



Multimodal Approaches to Teaching Reading in Hong Kong Primary Classrooms

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Abstract

In a shift from traditional practices of teaching reading to primary school students, a preference toward multimodal approaches has been adopted by a growing number of educators in recent years and is seen by many as more effective for literacy development. Hong Kong primary school teachers are increasingly turning to the wide variety of modern technology now available in the classroom to enhance language lessons and to communicate with learners through different channels. The use of computers, projectors, videos and other contemporary classroom tools is becoming more popular than traditional teaching activities used predominantly by teachers in the past. This paper discusses a number of approaches currently used by a group of English teachers in a Hong Kong primary school to teach reading. A questionnaire was developed to determine which teaching approaches, multimodal and/or traditional, are being employed more frequently in the classroom, and which are considered by teachers to be more effective for developing literacy in primary school students. The findings illustrate a clear preference by the teachers towards multimodal approaches in reading lessons and a decrease in traditional activities. The purpose of this study is to provide insight into the teachers' preferred approaches, their apparent effectiveness, and to propose recommendations to further enhance literacy development in young learners.

1. Introduction

Teaching styles and pedagogic approaches have changed significantly in the recent years. Kress [2007, p.15] reminds us that children today are not growing up in the same world in which we lived when we were their age. These changes have resulted in the emergence of very different learning environments for students. Educators are challenged constantly to keep students engaged in the classrooms [Prensky, 2010].

The teaching of English in Hong Kong also has undergone many recent reforms. Hong Kong schools have long been considered to use "teacher-centered" [Pennington, 1995, p.707], traditional approaches in the classrooms. More recently, there has been a growing trend to enhance lessons by making use of the wide variety of modern learning tools. More teachers are recognizing new teaching approaches and employing more resources in the classrooms. The use of computers, projectors, videos and other resources are being used by teachers on a regular basis. This has enabled teachers to incorporate a wide variety of media and communicate to learners through different channels. In short, traditional approaches to developing literacy in young learners are being replaced by multimodal approaches.

The term 'multimodal' refers to the use of more than one mode of communication at the same time. Kress and van Leeuwen [2001, pp.21-22] define 'mode' as 'semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realization of discourses and types of (inter)action'.

In many traditional classroom settings, reading lessons have been one-dimensional, not focussing beyond the printed text. Multimodal approaches, however, include various modes to transmit meaning. These can include images, colour, space, sound, movement and gesture [Stein, 2008, p.1]. In contemporary primary schools, various types of multimodal texts commonly include children's picture books, books with photographs and/or images, magazines, newspapers, cartoons, drawings, charts, CD ROMs, the internet and videos [Walsh, 2005]. These multimodal texts incorporate more than one mode in an effort to convey meaning through different channels. These separate modes work in concert to facilitate improved understanding and meaning-making [Jones & Ventola, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2003; Unsworth, 2008].



This study examines approaches used by local English teachers in Hong Kong to teach reading at the primary school level, and identifies whether the teachers are using traditional teaching approaches in their reading lessons or if there is a tendency towards multimodal approaches. This paper answers the following questions:

- Do primary school teachers prefer traditional approaches to teaching reading or multimodal approaches?
- Which multimodal approaches are used by primary school teachers when teaching reading?
- Which approaches do teachers feel are more effective and less effective?
- What recommendations can be made to enhance reading lessons using multimodal texts?

2. Participants and Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to 12 primary school English teachers, four at the P4 level, four at the P5 level and four at the P6 level. A decision was made to limit the study to only the English teachers of P4 - P6 students. This decision was based on two factors. Firstly, due to significant differences in reading levels of year one primary school students, there existed a concern that data from teachers at levels P1 through P3 might not prove as valuable. Secondly, time constraints prevented expanding the study to all of the English teachers.

The questionnaire was developed by reviewing resources commonly associated with multimodal texts in classrooms [Walsh, 2005], as well as by conducting an inventory of the resources available to the teachers who completed the questionnaire. A pre-questionnaire interview was conducted to review the questions and confirm understanding of all the questions. The questionnaire was given to the teachers during non-teaching hours and no time limit was given. All of the English teachers confirmed that they were familiar with the concept of multimodal approaches and that they understood all of the questions on the questionnaire. A brief, post-questionnaire follow up was held with each of the teachers. The teachers were asked if they had any additional questions or comments related to the questionnaire that had not been included. None of the teachers chose to provide any supplemental information. All twelve of the teachers completed the questionnaire and most returned it within two days. Finally, a short, post-questionnaire interview was conducted to review the responses and address any questions and/or comments by the teachers.

3. Results and Observations

The questionnaires were completed and the results by the twelve teachers were reviewed and compared. The results for all twelve teachers indicated that the attitudes toward the use of text-only materials with no illustrations were largely negative. Not surprisingly, the majority of the teachers was in general agreement and in favor of using text accompanied by images in reading lessons. The teachers' responses showed that they use multimodal approaches more frequently than traditional, text-only approaches in reading lessons.

Table 1 Frequency of different approaches to teaching reading by all teachers ($n = 12$)
All % are approximations.

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Not very often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Very often</i>	<i>Always</i>
Text-only materials	2 (16.7%)	6 (50%)	3 (25%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)
Text with images	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	9 (75%)	2 (16.7%)
Drawings/cartoons	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	4 (33.3%)	5 (41.7%)	0 (0%)
Photographs	0 (0%)	2 (16.7%)	5 (41.7%)	5 (41.7%)	0 (0%)
Children's electronic picture books	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	9 (75%)	0 (0%)
Charts/diagrams/graphs	0 (0%)	4 (33.3%)	5 (41.7%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)
Videos	0 (0%)	5 (41.7%)	4 (33.3%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)
Text-only w/ chalkboard	2 (16.7%)	4 (33.3%)	5 (41.7%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)



According to the results of the questionnaire, the approach most preferred by the teachers was the use of children's electronic picture books. The teachers' responses indicated a very positive attitude towards the use of children's electronic picture books and showed that they are used frequently in reading lessons. The responses indicated that there is general agreement on the use of these e-books and that they consider their use significant for the development of literacy in young learners. Painter [2007, p.40] explains that in addition to offering lessons in literacy to young learners, children's picture books also facilitate a better understanding of social values. Christie [2005] contends that children's picture books can be essential building blocks for children. The sequence and placement of images, combined with the selection of limited language, provide essential scaffolding for young readers (2005, p.125). Four of the teachers also responded that of the choices on the questionnaire, they considered picture-books to be among the most valuable tools for teaching reading.

Regarding the use of drawings and/or cartoons to teach reading, the results showed that most of the teachers use this approach either sometimes or very often. Five teachers considered the use of drawings or cartoons to accompany text in reading lessons among the most valuable of the choices given. Regarding the effectiveness of drawings and/or cartoons in reading lessons, the teachers explained that students are interested in them, are familiar with them and are motivated to engage in lessons that include drawings and/or cartoons.

Christie [2005, p.135] takes this position as well and points out that children typically enjoy cartoons and take pleasure in reading comics. Christie also reminds us that comics are reasonably priced, easy to obtain and therefore constitute a valuable resource for improving reading skills in young learners [2005, p.136].

The use of photographs was also shown to be widely used to accompany text in reading lessons. In addition, five teachers indicated that they considered photographs to be among the most valuable tools in reading lessons. Photographs are readily available and in limitless supply from the internet and can be used for a variety of teaching practices. Such practices can range from fundamental vocabulary building to complex meaning-making through the uses of angle, colour, gaze, vectors and spatial orientation [Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2005; Unsworth, 2008].

Regarding the use of charts, graphs and/or diagrams, the responses indicated that this approach is used less frequently. The responses were not surprising considering that primary school teachers do not typically generate charts, graphs or diagrams for reading lessons. In particular lessons, however, charts and diagrams are used for specific genres. Kress and van Leeuwen [2006, pp.48, 60-1] explain that charts and diagrams are commonly used to depict something 'real' or to convey complex information. In the P4 classrooms, charts are used in reading lessons about environmental issues. In the P5 classrooms, diagrams are used in lessons about endangered animals. Bateman [2008, pp.167-168] refers to a fact sheet depicting a Bengal tiger and discusses the effectiveness of structural layout and the intended rhetorical structure. Bateman warns, however, that 'mismatches' can occur when focus is drawn away from the intended areas due to the layout of images or other techniques. One teacher indicated that the use of charts, graphs and/or diagrams was among the most valuable of the choices on the questionnaire. Three other teachers, however, stated that it was among the least valuable of the choices given.

Videos also were shown to be used less frequently in reading lessons. One teacher commented that although she considers the use of video in reading lessons to be a valuable teaching approach, quality videos for teaching reading are difficult to find. A closer look at the results indicates that a number of teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of video in reading lessons, but they may not have what they feel to be an adequate supply of appropriate material.

Kress and van Leeuwen [2006, p.265] remind us that videos are 'characteristically multimodal, involving not just the visual, but also speech, sound and music'. Chouliaraki [2004, pp.151-165] details how connecting language and video images can produce meaning, as well as how it can form a relationship between the image and the viewer. Walsh [2009] takes the use of video to increase reading skills a step further. In a study focusing on developing literacy strategies in primary school learners, a group of P3



students generated their own 5-8 minute podcasts. The students prepared, wrote, produced and edited their videos before sharing them with audiences. Walsh described the students as eager and very involved in the exercise, which required them to 'read, write, view, design and produce in both print and digital modes' [2009, p.9]. Prensky [2010] also examines the use of student-generated videos in the classrooms and suggests that students are motivated and more engaged in this type of activity.

With respect to teaching reading using text-only on the chalkboard, the data indicated that this practice was less likely to be used than any of the other approaches in the questionnaire. The teachers' responses indicated that they considered text-only writing on the chalkboard to be much less valuable for teaching reading than the other approaches on the questionnaire. They noted that children become bored and are not as engaged as they are when other, multimodal approaches are used.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the participants are adapting to students' needs and modifying their lessons accordingly. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the teachers prefer multimodal approaches to teaching reading over traditional practices. In addition, teachers' responses indicate that the majority places a higher value on approaches that engage and motivate the students, such as using children's picture books, cartoons and photographs in reading lessons. The responses also indicated that there was not always a correlation between preferences and frequent use. Not only did the teachers demonstrate their preference towards multimodal approaches to teach reading, but they also showed that instead of employing only one or two approaches, they prefer to incorporate a variety of multimodal activities in the classroom. However, the study only aims to identify teachers' preferences based on their perceptions of what is working in the classrooms and further study is needed to examine the effectiveness of these approaches, as well as their effectiveness at different ages and proficiency levels. Open and frequent discussion among the teachers also is needed to review and evaluate the appropriateness of material, the selected media, learning objectives and how these and other factors contribute to improved literacy development in young learners.

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