An Exploration of Assessment Practices: English Paper 3 Listening and Integrated Skills

Carmel Alison Lam Foundation Secondary School

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School

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Background

Based on the implications revealed by the analysis of internal assessment results, the teachers at Carmel Alison Lam Foundation Secondary School identified students' learning needs for tackling the integrated tasks in Paper 3. The analysis of students' scripts helped the teachers specify three target areas for improvement:

- guiding students to understand the context of the tasks, identify keywords and predict the main ideas in the listening component;
- teaching students how to extract ideas from the Data File by understanding the genre features and language features of different text types;
- helping students learn and apply the different components and appropriate language features of formal texts.

Level

Secondary 1

Strategies Used

1. Using Visuals to Familiarise Students with the Contexts of the Tasks and Using Graphic Organisers to Help Students Organise Vocabulary Knowledge

Understanding the contexts in which tasks and relevant materials are presented is a prerequisite for students to make sense of task requirements and locate relevant information. The contexts of tasks are often presented in text format, which can present challenges to students attempting to form a mental picture of the situation. To help students anchor their understanding of contexts, visual aids, such as pictures showing the contexts of a singing contest and a formal meeting, were used to help students visualise the

people and actions involved in them. As Felder and Henriques (1995, p. 28) suggest, the use of visual aids is one of the most effective ways to accommodate the difference between teachers' teaching styles and students' learning styles or, in this case, the difference between the presentation of the context in the learning materials and students' learning styles. To help students organise their vocabulary knowledge of these contexts, a graphic organiser was used to help them categorise words. The use of the graphic organiser served two purposes: to help students learn and organise knowledge in a systematic manner and to provide a useful reference material enabling students to predict possible answers for the questions in the task.

2. Enhancing Students' Learning through Formative Assessment

Integrating assessment in the instructional process can help teachers identify the learning difficulties of students and adapt their teaching to respond to student needs in an informed manner. After analysing the milestones to be achieved for the completion of the final tasks, the teachers designed classroom assessments to help students gain a clear understanding of the success criteria and provide them with multiple practice exercises so that they could reflect on their performance based on the feedback given and strive to improve in a new attempt.

3. Revising and Making Scoring Visible to Students

The teachers made school-based adaptations to the success criteria and scoring system and communicated to students the message that every small step taken in learning is valued. Language and genre features showing regards for formality is outlined clearly to students. The award of score(s) for each small step that students took to show awareness of such features aimed to help students identify the specific targets to be achieved and motivate them to make an attempt.

Actions Taken

1. Designing Pre-Lesson Tasks to Help Students Acquire Contextual Knowledge and Making Use of a Graphic Organiser to Help Students Organise Key Ideas

a. Using visual aids in pre-lesson tasks to help students visualisze the context and learn key vocabulary items necessary for task completion

The teachers designed a matching exercise (Figure 1) on an e-learning platform. Students were provided with a picture showing different people in a singing contest, which was one

of the contexts presented in the integrated tasks. Students looked at the different people involved in the contest and matched the keywords by looking up the meaning of the words. A similar approach (Figure 2) was adopted to help students understand another context – a formal meeting – which was presented in one of the Data File sources.

Figure 1: Visual aids in the pre-lesson task
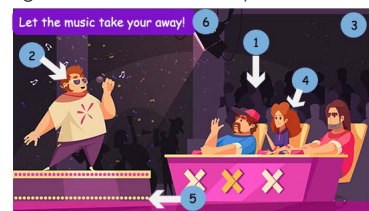
Figure 2: Visual aids in the pre-lesson task

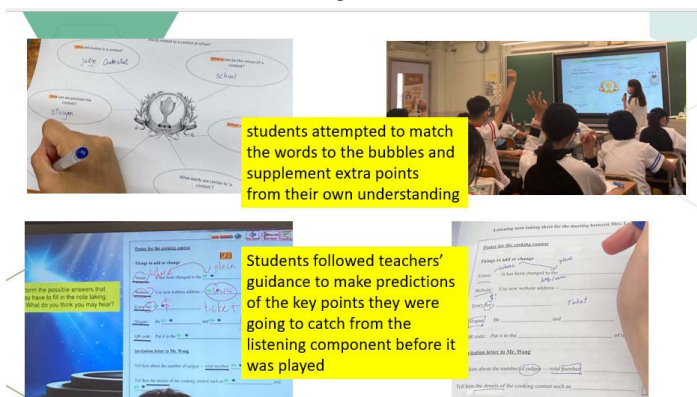## b.   Using graphic organisers to organise knowledge

According to Novak (1998), concept maps play a key role as a tool for representing the knowledge held by a learner, and constructing a concept map is one of the ways in which students can acquire specialised vocabulary. Having anchored students' understanding of the contexts in the pre-lesson task, the teachers used a graphic organiser – a semantic map (Figure 3) – to help students organise knowledge and predict possible answers by categorising different keywords. To check students' understanding, the teachers also encouraged students to think of other possible keywords that could be placed under each category.

Figure 3: Graphic organiser to help students organise key ideas

Words related to a contest at school
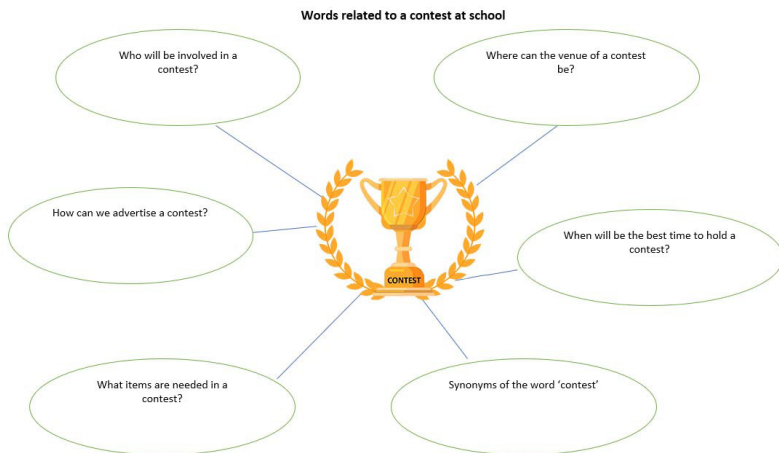
After consolidating the contextual knowledge with students by checking possible answers to the questions on the semantic map, the teachers guided students in making predictions about the type of key information to be presented in the audio component. For example, when students saw the cue word 'venue' in the question, they predicted that the word(s) they were going to hear in the listening component would be ones that referred to a place. Having made predictions with reference to the semantic map, many students were able to catch the key information in the while-listening stage.

Figure 4

students attempted to match the words to the bubbles and supplement extra points from their own understanding

Students followed teachers' guidance to make predictions of the key points they were going to catch from the listening component before it was played

2. Analysing the Genre and Language Features that Help Students Locate Key Information in a Text and Designing Formative Assessment that Allows Them to Transfer the Knowledge Learnt

Besides understanding unfamiliar contexts, another challenge identified by the teachers was understanding the more formal genres in the Data File and extracting key points from them without copying verbatim. The key reason why students were copying verbatim was their lack of ability to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant information presented in the Data File sources. By highlighting the types of key information needed and the kind of language features used in presenting them, the teachers aimed at helping students differentiate the key information to be extracted. They designed a worksheet (Figure 5) which guided students in learning the structure of meeting minutes and analysing the language features and their specific function(s) in expressing different kinds of key information. For example, the structure 'proposed / suggested + v-ing' is commonly used in meeting minutes to denote a suggestion raised in the meeting. Instead of spelling out these features to students, the teachers instructed students to make observations, and they then checked if the students could identify the functions of the language features (Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Students then transferred their knowledge in analysing other parts of the meeting minutes. The teachers adopted a colour-coding approach and assessed if students could identify the target language features and differentiate the different types of information presented in a short paragraph (Figure 8).

Figure 8
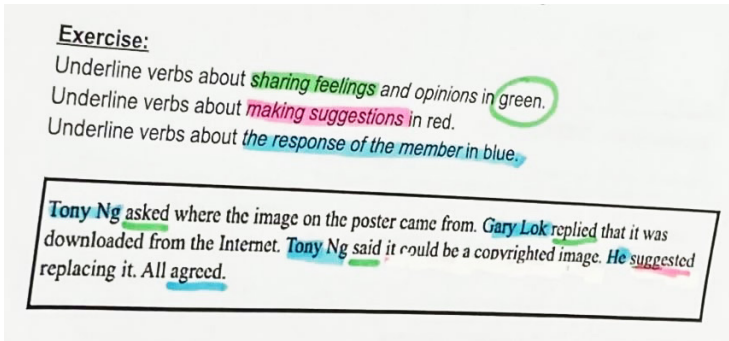
One other challenge that the teachers identified in helping students tackle integrated task was that students do not have sufficient practice in writing one text type before the syllabus rushes to introduce a new one to them. To ensure that students got sufficient practice and feedback before they were assessed, the teachers designed 'mini practices' to help students focus on one particular aspect each time (Figure 9). This not only allowed more time for students to comprehend, acquire and reflect on their learning at a deeper level, but also helped the teachers give more detailed feedback on specific areas for improvement.

Figure 9
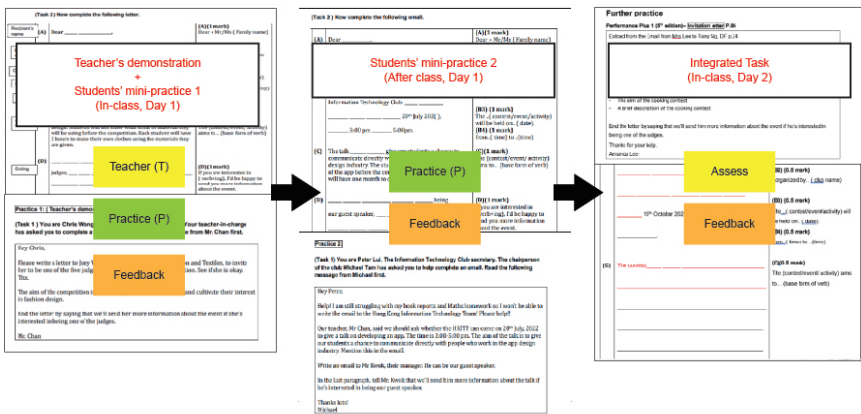
3. Refining the Scoring System to Help Students Visualise the Elements Assessed and Motivate Them to Make an Attempt

Martin-Kniep (2000) suggests that clear and descriptive performance criteria accompanied by rubrics and models serve the purpose of communicating expectations for students' achievement in ways that they can understand. With this in mind, the teachers refined the rubrics by allotting a mark for each target language feature used to connect ideas, expressing regard for formality (Figure 10). Different from the existing practice of awarding students a mark out of five marks for 'language' and two marks for 'appropriacy' which does not help students make sense of what constitutes to the different levels listed in the rubrics, the teachers refined the scoring system in a way that allowed students to clearly visualise the language features that contributed to the language and appropriacy domains. The teachers made these refinements with the aim of motivating students to make an attempt, as students understood that they would be awarded for every small step they took at the foundation-building stage.

This design was an example of both assessment for learning and assessment as learning, as both the teachers and students could use the clearly laid-out rubrics to evaluate learning and teaching and set clear goals for the next endeavour in follow-up practices.

Figure 10

Invitation letter rubrics (Total marks: 11 marks)	
(A) Dear Mr. Wong,	(A) (1 mark) Dear
(B) I am writing to invite you to be one of the judges for a cooking contest organized by our school Cooking Club. The contest will be held on 15th October 202( ), from 3:00 pm to 6:00pm. There will be three judges in total.	(B) (4 marks) (B1) I am writing to...(base form of verb) (B2) ..organized by.. (club name) (B3) The ..(contest/event/activity) will be held on.. (date). (B4) .from..(time) to ..(time)
(C) The cooking contest aims to test the cooking skills of our students. The contest is similar to the popular cooking show on TV--- The Top Chef. Students will not know what ingredients they will be cooking with before the contest. Each student will have 45 minutes to cook a dish using the ingredients they are given.	(C) (1 mark) The (contest/event/ activity) aims to... (base form of verb)
(D) If you are interested in being one of our judges, I'd be happy to send you more information about the event.	(D) (1 mark) If you are interested in (verb+ing), I'd be happy to send you more information about the event
(E) Yours sincerely,	(E1) (1 mark) Yours sincerely
Tony Ng	(E2) (1 mark) Name of sender
(NA)	(E3) (1 mark) Post

Impact

1. Student Level

Through thoughtfully designed pre-lesson tasks that included visual aids to help students visualise the contexts (e.g., a semantic map to organise vocabulary items), students could identify the types of answer that they would catch in the listening component. Allotting marks for each small step taken and making the scoring criteria visible to students increased students' willingness to make attempt. Comparing students' performances in the Term 1 and Term 2 listening exams, the teachers found that even students of lower English proficiency made more attempts in Term 2. Moreover, the overall passing rate for Part B of the listening paper increased, which was very encouraging to the teachers.

2. Teacher Level

The teachers shared how the exploration had given them new insights into the design of teaching materials, learning activities and assessments. In the collaborative lesson planning meetings, the teachers discussed the discoveries that they had made by analysing assessment data and identified challenges faced by students at different stages of learning. This helped them understand difficulties from the perspective of students and make data-informed decisions on task design, as well as refinements to the teaching schedule and the scoring system.

3. Curriculum Level

The participating teachers acknowledged that modifications to the curriculum were necessary to ensure sufficient opportunities for conducting formative assessments. The team decided to drop the practice of briefly introducing multiple target genres to students by reducing the number of genres to be covered each year, thus making space for deep learning and assessment for learning. With careful planning for vertical progression, the teachers aim to cover different target genres in depth at different levels.

Way Forward

With their solid experience of making data-driven refinements to existing classroom assessment practices and the confidence gained from seeing students' actual improvements, the participating teachers have become pioneers, sharing their explorations with fellow teachers at the school. The team is planning to transfer the insights gained from the collaboration to other levels to review and refine the listening curriculum.

References

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