With such a long and distinguished history, the school is of course, interested in how to promote effective learning among students. Teachers have been commissioned to research different approaches, one of which is a "problem-based" approach, a derivation of the project-based learning approach. The school has been promoting small class teaching since 2000. During English classes, 260 students at each of the five levels are divided into eight or nine groups. The elite and remedial classes have no more than 20 students each.

The project was conducted in September and October 2004 among 20 Form 3 (grade 9) English remedial students whose mother tongue is Cantonese, a Chinese dialect commonly used in Hong Kong. The school is considered one of the best Chinese medium of instruction middle schools, (all subjects are taught in students' mother tongue, except the English lessons). Students receive eight 40-minute lessons per cycle, that is to say, approximately 270 minutes of classroom contact time every week. Students whose English grades were near the bottom in the final examination in the previous academic year were assigned to the remedial class.

There were five stages in this project: (1) Students were asked about problems they faced in daily life or at school. These problems were mainly about growing pains, academic results, friendships, relationships with family, etc. Students were asked to surf the Internet for teen magazines, and check if their problems were shared by others, or unique to themselves. Discussion sessions were held. Through snail mail and e-mail, students then wrote to *Young Post* of the *South China Morning Post*, a local English newspaper, to ask for assistance regarding their problems; the same letters also appeared in the student forum, an electronic communication platform of the school. (2) The letters were further discussed in class in two areas: How students could help the writer, and, the strengths of the published letter. Responses would be written regarding the problem posted. (3) When the response letters were printed, the class discussed further comments for the two batches of letters, and another round of written response was made. (4) The activity ended with a comparison session when the students had all three batches of letters, making a complete set: problem-response-resolution. (5) Students reflected on the series of letter-writing activities and how the writing and the discussion helped solve teenage problems.

Students were first taught the letter-writing format, and the presentation of the envelope. All letters, about 100 words each, were proofread by the English teacher for grammar mistakes, but not content. This measure ensured an agreeable level of language standard and preserved objective and independent authorship. Class

discussion sessions were mostly done in small groups after the teacher's initial instructions and lectures. Sessions were well-spread out over two months in order to accommodate other areas of the regular English curriculum, and to allow time for students' writing.

Evaluations were done through four instruments. Upon completion, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix 1) with 20 items on a modified Likert-scale (1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) on the activity, what they had learnt and the change of their learning attitudes. Students were also asked to respond freely on other aspects absent from the questionnaire. They were invited randomly to attend comment sessions where open-ended questions were asked regarding the activity and their language attitudes. The teacher's observations contributed to the qualitative input of the writing up of this paper.

Results and Discussion

Students sent their letters to the newspaper and the electronic forum of the school at the end of September 2004. Five topics were found on the forum (Table 1), with a total of 51 responses (including the primary messages, suggestions, consolations, and appreciation messages), and a total of 562 hits were accumulated as of 4 November 2004. The hits include the 51 responses above, writers' checking in for responses, casual browsers' visits, teachers' monitoring, etc.

Table 1

Numeric Data of the Questions Posted

Topic	Last updated	Responses	Hits
Our problem (Appendix 2)	25 October 2004	6	59
My problem with study (Appendix 3)	23 October 2004	10	95
My problem with study (Appendix 4)	21 October 2004	26	233
My problem with study (Appendix 5)	15 October 2004	3	64
My problem with study (Appendix 6)	4 November 2004	6	111

The students who participated in this activity were all from a remedial English class; naturally they worried about their studies. In Hong Kong, grade 9 is a critical year, because it is the end of the nine-year compulsory free education. About 25 students, out of 260, will have to leave the school to work or to study in another school. Being in a remedial class, these students worried that they might not make the cut. Therefore, they were all concerned about their studies.

Since the English teacher of the class conducted the activity with the students, the students tended to focus more of their concerns on English. In some cases, students also voiced their frustration on other subjects, for example, physics and chemistry. Their main worry was that the teachers talked too fast, and they did not have time to absorb. Responses from other students were comforting, but not always practical. For example, in one case, a reply suggested that the worried student should watch English TV programs at home to sharpen up her English skills. But another response pointed out the difficulty that there was only one TV set at home, and family members wanted to watch Chinese programs. Teachers also encouraged students to have conversations with native speakers of English, but a respondent said that he did not know any native English speakers.

The results of the questionnaire are located in Table 2. The questionnaire results represent the 18 students who filled out the questionnaires (N=18). Most of the means are in the 2-point area, the spread is great. Only items 16 and 17 fall in the 3-point area, and items 7 and 14 in the 1-point area. Although it may reflect students' confidence in the activity, it may also reveal partial truth of their worry regarding study; after all, these students are in a remedial class. But it is encouraging to see that they voted confidence for the teacher for guiding them carefully through all activities and that she allowed more freedom in voicing their opinions (items 16, 17, ranked 1, 2). Socially, students gained more confidence: the questionnaire results indicated that they were more ready to discuss problems with peers, at the same time, offer objective comments to peers' problems (items 19, 20, ranked 3.5).

Table 2
Questionnaire Responses (ranked by mean)

Item	Mean	Rank
16. The teacher carefully guided us through all activities.	3.83	1
17. The teacher allowed us more freedom in voicing our opinions.	3.33	2
19. I am ready to discuss my problems openly with my peers in future.	2.83	3.5
20. I will try my best to offer objective comments to my peers' problems.	2.83	3.5
15. Reading newspapers helps me improve my language proficiency.	2.67	5
5. I like this series of activities better than the textbook lessons.	2.61	6.5
10. I feel that people really care about the problem posed.	2.61	6.5
3. The problem posed really concerns members in my class.	2.56	8.5
13. The activities allowed more time for English discussion.	2.56	8.5
1. I have learnt more about letter-writing in this activity.	2.50	10.5
11. I have learnt some new language items in this series of activities.	2.50	10.5
8. I will continue to read English newspaper on a regular basis.	2.44	13
9. In these activities, I learnt to provide comments objectively.	2.44	13
18. I learnt to cooperate with my peers in these activities.	2.44	13
12. I hope there will be more activities of this kind in English lessons.	2.22	15
6. In these activities, I found that reading forum messages is educational	2.17	16
4. The series of activities is an authentic learning experience	2.11	17
2. I am happy to see letters of my classmates published on student forum	2.00	18
7. I will continue to write to the newspaper for issues I care about	1.72	19.5
14. I have always enjoyed reading English newspapers	1.72	19.5

Interestingly, there is one contradictory comment: students agreed that reading newspapers helps them improve language proficiency (item 15, ranked 5), but they will not write to it (item 7, ranked 19.5). There are perhaps two reasons in explaining such a contradictory result. First of all, students understand the importance of learning English through the newspaper, but they do not have the habit of writing to the newspaper, and they may prefer other ways to improve their English. After all, these students who are in a remedial English class may not be as ambitious as students in other classes. Secondly, newspaper reading is not a common activity in this school, although the culture of reading is growing. This explains the low ranking of item 14, “I have always enjoyed reading English newspapers.” Students often think that issues in the newspaper concern adults more than teenagers. As they grow older, there seems to be a shift in this opinion.

Items 6 and 4 (ranked 16 and 17) reflected similar findings. Students did not think that the activity was educational and it was not an authentic learning experience. To many young students, even parents, textbooks are the only means to education. Any activities outside of a textbook may not be relevant to examinations. The English teacher introduced the letter-writing activity. It may have been seen as coercing students into finishing the tasks; hence, not authentic, whether writing to the newspaper or on the forum.

The other three instruments, free responses, interviews, and teacher’s observations reaped similar results. Some of the free responses are listed below:

- * *The activity is interesting.*
- * *I like sharing and answering others’ problems.*
- * *I am happy to see my problems answered.*
- * *Sharing problems in English is difficult.*
- * *I don’t know how to answer some questions.*

At the post-activity interview, the English teacher of this remedial class confirmed some of the findings. She said that a few students found the discussion on teenage problems useful. The writing helped students focus, and that they knew through collaborative learning, lessons could make sense; through problem-solving, they realized that their problems were actually shared by peers and they were not alone. By understanding that a problem was not unique to any one individual, they were able to lighten up and face academic challenges. The teacher also indicated that students were grateful for some of the responses. They had not believed that there would be other people interested in their problems. Although the problems had not been solved right away, they appreciated the respondents’ effort, and were glad that their voices were heard. Finally, the teacher believed that teenagers should learn to open up and discuss

academic, social, and spiritual concerns with peers, teachers, and guardians. During the vulnerable teenage years, helping students consider their problems, however trivial they may be, will definitely boost students' confidence.

Conclusions

There are two limitations in this project. First of all, the small number of remedial class students may not present reality in its most objective fashion. The training of the teacher as a remedial class teacher directly affected the knowledge students might gain. However, the primary aim of this activity was to see if a letter-writing activity on their problems could stir the learning interest of weaker students. The training of the teacher may not be highly relevant in this case, either, because although the students are in a remedial class, and did score low in English in the previous year, the overall language standard of the school is well above level. The teacher just aimed at pushing these students harder, so that they would be at level with the norm: the above average group.

This also explains why some students swim in and out of the remedial class; once their grades fall behind the rest, they will inevitably end up in the class, but that does not mean they have poor English language proficiency. The public examination results of Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations speak for themselves. Eighty percent of remedial class students traditionally pass the English language papers.

Another constraint hinged on how frequently the letters got published. This worked to the class advantage in that when the letters did get printed, students could see that their language standard had been accepted at a desirable level. In addition, students knew that the problems they posed were acknowledged by other teenagers, and that they were not alone. Students also had a chance to compare the edited version and the one they submitted and to learn how journalism works on editing and readership. The forum version had a similar educational function: viewers learnt from each other their strengths and weaknesses.

Nevertheless, this research provided findings on how authentic problems and materials could promote language learning for weaker students. Not only did students see their problems acknowledged and solved by other readers, but they also learnt to cooperate, communicate, empathize, and interact with each other. The implications here are twofold. First of all, language teachers should not underestimate the non-classroom time; students can work on their own after guidance and instruction given in class. When the issues at hand suit the level and students' interest, students will be willing to work on their own and at their own pace. Secondly, while students are reaching out for assistance, they are also allowing people from outside of the school to offer their help. This mechanism lets students learn from the world outside the classroom, and it prepares

students for future work and study, at which time they will need to be able to compromise, negotiate, make offers, and so forth.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims at collecting your opinions on the letter-writing activity. It intends to find out how you feel about the learning process, particularly how you have helped solve the problem posed. Please respond to the following items by putting a tick in the appropriate boxes (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) representing your comments. Your comments are very valuable to the future activities conducted by teachers of the Department of English in this school. Thank you for filling out this questionnaire.

Item	1	2	3	4
1. I have learnt more about letter-writing in this activity				
2. I am happy to see letters of my classmates published on the student forum.				
3. The problem posed really concerns members in my class				
4. The series of activities is an authentic learning experience.				
5. I like this series of activities better than the textbook lessons.				
6. In these activities, I found that reading forum messages is educational.				
7. I will continue to write to the newspaper for issues I care about.				
8. I will continue to read English newspapers on a regular basis.				
9. In these activities, I learnt to provide comments objectively.				
10. I feel that people really care about the problem posed.				

Appendix 1 (Cont'd)

Item	1	2	3	4
11. I have learnt some new language items in this series of activities.				
12. I hope there will be more activities of this kind in English lessons.				
13. The activities allowed more time for English discussion.				
14. I have always enjoyed reading English newspapers.				
15. Reading newspapers helps me improve my language proficiency.				
16. The teacher carefully guided us through all activities.				
17. The teacher allowed us more freedom in voicing our opinions.				
18. I learnt to cooperate with my peers in these activities.				
19. I am ready to discuss my problems openly with my peers in future.				
20. I will try my best to offer objective comments to my peers' problems.				

Reflections and comments:

Appendix 2

A lot of people told us to ask the teachers, but when should I go to ask them? In the lesson? During lunch time or after school? During lunch time, I don't have enough time to have my lunch (we have only one hour). After school, I have to go home quickly to finish my homework and study my test and dictations. I am also afraid that the teachers may think that I am not a good student because I do not listen to her.

Please tell me! What should we do?

By Eddy*

Appendix 3

5th October 2004.

Dear Editor,

When I had problem with English in Form 1, I was asked to enter the remedial class.

Teachers think that it is the only method to help me to solve the problem. However, they do not realize that there are other problems existing in the remedial class.

We are afraid of being labeled as poor students. Sometimes too shy to enter the classroom of the remedial class. We feel that we are not well-treated by the teachers we also feel that we are looked down by the teachers and the other fellow students.

Luckily I learn in this class because the teachers are nice. However, I still hate to be labeled.

Sindy Yick (F.3C)

Pui Ching Middle School

Appendix 4

27th September 2004

Dear Editor,

I am a F.3 student. I have a lot of problem with my study. For example, I do not understand what my teachers are talking about, especially in English lessons, because my teacher is talking very fast. She never stops for a minute. We have a lot English homework and we have many dictation. If I have anything that I do not understand, I will never ask my teacher, because I am scared that she will be angry. I really need help.

Rainbow Leung (F.3)

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Appendix 5

I always have many problems with my study.

I have to take extra lessons after school or in the holidays, because I can't understand what the teachers are talking about.

I sometimes need to learn badminton and so I go to bed late. I am quite tired so I can't pay attention in the lessons.

However, I can not give up because my parents insist that I should continue I am exhausted.

Appendix 6

5th October 2004

Dear Editor,

I am a F.3 student. My biggest problem with my study is that I am not good at English and I am afraid that I cannot promote F.4.

We are studying Chemistry and Physics in English. I find it difficult to understand.

In the future, I have to decide which stream I am going to enter—Art or Science. In my school, science subjects are instructed in English. I am so scared.

I always want to improve my English, but I always give up as life is busy. I feel tired and bored with my study.

Helen Leung (F.3)

Pui Ching