Innovation in English language teaching in Hong Kong primary schools: One step forward, two steps sideways?

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a number of recent research studies, this article evaluates the process of implementation of a more student-centred task-oriented approach to English language teaching in Hong Kong primary schools. The reform, essentially a top-down system-level initiative strongly influenced by curriculum developments in the UK and Australia, called for sweeping changes to existing learning and teaching practices by promoting whole-person development, task-based syllabus design, criterion-referenced assessment and pair and group work. The article presents an analysis of the various stages of the curriculum decision-making process – from the intended curriculum as manifested in policy documents; through to the resourced curriculum, as exemplified in commercially published textbook resources; to the implemented curriculum – what teachers teach – and the experienced curriculum – what students learn. The article shows how the reform was progressively reinterpreted by the various stakeholders, resulting in a hybrid and evolving set of accommodations to local cultures which ultimately may be assimilated by them. The article identifies the key factors which have caused this slippage, including conflicting or unclear expectations, attitudes and beliefs at all levels, as well as a lack of real understanding of the established pedagogical cultures, and concludes with some implications for teaching, teacher education and curriculum innovation.

Introduction

From their first year of primary school, most Cantonese-speaking students in Hong Kong study English as a second language. As in many other countries, including Australia, English language teaching in Hong Kong has changed dramatically in the last few decades. In the post-Second World War period a variety of methods and approaches was used to teach English, with the grammar-translation method being officially phased out in the late 1960s and 1970s and replaced by the oral-structural activity approach. The activity approach was then replaced by the notional-functional communicative approach in the early 1980s (Evans 1996; Adamson and Morris 2000),

which in turn gave way to task-based learning. Task-based learning was formally introduced through the Targets and Target Related Assessment (TTRA) scheme in 1990, which subsequently evolved into the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC) in 1993. The TOC task-based framework was then adapted and incorporated into the Syllabus for English Language (Primary 1–6) (Curriculum Development Council 1997). The current curriculum guide for the English Language subject in Hong Kong schools (Curriculum Development Council 2002), drafted on the basis of wide consultation with key stakeholders in 1999–2000 (Curriculum Development Council 2000), has entrenched the concept of task-based learning (along with targets) as the core conceptual framework for the curriculum. However, task-based learning in Hong Kong is essentially a top-down system-led initiative strongly influenced by curriculum developments in the UK and Australia (Carless 1999, 2001; Adamson, Kwan and Chan 2000). It has always been controversial in schools because it challenges traditional conceptions of good teaching and learning. The concept of tasks with an authentic purpose and context, requiring extensive student interaction and experimentation, contradicts long established pedagogic practices and community attitudes which emphasise the accumulation of academic knowledge and skills within strong subject boundaries.

Using a framework adapted from Marsh and Willis (1995), this article traces the implementation of task-based learning in Hong Kong primary schools through the various stages of the curriculum decision-making process – from the intended curriculum as manifested in policy documents; through to the resourced curriculum, as exemplified in commercially published textbook resources; to the implemented curriculum – what teachers teach – and the experienced curriculum – what students learn. The article provides a meta-analysis of recent research, drawing on a range of primarily qualitative studies that have been conducted into various aspects of the implementation of task-based learning in Hong Kong primary schools in the last few years which gathered questionnaire, interview, and observational data from key stakeholders including policy-makers, publishers, textbook writers, teachers and learners. The article describes the changing interpretations of task-based learning evident in the different levels of implementation. The article demonstrates how tasks in English classrooms rarely meet the criteria of purposefulness and contextualisation that define TOC tasks at the level of intended curriculum because of clashing teacher and student beliefs, pedagogical constraints, and conflicting or unclear expectations. The article concludes by identifying the incongruence between the intended, resourced, implemented and experienced curriculum and by discussing the implications for teaching, teacher education and curriculum innovation.

Task-based learning in Hong Kong primary schools:
Its background and rationale

The TOC Program of Study for English Language (Curriculum Development
Council 1994: 4) set out the aims for the subject as follows:

> To develop an ever-improving capability to use English to think and communi-
> cate; to acquire, develop and apply knowledge; to respond and give expression
> to experience; and within these contexts, to develop and apply an ever-increasing
> understanding of how language is organised, used and learned.

TOC was made up of three main conceptual elements: targets, tasks and
task-based assessment. Targets were classified into three different dimensions:
interpersonal, knowledge and experience. This classification was a dramatic
contrast to the previous syllabus which had focused on the four skills of
reading, writing, listening and speaking, the usual way the subject was divided
for teaching purposes in the school. In addition, instead of a set program of
discrete linguistic items or skills, the TOC syllabus was organised around
tasks which were designed to meet the needs of individual students
(Education Department 1994: 7). The target and task-based approach was
developed to encourage a learner-centred, process-oriented constructivist view
of learning, exemplified by the five cross-curricular principles of learning
promoted by TOC: problem-solving, reasoning, inquiring, communicating
and conceptualising. Tasks were defined in the TOC context as having the
following characteristics (Education Department 1994: 18): a purpose beyond
the display of knowledge or practice of discrete skills; a context (that is, realistic
uses of the subject inside and beyond the classroom); a process of talking,
thinking and doing by pupils, demanding the integration of knowledge,
strategy and skill; and a product that was more than just language.
According to the TOC developers, Clark, Scarino and Brownell (1994: 40),
uncontextualised practice of discrete language items or skills (such as a
grammar structure or pronunciation) were exercises, not tasks. Activities
which place structured linguistic practice within a context are termed for
the purposes of the analysis in this article as 'exercise-tasks'.[1]

The TOC developers described their framework as being derived from
the communicative approach which was already well established in schools
(Education Department 1994). Sze (1992), however, found that the com-
municative approach promulgated in the 1981 English Syllabus (Curriculum
Development Council 1981) had not been developed on the basis of any
research on language teaching and learning in the local context, nor was any
research of this kind done before TOC was developed (Chan 2000). At the
time of the TOC's development, primary English classrooms were still being

described as dominated by the three 'Ts': teachers, textbooks and tests (Adamson and Morris 2000; Mok and Ko 2000). Task-based learning was seen as requiring a significant shift of pedagogy 'from teacher-centred to pupil-centred, from textbook-based to task-based teaching and from summative assessment to formative assessment' (Ko 2000: 84).

The extent of the pedagogic shift required is exemplified by the place of dictation in Hong Kong primary schools. In the English language syllabus for primary schools in 1981 dictation was hardly mentioned. Yet dictation is entrenched in Hong Kong schools, 'a time-honoured routine practice which has passed down the generations to help teachers show they have discharged their duties' (Chiang 2002: 14). Parents, students, teachers and the general community all appear to have a strong belief in the role of dictation in language development. Teachers believe that dictation motivates students to revise and perfect their vocabulary and spelling (Cheung 1993). In most primary schools dictation has become part of the scheme of work, con-tributing to learners' formal results and recorded on their school report cards as an independent element (Chiang 2002: 5). In a traditional read-dictate-read dictation lesson, the teacher normally stands in front of the class and reads the text while students write down the exact words without any peer inter-action. Hong Kong teachers almost always provide pupils with 'seen' dictations, thus most texts are drawn from pupils' textbooks or set readers. As a result dictation is seen by its detractors as basically a textbook-based rote memory exercise, a test device rather than a technique for teaching and learning (Chiang 2002).

In the current primary English syllabus (Curriculum Development Council 1997: 74) teachers are advised to make use of different genres in conducting dictation lessons and a number of interactive task-like activities are recommended such as focus spelling, missing punctuation, and picture dictation. Educational officials try to discourage the overuse of dictation:
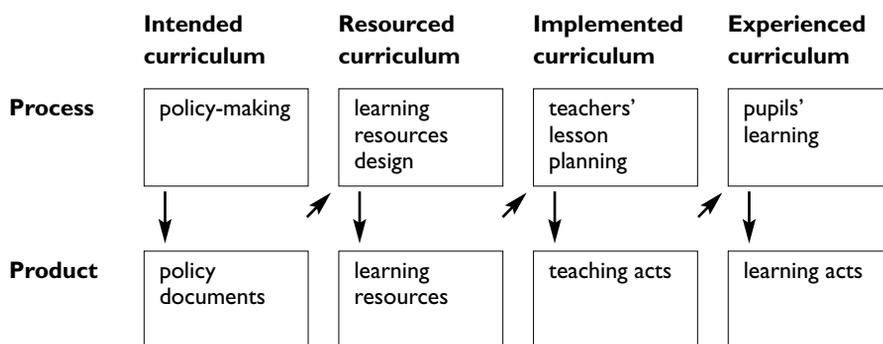
> Dictations should not be given too much attention. Not every word found in the learning materials or textbooks must be learnt by heart by the students. Do not over assess by giving quizzes and dictations of long passage at the end of each unit or after each learning objective has been covered.[2]

However, Chiang argues the opposite occurs with dictation in many Hong Kong primary schools. This raises the question of what happens when a new pedagogic approach is strongly advocated in schools. Do the textbook writers, teachers, students and their parents obediently follow the dictates of the system or do they subvert it? The next section will look at the curriculum implementation process and the likely reactions of the different stakeholders.

The curriculum decision-making process

According to White (1988: 136) 'any deliberate effort or decision to adopt new aims (or ends) and new methods (or means), perceived as new and intended to bring about improvement, is a decision for innovation'. Markee (1997: 46) argues that 'curricular innovation is a managed process of development change whose principal products are teaching (and/or testing) materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters'. However, adoption is only one possible response to innovation and not all stakeholders may perceive innovation as improvement (Fullan 1991). Davison (forthcoming) identifies six different responses to curriculum change: resistance including explicit rejection of the innovation; pseudo-compliance with little or no alteration to underlying practices and beliefs; compliance, where the innovation is assimilated without significantly altering existing practice; accommodation, where there are some adjustments made to incorporate aspects of the innovation into existing practices; and convergence and creative co-construction, where the most significant elements of the innovation are integrated into existing practice to create something fundamentally new.

Curriculum innovation is particularly problematic, given that it is clearly a complex and interactive process with different levels of implementation required (see Figure 1 below; Tong, Adamson and Che 2000: 146, adapted from Johnson 1989). Hence there may be slippage between levels, leading to changes in the conceptualisation of the intended innovation.

	Intended curriculum	Resourced curriculum	Implemented curriculum	Experienced curriculum
Process	policy-making	learning resources design	teachers' lesson planning	pupils' learning
Product	policy documents	learning resources	teaching acts	learning acts

(Tong, Adamson and Che 2000: 146)

Figure 1: Key steps in curriculum decision-making

In curriculum innovation in Hong Kong, the three key stakeholders in curriculum decision-making other than the policy-makers and curriculum developers are the textbook writers,[3] the teachers and the students (and their parents). Curriculum documents set out the intended curriculum and comprise

a delineation of content and recommended pedagogical approaches. The Education Department (ED)[4] is responsible for the production of these documents but their relationship with textbook publishers is distant. According to Tong et al (2000: 149–50)[5] the ED, as a civil service branch wishing to appear impartial when dealing with commercial companies, issues standard guidelines to publishers and then vets new resources for inclusion on the official approved list that is circulated to schools. The publishers have to consider commercial factors as well: decisions about textbook adoption are made by individual teachers, which means publishers have to satisfy the requirements of those at the chalk face.[6] This explains the incongruence that may appear between the intended and the resourced curriculums (Adamson and Lee 1994).

Teachers also play a key role in determining the success of a curricular innovation. The implemented curriculum can be far removed from the intended curriculum, particularly if inappropriate change strategies are used; if the innovation itself is inappropriate; if insufficient consideration is given to the context in which the reform is to take place; and if the social, economic and political environment does not support the change (Morris 1998: 120). Most Hong Kong primary teachers are under-qualified and much younger than their Western peers, and hence may lack confidence and be overly dependent on school administrators and external agencies for guidance and professional support.

Students (and their parents) are the third key players in curriculum reform. In Hong Kong students are renowned for their hard work and long hours toiling over their books. It is a very stratified and elitist school system in which students compete ferociously for secondary school places and only a small minority are permitted to qualify for university entrance. According to Chiang (2002: 14), even primary school students struggle hard to get high scores, and 'less able pupils work even harder to achieve satisfactory results to satisfy the expectations of their parents and teachers. Pupils are either under stress or deliberately give up … particularly those who are frequently unable to do well'. This raises the question of the effect of such a radical curriculum reform on the end-users – the students (and their parents).

Results: One step forward, two steps sideways?

FROM THE INTENDED TO THE RESOURCED CURRICULUM

Slippage between the intended and the resourced curriculum and accommodations to teachers' existing practices and beliefs is revealed in the data collected from publishers and textbook writers over the course of the TOC implementation. According to Tong et al (2000: 151), the intention of the

TOC was that teaching materials should take many different forms, and 'should be less subject-bound, graded according to complex linguistic, cognitive and affective criteria, and flexible in application'. The TOC developers defined materials as 'any published or unpublished material in any medium, and equipment used for supporting teaching and learning … [including] human resources such as teachers and librarians, within the school and community' (Clark, Scarino and Brownell 1994: 43). Such materials are seen in TOC documents as performing an integral role in supporting the process of teaching, learning and assessment (Education Department 1994). It is assumed textbooks, if needed, will be organised around 'holistic communicative acts (based on the pupils' need, interests and ability) that serve as the vehicle for pupils to learn'. Activities focusing on the mastery of discrete language items would play a supportive role, rather than the central position they occupied under the previous pedagogy.[7]

Tong et al (2000) analysed the nature, role and organisation of learner-centred activities in three sets of textbooks designed to support TOC primary English.[8] They categorised the activity (task, exercise-task or exercise), identified its relationship to the TOC learning targets, and analysed the macro-structure of the textbook and the frequency of certain tasks. They found no major differences from non-TOC predecessors. The textbook was the core, with a variety of resources available, such as workbooks, wall-pictures and audio-cassette tapes. There was little evidence of innovation in the range of resources, and as their detailed content analysis found, no major shift towards task-based learning. The role of tasks was really an add-on to language practice, rather than serving as the central organising unit of the syllabus. Many activities were exercise-tasks in the form of language games or contrived activities, such as asking pupils to count the number of objects in their school bag, or drawing a captioned picture illustrating how people use their five senses.

When interviewed, the publishers identified a number of difficulties in resourcing TOC, including lack of experience and expertise in developing task-based materials, unclear, even contradictory expectations, and a concern about undertaking a high risk investment by supporting a reform rather than meeting market expectations. Publishers retained what teachers felt were good elements of pre-TOC series and added new material. They also responded to teachers' feedback, though they felt some teachers' conceptual understanding of TOC was still vague. One publisher kept the Pupil's Book in a conventional form as reassurance for teachers and pupils. The published resources were still based around textbooks as that was more economical (class sets of books realise larger profits than a single CD-ROM or video) and

durable, as well as conforming to the ascribed status traditionally accorded to books in Chinese society (Adamson and Lee 1994). There was also a lack of faith in the direction of the reforms, partly due to their perceived lack of clarity in conception. Chan (2002) also cites the case of an English textbook editor who commented in 1999 that the TOC learning objectives were too unclear to develop textbook materials, noting in 2001 that the new curriculum was still very unclear. This raises the question as to the effect on teachers of the reform.

FROM THE RESOURCED TO THE IMPLEMENTED CURRICULUM

Slippage between the resourced and the implemented curriculum and accommodations to established pedagogic practices and beliefs is revealed in the data collected from teachers and classrooms over the course of the TOC implementation. In a study of teachers' responses to the introduction of task-based learning, Chan (2002) found that teachers could not make sense of the TOC due to its overly rigid and complex structure and very theoretical orientation. When teachers started to feel the ideas espoused by reformers were incompatible with reality, many switched back to traditional approaches. A minority of teacher respondents trusted their own experience and judgment more than the TOC prescriptions and created their own changes. The majority of them struggled to comply with the 'correct' pedagogic approach implied by the TOC system, and according to Chan (2002), lost direction and confidence as a result.

Tong et al (2000) also found through a study of teachers in 19 TOC primary schools over a three-year period that the dominant types of activities observed were exercise-tasks. Some uncontextualised grammar exercises – mainly structure drills – and some tasks were also sometimes recorded. Exercise-tasks commonly took the form of language games or activities that required the repeated use of certain structures such as 'Who is your favourite singer?', 'Where do you live?', 'What colour is your schoolbag?' and so on. The survey had no context or purpose other than practising wh- questions. Some aspects of traditional English language teaching, such as spelling tests and dictation, were retained as an important component of teaching and learning, although one would have expected their role to be downplayed in task-based learning. One teacher tried to contextualise a dictation by choosing a telephone message. Tasks mainly comprised surveys, information exchange and role plays in given social settings and served primarily as activities for extra, contextualised practice of linguistic structures.[9] One trend that was observed in a number of lessons was the practice of giving tasks as homework, leaving class time for the practice of language items.

Thus the resourced and implemented curriculum shared a very weak interpretation of task-based learning and the use of hybrid exercise-tasks. This did not simply arise from teachers following the textbook resources; in many cases the materials and activities designed by teachers themselves shared the same characteristics. Most teachers interviewed felt that there had been a small shift in their pedagogy since the introduction of TOC in English Language. This shift had been towards the greater use of contextualised practice. There had been some positive results: several teachers noticed that the students were participating more actively and enthusiastically in their own learning since they had adopted TOC. This had been facilitated by the use of group work or pairwork in the lessons.

Teachers' reasons for not wholeheartedly embracing the curricular reform were varied. Many teachers were comfortable with their old ways of teaching and did not want to abandon them completely, particularly, as some pointed out, as TOC had no track record. Other teachers said they were worried that task-based learning might create a lot of noise, which the school head may think was caused by poor classroom management. There was also the feeling that task-based learning took a long time to organise, and that there was insufficient time in a single lesson. Too much task-based learning was thought to lead to boredom. One teacher commented on the limitations of finding suitable contexts for tasks for young children. Her colleague, who actually supported task-based learning, resented the pressure she felt from ED officials to use the pedagogy, noting cynically that 'a task a day, keeps the inspector away', while others said that they carried out TOC in their subject even though they were not fully convinced of its merits – they had been cajoled by senior colleagues into adopting the reform. According to Tong et al (2000), a major complaint made by teachers was the lack of suitable materials, including TOC textbooks, to guide them in using task-based learning. Designing materials themselves was very time-consuming, even though some schools had arranged for resource banks to be set up, or materials development workshops to take place.

Primary Three teachers mentioned another constraint on their implementation of TOC (Tong et al 2000): the lack of clear information concerning the high-stakes test in Primary Six that determined the pupils' placement in secondary schools. Teachers were loath to abandon their conventional ways of teaching lest their students should suffer if the format of the tests did not reflect task-based learning. Overall, the teachers' response to TOC in English Language was one of accommodation as features of the new curriculum were assimilated into their regular practice without major changes to their beliefs or pedagogy.

FROM THE IMPLEMENTED TO THE EXPERIENCED CURRICULUM

There is little research of the effect of task-based learning and TOC on those it was intended to help: Hong Kong students. As there have been so many other changes in the Hong Kong education system, it is hard to isolate TOC as a factor, although some in the community do point to it as a reason for declining English standards. However, the experimental nature of the reform, and its uncertain effect on long term learning, are certainly noted by students as young as ten years old (and by their parents). Chiang (2002), in an action research study of dictation in a Primary Six Hong Kong primary school, found that even when she tried to accommodate the new curriculum into her existing practice by developing innovative dictation activities, her students wanted to retain traditional dictation exercises because they were more confident of getting high scores in the end of year examination. Although 85 per cent of the students were positive about the change they had experienced in their dictation lesson, and all commented that they found the new activities less stressful and more interesting and helpful to learning, they were worried about their scores. They were also concerned about their parents' negative attitudes to any curricular change, demonstrating the power a fairly conservative educational community can have on the implementation of curricular reform.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that in the process of implementation, task-based learning in Hong Kong primary schools has been progressively reinterpreted in ways that have mitigated its potential to change classroom beliefs and practices dramatically. The implementation process has instead resulted in a hybrid and evolving set of accommodations to local cultures which ultimately may be assimilated by them. Slippage in the original conceptualisation of task-based learning occurred at all levels as policy intentions were reinterpreted and re-conceptualised by the key stakeholders. Publishers incorporated some of the key aspects of the reform, but their concerns with marketing led to a pedagogy that was more finely tuned to the expectations of teachers than curriculum developers. In turn, teachers responded to curricular initiatives in different ways depending on their existing beliefs and practices, contextual support and professional expertise and understanding of the key concepts. Students and parents in turn were influenced by highly pragmatic concerns such as secondary school selection and uncertainty as to the consequences of the reform for academic advancement. In the case of TOC, the resourced and implemented curriculums were not very congruent with the planned curriculum. The experienced curriculums were even less so. As Tong et al (2000: 168) conclude:

> As a result of this sequence of mutual adaptations, a hybrid of pre-existing and new practices emerged. The hybrid represented a synthesis of aspects of the reform which were easily assimilated and conventional practices that were still held to be valid by practitioners, no matter how demonised such practices might be in official documents … This underscores the potential difficulty of policy-makers promoting an 'ideal' curriculum, which, although it may incorporate what are considered as the best practices internationally, might not be well suited to the particular environments in which various stakeholders operate.

The problem was that TOC was not grounded in any local experiences and educational realities: it was very much a 'Western-thought package' (Marton 2000: 287). Moreover, its theoretical framework was perceived as unintelligibly complex (Morris et al 1996) and not really pedagogically sound (Marton 2000). According to Marton (2000: 280) 'TOC did not equip those teachers who were driven by its urge to change with either theoretical or material tools for handling various pedagogical situations in accordance with the direction suggested'. Similarly, Chan (2002: 239) argues that 'the TOC aftermath, according to anecdotal evidence, is still bothering the textbook publishers, which in turn affects teaching and learning because the textbook culture in Hong Kong schools is still strong'. He cites the case of a teacher who agonises over her school head's demand that they adhere rigidly to a teaching schedule, which prescribes meticulously which part of the textbook is to be covered in each lesson. This highlights the problem of introducing a very creative, interactive curricular reform into a pedagogic culture which has been criticised extensively for its suppression of creativity and compartmentalisation of learning and teaching (Chan 2002). It also demonstrates the impossibility of implementing a top-down reform without grassroots understanding and support (Fullan 1991).

Some of the implications of this slippage are fairly obvious and are already being addressed in some areas. All teachers are being encouraged to gain an initial teaching qualification in English language teaching and to undertake professional development in order to strengthen their confidence and professional expertise. Teachers in pre-service education courses are undertaking immersion programs in countries like Australia, including first hand experience with task-based learning in schools. The entire education system, together with its rigid assessment system, is being overhauled, and concepts such as life-long learning and creativity are being widely promulgated (Curriculum Development Council 2001). At the same time researchers "are attempting to understand more clearly the particular strengths and weaknesses of home-grown pedagogic practice, to create a stronger bridge between new ideas and existing realities. However, the fundamental problem of successfully implementing an innovation remains – it is the entire process

(including the key players), not just the product, that has to monitored, evaluated and supported.

NOTES

1   The conception of task varies widely in the ELT literature with much argument over the question of controlled versus authentic language use (see Nunan 1989; Prabhu 1990; Stern 1992; Skehan 1996; Breen and Candlin 2001). However, a discussion of the theoretical implications of this debate for task-based learning in Hong Kong is beyond the scope of this article.

2   Statement by Chau Wai-Ming, a senior officer of the English Section of the Hong Kong Education Department at a teachers' workshop on 27 June 2001, cited in Chiang 2002: 16).

3   As curricular artefacts, textbooks are interpretations of the intended curriculum and its pedagogical approaches, either explicit (eg presentations of concepts to be grasped) or implicit (the nature and arrangement of learning activities, for example), and a hidden curriculum (such as the values and meanings of the dominant culture). However, their nature is circumscribed to some extent by political, economic and educational considerations (Tong et al 2000).

4   Recently restructured and retitled Department of Education and Manpower.

5   Tong et al investigated the interpretation of tasks by various stakeholders in the Target Oriented Curriculum. They focused on three levels of curriculum, adapting Marsh and Willis's (1995) categorisation: the intended, or planned, curriculum as manifested in policy documents, syllabuses, etc; the resourced curriculum, which is the curriculum as interpreted by writers and publishers of materials intended for classroom use; and the implemented curriculum, which is concerned with what actually happens in the classroom. The study comprised a qualitative analysis of sample materials, textbooks and other resources purporting to be task-based; English language lesson observations carried out over a three-year period in fifteen primary schools; and interviews with publishers, textbook writers, teachers and pupils.

6   Textbooks have long been the de-facto curriculum in Hong Kong schools and play a much more influential role than they do in Australian ESL classrooms.

7   According to Tong et al (2000), the previous syllabus promoted the presentation-production-practice (P-P-P) approach, which was based on a linear syllabus of linguistic items. A typical P-P-P lesson would involve the teacher selecting a language item to be mastered (eg the present continuous tense). This item would be presented in a context if possible, such as a dialogue describing a picture. The teacher would then highlight the features of the language item. The next stage would comprise controlled practice in the form of drills or form-focused exercises. Opportunities for free production of the language item by the pupils would then be provided by the teacher.

8   In this study (Tong et al 2000), a sequence of activities, rather than a single activity, might form the basis for analysis. For example, a sequence that includes a focus on discrete language items but then moves to a purposeful, holistic conclusion would

be viewed as a task. The main criterion for determining the nature of the activity as an exercise, exercise-task or a task is the final product or learning objective.

9   The following is an example from a series of Primary One lessons (Tong et al 2000). The sentence patterns *There are* and *They are* were first presented by the teacher, who used the context of animals on a farm. Pupils were shown picture cards: they had to name the animals depicted and say how many were in the picture. Next they were taught a poem about animals, which they recited, and then they were given a worksheet on which they had to write down the number of animals shown and to colour them. Next, they were given a song sheet for 'Old MacDonald had a farm' on which they had to fill in the missing number (eg 'On that farm he has <u>two</u> donkeys'). They concluded by singing the song. Throughout, the main focus was on aspects of language: vocabulary, grammatical structures and numbers; the holistic activities (the poem and the song) provided a context or light relief, rather than being the central aim of the lesson.

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