Front Cover by Reuben Boon, K2 Tulip, The Ascension Kindergarten

# Contents Page

*From the Editor*

Language, literacy, bilingual learners – these are common topics in our early childhood scene. Everybody in ECCE knows what these refer to. You do that every day that you are in your preschool class. You automatically know exactly what they refer to. All the more we cast our eyes and focus on them because of their immense importance in early childhood learning.

   The articles in this issue are an array of teaching practices, reflections and research. The writers discuss how students learn, develop or pick up language. Topics range from learning to read, to promoting the English Language through self-directed learning. Two articles take a look into how home environments play a role in fostering children's literacy growth; one discusses an unusual topic about a thirty million word gap, the other describes an intervention strategy on children lagging behind in emergent reading tasks. Look at the cover of this issue – can you create a lesson around it? Of course you can! Read the Book Reviews which share that book covers can become a wonderful starting point to engage your students. It is a first time that *Early Educators* is using an abstract piece of art for our cover. What do you see? What can you talk about? The colours, the shapes, or something entirely from the imagination!

   These articles here will excite you. At the end of your reading, you will close the journal, perhaps deep in thought, reflecting on your own principles and your classroom teaching practice. *Early Educators* would be truly delighted if we receive a piece from you, perhaps on how the action research article gave birth to one you tried out in your class. We encourage you – the teacher, the practitioner, the writer. Let's hear from you!


Ruth Wong
Editor

## LEARNING TO READ is no trivial matter

**If you have a child in the early years of school, you'll be well aware of the importance of learning to read and write for early school success.**

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Reading and writing are so much a part of our everyday lives that it's easy to think that they are 'natural' processes like talking and listening. However, humans only invented the first writing systems around 6 000 years ago. Compared to the tens of thousands of years we've used spoken language, that's just a blink.

### Why does learning to read matter?

Literacy is not an optional skill in a modern, technology-based society. It's one of life's essentials. Successful engagement at school becomes increasingly reliant on reading and writing skills over time.

Children who struggle to transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' at around the fourth year of schooling typically find school stressful. Their academic progress and behaviour often reflect this.

### What's involved in learning to read?

Learning how to read is very much a language-based task. To progress from talking and listening to reading and writing, children need an oral language 'toolkit' that comprises vocabulary, knowledge of word and sentence structure, and narrative (storytelling) skills in order to share

their experiences with others.

We also need to remember that language is a 'two-channel' process—that it has an expressive or 'output' channel, and a receptive, or 'input' channel. To be a skilled communicator, children need to have strengths in both understanding others and in putting their own ideas into words.

Reading requires children to be able to do two key things. First, they must 'decode' the text by recognising its letters/spellings, matching them to speech sounds and blending these to make a word. Second, they must understand what the word means. Struggling readers may have problems with either or both of these processes.

Spelling and reading are reciprocal processes, so spelling helps reading. The best spelling instruction teaches just one pattern at a time and helps children disassemble and reassemble words, and understand their components.

### Why does English have so many spelling patterns?

English is composed mainly of Germanic, French, Latin and Greek words, plus borrowed words from just about every other language. Words have mostly come into English with their spelling patterns, and pronunciation has changed over time.

Deciphering a word like 'gas' is quite straightforward, requiring the application of basic sound-letter rules. However, those same rules don't work for the word 'was', for which you need to learn the 'wa' pattern as in 'want', 'watch' and 'swan'.

### How is reading taught in Australia?

Commonly used approaches to reading instruction deal with this problem of tricky spelling by encouraging children to memorise whole words, and to guess words they can't decode from context, first letter or picture cues. These approaches are rooted in the (false) idea that learning to read is 'natural'.

The memorise-and-guess strategy (historically known as 'Whole Language') often seems to work well for a while, but unless children can quickly progress to decoding and encoding words, their visual memory abilities are soon overtaxed, and they start to fail.

There is solid research evidence that all children need to master the system of sound-letter links in English, from common to uncommon spellings, in order to become competent, independent readers after the first three years of school.

Teaching children to 'hear' the sounds in spoken words and learn their letters/spellings is often called phonics instruction. Phonics was the early literacy teaching approach recommended by the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, which also recommended teacher training in this method.

Most teachers and researchers agree that these skills are necessary but not sufficient for good reading, with other essential skills being vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. However, some children need much more phonics work than others in order to become independent, skilled readers.

Efforts to include more phonics instruction in literacy teaching have resulted in so-called 'Balanced Literacy', a mixture of methods that sound attractive and reassuring to parents but which in fact are not well-supported by research. Yes, that makes us scratch our heads too.

The problem is, no-one really knows what 'Balanced Literacy' means in practice, and the 'balance' for one teacher may be very different

from that employed by the next. It is likely that in many classrooms, the 'balance' in reading instruction is skewed towards Whole Language approaches such as guessing from context (e.g. picture cues), and only using phonics as a last resort. This is not what the research evidence tells us should be happening.

The outcome is that far too many children struggle to learn literacy. Without good intervention, their educational attainment falls further and further behind that of their peers.

### What can we do?

First, in both the pre-school and school years, engage children in lots of talking and listening activities—conversation, stories, word games (e.g. knock-knock riddles), questions, songs and rhymes. These will all contribute to the linguistic toolkit that children need in order to cross the bridge to literacy.

Read all kinds of books and encourage children to discuss the ideas and events they depict.

Choose books for young children to read themselves very carefully. Books for absolute beginners should contain only two- and three-letter words with basic sound-letter relationships.

Once a child can manage these, books containing longer words, can be introduced, then more complex spelling patterns, like the 'sh' in 'wish', the 'oo' in 'good' and the 'igh' in 'night'.

Over time, books should be carefully selected for the degree of reading challenge they provide, so that children master both the consistent and inconsistent aspects of English in a strategic and efficient way.

Discourage guessing and encourage children to sound out words as much as possible. Skilled readers don't guess; they act like little detectives cracking a code. Guessing seems like an OK strategy when there are helpful pictures, but what happens when children need to decode words in books that don't contain pictures?

# Making Reading Comprehension Visible:
# Beyond Getting the Right Answer

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(*Editor's Note: This article describes the teaching of reading comprehension in a Primary 2 class. As the term 'early childhood education' has been defined as between the ages of 2 to 8 years old, we feel some of the discussions, methods and strategies have a place, in a broad sense, in the teaching of literacy to 5 and 6 year olds.*)

## Introduction

Picture this scene: *Thirty Primary 2 children seated on the floor, each with a small whiteboard on their laps and a marker pen in their hands. The teacher showed a passage projected onto a screen in the front of the class:*

> *Ren was afraid to sleep alone*
> *and wanted to sleep on his*
> *mother's bed. "Please mum,*
> *just for tonight?" Ren asked.*
> *Mother replied, "We'll see".*

*The teacher asked the question, "Did Ren sleep on his mother's bed? Write your answer – yes or no – on your whiteboard". After all the children showed their answers, the teacher then called upon a student to explain which part of the passage gave the clue that Ren did not sleep on his mother's bed. Realizing that their answer was wrong, several students immediately erased their answers and quickly wrote "No". By then, the teacher had moved on and showed the next passage and asked the next question.*

This was a scene that I had video-recorded in a classroom in Singapore. I showed the video to a group of teachers and asked for their comments. Halijah pointed out that this was a common scene in a "comprehension lesson":

> It's difficult to *teach* comprehension because it

happens inside the head. What most teachers in Singaporean primary schools do is to test comprehension by giving pupils the opportunity to practise answering questions on passages. The assumption is that if the students are able to answer the questions correctly, they have grasped the skill of comprehending a text. How else will we know if they have comprehended?

## The problem with reading comprehension

The processes of understanding written material have become automatic for most adults, and we are often not aware of the processes we use (Kendeou *et al.*, 2007; Kintsch and Rawson, 2008). One of the reasons why we find it difficult to teach reading comprehension to children is because we take the automaticity of comprehension for granted, and are unable to articulate the cognitive and metacognitive strategies we use to make these connections (Perfetti *et al.*, 2008; Snowling and Hulme, 2008). Reading comprehension involves the skill of inference, commonly described as "reading between the lines" (SpÖrer *et al.*, 2009), which is the ability to make causal, referential, and even spatial

connections between different parts of the text. Good readers actively construct meaning as they read, using strategies such as summarizing, and cross-checking with other information, monitoring their own understanding, and making connections between what they read and the larger world (Blachowicz and Ogle, 2001; Hammerberg, 2004; Harvey and Goudvis, 2000; Jones and Clarke, 2007). To become good readers, all children and learners of a language have to learn how to negotiate the various relationships among processes that add up to comprehension of the written text. Acquisition of reading comprehension skills is, however, a daunting challenge, as it happens "inside the head", making the process invisible and intangible (Snowling and Hulme, 2008).

We still have much to learn about how to help children make the cognitive leap into making connections between their prior knowledge and clues from the text. This is a very personal metacognitive journey for each child, and it is difficult for a teacher to ensure that every child understands the mental steps to be taken on this journey. Another teacher, Angeline, commented about the video:

> Our focus as teachers is getting the right answers, and this has probably rubbed off on the students. The students want to please the teacher and want to get the correct answer, because we have trained them that way. Once the answer is given, we move on to the next question, and assume that those who wrote the wrong answer would know why their answer was wrong. The response of those who wrote the wrong answer is to quickly "correct" their answer to make it right. Those students who had the right answer would feel pleased

> that they got the right answer, but they do not think through the whole process – how did they get the answer? We have not stopped to give them time to think because we are pressed for time, to get through the exercise.

How then, do we make the cognitive connections visible for the students and the teachers? As Blachowicz and Ogle (2001) point out, "what is most important is that we share with students the nature of reading in its multiple forms and purposes, and that we help them develop a repertoire of powerful strategies so reading is enjoyable and they comprehend successfully" (p. 13).

### Making reading comprehension visible

Hattie (2012) summarized visible learning as "teachers seeing learning through the eyes of students, and students seeing teaching as the key to their ongoing learning" (p. 14). When teachers see learning through the eyes of students, they "intervene in calculated and meaningful ways to alter the direction of learning", by providing students with "multiple opportunities and alternatives for developing learning strategies based on the surface and deep levels of leaning… leading to students building conceptual understanding of this learning" (p. 15). The teacher has to make "deliberate interventions to ensure that there is cognitive change in the student" (p. 16). The challenge is that in a class of 30 to 40 students, "learners can be so different, making it difficult for a teacher to achieve such teaching acts" (p.15).

### Voting with their feet: a strategy to make reading comprehension visible

Working with five teachers, Yvonne, Angeline, Rohaya, Pamela and Rita, we explored ways to make reading comprehension visible. Our team identified

deeper issues embedded in the problem of teaching inferential comprehension – that of teacher and student mindsets. In our examination-oriented culture, teachers teach for the test (Cheah, 1998). In the teaching of English Language, it would mean practising examination-type comprehension exercises. The objective is to get the "right answer" as it would be an indication that the student had comprehended. We recognised that teachers in Singapore schools feel obliged to "ensure that the syllabus is covered", which is to practise examination-type comprehension exercises every alternate week. The video clip showed vividly that our students were not benefitting from such a practice.

After watching the video clip, Rohaya shared that in her work on teaching Mathematics, she would also encourage the students to write their answers on their personal whiteboards. After the children had written their answers on the whiteboards, she would tell them not to erase their answers after the answer had been given by the teacher, even if their answer was wrong. She would get them to share with their partner as to why they gave their answer as such. "I make conscious effort to find out about the way they think – how they got the answer." Rohaya mused that "teachers have to model the thinking aloud so that it becomes a habit for the children to ask the questions when they are doing their work on their own."

This underscored the point that the teaching of reading comprehension is not just about getting the right answer, but to get the students to reason out their answers. Even though it was about teaching Mathematics, we transferred that understanding into the teaching of reading comprehension. The challenge was: how do we consciously slow down the lesson (instead of rushing on to the next question), get the students to explain their answers, and still maintain the attention of the children?

The team looked through short reading passages and worked out comprehension questions. We chose a short passage that had the following gist: written in the first person, the passage was about how a father quizzed his two children, the narrator and the narrator's sister, Nancy, about vocabulary items. Nancy was prone to day dream and so, when the father asked "who mends shoes?" the mother decided to play a trick on Nancy and whispered, "plumber" to Nancy. When Nancy blurted out, "plumber", they all laughed.

The team discussed questions that could raise more than one answer from the students. One question was: "How many people are there in the passage?" We anticipated that the students would give two answers for the question, "How many people are there in the passage?" One group would say "four", which was the right answer (Father, Mother, Nancy and the narrator); while the other group would say "three" (missing out the narrator). This would be a good opportunity for us to try out the making-thinking-visible strategy we were experimenting with: voting with their feet. Those who wrote "four" on their whiteboards should move to one side of the room, and those who wrote "three" should move to another side of the room. We even discussed which group should be asked to name the people in the passage – should it be the group that wrote "three" or the group that wrote "four"? We decided it would be the group that wrote "three", as we anticipated that they would miss out the narrator, and then the teacher would turn to the group that wrote "four" and ask who is the fourth person? The teacher would then turn to the group that wrote "three" and ask if they agreed and if they wanted to change their answer now. We were concerned that since they were seated in their groups according to their answers, it would be clearly visible that one group had

the wrong answer and that the children in that group would "feel bad" that they had the wrong answer. How could we make their thinking visible without affecting their self-esteem?

Another question that allowed for "voting with their feet" was: "Did Nancy give the right answer?" The teachers anticipated that a few struggling learners may say "Yes". The team decided this question should be followed by another: "How did you know?" We discussed the possible answers to this second question:

1. "A cobbler is a person who mends shoes; a plumber is a person who mends leaky pipes." This answer would be based on general knowledge, not inferred from the passage.
2. "It says that the mother tricked her" – focusing on the word, "tricked".
3. "It says that the father laughed at her – if she had given the right answer, he would not have laughed at her – he would have praised her".

The team spent some time over the first answer. The teachers were inclined not to accept that reason, though the answer was right, because it would be based on the students' general knowledge. In the spirit of ascertaining the meaning of the word based on the clues in the text, the teachers would not "accept" the first answer. The challenge lay in explaining why the other two answers were "better" than the first.

Pamela volunteered to teach the lesson so that the team could see how the strategy of voting with their feet could work out. When Pamela got to the second question: "Did Nancy give the right answer?", to our surprise, all the students said "No". This, however, did not throw Pamela off. Instead, she asked them to write their reasons on their whiteboards. Based on their answers, Pamela got the children to get into groups. From our team's discussion, we had anticipated three answers. Seven of Pamela's students,

however, formed a fourth group: they had written on their whiteboards, "Nancy's answer was wrong" – which did not explain how they knew that Nancy did not give the right answer. Pamela took some time, sorting her students into the four groups, according to their reasons. Then, she asked each group to explain their reasons. When the group that said that "plumbers mend leaky pipes and not shoes" gave their explanation, Pamela pointed out that they knew the answer based on their general knowledge. What if it was a word that they were not familiar with? Would they be able to know that Nancy gave the wrong answer? The students in the other two groups pointed out clues in the text, such as the words "tricked" and "laughed". After all three groups presented their reasons, Pamela turned to the fourth group and asked the students which group they agreed with. One by one, the seven children moved to either the "tricked" group or the "laughed" group. Not one of the seven chose the "plumber" group.

After the lesson, the team huddled together to discuss our observations and reflections about the strategy. Pamela shared, "It was so messy… but at the end, I managed to slow them down. They managed to look at the reason for the answer that they gave." Rita shared, "you were able to consolidate everything and the students were able to see what you were trying to get at – so, I think it was successful."

Playing the devil's advocate, I asked, "Was it a waste of time?" Yvonne exclaimed, "Just for that question alone, we took 25 minutes". Rohaya summarized the entire experience: "I think that time was worth spending, because although she had many groups, she led them in further discussion, which got the group at the back – the group that did not give a reason – to really understand what the question wanted, and then what they are required to answer, and then she made it a

point to get each person to go to another group – which I like because now we know that after discussing with all the other three groups, who gave different answers and yet they are not wrong – these children are able to see 'I think this group is correct'."

## Conclusion

The voting-with-their feet strategy is based on the concept introduced by the economist, Charles Tiebout in his article "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures" (1956), which posits that the migration or movement of people in a free economy is indicative of their choice or decision that their wants are best satisfied. Getting the students to move into their "answer groups" not only makes their thinking visible, it also forces them to take responsibility for their answers. As we went through the lesson, it became obvious that the success of the voting strategy depended on the type of question (with enough variety in answers), as well as the mindset of the teacher to persist with finding out if each student has shown his or her comprehension visibly, before moving on to the next question. One crucial point in Pamela's lesson was when the fourth group of children gave the ambiguous "reason", "Nancy's answer was wrong". Those of us observing the lesson could see that Pamela was caught off-guard by this unanticipated answer. Deftly, she reframed and adjusted the teaching design and got the other groups to teach this fourth group by explaining their reasoning. At the end of that episode, getting the fourth group to make their choice by voting with their feet indicated that the reasoning by the three groups and Pamela had made sense to this fourth group.

In making their comprehension visible, we were ensuring that "every single child has the opportunity to learn through dialogue with subject material, others, and their inner selves"

(Saito, in press). In the case of Pamela's lesson, students who were invited to share their explanations had the opportunity to confirm and clarify their thinking. As they gathered into their "answer groups", each student made his or her answer visible to all in the class – their peers and not just only the teacher alone. Finally, the fourth group had the opportunity to choose and to make their thinking visible by voting with their feet.

This lesson also demonstrated the power of students learning from their peers. Besides those in the fourth group, the other students in the other three groups had the opportunity to extend, revise or refine their comprehension as they listened to each group present their reasons. During our post-lesson discussion, I mused aloud about what would have happened if Pamela had asked the students in the other 3 groups if they would like to change their answers after listening to all the reasonings. Perhaps there may be some from the "plumber" group who may have decided to change their reasons. Listening to how their peers make sense of something could activate what might have been inaccessible knowledge to another student. When collective knowledge is accessed, students could begin to elaborate on what they knew, and together, certain knowledge gaps are closed (Schmidt and Moust, 2000).

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# Mission I'm Possible: Effects of a Community-Based Project on The Basic Literacy Skills of At-Risk Kindergarteners

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## Introduction

The early years are important periods for young children's growth and development (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011).  Of particular importance is the role of early language and literacy development in shaping early learning and the nature of school experiences in later years (Duncan et al., 2007).  Children's language skills have been shown to be critical in predicting reading proficiency and how quickly they acquire academic skills (Cadima, McWilliam, & Leal, 2010; Gettinger, Ball, Mulford, & Hoffman, 2010).  These language capacities are important in the development of self-regulatory ability in behaviour and attention both of which are important to academic attainment (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek, 2010; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010).  Cognitive, language, social and behavioural capacities are therefore inextricably intertwined with learning to influence developmental outcomes and well-being in diverse ways (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011).

The home environment and early preschool experiences are recognised as important immediate contexts to foster children's literacy growth and shape their cognitive trajectories in school-going years.  However,

parents with fewer economic or educational resources are often less likely to provide a home environment that support their children's development. As such, the preschool becomes a critical context to strengthen children's early literacy development. In the light of this, a Singapore study was undertaken to evaluate the impact of an emergent literacy intervention on preschool children identified with early reading difficulties.

## The Mission I'm Possible (MIP) Project – Overview

The MIP project is a pilot community-based project developed by the Department of Child Development, KK Women's and Children's Hospital. A multi-disciplinary team of allied healthcare professionals together with PCF Kindergartens worked to support young preschool children with mild developmental and learning issues in their respective preschools. The Lien Foundation provided the essential funding to support this program. MIP's intention is to bring hospital-based therapy services to these pre-schoolers attending mainstream kindergartens. By bringing therapy to the community, it seeks to extend children's learning beyond traditional hospital-based therapy and situate such therapeutic support within the children's contexts of development. A unique and key feature was the use of a learning support educator (LSEd) to support the child and the teacher in the classroom, after completion of a one-on-one pull-out literacy intervention conducted over 10 weekly sessions.

## Findings

Thirty-five children with developmental delays were compared with 39 typically developing classroom peers on various reading measures. Prior to MIP intervention,

the target children were shown to lag behind their peers in most emergent reading tasks. At post-test, they made a significant gain of 11 months across various tasks that involved vocabulary, pre-reading and reading performances, and written language. No significant differences were found in aspects of their receptive and expressive language. Parents reported significant improvement in their children's pro-social behaviour but not in other aspects of social and behavioural functioning.

The findings from this study are consistent and reiterated that of early intervention programmes in the West, demonstrating the malleability of young children's learning capacities despite developmental delays. Although the programme designs vary, these studies indicated that young children with mild learning needs demonstrated a capacity for improvement in early literacy learning with increased exposure and structure in teaching instructions. With regard to MIP, the most significant gains were in vocabulary, pre-reading and reading performances and written language.

A core aspect of the MIP project that differs from other early intervention programmes is the instrumental role of the LSEd who is there to ensure gains made by the child are sustainable in classroom and at home. LSEds are enablers of change for the children they support, act as resource teachers with the capacity to facilitate instructional changes in the classroom and work with parents to support home efforts. Although there were constraints to the study, the findings pointed out that the MIP project articulated a workable conceptual ecological framework by shifting intervention from the hospital-based model to the community-based model where young children gain access to support in their natural learning environment.

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Shonkoff, J. P., & Bales, S. N. (2011). Science does not speak for itself: Translating child development research for the public and its policymakers. *Child Development*, *82*, 17–32. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01538.x

If you are interested in the full paper, you may wish to contact the lead investigator: Wan Har Chong, PhD, Psychological Studies Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University at wanhar.chong@nie.edu.sg. MIP has now evolved to a national level and re-named DSP. For more details about the project, please contact Tang Hui Nee at tang.hui.nee@kkh.com.sg

# Promoting the English Language through Self-Directed Learning

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## Introduction

I have been a classroom teacher for ten years in an International school in Thailand in which English is used as a medium of instruction. The curriculum is target led and prior to engaging on a diploma course in early childhood education, I would have argued that my pedagogy was constrained by that curriculum although I have always held the belief that children learn through their engagement in the world and attempted to offer them a secure and happy place to learn. I also believe that English is caught and not taught and when children are engaged in their learning experience, they learn English along the way. My experience of this course has been one of enlightenment, I now realize having been introduced to the theories of early childhood development and good pedagogical practice that the only barrier or constraint to good practice is myself. We were encouraged from the start to make small but significant changes within our classrooms and I could immediately see the benefits. This gave me the confidence to try new ways of delivering the curriculum while being more sensitive to the interest of the child. The research topic I have chosen is Promoting the English Language and Self Directed Learning.

## Literature Review

Promoting English and self-directed learning is at the heart of my action research and it is embedded in the theories we have been introduced to during this course. Introduction to these theories has brought about a change in how I see my role and engagement in the classroom.

## The Constructive Approach

The principles I have been most influenced by are grounded in theories that see children as strong and capable meaning makers who are actively engaged in the learning process and learn English as they are actively engaged (Piaget, 1969). Piaget believed that children's curiosity was the drive behind learning and the best strategy was to keep children curious and offer them problem solving strategies. In line with a socio constructivist position, I also view learning as a social process that children are formed and shaped by their engagement in the social world (Vygotsyky, 1962; Rogoff & Moss in Robert-Holmes, 2011). When constructivist (Piaget, 1969) and socio constructivist (Vygotsky, 1962) theories are considered, the image of the teacher changes from an expert and 'keeper of knowledge' to a 'partner, nurturer and guide', someone who nurtures inquiry and supports the child's own search for answers.

## The Socio Constructivist Approach

In a socio constructive approach, the children are immersed in a social world in which they will naturally pick up the language used in that context of learning. This approach has helped me to see the children as independent and active

learners who construct and give meaning to what we do in our community of learners. It puts the children in a place of exploration not in a position of being right or wrong, they are placed in a line of inquiry of finding out what is possible. Malaguzzi (1993) saw children as social beings from the moment of birth and Garhart (2000) believed that if children are social beings then learning must be seen as a social process (Vygotsky, 1962). Therefore social relationships are essential in giving meaning to a child's understanding. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (2005) shows the child in relation to the significant influences in their lives. It places the school directly after the family which charges us with the responsibility to provide the best possible learning experiences to scaffold and support the young child while they are in our care.

## The Sociocultural Approach

Reggio and Montessori settings are held as examples of good practice in early year's settings and exemplify self-directed learning. Maria Montessori (in Garhart Mooney, 2000) posed the question "What does it mean to be a teacher? Keeper of knowledge or partner of learning". This question for me highlighted the importance of shared experience in the learning environment, and the need to provide the child with the tools to develop strong mutual attachments. Dali (in the Welsh Assembly Document, 2004) held that when children feel valued within warm and supported relationships, there is an increase in their social and emotional competence. This makes early relationships highly significant as becoming socially competent is a prerequisite to self-directed learning. What then is the role of the teacher?

## The Role of the Early Years Teacher

There have been different interpretations of the role of the Early Years teacher while some approaches argue that 'practitioner directed' approaches are particularly effective in diminishing gaps in literacy and numeracy knowledge (Maynard et al, in the Welsh Assembly Document, 2013). Pedagogical systems which see the development of the whole child, their learning disposition and well-being advocate self-directed learning. These theorists tend to stem from a sociocultural approach to the curriculum. Also, research by Katz (1993) indicates that developing interests and questions of children into curriculum development has a beneficial impact upon all children. These are important considerations as they have fundamental implications for the pedagogical practices offered to young children in the name of learning. Also of importance are parents' expectations of children's learning.

## The Cultural Expectations

The expectations of some parents in Asia are traditionally skeptical of ideas which advocate self-directed learning and a preference for more traditional methods. In order to introduce and implement the concept of free choice lessons into a curriculum that is grounded in academic achievement and targets, I need to be able to show that the changes I am making are beneficial to meet the needs of the child while fulfilling the expectation of their parents.

John Dewey (1915) encountered similar beliefs but believed the real issue was not new versus old but what was worthy of being called educational. He believed an activity is not a learning activity if it lacks purpose and organization. Dewey thought that rather than saying "children will enjoy this", teachers need to ask the following questions when they plan

activities for children. John Dewey's questions of what is educational include:

(a) How does this expand on what children already know?

(b) How will this activity help this child to grow?

(c) What skills are being developed?

(d) How will this activity help these children know more about their world?

(e) How does this activity prepare these children to live more fully?

My argument here is that from Dewey's perspective, an experience can only be called educational if it meets the following criteria: I am therefore using Dewey's criteria as a reference point for reflection when introducing new learning experiences and ways of delivery and they are as outlined below. The new learning experience

(1) is based on children's interest and grows out of their existing knowledge and experience.

(2) supports the children's development.

(3) helps the children develop new skills.

(4) adds to the children's understanding of their world.

(5) prepares the children to live more fully (Dewey in Garhart Mooney, 2000).

Based on Dewey's and my research questions I embarked on my teacher research.

## Methodology

Central to my research question is the notion of change, I will therefore be using an ongoing cycle of reflective action (McNiff, in Roberts-Holmes, 2011). The rationale for this came from reflecting on my own practice and seeing the need for change. I see my action research project as an ongoing process, a journey that started when I enrolled in this course. It has been a time of reflection and change making a series of small but significant changes. MacNaughton and Hughes (Robert-Holmes, 2011) hold that action research is concerned with practically changing an issue within the working environment to improve the researcher's knowledge and their colleague's knowledge and practice. My aim is to foster a learning environment where we can meet the demands of an academic curriculum while promoting the principles of self-directed learning through free choice lessons and creating opportunities for children to interact meaningfully with the teacher and their peers in English. This will require a systematic enquiry of asking questions collecting data and analyzing and evaluating findings gathered from myself, my co-teacher and the children. We will all be partners on this journey of discovery and learning. We will observe and reflect on what is happening and find ways of improving in the light of our reflections using the graph below.



McNiff (in Roberts-Holmes, 2005)

## Research Question

My reflections revolved around the following research question and sub questions - How can I implement free choice lessons into an academic curriculum to promote self-directed learning and the use of the English language? Sub questions:

(a)     What choices can I offer?

(b)     What impact does this have on the children's attitude to learning?

(c)     What impact will reflection on this process have on my own practice?

My objective is to help the students become independent and self-directed learners by offering levels of autonomy. I feel that the topic is significant as it reflects the change in how I now see my role as a teacher in an early year's classroom. It also reflects how I now see the child being engaged in a learning experience that would enhance the development of the English Language. The setting of this research is set in K2 Love Ekkamai with 11 students and the data was collected through:

(a)     Reflective Journal (to focus on meeting objectives behind proposal).

(b)     Observation of children and documentation of pupil voice.

(c)     Co- teacher interview

## Action taken

Once I had decided on the change I wished to implement, I created a lesson template of how I would initiate the change through free choice lessons. The template was very different from my old lesson plan and although I was offering free choice, I did not want a free-for-all; I realised that I would have to set certain guidelines for us all to follow in order to create an environment that was responsive to learning. The guidelines were not too rigid, they were based on mutual trust and respect that I hoped would enable us to conduct the lesson in a harmonious fashion. Before we implemented the new practice, I gave the children an introduction and explanation of what we would be doing together and provided them with opportunities to express their views in English and take an active part in the learning process. This required me to ensure that the children felt:

(a)     They were being listened to.

(b)     They felt supported in expressing their views in a language not their home language.

(c)     That their views were valued and taken into account.

I then gave them a brief account and description of the new learning stations and what their part in helping this activity to run smoothly would be. We had a long discussion and I was encouraged by their enthusiasm. We talked about not getting it right at the start and how we could all learn from our mistakes as we went along. Engaging children in such conversations certainly helps in conversation English.

We had two lessons which ran fairly smoothly considering it was new to all of us. The children were very responsive and eager to participate. I did however have to reinforce the notion that free choice meant knowing that other people had choice too and their choices needed to be respected. I explained about fairness and learning that we all have to take turns and learn to wait patiently.

My co-teacher Karen and I have twice weekly meetings after free choice lessons to evaluate our observations (Appendix) and conclusions. Jointly, we discuss what is working and what needs to change. From one of these discussions, we concluded that the sentence writing station was not capturing the children's imagination. I had documented an activity in language science, Land of Make Believe, which was meeting the children's curiosity and was popular with both boys and girls. As the children have become more accustomed to free choice, their engagement

and participation in the lessons requires less teacher directed assistance.  This allows for greater interaction between teacher/pupil and pupil/pupil.

## Outcomes

One of the most unexpected outcomes has been the mood of the lesson, free choice lessons feel more relaxed and inclusive.  The lessons flows well, the classroom is busy and engaged with low levels of noise and a greater sense of ownership.   This allows for self-differentiation with each child realising their own potential at their own pace.  I am mindful that we are all learning from this new experience and from each other but I am also aware of my responsibility to meet the objectives set out in Dewey's perspective of what we offer in the name of education.  In line with these principles, Teacher Karen and I ask ourselves these questions when considering any future changes and activities.  Below are Teacher Karen's and my reflections on evaluating the changes made.

## Evaluation of Change

The change was evaluated through journal reflection and reflecting on questions posed by the research and Dewey's questions.

Reflections by Co-teacher Karen
*What impact do you think the free choice lessons have had on the children's learning?*
Children were motivated.  They were highly engaged and productive.  They were excited and kept themselves busy with the activities given to them.

*What impact has it had on your own practice as a teacher?*
It is very important for the children to be highly engaged in their activities.  Children have short attention span and so the free choice lesson gave them the opportunity to be highly engaged with different activities given them.

Having these lessons, we teachers are able to give our attention to interacting with the children rather than supervising or monitoring the children's activity.

*What further changes would you like to see, and why?*
Adding more activities or changing the given activities once in a while to get the children more motivated. (Reading sight word games/a story game).

Response to Dewey's Questions
*How does this expand on what the children already know?*
This method of learning is of interest to the child and so, he is encouraged to work his best to achieve his goals.

*How will this activity help them grow?*
The child loves to be given choices as it empowers them.  These choices will motivate him and encourage him to work harder and to make the best use of his skills.

*What skills are being developed?*
The child learns how to share and take turns.  He learns how to listen, work with his friends and negotiate to solve problems together.

*How will this activity help these children to know more about their world?*
The child develops physically and cognitively through exploring their environment.  The use of their senses, their body and minds help the children to experience the world around them.

*How does this activity prepare them to live more fully?*
When a child is confident, he learns how to work with his peers, make friends easily and confidently solve problems.

Reflections of Scott

*What impact do you think free choice has had on the children's learning?*

It has made them more responsible and allowed them to take ownership of their learning. They are learning to work independently and collaboratively, they are sharing and helping each other. They are getting more satisfaction from their learning, having made their choice they settle to their task more industriously. They talk between themselves about what they are doing. They love to share their pictures and stories with each other and their families. They look forward to free choice lessons and plan what they are going to do next. The children are more engaged and curious. I have noticed that they are learning from each other, sharing ideas and helping one another. There is far more interaction as the structure of the lessons is not constricting them from engaging with the teacher and each other. All this results in a learning community in which English is used in context and in a meaningful way.

*What impact has this change had on your own practice as a Teacher?*

(1) It has made me realise that what I thought was too difficult to implement can be achieved. The children are setting the benchmark, working things out for themselves. They are asking for help when they need it from each other and the Teachers.

(2) The learning stations once established has afforded me more time to observe and document children's learning. This practice highlights areas for improvement and change. This also enables me to focus on individual children who need to be supported in their task.

(3) It has changed how I see the child in the classroom, it allows me to facilitate and participate in the learning process.

Seeing them share their ideas with each other, it has made me realise that their peers are sometimes the best teachers they learn from each other naturally.

(4) Observation consciously practised has given me a new way of seeing pupil voice observations and recordings of the children's views were gathered from the verbal and nonverbal messages that I received. I could see when the children were actively engaged and when they were not.

(5) In her feedback at my evaluation, my practicum mentor assured me of the rewards of putting self-directed learning principles into practice. Seeing the positive outcomes of this small piece of action research, I can now appreciate the importance of bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Response to Dewey's Questions

*How does this expand on what the children already know?*

It enables the children to build on prior knowledge and offers them an opportunity to practise their English language and expand their skills independently in a warm and safe environment.

*How will this activity help them grow?*

It affords them the experience of practice in the prosocial skills required in order that the child learns how to interact amicably with his peers and direct his own learning.

*What skills are being developed?*

These would be prosocial skills of respect and regard for others, skills of self-discipline which are highly significant to being able to socialise in the wider environment and expanding their vocabulary in the English language. Free choice requires taking turns, sharing, and problem solving working as part of a team as

well as sharpening their listening skills which are required in good communication.

*How will this activity help these children to know more about their world?*

The child knows his world through his engagement in that world. It is important that a child learns the norms and customs of the world in which he is placed. Moral values form part of our understanding and set the standards of the world in which we live. Respect, regard and empathy for others are common factors that shape social competence and self-reliance which are essential if the child is to successfully take their place in the world.

*How does this activity prepare them to live more fully?*

When a child is socially competent he is able to engage in a confident and socially acceptable manner. When he has the mastery of the English Language he becomes confident, able to interact fluently in English, make friends more readily and be more at ease with himself, his peers and those around them.

### Conclusion

The implementation of free choice lessons was not difficult after the initial period. It made teaching easier less stressful and more effective. The lessons were far more engaging as it fostered an atmosphere of self-directed learning with exchange between all participants, exchange of ideas and respectful ways of working and more English was being heard in the classroom among the children and not only the voice of the teacher. I was conscious that relationships were conducted on a more equal basis, because it was not teacher led. The children monitored each other within their group if one of the group was not adhering to the guidelines. The experience provided me with a chance to observe how individual children blossomed and responded in ways I had not seen before; children who were normally overshadowed by

the more vocal members of the class worked particularly well in small groups, while the more vocal members worked within the group as a member not as a competitor. I discussed this with my co-teacher and we concluded from this that small groups are more effective in teaching children to practise their social and communicative skills. After observation and listening to the children's feedback, we were pleased that every child within our class said free choice lessons were their favorite lesson.

An unexpected outcome has been the positive response from parents who were initially skeptical to free choice lessons. They were informed of the change prior to its introduction and I explained the principles behind that change. They are now curious and enthused by their child's obvious engagement and enjoyment of the lessons. In order to build upon their enthusiasm and support, we are planning to invite them to observe a lesson in progress where they will be able to offer their views and comments.

Reflecting over the whole experience if I were starting this research afresh, I would probably use the same questions in my research proposal. My thinking behind this is that these questions have posed new questions that are relative to the cycle of change which will drive the way forward. They have also provided evidence that supports three basic concepts of free choice lessons:

(a)    The importance of key stations.
(b)    The importance of each member's awareness of their responsibilities.
(c)    That children are often the best teachers for their peers.

Based on my experience of this small piece of research, I am confident and inspired to make free choice a central part of my teaching practice and provide the opportunities for English to be truly a living language and not a textbook language only. I can see no area of the curriculum where it would not offer beneficial results. The opportunity to offer new activities and to make lessons less formal

and more meaningful are endless.  Inspiration comes from unexpected moments and I find myself more conscious of what is going on in case I miss something new.  In the words of William Butler Yeats "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire".  With children as self-directed learners, we as early years teachers are lighting the fire.

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**Sample of Observations and Children's feedback**

| Wk.1 | Activity | Methods for Data Collection | Reflection of the observation of the Children and Pupil Voice |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Book Making | • Observation 1<br>Four children are folding their books and talking about the books they have made before. Once all the children have folded their books, they start writing under the pictures. Child 1 is writing only one sentence under each picture while child 2 is writing three to four sentences. They are sharing their work with each other. Child 3 says her Mother is making a file to keep her finished books. The children finished writing in their books at different times. Child 4 is still working on her book when the others are drawing a cover page and adding their own title. Before moving to the next activity the children who have finished reading their story to T. Karen, put it in their bag to read it to their parents when they get home. T. Karen asks the next child at the top of the waiting list to join the activity. Child 4 is showing her book to the new child and telling her about the story. | The children work independently but there is interaction as they share their ideas of what they are going to write in their books.<br>The children set their own limits and work at their own pace. One child is happy to write one sentence while another will write more.<br>They are proud of their work and they are comfortable to share it with each other. Child 3 shares that her Mother is part of her writing project as she is making a file for her to keep her books in.<br>I can see that the children are enjoying the experience as it captures their curiosity as they are actively engaged in the process using all their skills in a productive way. |
| 2 | Teddy Talk | • Observation 2<br>Only three students choose the Teddy Talk activity. They collect the cushion and soft toy and go to their own square on the mat. They then go to the Oxford Reading Tree books. Each child selects a stage 5 book. They return to the mat and sit on their cushions. Child 1 sits crossed legged on his cushion and he puts the toy dog between his legs. He then starts to read loudly to the dog. Child 2 lays on his stomach he props himself up on his elbows which are | Teddy Talk is popular the children tend to find a quiet spot and work independently with the animal that they have chosen. Interestingly it is often chosen by the less vocal children but in their engagement in this activity they appear to be confident and comfortable to read aloud to their chosen toys.<br><br>They chose which books they want and where they are going to sit.<br>Each of the children make themselves comfortable in different ways. They are |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | on the cushion. He places a toy kangaroo on the side of the cushion. He reads softly but clearly to the toy. Child 3 puts his cushion in the corner between the wall and the cubby. He sits on the cushion and leans back into the corner. He is holding a toy seal under his arm. He reads aloud to the toy. | relaxed but serious when they read to the animals.<br>Child 1 reads with good inflection to the story, making it meaningful for his dog.<br>Child 2 is lying down and almost whispering. He reads softly as if they are in bed. His enjoyment is obvious as he gently pats his toy kangaroo as he reads.<br>Child 3 who is slow to read, finds a secluded spot and surprises me when he reads loudly and confidently to the seal which he keeps close to him by tucking him under his arm.<br>The children are at ease with this activity. They are able to interact with their chosen toy to take control and read for their enjoyment and to give enjoyment through their ability to read. |
| 3 | Teacher, Teacher | • Observation 3<br>Only two children have chosen Teacher, Teacher. Child 1 wants to be the teacher and child 2 says," ok I'll be the student". During the activity, they decide to use sight words. The teacher waits while his student writes the word on the board "next word You" This continues until the student has written ten words on the white board. The teacher marks the correct answers and spells out the incorrect words. The student writes them on the board.<br><br>Now they are swapping roles. By the time they both had their turns at being teacher, there are more children waiting to take their turn. They call to them and rush off to find another activity. | The children are happy to share and take turns. They take their role of the teacher seriously and enjoy asking the questions. They work together when they get a question wrong.<br>Together, they decide to use sight words. When taking the role of teacher, child 1 adopts a commanding voice. Child 1 took the activity one step further by making verbal sentences from the words on the board. Child 2 followed his example and made his own sentences.<br>This was something I took on-board and my co-teacher and I built this practice into the activity, giving child 1 credit for his initiative and autonomy.<br><br>The children decides when they are ready to join in another activity. This is done collaboratively when they each go off to their chosen learning station. |

| 4 | Make Believe Land. Pictures and words | • Observation 4<br>Three children sit at the Make Believe activity. Child 1 starts drawing a mermaid in an underwater world. While drawing, she tells the names of the mermaids to the other children. I ask child 2 to tell me about his picture. He tells me he is drawing a golden ninja. Child 3 announces that he is drawing Ginger Bread Man World. The children continue to talk about their pictures to themselves and their group. Child 2 finishes his picture and writing. He goes across to T. Karen and reads his finished work before putting it in his bag. Another child joins the activity and starts to draw her picture. She is very intent on what she is doing and draws her picture with great detail but no writing. When I ask why she has not written anything on her drawing, she tells me it is for her little brother and he can't read. "look" she says, "he can see the story, it is raining candy". | From observing this station I am conscious that the children engage in a very interactive manner. All the children find a way of expressing themselves independently. There is greater articulation about what they are drawing and why. They discuss at length their ideas and what they are doing. They are quite happy when their peers take up the theme that they have made up and build their own interpretation into it. This station allows them to work freely and it is an activity they engage in during their free time.<br>Child 4 who joined the activity late, is very competent in her reading and writing skills but choses to draw a picture in great detail to convey the story of Candy World to her young Brother. She recognizes he can't read but is inventive in her thinking to find another medium to share her picture and its meaning to him. |

# Singapore's Little Treasures
## Museum Magic and Mother Tongue Language Learning for Pre-schoolers

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Trissa and Alina are two Malay pre-school teachers from PCF Sparkletots Preschool @Hong Kah North Blk 319, but today they are the Raja or King.  They welcome their class of 'foreign merchants' for a feast in the palace at Kampong Glam, present-day Malay Heritage Centre (MHC).  Children had created oars out of newspaper; they 'row their boat' into the galleries singing *Dayung Sampan*.  After the class has traded their goods, scrutinised boats, fish-traps and the kitchen, they go on a StoryWalk to hunt down pages of a book in the garden.



This activity was inspired by the StoryWalk as developed by Anne Ferguson in Vermont to enjoy reading and the outdoors.

Bindhu and Kohilavani, Tamil teachers from Khalsa Kindergarten, are captains of a ship that is coming into the harbour of Singapore. With her class on board, they sing *Alaylo Aylessa Alaylo Aylessa* as they enter the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC).  A child holds up a red card with the Tamil word 'Stop' - one of three 'traffic light' cues - so her friends know when to halt to examine puppets, newspapers travel essentials and vanishing trades through costumes.

Chinese teachers, Song *laoshi* and Qi *laoshi*, from PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Bukit Batok East Blk 271 decided they are Mr and Mrs Zhang, owners of Wan Qin Yuan or Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH).  They are hosting their workers at their villa.  They investigate an old photograph, a painting and a print press.  They also try out various occupations and help Mr Zhang look for the pocket watch that was lost in the garden. Upon finding the watch, children are treated to a story and snacks.



What is happening?  Are these children just playing?  Or are they learning as they research museum objects?  Albert Einstein once said "Play is the highest form of research".  These gallery explorations are part of National Heritage Board's pre-school initiative called Singapore's Little Treasures (SLT) where pre-schoolers play to learn in museums.  Pre-schools in Singapore have yet to tap on museum learning for child development. Likewise, early learning in galleries is new to many museums.  International case studies, however, have demonstrated that access to museums and objects encourages active learning and prompts language development for thinking and communicating (Graham, 2008).  This is true even for the youngest visitors. The Smithsonian Early Enrichment

Centre brings children as young as 12 months old to museums up to 4 times a week. Toddlers look for mammals' footprints while kindergarteners acquire new words and create self-portraits after inspecting Rembrandt's painting of himself. Museums really do afford opportunities for learning that do not occur in other settings (Crowley & Jacobs, 2011).

In SLT, every heritage lesson is unique. There are no cookie-cutter lesson plans to follow. 50 pre-school teachers of Mother Tongue Languages (MTLs) joined us in this heritage project that is implemented in partnership with Early Childhood Development Agency's Innovation Guidance Project. SLT is where teachers are supported in their experiments to introduce heritage to kindergarteners. SLT first started in the National Museum of Singapore (NMS); this pilot laid the foundation for using museums to ignite interest in MTLs. The Teachers' Workshop in NMS was conducted in English and a few teachers carried out their lessons in Malay and Mandarin. The workshops at MHC, IHC and SYSNMH were conducted in Malay, Tamil and Mandarin. Participating teachers are expected to carry out heritage lessons in school and visit MHC, IHC and SYSNMH over 2 years. Teachers try out suggested ideas and share their own innovations with their peers. This paper will cover insights we gained about our bi-lingual educational policy, child-centred pedagogy and professional development for pre-school teachers of MTLs.



## Literature Review

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) proclaims that children should have free and full access to cultural life from birth to 8. While anti-bias modules are not uncommon in early childhood studies, researchers observed that many cultural activities organised by pre-schools in Singapore did not go beyond the 'tourist' perspective (Karuppiah & Berthelsen, 2011). Teacher participants reflected that SLT is their first time introducing heritage in an intentional way into MTLs lessons.

Museums present object-rich spaces thatinvoke imagination and conversations even for kindergarteners. For this project, we look to Loris Malaguzzi who developed the Reggio approach of working with children in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Reggio education sees the environment as the third teacher after the teachers and children in the pre-school classroom (Malaguzzi, 1994). This philosophy pushed us to be more intentional in the way we use museum displays for early learning. Children like exhibitions they can link to their pre-existing knowledge and experiences (Piscitelli & Anderson, 2001). Instead of just browsing the galleries, we need to promote play and learning conversations as meaningful ways to connect museum objects with daily life.

In Reggio, the teacher is considered a researcher along with the children. Children are respected as thinkers. The children's relationships with each other, with the teacher and with the environment are considered essential in supporting learning (Gandini, 2011). This vision of learning supports inquiry-based learning in museums. When we see a child as a thinker, we see the teacher and the class as co-producers of ideas and knowledge. To help teachers do that, we adapted Thinking Routines as developed by Harvard University's Project Zero to structure

observations and help cultivate a culture of thinking in museums (Ritchhart, 2007) and pre-schools. In language learning, children should be exposed to natural learning environments, to real communication situations and to special teaching practices that make learning a meaningful, enjoyable and lifelong process (Gonzalez, 2010). Teachers struggle to make MTLs attractive in the context of our English-speaking environment. SLT aims to employ the power of objects to drive the use of MTLs in class, at home and in the community. The good news for early learners is that objects, unlike print materials, are not age-specific. Objects help to develop our capacity for critical observation of the world (Shuh, 2001).

### The Design Process

John Dewey, an educational philosopher, viewed museums as an integral part of the active learning network of any school (Hein, 2004). NHB museums only received 7% of all pre-schoolers in 2013. Two institutions had pre-school programmes in English. Thirty-seven percent of pre-school groups were self-guided and often found 'wandering about aimlessly' in large groups of up to 40. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with 6 MTL pre-school teachers surfaced that heritage education in pre-schools currently revolved around Racial Harmony Day and festivals. Teachers felt that the museum visits could help fuse cultural learning with spoken and written forms of MTLs. Teachers raised the value of sound pedagogy, culture and cross-cultural understanding as key discussion points. Teachers covet the gardens of MHC and SYSNMH as most pre-schools do not have access to green spaces; outdoor learning is one of the most effective ways to discover the world. Colleagues at NHB have also been discussing nature-deficit disorder (Louv, 2010) and our highly-urbanised audiences.

The galleries that interested the FGD teachers most became learning stations for pre-schoolers. In SLT, pre-school educators and their young learners become co-curators of heritage education because we believed in Dewey's continuity of experience. The educative value of experience should be judged by its capacity to enable the children to have future (educative) experiences (Hennes, 2002). Museum guides with only an hour with pre-schoolers cannot extend learning beyond the gallery visit. The pre-school educator, on the other hand, can engage the class before and after the museum visit with a myriad of learning opportunities. We took the iTeach principles from MOE's Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) framework to heart; teachers become facilitators of learning and children constructors of knowledge on museum grounds and in the classroom. In fact, it is possible to cover all 6 learning domains through SLT activities.

### The SLT Experience



The SLT Teachers' Workshop lets pre-school educators experience museum magic for themselves in their MTLs. They in turn design engaging gallery experiences for their kindergarteners. The 2.5 day teachers' workshop equips teachers with strategies to innovate heritage exploration in museums and classrooms in small groups of 5 to 10. Play in galleries is, to many, trouble in

paradise. To dispel teachers' fears, we couched museum manners in games and action songs that help children develop executive functions. The Harvard Center for the Developing Child states that "executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. These skills are crucial for learning and development." These are also the very skills that will inhibit a child from touching a museum object, running and shouting in the galleries. We worked with early childhood specialists and performing artistes to write new songs, adapt local rhymes as well as create games that require attention, inhibition and cognitive flexibility.



The activities require children to track which rule to apply and switch actions. One example is the Big Pot and Small Pot game Tamil teachers experimented with their class. When the teacher calls out Big Pot, children are to gesture a small pot with their hands. In doing the opposite, children are training their brains to think before they act. We also got teachers to sing with diminishing volume; such games allow children to keep their voices down in a fun way.

Heritage education should also be available beyond museum walls and outside festive days. In SLT, children first encounter cultural objects through a heritage kit sent to participating pre-schools. The MHC kit is a rattan basket with 2 *wayang kulit* puppets, a *tanjak* or traditional Malay headgear and an ancient currency - shaped as a grasshopper -

produced by 3D printing. The IHC kit features a metal travelling trunk with a turban and an Islamic cap, *salangi* or anklets with bells and 3 typeset characters for a print press, also created by 3D printing. The SYSNMH kit holds a surveyor's hat, a straw hat, a Chinese seal and a pocket watch in a 'leather' luggage. All kits come with archival photographs that portray children and families. Teachers are encouraged to sit children in a 'magic circle' and take turns to handle objects; each child gets to share their observations. The See-Think-Wonder Thinking Routine, a strategy covered in the Teachers' Workshop enables teachers to help children develop critical thinking skills. SEE questions allow children to build vocabulary, confidence and observation skills. THINK questions encourages children to think critically and support their opinions with evidence they gathered from close looking. WONDER questions inspire curiosity and creativity.

A triad involving children, teachers and families is crucial to early education (Malaguzzi, 1993). Teachers not only designed lessons before and after museum visits, they also created parent-child language games. Teacher Nurfahan, from My First Skool Tampines 803, challenged her class to design and fold their own *tanjak* out of a square piece of fabric after sitting in a magic circle to generate familiar and new Malay words from their observations. In another lesson on



shadows, light and *wayang kulit*, she boldly allowed children to take turns to bring them

home with care; she added instructions for parents to speak in Malay to their children while using the puppets to role-play a little story. Teacher Vengadasalam Parmeswari, from PCF Sparkletots Preschool@Blk 226 Serangoon convinced a father to role-play as a *kacang puteh* man and interact with children in Tamil. Liu *laoshi* and Chang *laoshi* from PCF Nee Soon Central Blk 737 invited parents to construct a dragon-boat with their children for a land race. These activities encourage parents to engage in play talk in MTLs, an essential habit for families that predominantly speak English. Play talk - the chit-chat, the pretend play and the running commentaries – is crucial in developing language skills (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Teachers also used the SEE-THINK-WONDER Thinking Routine to sustain learning conversations and play talk in the galleries. Teachers familiarise children with this strategy in school to prepare them for the museum visit. We shared with teachers how to construct a viewfinder using ice cream sticks or bangles; teachers innovated with paper plates and cups as well as pipe cleaners. We used viewfinders to help children focus their attention on details in museum objects.



Teachers, upon arrival at the museum, can sign out a POP-UP kit consisting of picture cards and props that support imaginary play.

Teachers make use of the POP-UP kit in their own ways. On top of looking at close-ups of objects, Tamil teachers Jayamany and Angela from PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Chong Pang Blk 107 used play props together with their class to stage a wedding complete with songs. They also made use of IHC exhibits to role-play a police-thief encounter. Zhang *laoshi* from PCF Toa Payoh East 45 asked their class to close their eyes while they prepared 'Nasi Ambeng' at MHC. When they opened their eyes, the teachers asked them 'What do you smell?'. Their responses, ranging from rice to fried chicken to a cockroach, reflected strong observation skills and a wonderful sense of imagination.



A school building needs to include a museum (Dewey, 1907). SLT teachers are expected to create their own 'museum' or heritage learning corners in their pre-school with their class. Learning centres usually contain props from educational companies or items handmade by teachers. While many of them promote pretend play, they feature largely western conventions of food, drinks and puppets. The challenge in SLT is to include elements of our own heritage. The best productions allowed children to make their own play props. Children get to determine what is needed; use their working memory and planning skills.

Be it a mini museum or a hawker stall, the key is to offer children the freedom to make decisions as well as to go through trials, errors and adjustments of their own ideas.  Tamil teacher Letchimi from PCF Sparkletots Preschool@Teck Ghee Blk 466 had her class create *puttu mayam* out of white strings and clear tape; they also made other snacks out of clay and cotton wool.



The stall has everything, ice cream stick money with values highlighted in posters, paper wrappers and plastic bags for takeaways.  In another corner totally handmade by the class, children identify which Indian instrument is featured in a piece of music played to them on a disc-player.  When the teacher invited traditional performing artistes to perform, all students regardless of MTLs were able to interact with real instruments and performers.

Malay teachers Mdm Tanty and Mdm Siti Maznah from PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Woodlands Blk 875 were also thoughtful in the design of their Malay house.  Children learn to wash their feet the traditional way, with imaginary water 'ladled' from a pot before entering.  Children can also try their hand at fishing for Malay words and numbers from a pond.

## Conclusion

Is heritage really too difficult for children to learn?  Learning through play or *plearning* – a term invented by an anonymous educator  – is key to heritage education for young learners.  Opportunities for children to think and talk about cultural encounters in museums, in the classroom and at home are equally essential.  Teachers have used museum magic to successfully create innovative lessons where children *plearn,* think and talk in their MTLs.  The Singapore's Little Treasures project is also a timely reminder that without our Mother Tongue Languages, "we would have lost our cultural identity, that quiet confidence about ourselves and our place in the world." (Lee, 1998)

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# The Thirty Million Word Gap – Why It Matters

Koo Yi Jie

The Caterpillars' Cove Child Development and Study Centre

During my first year in my degree programme at Wheelock College, I had the opportunity to volunteer in a voluntary welfare organisation preschool to provide a myriad of language and literacy opportunities to young children who were struggling. Over that period of time, I worked with young children from middle to high income families. In comparing these two vastly different income backgrounds, it struck me that the language disparity was dangerously wide and the gap would continue to widen if no immediate action was taken. I formulated my hypothesis that socio-economic status has a relationship with a child's language opportunity; children from higher income families have better language acquisition than children from lower income families. I chanced upon "The Early Catastrophe; the 30 million word gap by age 3" by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley (2003) and realised their research supports my hypothesis.

It is a revelation that children's vocabulary skills is related to their family's economic backgrounds and what he/she hears has direct consequences on what he/she learns. By age 3, there is a 30 million word gap between children from the wealthiest and the poorest families (Hart & Risley, 2003). Findings have shown that at age 48 months, children whose parents are professionals attained up to 45 million words, children with working-class parents attained up to 26 million words while children who are on welfare attained 13 million words (Hart & Risley, 2003). Similarly, the researchers found that measures of accomplishment at age 3 were highly indicative of performance at the ages of 9 and 10 on various vocabulary, language development, and reading comprehension measures.
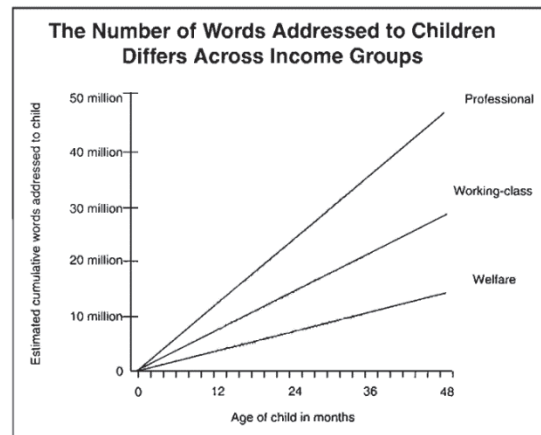


Fig 1: A 30 million word gap between children from high income group and children from lower income group (Hart & Risley, 2003)

In addition, children from a higher socio-economic status receive more positive affirmation from their parents compared to those from a lower socio-economic status. Statistics reveal that an average child from middle to high socio-economic status receives a ratio of 6 encouragements to 1 discouragement while their counterparts from the lower socio-economic class receives a ratio of 2 encouragements to 1 discouragement (Hart & Risley, 2003). We need to understand that emotion plays a powerful role in learning in any subject, at any age and ability level and for any learner. Christine Ingleton (1999) argues that confidence has a basis in particular experiences of social relationships – "those situations in which a person receives acceptance and recognition. Conversely, anxiety and fear have their basis in situations

in which a person is denied acceptance or recognition". (p. 2)



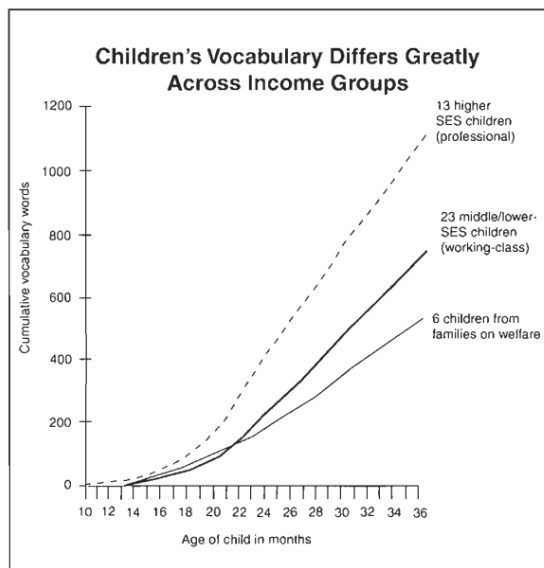**Children's Vocabulary Differs Greatly Across Income Groups**

Fig 2: Children's vocabulary differs greatly across income groups reflects a startling fact (Hart & Risley, 2003)

Thus, the foundation built, at age 3, has a great bearing on their progress in the many years to come. This further negatively affects school readiness, long-term educational and health outcomes, earnings and family stabilities even decades later. As an educator, the differences in language development I observed were real and startling; some children could describe an object fluently while their counterparts from less well-to-do family backgrounds struggle to identify it accurately; some could identify common sight words, others expressed little interest in print. The disparities in vocabulary development are of great concern and prove that families and caregivers do impact a child's learning success. This has led me to advocate for bridging the word gap between the various income groups and promoting better language opportunities for all. My utmost concern was about how adults (parents and early educators) could eliminate this inequality and promote a level playing field for all children.

I have faith that concerted efforts can be conducted through a joint partnership between early educators and families in order to narrow the word gap among young children across socio-economic status. I would recommend that adults talk with the child, not talk at the child. This is done through taking cues from the interests of the child and building natural conversations rather than engaging in direct instructions. Moreover, there is a need for adults to read to children more often, engage in descriptive language, ask questions to inspire critical thinking and expression of thoughts and use positive words of encouragement rather than discouragement.

This article has been a soul-searching experience and it calls us to reflect on the need to re-examine our pedagogical practices and alter the focus to the use of positive teaching and reinforcements. Singapore lacks natural resources and relies mainly on human resources; thus, each citizen is important and should be supported to achieve his/her maximum potential. We must, therefore, help every single one of them find their place in society so that they can make their contributions. It is important to know that promoting a level playing field for all children is not treated as an isolated policy but an ideological value that requires the commitment and conviction of policymakers, schools, parents and the public. Some examples could be to nationalise teachers' qualifications and training, provide more funding for learning resources or host more language related social initiatives in public areas for all.

I am not advocating nor suggesting that children be sent for additional reading, writing and enrichment classes. In my opinion, research has yet to prove that rote learning methods are effective in long-term language acquisition. I would encourage parents to re-evaluate the usefulness of enrichment classes

and to perhaps devote more time with their children than to place the learning of their children in the hands of others.  In a local survey done with young children, they often wished for more time with their families and this is evident in their conversations, play episodes and conversations (Chen et al, 2013). They always look forward to and enjoy spending more time with their parents than to go for classes or playing with their friends. Parents can turn their everyday life into snippets of learning, for example having meaningful conversations with their children, creating a grocery list with your child, reading food labels at the supermarkets and playing "I spy" on train rides.  There are endless things to talk about, knowledge is boundless, beyond what schools teach in class.

As an early childhood educator, I would like to observe and understand each child better and be aware of their developmental needs. With this in mind, I can facilitate and scaffold their language acquisition through effective questioning, providing them with the vocabulary and responding to them in a developmentally appropriate manner.  In addition, I would have story reading sessions to garner their interest and engage in dialogue with them.  Mem Fox shared, "if children love the words they hear, they will be delighted to use it in their own speaking and writing" (Fox, 2009, p. 47).  A child who is not able to use English effectively in mainstream classrooms will certainly be at a disadvantage.  Educators should be quick to respond by engaging children in conversations and reading to them so as to widen their exposure to the English language.

I believe the early childhood years is a critical period because brain development is influenced by the amount of central nervous system activity stimulated by experiences.  For language development, certain skills (including grammar and phonology, which is the ability to perceive and produce individual speech sounds) are more sensitive than others (such as vocabulary size) to a child's experience with language in the first few years of life (Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, 2014).  Once children become older and can speak for themselves, they gain more opportunities for experiences neurologically.

The magnitude of the differences in children's cumulative experience before the age of 3  highlights perplexing issues and calls for the need for early intervention.  In order to narrow the thirty million word gap, we need to take the bull by the horns, change the way we speak to children, engage them in meaningful conversations, so that we can change their future for the better.

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# What's in a box?:  Child-led play, talk and adventure

Pop-Up Adventure Play on World Tour, in Singapore (11 – 15 November, 2015)

Put loose parts and found objects together in an outdoor or indoor space, give children time and invite them by saying, "You may do whatever you want with these materials!"

What do we end up with?

Magic.  Laughter. Talk. Creation.

Here are some photos and reflections from a few children at Sarada Kindergarten that came to play.  They built, experimented, explored at the temporary adventure playground set up at Gillman Barracks.   The playground had loose parts such as cardboard boxes, rubber hose, tyres, bicycle wheel, a discarded wooden chair, clothes hangers, an old umbrella, large pieces of fabric, cardboard tubes, large plastic tubs, plywood planks, tree branches as well as smaller items such as empty Nespresso capsules, yarn, bubble wrap, string, cupcake liners.  The open-ended possibilities of these materials encouraged children to communicate, work together, imagine and express their feelings and ideas.



About **Pop-Up Adventure Play**:
It is an international non-profit run by two professional playworkers, Suzanna Law and Morgan Leichter-Saxby.  The organisation is dedicated to creating and improving child-led play opportunities in local communities around the world. They were in Singapore for the first time this year on their World Tour, hosted by Playeum, Children's Centre for Creativity and SIM University.
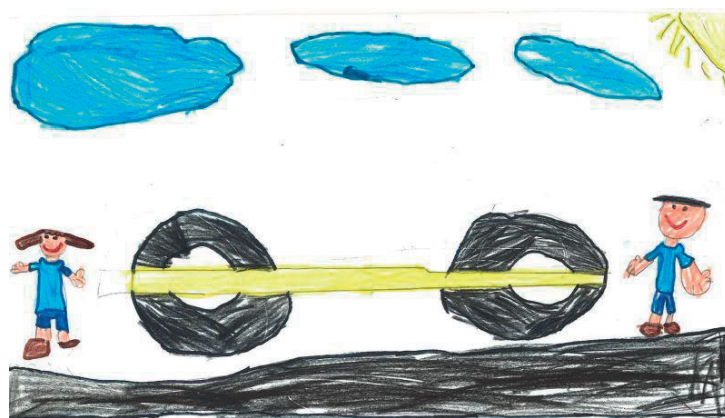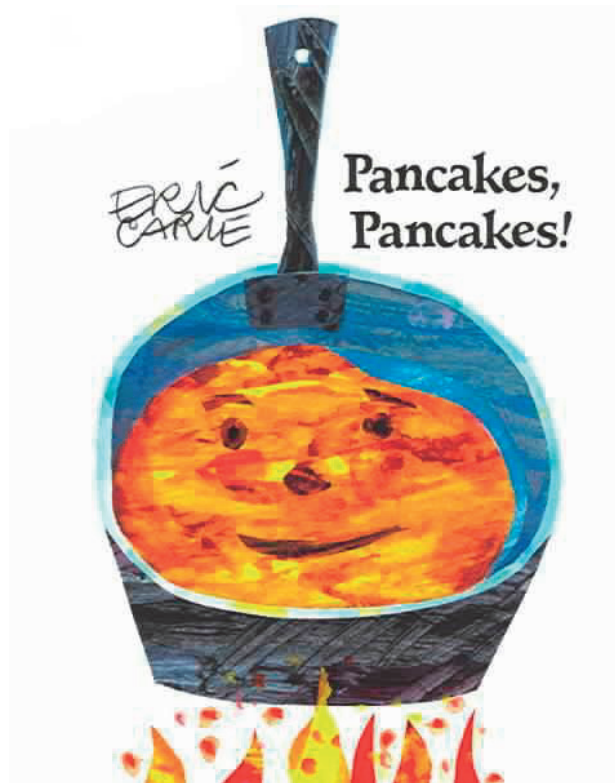
The BEST Part was Playing in the Plank.



"I made a hanger thing and a cake.  It was fun. I had a great time. I played outside and inside. It was a big place. I want to go there soon to play. I made it with my friend Mithura."

Book Review
By Janice Loke
Pro-FLAiR

## Introduction

Looking for a book by an author that the children were familiar with, I chanced upon Eric Carle's 'Pancakes, Pancakes!' The children have been enjoying his books, they are simple and with big colourful illustrations. I decided on this story for my next lessons.

The story is about a boy who wants his mother to make him some big pancakes. She told him that he had to go out to get all the ingredients for her, items such as flour, eggs, milk, butter and even firewood. This was a lot of work. Children would learn that if they wanted something, they would have to learn to get it themselves.

What also stood out for me was the storyline being a good example of writing which had a step-by-step sequencing of events.

### The Lessons Around the Story

Because this story was captivating, I had lesson plans that covered a period of four days.

**Day 1:**
Observing and talking about the book covers, its front and back. The children had a lot to say:

> "I can see a woman cooking a soup."
> "I think it's a pancake."
> "I can see fire underneath the pan."
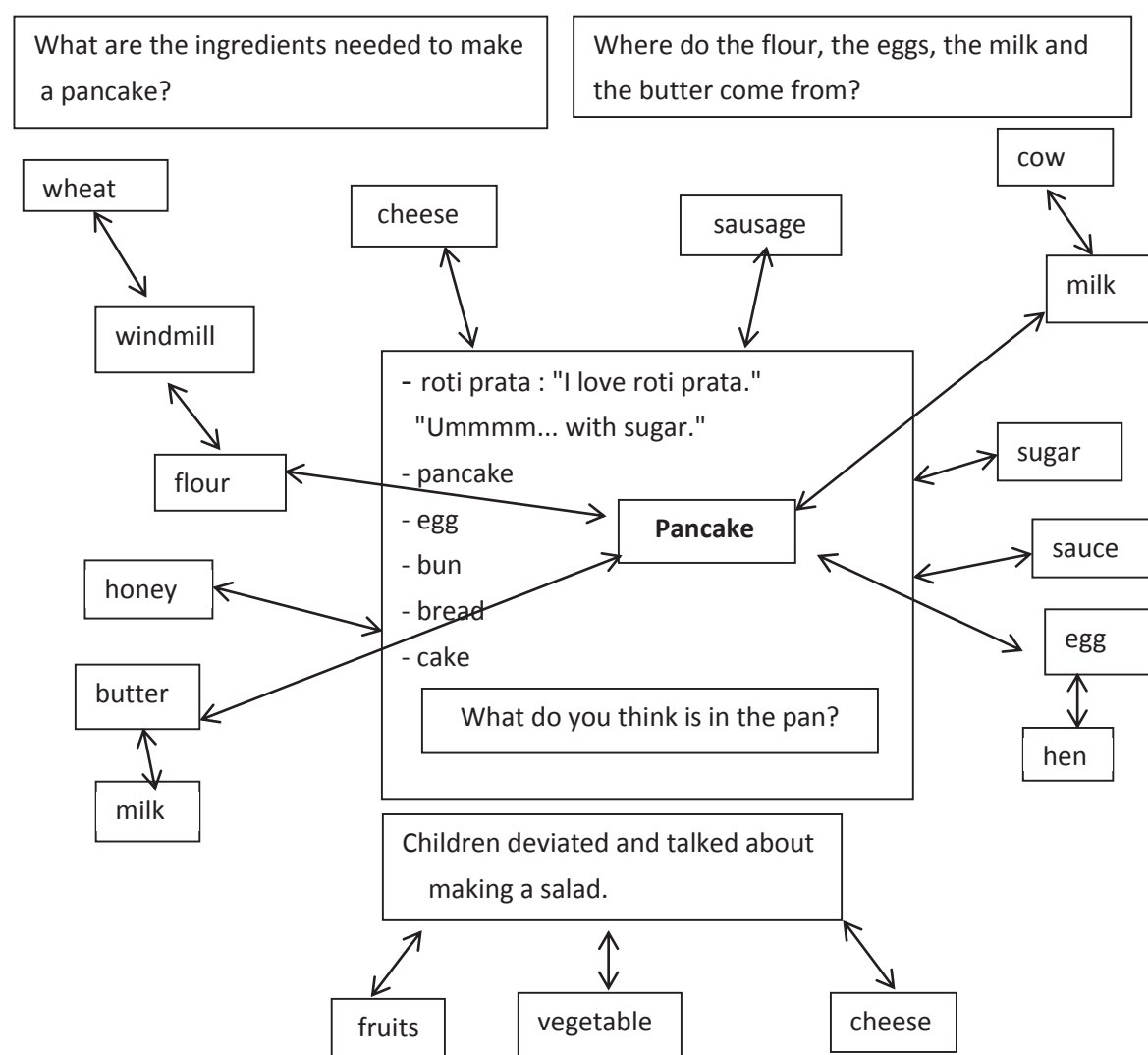> "I can see what is cooking in the pan."
> "I can see an orange pancake in the pan."
> "I can see the blue pan is on top of the fire."
> "I can see the pancake is smiling."

When I introduced the author and illustrator of the book, Eric Carle, one child exclaimed, "Eric Carle again!" The children were able to recall some of his other books like 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?', 'From Head to Toe' and 'The Grouchy Ladybug'.

I asked the children to guess what was in the pan, what sort of ingredients were needed to make a pancake and where one would go to get flour, eggs, milk and butter. As the children responded, I drew a web from their answers.

What are the ingredients needed to make a pancake?

Where do the flour, the eggs, the milk and the butter come from?

wheat

cheese

sausage

cow

windmill

milk

- roti prata : "I love roti prata."
  "Ummmm... with sugar."
- pancake
- egg
- bun
- bread
- cake

sugar

flour

**Pancake**

sauce

honey

egg

butter

What do you think is in the pan?

hen

milk

Children deviated and talked about making a salad.

fruits

vegetable

cheese

As I walked the children through the book, I told them to observe the pictures and said that we would be discussing our feelings at the end of the 'walk'. When I opened the book to the first page, one child stared at the colourful pictures and exclaimed, "So colourful!" Another child said, "A rooster. Cock-a-doodle-doo." When I turned to page 2, one child said, "A woman."  I then signalled to the children to observe quietly. At the end of the book, some children laughed and said, "Oh … the end!"

Then they took turns to reflect about how they felt about the pictures:

"I feel happy because the pancakes look yummy."

"I feel scared because I am scared of fire."

"I feel hungry because I want to eat the pancake."

"I feel excited because the lady made a pancake. I also want to try to make a pancake."

**Day 2:**
I read the story to the children and they shared their reflections with each other,

"I feel scared, the boy accidentally poured the milk on the ground."

"I feel happy because it is delicious."

"I feel sad because the boy could eat the pancake because he was hungry. I don't have the pancake."

"I feel happy because I would like to be Jack, to help mama make the pancake."

One of the objectives was to have the children be aware of some of the effort that goes into producing food. I asked the children if it would be easy to make a pancake. Some responded with,

"Yes, I help my mummy to go buy eggs, milk, strawberry sweets, and a box of flour."

"Easy. Just take the butter, you go and take the milk from the cow, the egg from the hen and you take the flour from the wheat. Then you take strawberry jam and done already."
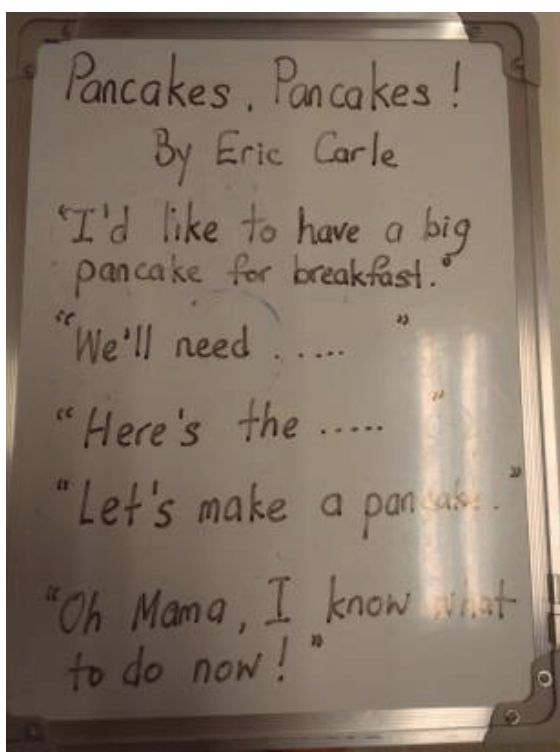


"No, because need to do hard work. Put the flour, put the milk, take the butter, all these things. You need butter and you need to mix, mix, mix. The flour is made from the wheat. First, you take and then you chop, chop, chop. Then you give to the miller to grind into flour."

"No. Need many things, need to cook, need to flip. Jack do many things. Taking milk and taking the eggs, feed the hen and take the strawberry jam, pour the flour into the bowl. Milk the cow, cut the wheat, beat the wheat to separate the grain. The mill man grind the grain into flour. Chop to make the butter."
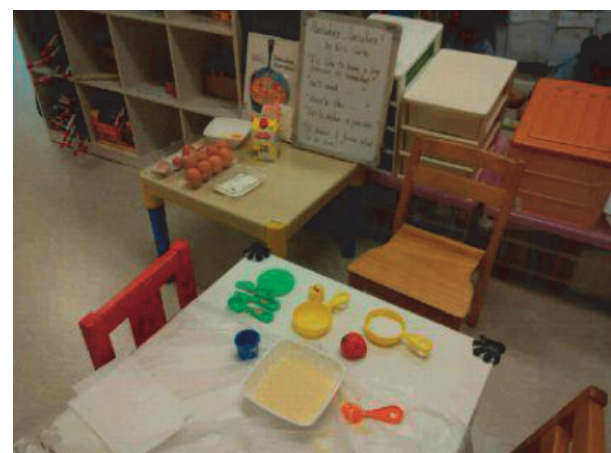
**Day 3:**

The children helped one another to retell the story, they enjoyed repeating these narrations:

"I'd like to have a big pancake for breakfast."

"We need ..."

"Here's the ... Let's make a pancake."

"Oh, Mama, I know what to do now!"

Then we had a hand in making a pancake, we also tried flipping it. I laid out the ingredients: egg, flour and milk and passed them round to let children look at them, examine and touch them. The children felt the egg:

"The egg is rough, difficult to break."
"The egg is hard. The egg is cold. The egg is oval."
"The colour is light brown. It's not easy to break."

I broke the egg into a bowl and passed around the broken egg shell. These were their comments:

"The egg shell is soft. Inside got the water and is very nice."
"Easy to break. The egg shell is rough. Inside the egg is a yolk."
"It feels like slippery and is easy to break."

Next, they touched the egg yolk and egg white and came to these conclusions:

"The egg yolk is soft and is very beautiful. The egg white is like water."
"The egg yolk is soft, yellow…wobbly. The egg white is sticky. "
"The egg yolk is bouncy. The egg white is slippery and sticky."
"The yolk is harder than the egg white. The egg white is softer than the yolk."
"The egg white is cold."

After touching the flour, they said:

"The flour is soft and curly."
"The flour is very soft and very clean."
"The flour is soft and white."
"The flour is not sticky."
"The flour is soft and smooth."

I added milk to the egg and mixed in the flour. The children took turns to stir the batter and to feel it. Some children were quite sceptical at first, but on seeing their friends' enthusiasm, they jumped right in and enjoyed the experience. Here are some of their observations:

"Become cover by the egg. Very sticky and rubbery and yucky and watery. Easy to stir."
"It feels like sticky and got lumps inside. It's not easy to stir."
"It feels mushy. It is like a sand."
"The brown is like mud. The white thing is like snow."
"The egg white is like porridge and the flour is like a cloud."

We were not able to cook the pancake because of a no-cooking rule in the school. So, I had the children play with a toy egg and a toy frying pan, they practised flipping the egg. It is a good exercise as it enhances eye-hand co-ordination. They had a fun time cheering each other on.



**Day 4:**

I explained the concept of making a picture or story using the collage technique. I gave them recycled paper and magazines, and they were given free choice to create anything they wanted.

### Reflections

The lessons were absolutely successful. The children enjoyed the story and related activities. They were excited to examine the ingredients. They enjoyed the process of making and flipping a pancake. They especially enjoyed the freedom to choose what they wanted to create for the collage picture.  As this lesson was done in the latter half of Term 3, most of them were able to express themselves better as they had acquired with a rich vocabulary bank. They are also more confident and vocal. Most importantly, the planned activities were very hands on for them.

I enjoyed this activity as it deepened my belief in 'learning through play'. Typically, the children  were attracted to the big, colourful and vibrant pictures and they responded well to it. On the objective of impressing upon them the value of and appreciation for food, they were able to articulate to me that they would share their food with others and that they should not waste food. Overall, the choice of the book and the careful selection of appropriate activities worked well together for the benefit of the children's literacy lessons.



### Giraffes Can't Dance
By Giles Andreae
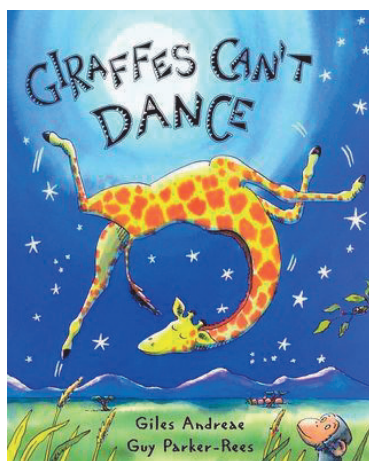


I chose this book as a follow up to the book 'From Head to Toe' by Eric Carle.  The children learnt about the giraffe, and, most importantly, there were good morals in the story.

This book has beautiful illustrations and they invite a lot of discussions from the children:

"I can see the monkey and the moon upstairs. All the leaf. Giraffe do upside down. The giraffe leg go up. I can see the hair. I can see the dot dot in the body. I can see the coconut and the tree."

"Giraffe, monkey and moon. I can see the star. I can see the giraffe, a mountain. I can see a small tree. The giraffe want to dance. The giraffe is doing ballet. I can see the nose, also the tail. The tail is touching the eye. The monkey is looking the star and the giraffe."

"Giraffe. A caterpillar (pointing at the cricket). Tiger (pointing at the tall plant). Tree. Floating, sleeping, floating. Night."

Like the giraffe, the children may also have weaknesses. "His knees were awfully crooked and his legs were rather thin" (pg 2), "when he tried to run around, he buckled at the knees" (pg 4). On their strengths – "he was very good at standing still and munching shoots off trees" (pg 3). When a child does not participate in certain activities, it could be that he/she does not have the skills or confidence and fears being laughed at. His/her self-esteem could be low.

The giraffe met a mentor in the cricket who had been observing it from afar and who stepped forward when the giraffe was at its most vulnerable moment. Cricket provided appropriate encouragement, "sometimes when you're different you just need a different song". Weaknesses may turn into strengths and the child may discover his/her hidden potential.

Thus, as educators, we are encouraged to take the time to observe children, empower them with skills, create a conducive environment and give lots of love and encouragement. This way, no child will be left behind.

This story will also remind children to be nice toward their friends, instead of laughing at their friends' shortcomings, and that if they do not give up and try their best, nothing is impossible.

This is a good and educational book highly recommended to early educators.

# 快乐的语言学习之道——一点教学心得分享
## Learning Language the Fun Way

李莉
Li Li

"为什么孩子不喜欢华文？""少教多学要教什么？""汉字不大量练习书写怎么学得会？"这些是华文老师们遇到的问题。华文真的很难学吗？孩子一定要教才能学得会吗？在课堂上不用汉字书写练习，孩子是否也能掌握书写的能力?这是我多年教学实践中给自己的挑战。

经过反复实践，我不仅做到了，并且孩子的能力还远远超过我们的预期。孩子们不仅具有较强的听说读写的能力，更重要的是对华文学习充满热情。以下就个人历程做一些分享。

### 理论篇

我需要对儿童有深刻认识和对语言学习有所理解。首先，在儿童观上，开放教育理论倡导"孩子是有能力的学习者"，教育的作用在于激发孩子的潜力和内在学习的热情。老师的角色是引导者而非传统意义上的教学者。其次在语言方面，老师要深刻了解孩子究竟是怎样学习语言的。在探索中我从 "全语言"教学观中找到了答案。因此孩子的语言教育，我融合了全语言教学观、大脑科学研究成果、高效识字法、芬兰式的技能教养法等理论，从语言学、行为学、大脑学等角度来思考和有机的统整了孩子的认识和了解世界的方式，追求做到"润物细无声"才是教育的境界。

### 实践篇

学习是一个历程，不能一蹴而就。要将这些理论巧妙融合，可以从以下几方面来进行。

一　体现无处不在的语言学习

人类从一出生就开始学习语言，因此环境是孩子最重要的老师。凯茨提出："原则上，儿童的年龄愈小，花在非正式活动的时间应该愈多。"基于孩子年龄越小自控能力越弱、好奇心强、兴趣易转移等特点，具体可做的有以下：

1　学习环境的创设

课室中的文字呈现，可包括角落名称、材料名称、儿歌图片、主题墙的设置等，增加孩子在环境中接触华文的机会，达到在潜移默化中学习。

**2 与生活息息相关的事**

午餐中可以跟孩子介绍今天食材有哪些？食物的味道、吃饭相关的词语或成语等。如美味可口、香喷喷、细嚼慢咽等。孩子从中可以累积大量的词汇和语言经验。以此类推，生活中每个时段都潜藏了语言学习的契机。

二　　　在有意义的语境中学习

"有意义才记得住！"这是《大脑守则》中的一条守则，对孩子语言学习来说显得格外重要。这个"意义"的含义不仅包括孩子能理解词语，更包含语言本身和孩子的关系两个层面。也就是说，虽然老师选择的语言材料是孩子能理解的，但这个材料与孩子自身没有关系，就无法建立孩子学习的热情。例如，孩子被蚊子咬了时教他们学习《蚊子》的儿歌，孩子学习就非常积极，且印象深刻。对孩子来说，什么是有意义的语境呢？例如：
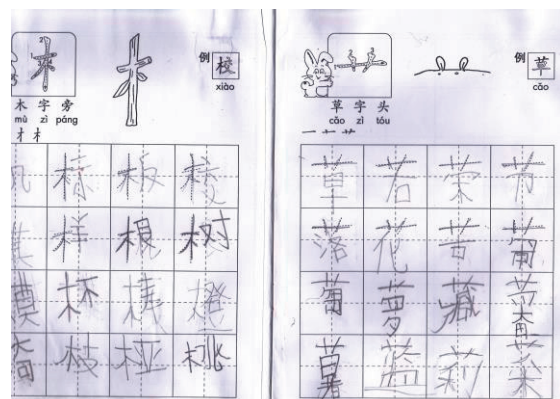
课堂讨论与记录：如课室规则、主题讨论记录等。
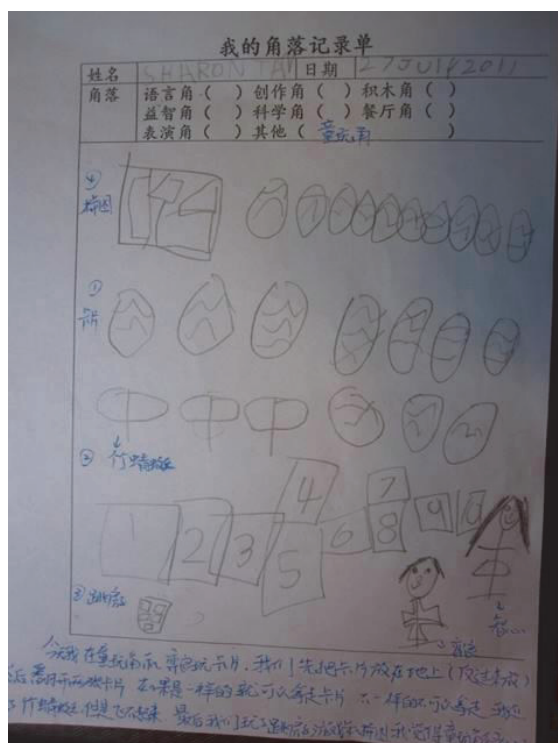
角落活动记录，如记录单、提示牌等。

写信给朋友。



### 三　　发现语言和文字的规律

中华文化博大精深，而汉字也被认为是最难认读和书写的文字，成为华文教学的一大挑战。"授之以鱼，不如授之以渔"，世界充满规律，汉字虽然繁多且复杂，但也有规律可循。老师引导孩子探索文字，从中发现文字的规律，就能帮助他们打开一扇文字学习的大门，不但学习起来事半功倍，并且大大增强孩子语言学习的成就感。例如引导孩子发现汉字的结构以及书写规则后，孩子更能主动遵守规则。





### 四　　听说读写齐步走

听说读写虽然是语言学习的四个重要领域，但是在学习上是同步发展的。

1　　儿童文学欣赏和阅读习惯的培养儿童文学是为儿童欣赏的文学，在欣赏中能让孩子感受文学的美，开阔语言视野，累积丰富的词汇，更重要的是帮助孩子了解世界，学会思考，是非常重要的儿童语言学习内容。适合学前儿童学习的儿童文学内容有：儿歌、儿童诗歌、绕口令、故事、谜语、散文等文体。我们在大班一年级时就带入经典故事的阅读欣赏，并引领儿童做改编、创编等活动。

总之，儿童文学可以将孩子的语言学习带到更高层次。

## 2 表达能力也要建构

展说（show and Tell）如果每次只让孩子讲，老师没有从中搭鹰架，孩子的展说就会流于形式。老师要思考如何循序渐进地支持孩子在展说上发展，培养孩子持续的兴趣。我的做法是一开学，就制定全年的展说目标，从物品、事件、新闻、图片等几方面逐渐进行讲述，每两个月一个主题。在讲述中老师要边听边记录，之后将记录的内容读给大家听，鼓励孩子自己发现问题或不完善的地方，大家也可以提出意见和讨论如何讲得更好。之后将讨论结果做一个总结，再次读给大家听。经过一次次的讨论和整理，孩子们在书面语的表达方式、词汇的使用、故事结构的认知等各方面均有很大的进步。之后很多孩子都能出口成章，大胆自信的表达。
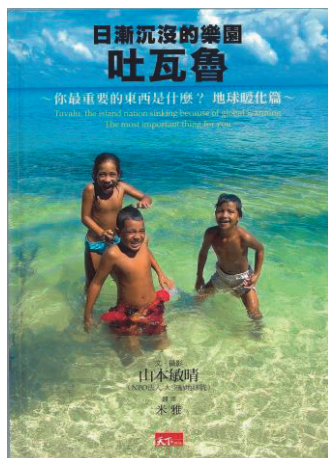


## 3 全方位培养阅读习惯和能力

专家指出，阅读能力与孩子语文学习兴趣和能力都有直接的关系。学前是阅读习惯培养的关键期，阅读习惯的培养与家庭是分不开的，如何家园合作共同培养孩子的阅读习惯和能力呢？我们从以下几方面来进行：

i. 亲子共读：开学时老师为每位孩子挑选一本绘本作为亲子共读的材料，全年级就有将近六十本绘本。大家每周带一本绘本回家跟家长一起阅读，并作阅读记录，下周再带回学校交换绘本。当然，开学前我们也举办阅读家长工作坊，教家长如何在家开展亲子共读，解决家长的一些疑问。
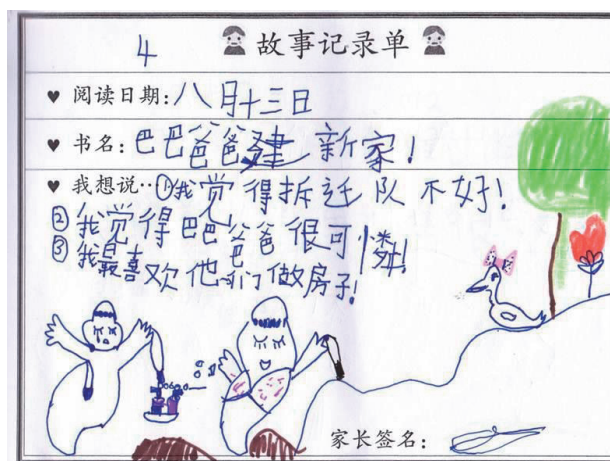


ii. 跟方案及孩子生活结合的绘本阅读：跟随方案的进展，老师会跟孩子阅读相关的绘本以深化方案。如在"减少垃圾"方案中我们就阅读了大量环保主题的绘本。

另外，当发现班级很多孩子当了哥哥和姐姐后，出现了心理变化，老师及时给孩子阅读了相关绘本，从讨论中帮助孩子走出情绪困境。

iii. 每日睡前故事时间：午睡前的绘本阅读就像一种仪式，孩子从中不仅能感受绘本带来的愉快，更能稳定孩子的情绪，让孩子能更好地进入睡眠。

iv. 每日晨读十分钟：孩子自己从家中带来书本自己安静的阅读，在这过程中孩子能建立自己与书本之间的关系，是培养孩子走向自主阅读的重要途径。阅读之后的分享，也为孩子创造一个解读和表达书面语言的机会。同伴间甚至形成追看某类书的热潮，激发孩子阅读的兴趣。



v. 班级新闻：每周五跟孩子回顾一周生活，并用文字记录下来，带回家读给爸爸妈妈听。将阅读与自己生活紧密结合，文字和阅读的意义不言而喻。

### 彩虹一周新闻

（七月二十三至七月二十七日）

*张璃恒星期一做了咖喱鸡翅，很好吃！

*星期一早上，我们去访问学校的老师，还去学校找哪些地方有时间表。

*星期二我们拍照时男生都穿得很帅，女生穿得都很漂亮。

*谢毅恒星期四做了玉米鸡汤，很好喝！

*星期四我们第一次学煮饭。



4 在需要中学会书写

虽然我们不鼓励孩子做机械的书写练习，但并不表示我们没有书写活动。实际上我们认为书写就像学说话和走路一样，要在书写中学会书写。我们这里所说的书写就是为孩子创造各种有意义书写的契机，在不断的有意义书写中掌握书写的规律、理解书写的意义，最重要的是产生成就感，最后才会爱上书写。

黄俊杰 我要记得

| 到校时间 | 9:00am | 外出地点 | Imm 超市 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 去干什么? | 买露营的东西 | | |
| 我要记得带的东西 | 1张长车卡 [204] 3不穿拖鞋 | | 2有带子的水壶 4一个王不保代区 |

家长签名 九月十二日



哭了一会儿了。
夜行后我们回营地洗澡。
这时妈妈足跟了电话,打电话
后我们且睡觉了。明天我要快点觉
因为明天更好玩的活动在等我们



我的露营(第一天)

二0一二九月九 我们去露营.
我们坐巴士去石鸟头再坐舟份
去圣约翰翁的露营。我们走到
营地然后车雨床。
我们去苗圃,Vik哥哥给我
们看木对皮里有像褐色虫蚂蚁。
苗圃欢烧烤会在烧烤会上
负责生火,我也负责烧烤肉。
然后去夜行的时候老公Julias
对我们说需要跟着一条线。
夜行的时候我足先倒到了我
一点都不痛,但是我还是



彩虹班入园登记表

日期 九月一日 星期一 要带

| 第几名 | 姓名 | 工作 | 联络本 | 日记 | 露营 什么行李? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 一 | 杜宛欣 | | | | 毛巾 |
| 二 | 梁宛萱 | √ | √ | √ | 毛巾 |
| 三 | 林培恒 | | | √ | |
| 四 | 林铭博 | √ | √ | √ | 衣服 |
| 五 | 潘洵石 | √ | √ | | 牙膏 |
| 六 | 林梅仪 | | √ | √ | 雨衣 |
| 七 | 林宝诗 | | | √ | 车林 |
| 八 | 吴馨增 | | | | 水壶 |
| 九 | 潘宏瑜 | √ | √ | √ | 长之库 |
| 十 | 陈尚萱 | √ | √ | × | 水壶 |
| 十一 | 郭兰琳 | √ | √ | | 雨箭 |
| 十二 | 洪欣怡 | | √ | √ | 毛雨 |
| 十二 | 仔儿 | | √ | √ | 水壶 |
| 十三 | 刘蓁 | | √ | √ | 书包 |
| 十四 | 徐杰 | √ | | √ | 拖鞋 |
| 十五 | 钟燃萱 | √ | | √ | 毛巾 |
| 十三 | 陈智川 | × | √ | √ | 雨箭 |

五　　抓住语言学习的契机

幼儿教育的挑战在于每个孩子都不同，并且孩子们的想法天马行空且善变，要跟上孩子的步伐就必须走进孩子的内心，孩子"变"，老师也要跟着"变"，如能接住孩子抛来的"球"，就能得到意想不到的惊喜！入班必需念密码，就是顺应孩子的好奇与兴趣而设置的。



六　　从行为学角度激发孩子内在热情

我在实践《芬兰教养法》时，看到它在孩子行为改变上发挥了巨大作用，从中得到很多启示，深切感受到要激发孩子的内在热情，教师必须从以下几方面来协助孩子：

1　让孩子体验成功

自己学习认字看起来是不可能的事情，我从全语言教学观中了解到孩子的语言学习是从整体到部分的。根据这个原理，我鼓励孩子在儿歌书中自己学认字，并把会认的字记录在小字典中。在短短几个月内`，孩子们用课余时间平均认识了 400 多个汉字，最多的会认得1200 个汉字。据家长们的反映，孩子们能认读《小字典》中 95%的汉字，他们从中体验到巨大的成就感。

2　多重肯定的作用

对孩子来说一个肯定就是一个激励，多重激励能大大激发孩子学习的动力。为鼓励孩子能持续热情，在每个环节中老师创造很多机会让孩子得到肯定。如读《小字典》的字给同伴和爸爸妈妈听，每学会认读十个字就有一个苹果贴纸。在每周班级新闻活动中，鼓励孩子读新闻给家人和朋友听，每读一次就可以给花瓣涂一个颜色，涂满三个颜色花瓣就可以得到笑脸贴纸贴在花蕊中。

3　形成积极的班级学习氛围

集体的力量和同伴的影响力远远超过老师。打造一个积极向上、互相支持、每个人都能获得尊重和体验成功的班级文化氛围，老师在其中起到重要的作用，如发现孩子不写信时，及时跟孩子讨论原因；老师也主动每周给每个孩子写一封信；每天也给孩子时间写信，以

及请孩子读自己收到的信。家长们也很支持孩子，儿童节还送孩子们漂亮的信纸作礼物。我们根据每个孩子的能力给予他们自我展示的机会，如认字专家、写字专家、找字高手等。这些有助促成一个互助学习、互相鼓励、积极向上的班级团体。

总之，老师必须要先放下自我，走进儿童、倾听儿童，全方位支持儿童，让孩子在一个被鼓励和支持的环境中，激发出内在学习的动力，才能踏上学习和成长的快乐之路！

# 台湾幼儿园的语文教学

## Early Literacy in Taiwan

陈真真

Chen Zhen Zhen

Visiting Lecturer, Ngee Ann Polytechnic

我在十六年前取得美国博士学位并且在托儿所教学一年多之后回去台湾的大专幼儿教育相关科系开始教书，当时台湾已经开始推动统整教学，也就是幼儿园里所有的课程领域都被统整在一个主题之下，语文活动为其中一个领域。 但是因为有许多教师因为担心家长的期望，会在教学当中自觉或是不自觉的特别强调语文的成分，以至于变成为以各个领域来教语文，主要着重在注音符号和各种名词的教学，很多的教学方法是为幼儿上小学做准备的重复背诵和运笔练习，不仅不符合幼儿的发展需求，也在无形当中抹煞了幼儿学习各个领域的动机和兴趣。 但是在过去十几年，经过了师资培育机构教授们多年的努力之下，幼儿教育政策的改变和新版幼儿园课程大纲暂行版的公布，现在台湾一些优质幼儿园的语文教学目标、方法和成果，其实已经和以前大相径庭，不仅是发展合宜，

而且提升并且延续幼儿对于语文活动(尤其是阅读) 的阅读，加强了幼儿的语文能力， 扩充幼儿的想象空间，同时增进幼儿的想象力，也提升了幼儿对于各个领域的学习兴趣。 在此我根据自己在台湾辅导幼儿园九年的经验与对于幼儿语文教学的观察与新加坡的华语教师们做一个分享·

台湾目前的幼儿园语文教学主要是透过游戏式的统整课程来进行，这样的课程包括学习区活动、统整主题的教学活动，还有强调幼儿探索和运用所学技能的方案教学活动。幼儿依据自己的兴趣选择教玩具，经由操作的过程当中和教玩具以及与教师、同侪之间的互动去主动的学习如何知道生活中事物的名称、描述生活当中的事件、表达自己的想法并提出意见等等。 这样的语文学习方式让语文教学不再只是听说读写分开教学的型，

减少了传统语文教学当中大量的记忆和背诵，更重要的是这样的学习建立在幼儿的兴趣之上，幼儿可以学得更深入，学习动机可以维持的更久，学习效果因为通常以教师和幼儿或是幼儿和幼儿一起的个别或是小组型态来进行，也可以学得更清楚而且扎实。

接下来，为了提供各位一个更为详细的范例，我想要跟各位分享我多年前在一个位于台湾台北县和基隆市边陲地带的一家偏远幼儿园的辅导经验，说明读写萌发式的语文学习课程是如何可以透过正确的图画书阅读课程来提升幼儿的学习兴趣。缘起于约２００２年，台湾教育部的为了推动幼儿园阅读活动，赠送了全台湾所有的立案公私立幼儿园所谓的 101 本好书，这些图画书都是配合幼儿发展和兴趣之插画精美且内容有趣的童书，还包括了展示型的书柜，让幼儿可以看著书的封面来选择自己想要深入阅读的书，而且幼儿可以在周末借回家和家长一起阅读， 希望藉此增进亲子关系，并且增进幼儿对于阅读的兴趣。但是这个活动在施行了多年以后，发现幼儿阅读书本的数量好像增加了，但是

很多幼儿进入到小学后的语词数量并未增加，甚至于说出的语句的文法结构常常是破碎不完整的，这才发现先前很多幼儿园把图画书当作课本的语文教学方式其实存在着许多的技术性的问题，以至于没有达到应该要有的效果，尤其是当幼儿来自于低收入的家庭背景、母亲为台湾的新住民或是很多幼儿都是由教育程度不高的祖父母所抚养时，这样的幼儿的语文能力让这间请我辅导的公立小学附设幼儿园的校长和两位幼儿园教师们非常的担心。在她们邀请我去辅导时，我便特地先去了一趟那间幼儿园，我发现这间幼儿园的教室里已经有学习区了，而且图书角里的图画书都选的不错，而且图书量也足够。 同时，我也发现两位教师的教学因为怕幼儿输在起跑点上，所以比较偏重于传统的语文教学，重视听说读写的技巧。还好，老师们愿意学习，都会配合辅导建议进行改善，所以我决定将该班的教学的重点转移到幼儿们的阅读兴趣上。

要如何知道幼儿对于一本图画书有兴趣呢?当幼儿喜欢一本图画书的时候，他会仔细去

浏览，而不只是翻翻页就放回书架上；如果真的很喜欢，他会想看着图开始自言自语的说故事甚至于请成人听他说故事；当他很强烈的想要知道这本书的内容到底是甚么的时候，他会请家长或是教师读给他听。当然，如果他很喜欢这本书，他也会因为对于图画书内容里某些人事物或是事件的兴趣，经由在不同学习区里的操作和表征方式把这些人事物呈现出来。在仔细观察幼儿操作的过程当中，他们也会清楚的告诉你他们作品，不论是在艺术区的画画、积木区的建构、在工作区利用回收资源做出的作品或是在扮演区里即兴演出的戏剧或是扮家家酒，是因为他们喜欢某本图画书的故事内容。如果教师们的观察能力强，又具有很好的引导技巧，甚至于可以引导幼儿从图画书延伸发展出一个教学方案，或是主动的自行创作出一场幼儿戏剧。

所以，在重新调整设计该幼儿园的课程时，我们重新安排幼儿园的作息表，除了教师们原来就安排好的早上体能时间外，我们安排了教师说故事的时间 (教师们接下来也请幼儿

轮流借自己喜欢的图画书回家练习说故事，增加了小小说书人的活动)，之后有一小段时间的讨论，再将学习区时间延长为五十分钟到一个小时的完整时段，让幼儿有足够的时间选择自己喜欢的学习区去和友伴进行互动，同时教师也会到各个学习区观察幼儿并且适时的给予一点引导。在学习区结束后，我们安排了约半小时的时间请各区的幼儿轮流上台介绍自己在学习区活动的友伴、游戏过程和作品。 最重要的是教师说故事的部分调整了说故事的步骤和方法。首先，根据近年来美国幼儿教育概论和幼儿文学等相关专业书籍的建议，教师必须要先带幼儿一起安静的浏览过图画书的封面和所有的插画，目的是引导幼儿了解一本图画书不是许多张个别的名词教学闪示卡，而是有情节的描述一个故事；这样做也鼓励幼儿安静的观察一本好的图画书里吸引他们的插画细节。 然后，教师和幼儿讨论这本书可能是在说些什么内容，目的是要了解幼儿对于图画书里的图像了解了多少，让幼儿学习预测故事情节的变化; 接下来由教师把故事读过一遍，尤其是针对文本的部分，因为一本可以出版的图画书一定

是文笔流畅优雅的，而且里面会有许多的形容词甚至成语，所以可以藉由图画书引导幼儿将图像和这些词语做链接。以作文来说，其实看图说故事是写作前的准备，幼儿要能够看图然后以自己的话描述故事，之后才有写作的能力；而形容词的恰当使用也是真正表现出一位学生语文程度的基准之一，但是很多幼儿园教师都忽略了这些存在于图画书里的教学要素。 在读完了图画书的文本之后，教师会引导幼儿讨论先前教师交给我给过修改建议的问题，这些问题不再只是问幼儿一些将图画书当作教科书教学常会问的问题如下，例如:这本故事书里有谁? 有什么? 这本故事里有几个人? 这个东西是什么么颜色? 这些封闭性的问题明显的只是在教一些语词或是简单的概念，所以发现幼儿们不需要说完整的句子，只要简单的说出一些名词、数量和颜色就够了，而大多数的幼儿教师认为这样就够了。但是在这个园所在接受辅导之后，教师的提问的开放度变大了，例如:你喜欢这本故事书吗? 最喜欢哪个部分? 为什么? 你觉得发生了什么事? 为什么? 你觉得这本书在告诉你什么? 为什么? 你觉得这个故事里的主角

是谁? 为什么? 类似上述这些激发幼儿思考的问题，幼儿不仅仅要说出一些人事物的名称，还要运用自己的逻辑思考描述一些事件的前因后果，在教师的引导之下去利用一些形容词描述自己喜欢的部分，或是运用比较完整的语句去表达自己的想法，幼儿使用语文的深度和广度都增加了。或许很多教师会先自我设限的认为幼儿做不到，但是只要教师适当且有耐心的运用正确的策略引导幼儿，幼儿们真的可以做到，然后就可以慢慢地建立起他们使用的信心。在讨论或是分享的时候，教师们也常常会鼓励幼儿向同侪提出问题或是给予建议，幼儿们同时学会了问问题，也学会了虚心接受不同的意见。

当教师和幼儿讨论完之后，教师会告知幼儿会将图画书放回到图书角的书架上，提醒 刚刚看不清楚或是想要再看一次的幼儿可以自己去拿来仔细欣赏，我们发现幼儿或因为 教师介绍过某本图画书而特别对它产生兴趣，进一步详细阅读或是想要创作自己的小书， 幼儿的观察力变得敏锐，画画的技巧也跟着进步了。我们从之后的学习区活动时间

观察到，有些贴近幼儿发展阶段和喜好的优质图画书的确会激发幼儿在不同学习区里利用不同方式 (例如画出故事的内容) 和教玩具 (尤其是利用各种积木或是乐高建构盖出故事里的场景) 做 出呈现的动机。而学习区活动时间后的分享时段，因为提供幼儿机会去描述自己的活动过 程，并且努力的说出自己的创作动机，幼儿的语言表达能力变好了；幼儿们也因为想要分享而在操作的过程当中更为专心聚焦。虽然这一个班里大多数的幼儿的家庭经济和教育水 准都不高，但是他们回家会主动要求家长带他们去图书馆借书或是去买图画书。在上了小 学之后，他们的老师发现这些幼儿要比先前同一个幼儿园毕业的学生会主动的利用下课或 是其他闲暇时间主动的去找书看，这些书包括了图画书和知识性的百科全书。

这个阅读课程的模式后来我在许多不同性质的幼儿园里也进行过，发现效果都不错， 幼儿们因为被提供机会去仔细观察图画书里有趣的图像，所以想要知道故事的内容，进而想要知道里面文字所描述的故事内容，

他们发现了文字的重要功能，他们想要主动的学习以自己的方式来画画或是仿写文字。于是藉由一个有趣的图画书教学活动，幼儿们有机会可以学习并且运用到听说读写的各项语文能力，重点是这一切的活动都是架构在他们有兴趣的活动之上，所以幼儿们的语文学习更为快乐有效。

在前年，台湾教育部公布了新版幼儿园课程纲要暂行版，语文领域非常重视图画书和儿歌在教学上的运用，以图画书来说，建议教师们也是要先展图，让幼儿们有机会看过整本书里的插画，先自己思考图画书的内容，然后再由教师来阅读文本，通常当教师开始 阅读文本时，有些幼儿就会对某些不懂的词句提与形容词或是成语提出疑问，这时候教师就可以趁着幼儿有兴趣的时候解释新的词句或是形容词，幼儿们就会很快的学起来了，不再需要重复的背诵。 教师们要记得，幼儿因为有兴趣觉得对他们有意义而想要学习时，他们就会很快的把想要学的内容记起来，不懂得词句的意义单靠机械式的背诵是无法长久记 忆的·为了让教师们不要窄化了

文本的定义而在教学上有所限制，台湾的课程大纲特地清楚的定义了「文本」不仅仅只是书里面的文字，还有其他任何利用 肢体 、 口语 、 图像符号及文字 等等所 创造出来的作品，包括 童谣、工具书、图画书哑剧、生活经验的叙述、故事、舞蹈表演及电影等, 都属于文本的一种。以幼儿最容易朗朗上口的儿歌来说，我发现在过去这些年台湾有些年轻的教师会忘了儿歌对于幼儿学习语文的重要性而忘了介绍，在课程大纲里再度受到了重视，让我可以提醒现场的教师儿歌教学对于幼儿语文学习的重要性·

我辅导幼儿园时常常会提醒有些传统幼儿园教师们，儿歌和唐诗、弟子规是不同的，儿歌 应该是贴近幼儿生活经验的歌曲，要简单清楚节奏重复容易上口，而教师们也不应该只是特别为幼儿上一堂儿歌的课，或是凭空上课就算教儿歌了，如果可以利用演出戏剧 、 海报或插画和幼儿一起讨论这首儿歌的意涵，除了教儿歌的时段外，还可以把海报展示在教室里，同时利用不同的转衔时间让幼儿练唱儿歌，也可以减少幼儿因为等待而可能会发生行 为问题或是危险的情况。 当幼儿熟悉了儿歌之后，教师就可以适时的引导幼儿认识音韵·后来，台湾教育部在 youtube 上发布了一段幼儿园语文教学的影片 做为倡导，让台湾 的家长和幼儿园教师可以认识台湾现在幼儿园的语文教学如何进行，还有幼儿们对于这 些活动的喜爱和投入。 在影片当中也提到了利用图画书(绘本教学)，主要的方法包括了 幼儿看图说故事、幼儿跟全班分享故事、教师引导幼儿以戏剧的方式演出故事、讨论故 事里的内容、利用绘本改编故事、与绘本作家面对面等。 除了图画书外，利用童诗进行 教学，例如介绍童诗、童诗仿作，童诗创作接龙、童诗发表成果等等的活动。 这些活动 的主要目的都是在引导幼儿在对他们有意义的情境当中理解、运用语文，进而扩展并且深化幼儿对于自己周遭生活环境的认识。

从上述台湾的语文教学方法和型态可以看到，台湾优质幼儿园的语文教学已经远远脱离了传统由教师主导且只重视教导幼儿听说读写技巧的教学层次了，取而代之的是 提供

幼儿有意义的语文学习情境与运用多元的教学方法与文本，尤其是教师们要设计一 些多元有趣而且会给予幼儿空间去思考学习的活动，引导幼儿自行依据自己的兴趣和步调，去理解并且运用语文，甚至于更进一步的运用自己的想象力和创造力，运用自己学 到的语文进行创作。

要协助幼儿对语文学习产生浓厚的兴趣并且延续他们的兴趣，配合幼儿发展需求并且提供幼儿机会去选择自己有兴趣的活动是非常重要的。 适当的语文教学方法、步骤和型态才能延续幼儿对于语文学习的兴趣并强化他们利用语文学习知识的动机。 华文教学，即使在以华文为主要语言的台湾，对幼儿来说也是一项挑战，所以激发幼儿的学习动机 和提升他们的兴趣应该是首要的目标· 因为有兴趣且有机会和环境可以使用华语，幼儿才能建立起对于学习华语的信心，接下来才会持续努力愿意学习华文。 在新加坡这个文 化和语言多元的国家，因为是一个以英语作为主要共通语文的环境，幼儿很可能会倾向于愿意学习看似容易学习的英语，

如果家庭环境不说华语，幼儿更可能对学习华语产生兴趣不高，甚至于排斥或是不愿意持续，所以在新加坡的华文教学就要更能符合幼儿的发展需求，贴近新加坡幼儿的生活经验，以激发并加强幼儿的兴趣，这样才能达到推动 华文教学的最佳成效。 以上是有关我自己在台湾从事幼儿语文教学方面的经验，希望可以供新加坡的华语教师们做为一个参考。