An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 1

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An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the

Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

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An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 2

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the Primary Literacy Programme – Reading and Writing (PLP- R/W)

Introduction

Since 2007, a programme titled "Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing" (PLP-R/W) has been integrated as a part of the English curriculum in over 170 primary schools in Hong Kong (NET Section, 2010). It takes up 40% of the General English (GE) lesson time every week in the school-based English language curriculum, and is led mainly by Native English Teachers (NET) under the Primary NET Scheme (CDC, 2004). PLP-R/W has by far been implemented for about 9 years, though it has attracted little research attention. There are very few studies on teachers' perception about PLP-R/W. Given Local English Teachers (LETs)' beliefs toward the programme has great influence on its success, their opinions about the programme matter to its implementation (Yeung, 2012). This study seeks to gain an understanding of the extent to which the Primary Literacy Programme – Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W) influences the beliefs and practices of Local English Teachers specifically in teaching reading. Six in-service Hong Kong primary local English teachers (LET) who have involved in PLP-R/W from the same school were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. Data were transcribed, translated from Chinese into English, and coded based on the themes of the interview content. They were analyzed together with data from lesson observation records and school documents.

Literature Review

General Context of PLP-R/W

In 2004, the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council (CDC) advised local schools to include a Reading Workshop component to promote reading to learn in the school-based English language curriculum (CDC, 2004). Based on the suggestion, the Advisory Teaching Team (ATT) of the Native English Teacher Section (NET) developed a three-year pilot reading programme titled "Primary Literacy Programme-Reading (PLP-R)", aiming to "enhance the reading proficiency of the Key Stage 1 students" through "innovative and appropriate learning and teaching practices and methods" and to "provide support and professional development for [….] English

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 3

teachers […]" (NET Section, 2010, p.2; NET Section, 2013, p.8). In 2007, the PLP-R was refined to "Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing" (PLP-R/W) with an additional emphasis on students' writing proficiency. To achieve the first aim of PLP-R/W, language-rich and whole-school classroom environment are set up. Reading and writing strategies, such as reading aloud, storytelling, shared-, guided-, and Independent-reading as well as process writing, are adopted and promoted in PLP-R/W lessons. Resources such as storybooks and Home Reading Booklets are also designed in hopes to provide more meaningful and engaging local contexts for learning, and avoid over-reliance on textbooks in developing students' language skills (NET Section, 2013). As to achieve the latter programme aim, co-teaching opportunities and professional trainings are provided. In the programme, NETs, together with LETs and classroom assistants (CAs), collaborate to run reading and writing workshops for junior primary students on a weekly basis. In every school's practices, NETs take the leading role in the whole-class teaching sessions, while LETs and CAs may support his/her teaching through co-teaching, maintaining classroom orders or joining small groups to guide students to read and write. Moreover, to provide guidance and directions for English teachers to teach literacy in PLP-R/W, professional development training, such as centralized workshops and teachers' conferences are regularly held by Advisory Teaching Team (ATT), a unit that helps evaluate and reflect on schools' PLP-R/W practices.

Education theory of PLP-R/W: Reading and Writing

The practice of PLP-R/W echoes with Clay's (1966) belief that early literacy should be viewed as a process that involves "real literature and purposeful writing" (p.5). It implies that reading and writing are interrelated and should go hand in hand when relevant skills are taught to children. Farris, Fuhler & Walther (2004) share similar views that they believe reading and writing are linked together for the development of critical literacy skills, since the process of reading and writing are parallel to each other: In a reading process, we activate our prior knowledge in pre-reading, construct meaning while reading, and reconstruct or modify meaning when revisiting text (Farris et al., 2004; Graves, Juel & Graves, 2001). In a writing process, we access our prior knowledge, create meaning and reconstruct and modify the writing (Farris et al., 2004; Graves, Juel & Graves, 2001). Reading and writing are closely associated because successful readers and writers will utilize their knowledge and experience to

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 4

construct meaning for communication (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003).
Appendix 1 exemplifies the structured reading and writing lessons of PLP-R/W from
the Unit of Work of Key Stage 2 students.

Investigating the reading approach: Balanced instructional approach to literacy

PLP-R/W is conceptualized under the ideas of balanced instructional approach to
literacy. Unlike the bottom-up approach which advocates the necessity of developing
the basic phonics skills for beginning readers to read and write (Evans, Fox, Cremaso
& Mckinnon, 2004; Farris et al., 2004), and the top-down approach emphasizing
making meaning with the environment such as their personal background knowledge
and understanding of the world (Graves et al., 2001; Reutzel & Cooter, 2000; Farris et
al., 2004), a balanced approach to literacy is a combination of the two. Both the skill-
based and meaning-based aspects of reading are concerned and addressed (Duffy,
2001; Rasinski & Padak, 2004; Farris et al., 2004; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).
Moreover, under balanced instructional approach, the use of effective instructional
methods for guiding early readers to read and write is significant (Clay, 1966; Farris
et al., 2004). In the reading skills framework of PLP-R/W, research-based teaching
strategies that help develop children's phonics skills and facilitate their
comprehension are planned (NET Section, 2010). For phonics instructions,
phonological awareness and phonics activities like songs, chants, rhymes, sound box,
phonics fan are incorporated in lessons; for the meaning-based aspect of reading, high
frequency word and vocabulary development, shared reading, guided reading and
independent reading are adopted in hopes to develop students' reading proficiency
effectively (see Appendix 2 for details).

Investigating the professional support for English teachers in PLP-R/W:

One of the aims of PLP-R/W is to facilitate teachers' collaboration and professional
development (NET Section, 2008). Its belief in community of practice is reflected.
According to Wenger et al. (2002), community of practice refers to groups of people
with "shared repertoire that generates shared interest, commitment and competence to
distinguish members from other communities" (p.4). It encourages active
participation, contribution, social construction and negotiation of meaning over time
among members (Wenger et al., 2002; Smith, 2009). To facilitate community of
practice in PLP-R/W, different professional workshops for LETs are arranged, and

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 5

support from NETs is drawn on. LETs and NETs are expected to constantly participate in meaningful and reflective discussions that enable them to reflect on the context of the situation and the background the individuals brings to the episode (Kelchtermans, 2005; NET Section, 2013; Taggart & Wilson, 2015). They will not only help improve the implementation of PLP-R/W, but also develop personal and professional growth (Taggart & Wilson, 2015; Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones; 2002).

The Present Study: Researching LETs' perception of PLP-R/W in Hong Kong

A few previous studies have shown that PLP-R/W has a positive impact on teachers' professional growth. According to NET Section (2013, p.91), LETs expressed there were "significant changes" in the way they taught reading and writing. They no longer perceived reading and writing as two discrete items that have to be taught separately, but saw the interconnectedness and relations between them (NET Section, 2013). They also showed appreciation on the use of guided reading in the programme as it helped develop students to be independent readers through regular practices on reading strategies in PLP-R/W lessons (NET Section, 2013). With the involvement of NETs, some teachers stated that they acquired new teaching ideas and general methodology related to reading that they "could apply in the PLP-R lessons" (Griffin et al., 2007, p.84). They appreciated the guidance, input and advice of NETs as they were more specialized in literacy, more able to develop fun and relaxing classroom atmosphere, and had richer linguistic and cultural background that LETs (Griffin et al., 2007).

For the study conducted by Griffin et al. (2007), although they investigate how PLP-R/W lays positive impacts on LETs' professional growth and teaching beliefs, the extent to which the programme influences their practices in teaching reading in General English lessons (not in the reading workshop and without NETs' guidance) have not been investigated. Furthermore, researches on LETs' perceptions toward PLP-R/W are very limited. There is a necessity to research more on teachers' beliefs as they are crucial for "performing specific functions and tasks in teaching", i.e. for teaching reading effectively (Leutwyler & Mantel, 2014). How the LETs perceive about the program as their beliefs and the followed practices are also critical to the school English curriculum development and programme evaluation (Yeung, 2012).

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 6

Therefore, this study will build on the previous research, and further investigate LETs' beliefs and teaching practices toward PLP-R/W. To narrow the research scope, only how the two major components of PLP-R/W, 1) the reading strategies/approach and 2) NETs' involvement in PLP-R/W, influence LETs' practices and beliefs toward teaching reading in ESL classrooms (especially in reading lessons other than the PLP-R/W lessons) will be studied:

Research questions: How does the Primary Literacy Programme- Reading/ Writing (PLP-R/W) influence local English teachers' perception toward teaching reading?

Specific questions:

1. To what extent do the reading strategies/approach used in the literacy program influence LET's practices toward teaching reading in ESL classroom (especially in reading lessons other than the PLP-R/W lessons)?

2. To what extent does NET's involvement in the literacy program influence LET's teaching beliefs and practice?

Methodology

Setting

The study was conducted in a local government-aided primary school in Hong Kong. It was situated in public estates with low socio-economic status in Northwestern district. The English curriculum for Key Stage 1 students (P.1- P.3) was composed of two components, including GE lessons for teaching the New Magic textbook series and the reading program PLP-R/W. Students had five 35-minute GE lessons and two double lessons (140 minutes) for PLPR/W in a week. Two PLP-R/W lessons were co-taught by the NET and LETs with CA's assistance in school's English room which was well-furnished and filled with prints on wall. The research lasted for 10 weeks during the field experience of the researcher.

Participants

Six primary school local English teachers (LETs) were invited to sign up as voluntary participants. Three of them were female and three were male. They taught varied

grade levels, had over 10 years of teaching experience and at least 1 year of experience in conducting PLP-R/W with the NET in school. They all attended professional trainings hosted by ATT.

Instruments and Procedure

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study for data collection. Data from curriculum guides and school documents, semi-structured interviews, lesson observations were obtained in order to examine teachers' perceptions toward PLP-R/W, as well as the implementation of the program in the targeted primary school.

Document analysis

First, curriculum guides issued by the NET Section and Curriculum Develop Council were examined. They provided an insight on the aims and implementation of PLP-R/W and set the foundation for the research. School documents such as lesson plans on PLP-R/W, school timetable of junior students, timetable of co-planning between NETs and LETs were also collected for an overview and the analysis on how PLP-R/W was implemented in the research school.

Semi-structured interviews and factual questionnaires

The second data collection tool for the study was the semi-structured interviews, alongside with a questionnaire with factual background questions (see Appendix 3). Semi-structured interviews were used here because it allows space for "richer interactions and more personalized responses" from the teachers (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). The interview was one-on-one and lasted for about 15 minutes. Before the interviews, participants filled in a short questionnaire on their background information, such as gender, years of teaching experience and in the literacy programme in particular. There were 10 basic structured open-ended questions. The first 5 questions focused on participants' perceptions and experiences on the use of reading strategies/approach in PLP-R/W/ESL classroom; then the next five questions focused on their perceptions and experiences when collaborating with NETs. The interviews were audio-recorded and brief notes were taken by the researcher for follow-up questions during the interviews. Consent to be audio-recorded during the interviews were sought from the interview participants. All the interview data were transcribed, translated from Chinese into English by the researcher. To ensure validity

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 8

and reliability, the interview transcripts were approved and signed by the participants.

Lesson observations

The third data collection tool was lesson observations. Researcher observed at least 10 sessions of the reading workshops run by NETs, LETs and CAs and GE reading lessons, in order to understand how the literacy program was implemented and the teaching practices of LETs. To enhance validity, only a few aspects of the lesson were observed i.e. the lesson rundown, lesson objectives, effective reading strategies used, the responsibilities between teachers and student-teacher interactions. Field notes on aforementioned items were recorded in observation forms.

Results

This section reports the discourses that describe LETs' beliefs and teaching practices under the influence of PLP-R/W. From the interview and observation data, most teachers reported that that there were not many significant changes in their beliefs and practices. However, they gained some insights of teaching reading from 1) the effective reading strategies used and 2) the NET's involvement in PLP-R/W. Their positive and negative perceptions were categorized and described in the following part.

Positive perceptions

Some LETs found the reading strategies used in PLP-R/W were helpful to their own teaching in ESL classroom. They tried to apply them in their GE lessons:

Employing phonological awareness and phonics activities. All LETs were impressed by how phonics was taught in PLP-R/W. They believed developing students' phonics and decoding skills could help students to read, spell and write, and thought that PLP-R/W developed a systematic way for LETs to learn ways of teaching phonics. A teacher stated that before PLP-R/W was introduced, teaching phonics in GE reading or vocabulary lessons were not common. PLP-R/W raised her awareness of teaching phonics in English lessons. Some shared their applied practices of phonics teaching in their GE lessons:

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 9

Extract 1

"It helps develop my skills in teaching phonics. You know… in the past, the English curriculum does not pay much attention on phonics instructions. Now, most English textbooks include a section that draws attention on phonics in each chapter. If PLP-R/W had not been introduced, I would have been very frustrated with teaching phonics."

"I sometimes use the teaching skills learnt from PLP-R/W in my GE lessons to help students recognize the word letter or sound. Like PLP-R/W, I have written two to three target letters on the blackboard, and invited some students to come out for a tapping game. Students had to listen to some target vocabulary items said by me, and point to the corresponding letter after. I reuse this game because it draws students' attention to the letter and sound of a word, which helps their pronunciation and spelling. Also, since this game is always used in PLP-R/W lesson, students understand the instructions well. This saves the teaching time… And they like the game very much."

Extract 2

"Learning phonics is one of the key components in PLP-R/W. It has helped students to decode the pronunciation of the words, helping them to recognize and spell the words, and build their confidence when they are reading."

Extract 3

"There are songs, interesting chants, and pictures showing how the lips and tongues should be placed for a particular sound. They allow students to practice and "play with" the sounds. I think they are all good ideas. I always showed the pictures to my students in my GE lessons, teaching how their lips and tongues should be placed for accurate pronunciation. Through recognizing the letter-sound relationship and pronunciation of words, students can read aloud the reading text with greater confidence. They can identify and spell the words more easily."

More questioning in guided reading. Some LETs expressed that they asked students

more questions when reading a reading passage. They tried to plan and ask more different types of questions in order to cater for different levels of students, to encourage high-order thinking and prediction, and to support students' comprehension:

Extract 4

"After students have read the textbook passage once, I ask more open-ended questions in class, such as 'Why' questions, to encourage students' thinking."

Extract 5

"In PLP-R/W lessons, students always have to guess the plot and ending of the story. A lot of questions are planned beforehand to initiate students' thinking, prediction and imagination. I think it is a really good idea. I have used it when I was teaching the textbook passages with story as the genre. It is more interesting and thought provoking than just telling them the ending directly.

Extract 6

"There are plentiful of questions prepared to ask students before-, while- and after reading the story (in PLP-R/W). Who, what, when, where and how questions are involved. They are in different levels of difficulty and can cater for different levels of students. They understand the story much better."

Teaching high frequency words. One indicated that he became more aware of the explicit teaching on high frequency words. He taught more high frequency words in his own GE lessons, hoping to raise students' awareness to these words and expand their vocabulary bank:

Extract 7

"I used to focus on the thematic vocabulary in textbooks. But I think it is good to make the high frequency words explicit in my own lessons, just like PLP-R/W. I hope my students can be more aware of them… as you know, they appear very often in stories… So…I have asked them to keep a small notebook to jot down the high frequency words as well as the thematic vocabulary. And… sometimes I may recycle the flashcards of high frequency words used in PLP-R/W lessons

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 11

and use it in my GE lessons for consolidation. And… similar to how NET teaches high frequency words in PLP-R/W, I have asked some students to come out, listen to the teacher, and tap the new vocabulary or high frequency words on the whiteboard as fast as they can...”

The involvement of NET in PLP-R/W

The LETs all thought the NET's involvement in PLP-R/W facilitated students' language development, and their professional and personal growth. Their learning from NET was not only bound to the area of teaching reading, but to teaching or teaching English on the whole.

Facilitating students' learning. Three LETs reported that they appreciated NET's ability to facilitate students' learning. They thought the NET promoted a western style of teaching and learning that inquiry-based learning and students' centeredness were valued.

> Extract 8
>
> “I have learnt the western style of teaching and learning from the NET. As you know, she is from Britain and has received her education there. She is able to encourage students to think using prompts. She can ask a lot of good questions to provoke students' thinking.”

Facilitating teachers' learning through collaboration. The LETs appreciated the involvement of NET in PLP-R/W as it could facilitate their professional growth through co-planning and co-teaching. They could exchange teaching ideas or feedback, and learnt from each other's teaching styles and practices.

> Extract 9
>
> “An experienced NET teacher can share different teaching views and experiences with us, leading to our professional and personal growth.”

> Extract 10
>
> “She can give feedback to my own teaching in PLP-R/W.”

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 12

Extract 11

"We have different teaching styles. I always use my own teaching method. So I think it is good for me to exchange ideas with, or learn how she teaches during PLP-R/W lessons."

Some reported that they asked more questions in class to guide students to think and learn steps by steps like the NET (Extract 4-6). A LET found the collaboration with NET on modifying students' PLP-R/W learning materials rewarding as the NET was more experienced (Extract 12).

Extract 12

"I have cooperated with her for two years. This year, we collaborate together to teach writing in PLP-R/W, we may talk about how to modify the writing tasks based on our past experience and different students' levels. It is nice to have such a talk with her in co-planning because she is more experienced in teaching PLP-R/W. Also, as she teaches the whole form of students, she will probably have a clearer picture to the general performance of students at that level."

NET's advice was helpful to LETs as the NET was able to compare between the western and Chinese style of teaching. For instance, Hong Kong teachers tended to teach fast because of their heavy concern on time. They might not provide sufficient wait-time for students to think thoroughly and construct their answers, which might hamper students' comprehension and thinking.

Extract 13

"In co-planning, the NET has reminded me to not to rush through the storybook. She encourages me to pause, ask questions and get students' responses while reading the story… Her advice is really good because I think most Hong Kong teachers are always anxious about whether they have completed or finished the content of storybook, or textbook. We may neglect some students' needs. For example, they need time to process and think."

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 13

Accurate English pronunciation. All LETs stated the accurate English pronunciation of NET could help them and students learn authentic British accent and improve their pronunciation and intonation. One indicated that he would like to use more English in class to provide more opportunities for student to listen to English.

Extract 14

"Phonic. NET teacher has a native accent so students can see her as a model. As our first language is not English, and every local English teacher has their own accent. If there is a NET who helps P.1 to P.3 students in learning phonics and pronunciation, it will be more effective and systematic."

Extract 15

"She has good pronunciation and intonation in speaking. I have learnt some native pronunciation from her, for example, sand, sandwich etc."

Extract 16

"She can speak 100% English in English lessons, which I believe is good for L2 learners because they can listen to English more. She has somehow inspired me to try to explain difficult concepts in simple English more, rather than giving students L1 translation directly."

Extract 17

"For example, she teaches pronunciation very well. She is very sensitive to wrong pronunciation and can spot students' mistakes quickly. We are not native teacher and so we may think the students pronounce the words right even though they do not say them accurately. "

Negative perceptions

Despite of the positive insights gained from PLP-R/W, LETs reported the least appreciative parts of the program. These might explain why they claimed that there were "not many", "a few", "some" changes in their teaching practices.

Packed GE curriculum. All teachers expressed their concerns on the limited teaching

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 14

time for the GE curriculum. They could not be as relaxed as in the PLP-R/W lessons and carried out many interesting learning activities because the GE curriculum was very packed. There was a lot of exercise for students to complete:

Extract 18

"Not many changes. We have to teach the textbook content. We have to teach grammar. I used to have all the lessons in teaching GE in my previous school. Yet, now I just have half of it, which is not enough. I have to rush through the content all the time. I have to teach it quickly. There is actually not much time for me to play the interactive games or read aloud the text as many time as in the PLP-R/W lessons."

Extract 19

"…in GE lessons, I have to teach a lot of things. The lesson pace is very intense. They have to listen and do the exercise all the time. They have to be serious to learning in my lessons, otherwise, we cannot finish the textbook chapters before exam… Sometimes I think PLP-R/W is taking too much of our lesson time."

Different teaching materials and curriculum: Some mentioned that the textbook reading materials used in GE classrooms were very different from the storybooks used in PLP-R/W. The former one "focused on text types and grammar structures", while the latter one "focused on the plot and storylines" (Extract 18). Thus, it might be difficult for teachers to resemble the teaching strategies in PLP-R/W in their GE lessons. Also, a teacher thought that the focuses, objectives and themes between the two curriculums were very different. GE lessons were more assessment-oriented, while PLP-R/W was not. The units of the textbooks and the storybooks could not match with each other. He felt that the curriculum was a bit segregated.

Extract 20

"Traditional GE lessons focuses mainly on how much knowledge you have learnt or can 'take away' after each lesson. For instance, we hope the students can be able to finish the homework given on that day. Yet, for PLPR lessons, it is hard to measure the amount of homework given to students because teachers give

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 15

homework irregularly, we may give a piece of homework and formative assessment every four lessons. So, comparatively, it is not obvious for me to measure the effectiveness of PLP-R/W."

Extract 21

"The themes of the units do not match with each other. The inconsistency of teaching materials put burden on students' learning as well as our workload."

Negative impression of PLP-R/W:
Unsuitability of the teaching materials to students' abilities and daily-life context.
Two teachers commented that the content of PLP-R/W was sometimes "a bit difficult" for students to learn in L2. One reason was that the context of the storybooks made weak connections to the daily life of her students with low-socio-economic status.

Extract 22

"Some students might find it hard to understand the story content. Especially the students in our school, their socio-economic status is not very high. Their background knowledge is very limited. For instance, many students have no background knowledge for the storybook "The Magic Science Museum" … and "Our cousin in Canada" because they haven't been to there or heard about it. When they have to understand the story in their second language, it is even harder."

Extract 23

"Our school students are extremely weak in English… Sometimes, I think there are too many new inputs to students that they are not able to internalize them. For example… the storybook "The Magic Science Museum" we are using… there are many new vocabulary items… like dinosaur room… mirror room… Science museum… touches… It is a bit demanding for the less-able students to learn the vocabulary in the storybooks as well as those in textbook."

From observation notes dated on 12th October 2015,

"When the NET asked the students who have been to the Hong Kong Science

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 16

Museum to put up their hands, most students appeared very confused. There was no one putting up their hands. After the LET translated the question, three students putting up their hands."

Incoherence between teachers' literacy instructional beliefs and the theoretical model of PLP-R/W. A LET did not share the same reading approach as the one in PLP-R/W. Before moving on to read storybooks with lots of texts, he thought that students should learn the basic phonetic skills first for motivational needs. He compared PLP-R/W with another reading program called "Read-Write-Inc", which emphasizes phonics instructions.

Extract 24

"Students need to learn phonics before reading. When they know how to decode the letters and sounds of the words, they will be able to read aloud the whole book. They will thus feel proud and motivated to read an English book, even though they may not necessarily know the meaning of the text. But it doesn't matter. They will want to understand a text at later stage."

"I don't think PLP-R/W focuses on phonics as much as "Read-Write-Inc." does. PLP-R/W emphasizes everything… the storyline, vocabulary development, phonics, comprehension etc. Students have to learn everything at the same time. Though, in Read-Write-Inc., phonics will first be taught for the entire term. When they know all the letters and sounds, they will begin to read some very simple stories in the second term. There will be hints and marks under some words in the stories to help students decode the words… I think that can help students read better…"

Discussion

The results showed participants hold ambivalent perceptions toward the program. Concerning the positive remarks, all participants suggested that they gained insights of teaching reading from the PLP-R/W, which helped prepare them to be more effective in teaching reading in ESL classrooms. Though, they reported there were only "some", "a few", "not many" changes in their practices in teaching reading. The

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 17

findings in this study does not seem to corroborate those by the NET Section (2013), which reported the LETs had "significant changes" in the way they taught reading and writing (p.91). The extent of the influence of PLP-R/W on LETs between the previous studies and the results of the present study differs. However, it is undeniable that LETs exhibited professional growth when engaging in PLP-R/W. They all gained insights of teaching reading and could mediate their professional experience with individual backgrounds and the context of the situations (Taggart & Wilson, 2015). Some LETs even changed their traditional ways of teaching reading and integrated elements of PLP-R/W in their mainstream ESL classrooms, showing that they were influenced by PLP-R/W to a larger extent than those who merely had a change in beliefs. Their change in beliefs and practices are mainly in three aspects, including the use of phonological awareness and phonics activities, differentiated questions in guided reading, and the teaching of high frequency words. For the adoption of phonological awareness and phonics activities, it is noteworthy that some LETs mentioned the advantages of phonics instructions in terms of students' development of reading and writing skills. For instance, they believed that phonics instructions are important and effective to help students "recognize and spell the words" (Extract 2) or "identify and spell the words more easily (Extract 3)". These evidences reflect that the LETs perceived the learning of reading and writing skills are related and parallel to each other (Farris et al., 2004), and the literacy learning process could be facilitated with the use of phonics instructional strategies such as "songs and interesting chants" (Extract 3). Their beliefs echo with the participants in the research by NET Section (2013) that the LETs no longer viewed reading and writing as two discrete items that need to be taught separately but together. Apart from the employment of phonics activities in GE curriculum, some LETs stated that they asked more different types of questions in guided reading and taught more high frequency words explicitly. They believed more questionings could facilitate students' thinking, and encourage their prediction and comprehension. Students would "understand the story much better" (Extract 6). Moreover, the explicit teaching of more high frequency words could also expand students' vocabulary bank and enhance their word recognition ability while reading (Extract 7). These pieces of evidence show that LETs were influenced by the balanced literacy approach advocated in PLP-R/W that they considered not only on the skill-based (teaching phonics) aspects of reading, but also the meaning-based aspects (teaching comprehension) of reading, exhibiting teachers' growth in teaching

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 18

reading (Duffy, 2001; Rasinski & Padak, 2004; Farris, Fuhler & Walther, 2004; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

The involvement of NET in PLP-R/W has also brought positive influences on students and LETs' learning. The NET was able to "provide support and professional development for…English teachers" in school, leading to professional growth (NET Section, 2013, p.8). The positive influence of the NET on LETs extends from the field of teaching reading to teaching on the whole. Some LETs learnt from NET's good teaching practices including her ability to guide students' thinking (Extract 4-6, 8), her patience in providing longer wait-time for students to respond in class (Extract 13), and her sensitivity to correct students' pronunciation (Extract 17). Similar to the findings by Griffin et al. (2007), LETs appreciated the cultural and linguistic background of the NET, as shown by their positive recognitions on the NET's style of teaching, which is more inquiry-based and students' centered (Extract 8), her rich experience in teaching the literacy program PLP-R/W (Extract 12), and her authentic British accent and accurate pronunciation (Extract 14-16). It is believed that LETs' professional growth is partly the result of community of practices (Wenger et al., 2002; Smith, 2009) because LETs always related their learning to their co-planning and co-teaching experience with the NET. Their effort in the co-construction and negotiation of meanings for effective teaching is believed to help enhance their professionalism, reaching one of the goals of PLP-R/W: to foster teachers' professional development (NET Section, 2013; Smith, 2009; Wenger et al., 2002).

As participants reported there were only "some", "a few", "not many" changes in their practices in teaching reading, factors that hinder their changes will be discussed. First, the packed English curriculum and inconsistency of the learning materials between GE lessons and PLP-R/W were regarded as the major obstacles for their changes in practices by LETs. A LET has asserted that "PLP-R/W is taking too much of [their] lesson time" (Extract 19). They just had half of the amount of English lessons to teach the textbook content and grammar (Extract 18). LETs' anxiety of the slow teaching progress of the textbook curriculum is demonstrated. Moreover, a LET mentioned the use of different sets of teaching materials "has put burden on students' learning as well as [LETs'] workload" (Extract 21). She thought the themes of the storybooks should match with those of the textbooks (Extract 21). From these data,

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 19

we could observe that the LETs focused on the textbook curriculum more than the PLP-R/W one. They regarded the use of textbooks as the primary source for English teaching and learning. It is believed that LETs' beliefs and practices have been greatly influenced by the educational context and system in Hong Kong, which has always been notorious for its spoon-feeding and assessment culture. Despite reading storybooks in PLP-R/W lessons can also help develop students' English language skills, LETs tended to be textbook-bound, exercise-based and exam-oriented in teaching (Extract 18-19). They hoped to spend more English lesson time on equipping students' textbook knowledge for examinations (Extract 19). They might give a lot of exercise to students, hoping that they could get good examination results. The influence of the long-established local educational culture might be one of the reasons why the LETs held back from adopting the innovative teaching methods in their reading ESL classrooms. It might be a long way away from reaching the goal of PLP-R/W—to avoid over-reliance on textbooks in developing students' language skills (NET Section, 2013).

Second, LETs' negative perception toward the reading materials might also be a factor that hinder their adaptation of the reading strategies in ESL classroom. Concerning the design of the storybook content, a LET thought it did not relate to the daily-life context of their students having a low socio-economic status (Extract 22), although the storybooks were purposefully written under Hong Kong setting and Chinese characters were designed to contextualize local students' learning in PLP-R/W (NET Section, 2013). She thought it would be hard for most of her students to establish personal connections with the text about the Science Museum, as they did not have relevant life experience of visiting the Hong Kong Science Museum in Tsim Sha Tsui, which is far from where they live. Similarly, the book "Our Cousin in Canada" for Key Stage 2 students with travelling and visiting overseas relatives as the theme seemed to deviate from the everyday context of her students. The LET's comment reflects her emphasis on the activation of students' prior knowledge in the process of reading (Farris et al., 2004). She doubted that, with the use of the reading materials from PLP-R/W, students might find it hard to construct meaning for effective communication as they lack relevant personal experience (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003; Roberts, 1996). Thus, PLP-R/W might exert less influence on the LET's beliefs in teaching, resulting in only a few changes in

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 20

practices of teaching reading.

The incoherence between teachers' literacy instructional beliefs and the theoretical model of PLP-R/W might also explain why some LETs' teaching beliefs and practices were not influenced much by the program. A LET believed that early readers "need to learn phonics before reading" (Extract 24). He thought "it does not matter [if] they [do not] know the meaning of the text" as "they will want to understand a text at later stage" (Extract 24). From his opinions, we could deduce that he believed in the bottom-up reading approach (Chall, 1967; Cremaso, Evan, Fox & Mckinnon, 2004; Farris et al., 2004), which is not coherent with the balanced literacy approach advocated in PLP-R/W (NET Secion, 2010). The mismatch of their beliefs in literacy theories might be a force underlying their negative perceptions of PLP-R/W and LETs' unemployment of the reading strategies in GE curriculum. If the LET remains to hold a biased view toward PLP-R/W, in the long run, his performance in teaching reading in PLP-R/W might be influenced as Leutwyler & Mantel (2014) suggested.

Based on the findings, advice and recommendations for the school English team, teachers, the NET Section and ATT are made. It is advised that the school English team should seek teachers' advice when selecting the appropriate reading programme. They should put teachers' literacy beliefs, and students' background needs and English proficiency level into careful considerations before and after the implementation of the literacy program. The school English teachers should also constantly evaluate the program effectiveness. If they find the program ineffective to students' learning, they should proactively voice their opinions to the school curriculum leaders in hopes of further program evaluation and actions, such as adopting another reading program. In the meantime, teachers are encouraged to stay open-minded toward different literacy approaches and try to allow more flexibility in teaching for the sake of students' effective language learning. As for the NET Section and ATT, it is advised that support on strengthening the linkage between the textbook content and the storybooks should be provided for the school so as to remedy the segregated curriculum, and meet the needs of the assessment system in Hong Kong. Also, the content of the storybooks should be carefully designed in order to address students' diverse background.

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 21

Limitations of the study

A limitation of the study is the nature of the sample. The research is limited to a school's setting. Given that PLP-R/W is a school-based English curriculum, teachers' perceptions toward it are dependent on many contextual factors such as the abilities of students and the school English curriculum and policies. For instance, some schools may replace the textbooks with the reading materials of PLP-R/W; therefore, some challenges identified in the discussion may not be applicable to their contexts. Moreover, there are few respondents. The data represents only a small group of teachers whose opinions may not be representative, which might limit the relevance of the results. Readers should take caution when extrapolating from the study results to different groups of teachers. For a more representative result that helps reflect the general perception of LETs toward PLP-R/W, future research should include a wider representation of samples. Perceptions of LETs from schools in different districts and with different approaches to programme implementation should be sought. Quantitative research on teachers' ratings on the components of PLP-R/W can also be conducted in future studies so that a clearer and detailed description on how the teachers perceive the literacy programme can be developed. To expand the field of research about PLP-R/W, future researchers can investigate the effectiveness of reading programs or practices adopted by local schools, and conduct a comparison study on the effectiveness of PLP-R/W and that of other literacy programs (such as Read, Write, Inc.) in order to provide insights and recommendations to the English curriculum developers.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated and interpreted participants' perceptions towards PLP-R/W with a focus on reading in light of their professional experiences. The results suggest that all participants gained insights of teaching reading from the effective reading strategies used and the NET's involvement in PLP-R/W. They exhibited professional growth in teaching reading and in teaching on the whole. Some participants showed changed practices in teaching reading in their ESL classrooms.

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 22

For instance, some used more phonological awareness and phonics activities, asked more different levels of questions in guided reading, and taught more high frequency words. Though, some had reservations about adapting the reading practices of PLP-R/W in their mainstream text-book based classroom due to packed GE curriculum, differences in teaching materials and teaching content, negative impression of PLP-R/W and incoherence in literacy instructional beliefs. Their perceptions have been discussed and elaborated in relation to educational theories, local context, professional experiences and the policies of PLP-R/W, in hopes to offer richer insights and add complexity to our understanding to their diverse views. It is hoped that this study can provide some insights for the curriculum developers as they evaluate the programme effectiveness, and consider teachers' professional development.

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An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
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Page 24

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An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 26

Appendix 1: Unit of Work of PLP-R/W for Key Stage 2 students

9. Unit Overview

Week 1 SR 1	Week 1 SW 1	Week 1 G.E. Lessons	Week 2 GR 1	Week 2 SR 2/SW 2	Week 2 G.E. Lessons

Week 1 SR 1

Session Outcomes
1. Recognise learned high frequency words, e.g. what, where, here, some, like, his.
2. Recognise new high frequency words: hot, up, very.
3. Recognise initial sound 'v'.
4. Understand and use present continuous tense to describe a picture.

Teaching of Reading
- Song, *Daddy's Taking Us to the Beach Tomorrow*
- New high frequency words: **hot, up, very**
- Phonics, 'v'
- Shared Reading: 1st and 2nd reading of the big book
- Whole class activity: Miming
- Group Work: Matching Activity Picture and Sentence Set 1 - 4
- Sharing and conclusion: read aloud one of the small books (8.1.1, 8.1.2 or 8.1.3)

Week 1 SW 1

Session Outcomes
1. Recognise nouns.
2. Construct a story map about the story.
3. Retell the story using a story frame.

Teaching of Writing
- *Alphabet Chant*, 'v'
- Vocabulary Building: mark nouns
- Shared Reading: 3rd reading of big book
- Independent Writing: Story Map 1
- Shared Writing: Writing Activity Sheet 1A, B, C – Story Frame 1
- Sharing and Reading Time: read a small book at their level

Week 1 G.E. Lessons must cover and consolidate the following:

GRAMMAR ITEMS
1. Use nouns or noun phrases to identify objects (SR 1, SW 1)
2. Use the simple present tense to talk about present states (SR 1, SW 1)
3. Use the present continuous tense (SR 1, SW 1)
4. Use the personal pronouns "he, she, they" as subjects to identify people and animals (SW 1)
5. Use the interrogative pronoun "what" (SW 1)
6. Use the interrogative adverb "where" (SW 1)
7. Use adjectives to describe people (SW 1)

CONTENT WORDS
Vocabulary for places and objects at a beach; 'ing' words for present continuous tense; and describing words for feelings

HIGH FREQUENCY WORDS
1. Revise some of the learned high frequency words, e.g. what, where, here, some, like, his, etc.
2. **hot, up, very**

PHONICS
Initial sound, 'v'

Week 2 GR 1

Session Outcomes
1. Recognise learned high frequency words.
2. Recognise initial sound 'v'.
3. Work on developing confidence with some reading strategies, e.g. identify and use letter/sound relationship.

Guided Reading
- Song, *Daddy's Taking Us to the Beach Tomorrow*
- High frequency words: revise learned high frequency words
- Revise phonics, 'v'
- Shared Reading: 4th reading of big book
- Activities in groups:
  - Guided Reading: small book (8.2.1, 8.2.2 or 8.2.3)
  - Sequencing Activity
- Sharing and conclusion

Week 2 SR 2/SW 2

Session Outcomes
1. Recognise more learned high frequency words
2. Recognise digraph 'sh'
3. Use picture clues to construct their own story

Teaching of Reading
- Song, *Daddy's Taking Us to the Beach Tomorrow*
- High frequency words: revise some learned high frequency words
- Phonics, 'sh'
- *Alphabet Chant*, 'sh'
- Shared Reading: 5th and 6th reading of big book
- Whole Class Activity: role play scenes from the story
- Group Work: story cards
- Sharing and conclusion
- Reading Aloud: one of the small books

Week 2 G.E. Lessons must cover and consolidate the following:

GRAMMAR ITEMS
1. Use nouns or noun phrases to identify objects (GR 1, SR 2/SW 2)
2. Use the simple present tense to talk about present states (GR 1, SR 2/SW 2)
3. Use the present continuous tense (GR 1, SR 2/SW 2)
4. Use prepositions to indicate position (GR 1, SR 2/SW 2)
5. Use adjectives to describe people, show position or order (GR 1, SR 2/SW 2)
6. Use phrasal verbs to indicate actions (SR 2/SW 2)

CONTENT WORDS
Vocabulary for places and objects at a beach; 'ing' words for present continuous tense; and describing words for feelings

HIGH FREQUENCY WORDS
Revise more of the learned high frequency words, choose from the high frequency word list in the back of the book

PHONICS
Initial sound, 'sh'

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 27

Appendix 2: Reading skills framework of PLP-R/W

PLP-R/W (KS1)

5.3.   Teaching Reading and Writing

A.   Teaching Reading

Reference: PLP-R/W (KS1), Teacher Manual Section 2, 3, 6

Note: The PLP-R/W includes a Reading Skills Framework that is based on the Reading Skills
from the Hong Kong English Language Curriculum Guide. This Framework divides the skills into
three levels. The levels are not necessarily developmental. These levelled skills were used to
help develop the learning and teaching activities in this unit and provide observational descriptors
for assessment

For more information about the different Teaching of Reading Strategies used in this Unit refer to
Section 2 of the Teacher Manual:

1.   Storytelling
2.   Reading Aloud
3.   Shared Reading
4.   Guided Reading
5.   Independent Reading
6.   Home Reading

For more information about Home Reading and parent support of Home Reading see Section 9
and 10.

The activities in the sessions for the book *At the Beach* teach Level I/II/III skills from the
Reading Skills Framework:

- **Phonological awareness activities – songs, chants and rhymes**
  - *Continue to develop receptive language.*
- **High frequency word activity – flashcards and sentence making**
  - *Recognise more high frequency words.*
- **Phonics activity – sound box, phonics fans or notebooks**
  - *Recognise more initial sounds in words.*
  - *Recognise onset and rime.*
  - *Identify and use all letter/sound relationship.*
  - *Recognise all initial sounds and some final sounds.*
- **Shared reading**
  - *Use pictures to interpret and predict content of text.*
  - *Recognise some reading terminology – letter, name/sound, picture, illustration, illustrator,
    author, title, cover, story.*
  - *Recognise small words in larger words.*
  - *Scan cover and text for information, e.g. pictures, letters, words.*
  - *Use pictures to assist reading unfamiliar texts.*
  - *Share personal responses about texts.*
  - *Retell a story with teacher assistance.*
  - *Join in during shared reading.*
  - *Read words and repetitive language patterns with teacher support.*
  - *Respond to simple tasks about characters, cause-effect, sequence of events and/or main idea.*
  - *Continue to develop receptive language.*
  - *Continue to develop expressive language.*
  - *Identify more language items, e.g. prepositions.*

- **Guided Reading**
  - *Continue to develop receptive language.*
  - *Recognise more initial sounds in words.*
  - *Identify and use more letter/sound relationship.*
  - *Use pictures to assist reading familiar texts.*
  - *Scan texts for information.*
- **Worksheet – Phonics Game**
  - *Identify and use more letter/sound relationship.*
  - *Continue to find pictures, letters and words in classroom
    environment and books.*
- **Whole Class Activities – miming, role play, transparency
  sheet, Post-its**
  - *Continue to develop receptive language.*
  - *Continue to develop expressive language.*
  - *Respond to simple tasks about characters, cause-effect,
    sequence of events and/or main idea.*
  - *Scan text for information, e.g. pictures, letters, key words,
    headings, sentences.*
- **Group Activities – matching activity, sequencing activity,
  Story Cards**
  - *Continue to develop receptive language.*
  - *Respond to simple tasks about characters, cause-effect,
    sequence of events and/or main idea.*
  - *Scan text for information, e.g. pictures, letters, key words,
    headings, sentences.*
  - *Relate pictures to words.*
  - *Continue to develop expressive language.*
  - *Read aloud accurately simple familiar texts.*
- **Independent Reading**
  - *Follow text from top to bottom and left to right.*
  - *Relate pictures to words.*
  - *Read aloud accurately simple familiar texts.*
  - *Continue to develop receptive language.*

An investigation of primary ESL teachers' perceptions toward the
Primary Literacy Programme - Reading and Writing (PLP-R/W)

Page 28

Appendix 3: Interview schedule and Questionnaire

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

I.   Arrival prior to interview to set the venue and recorder
II.   Greeting and self-introduction
III.   Introduction of the research topic, content, research methods, data uses and relevant confidential issues (e.g. privacy and honesty)
IV.   Beginning the interview by asking for some general background information (see Part A below)
V.   Body of interview (Answering research questions, see Part B below)
VI.   Ending the interview (Expressing gratitude, switching off recorder and discussion of follow-up participation, if needed)

Part A
Background information

Name of participant:_____
Sex: Female/ Male
Your teaching experience: _____ year(s)
Please list the role(s) that you hold in the school (e.g. P.2 English teacher, English Panel etc.):

_____

_____

Your PLPR/W teaching experience: _____ year(s)
The levels of students you have taught in PLPR/W: _____

Have you participated in any form of professional training about the Primary Literacy Programme – Reading and Writing (PLPR/W)?

YES/ NO. (Please circle your answer.)

If yes, please name the kinds of professional training(s) you have ever had and briefly describe about them (e.g. the nature, the organization, the hours of training … etc):
_____
_____
_____

Part B Research questions