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## **A case study of a small-group teacher-led pull-out EAL intervention for Form 2 pupils in a Hong Kong Direct Subsidy School**

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### **Abstract**

In an English Medium Instruction (EMI) school all lessons and assessments are conducted in English, irrespective of the students' native language or country of residence. When the school admits a student with limited English, policy dictates that it must provide the resources to improve their English skills. The literature around language development and school-based interventions presents a range of ways that this support can be provided. This case study asks to what extent a small-group teacher-led pull-out EAL intervention can help Form 2 pupils in an EMI Hong Kong Direct Subsidy School (DSS) develop in English? Using a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations and secondary data, the study concludes that there is value in the small-group approach, but that the school's lack of capacity to continue the support beyond the initial upskilling in Form 2 means that the consequences of this decision may become visible in senior years when students need to prepare for their public exams. It recommends that lesson activities focused on listening and speaking skills and reading and writing tasks must be further developed and implemented. It further suggests that technology may be a useful way to do this.

### **Introduction**

#### **Context of school and region**

The DSS (Direct Subsidy School) school where the intervention takes place is a diverse environment that presents a unique challenge for educators, as it is the only EMI (English Medium Instruction) school in this community. "About 62% of the students have an international background, coming from 40 countries, and about 51% of the Form 1 students come from local primary schools where Chinese is the main medium of instruction. Moreover, 31% of the students speak Chinese at home, while the rest speak English or other languages, totalling 20 different languages spoken by the students" (Annual School Report, 2022, p.23).

#### **Background to the intervention**

The school is not only aware of its unique context but also committed to providing quality education that helps every student to excel in their academic goals (Placement School, 2022). Hence it has developed a school policy to identify students who need extra English support to adjust to an EMI school. The school policy established that before enrolling in the school, all students must pass an internal school interview, take an English test, and attend an enhanced English course that is taken in the school on Saturdays for eight weeks, and every session is 1.5 hours long (Learning and Teaching Policy B12, 2022). The EAL (English as an Additional Language) Coordinator, the Head of the English Department, the Literacy Coordinator and the Heads of Local/International Curriculum are the school staff responsible for the EAL intervention, and therefore they are the ones that decide who needs to attend the extra English lessons (Learning and Teaching Policy B12, 2022).

### **The learning issue**

Being an EMI school means that all lessons are conducted in English, and all the internal and external exams (except for language subjects) must be taken in this language. When the school admits a student with limited English skills, it commits to provide the resources to improve their skills as part of their in-depth and all-round support for students' growth policy (School Development Plan, 2020 – 2023).

For the three students enrolled in this case study EAL intervention, English is not their first language, and the three of them were studying in primary schools where their mother tongue (Cantonese and Japanese) were used as the medium of instruction. Although they studied English as a second language in kindergarten and primary schools, their English academic competence in the four key areas was not fully developed in all subjects, such as Mathematics, Science or History.

Consequently, they were selected to start EAL pull-out lessons when they joined the school in Form 1, and they continued with these lessons in Form 2. Currently, they take weekly 55 minutes lessons on Fridays led by the EAL teacher coordinator and the English Teacher Assistant.

The research question underpinning this case study asks to what extent can a small-group teacher-led pull-out EAL intervention help Form 2 pupils in an EMI (English Medium of Instruction) Hong Kong Direct Subsidy School (DSS) to develop the four key areas in English in order to access the curriculum in this school?

### **Literature review**

#### **The importance of strong English skills to succeed in a Hong Kong EMI Secondary School**

The Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) established that a solid and coherent English Language Education curriculum is one of the pillars for a smooth transition between education key stages, as developing English language knowledge and skills is indispensable to cultivating Hong Kong students' future studies (EDB, 2022). In 2017, the EDB established "the English Language Education Key Learning Area (KLA)" as an integral part of Hong Kong English school curriculums aiming to provide all-round English education for students' future studies and professional careers, personal, social and leisure time as well as international competitiveness (EDB, 2017).

This educational approach is even more relevant to EMI schools where all the lessons are conducted in English, and all the internal and external exams (except for language subjects) must be taken in this language. The school endorsed the EDB goals and has promoted high expectations for students to develop a high level academic use of the English language to access the excellent quality education provided in the school and assist students in performing according to their abilities in all school subjects (School Development Plan, 2020 – 2023).

In secondary education, students are required to understand and transmit more abstract and complex knowledge involving increasing language and cognitive demands to manipulate exceptional language vocabulary and structure. In addition, students in EMI schools also need to develop rhetoric for academic purposes and learn subject-specific vocabulary and complex sentence structures to enhance their learning across the curriculum (EDB, 2022).

At this educational key stage, literacy is not only the student's ability to read and write. Schools must teach new literacy skills in their syllabuses, such as the use of "different media and technological tools for effective communication and information management" (English Language Education Section Curriculum Development Institute Education Bureau HKSAR, 2021, p. 3). Teaching these new literacy skills requires schools to adapt their curriculum and offer professional development opportunities for teachers to increase their capacities to promote language across the curriculum (EDB, 2022).

### **Benefits of EAL to increase cross-curricular learning and understanding**

Regarding EAL students, more emphasis and effort must be put into increasing their English cross-curricular learning and understanding as they have different needs than non-EAL learners. Moreover, it is also important to highlight that the EAL students form a heterogeneous group with different English level proficiency as they are those for whom English is not their first language and at home speak another language (Hutchinson, 2018). This description complicates defining homogenous EAL policies, as schools must be aware of the whole region's demographics and the school community context. However, the reference school for this case study is committed to providing quality education to every student to excel in their academic goals (Placement School, 2022). Therefore, they have developed a versatile and adaptable EAL program suitable for students to be part of different interventions depending on their EAL needs. As soon as a student with limited English skills is admitted to the school, the leadership team and the staff in charge of EAL interventions establish the EAL program they will attend as part of their in-depth and all-round support for students' growth policy (School Development Plan, 2020 – 2023).

In order to demonstrate English teaching methods in the classroom that take into account a variety of students' abilities, interests, and learning styles, the Hong Kong English Language Education Section Curriculum Development Institute Education Bureau HKSAR published a Catering for Learner Diversity in the Senior Secondary English Classroom Introduction in 2011 (English Language Education Section Curriculum Development Institute Education Bureau HKSAR, 2011). In addition to these methods, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council also published an EAL guide to suggest teaching strategies to support the four key learning areas in English: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 2016). Furthermore, it has been proved that English language proficiency affects students' level of attainment (Hutchinson, 2018), and consequently, teachers must provide different teaching methods to allow EAL students to excel in their secondary school studies.

An easy but effective teaching method that can be applied in EAL lessons for junior years is writing frames to scaffold students' writing. These writing frames can provide grammar, sentence structures, text starters and linking words and must be reduced and eventually taken away to allow students to improve their own control over literacy skills (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 2016). Another skill that must be developed in EAL students is reading comprehension, as they need to understand complex texts to achieve other subject knowledge. EAL teachers can implement many classroom activities and tools, such as pairing up students with more competent readers, providing reading material adjusted to the student level, and involving families for them to be reading role models at home.

### **How COVID-19 has impacted Hong Kong Secondary Schools**

Last school years have been heavily affected by COVID-19, and according to UNESCO, more than 98% of students worldwide were impacted by school closures. Hong Kong students and teachers were highly distressed because of the changing measures from face-to-face to online learning lessons (Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2021).

The emergency remote teaching started as soon as the pandemic took over, and teachers and students had no other option than to adjust to the new circumstances. According to Thomas, Lucski and McCulloch (2021), emergency remote teaching is "a temporary shift from on-site instruction to online education due to crisis circumstances" (Thomas, Lucski and McCulloch, 2021, p. 1). Regarding the Hong Kong educational scenario, the temporary change to remote education lasted longer than expected. Although the current situation is improving, and in-person school was resumed for secondary schools this school year, COVID-19 consequences are far from remaining in the past, with possible future psychological outcomes (Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that the EAL intervention in this school will be studied to understand the extent it is effective for the targeted students.

## **Methodology**

Due to the singularity of every case study, giving a single definition of a case study is complex. According to Stake (as cited in Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013), every researcher must define a new way to understand a case study according to their particular study field and educational context. For the purpose of this specific case study, the definition will be framed as an approach to a particular school-setting issue where information has been collected in a short period of time using several data collection tools in order to allow data triangulation to support the validity of the conclusions (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013).

For the scope of this case study, the required information was collected using a mixture of methods so that triangulation could be used to analyse the chosen intervention from different viewpoints and contrast the results. The methods were selected considering the specifics of the intervention, and the data compilation obtained was used to generate this case study (Bell and Waters, 2014).

### **Semi-structured individual interviews**

The first data collection method was semi-structured individual interviews with two teachers who developed and delivered the lessons: the EAL Teacher Coordinator and the English Teacher Assistant (TA). It is known that more than covering the syllabus and transferring content is needed for students to learn. Teachers need to focus on a whole-person approach knowing that knowledge is also generated through human interactions, often through conversation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Therefore, this method was chosen because, according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison, it enables the understanding, evaluation and assessment of the intervention as well as allowing the teachers involved to share not only their professional opinion towards the intervention but also their interpretations of the community in which the school is immersed.

The interviews had a qualitative semi-structured approach and were planned with a precise topic, a list of issues to discuss, and open-ended questions about the issues. They were conducted in a “traveller” style, using questions to control the order of the interview, always allowing time for spontaneous, explicit and detailed answers (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

### **Lesson observations**

The second method used was lesson observation conducted as a complete overt observer for a period of one month, adding a total of 4 lessons observed. The purpose of the observations was to pay close attention to the events happening during lesson time, the behaviour of the teacher and students and the classroom visuals and decorations. According to Patton, a lesson observation enables the researcher to access the classroom intervention studied to contrast the data collected through the interviews with first-hand data observed directly by the researcher (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This method was chosen because, as stated by Robson, “what people do may differ from what they say they do, and observation provides a reality check” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 542).

Furthermore, the observations were followed by a reflection process to reveal and overcome the tendency of a single researcher to draw conclusions based on their prior knowledge, personal values and beliefs, and intentions for the specific case study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

### **Secondary data**

The third method supporting the triangulation approach was secondary data. A balanced selection of documents was gathered, taking into consideration the small case study scale and the limited time provided, always bearing in mind that the value of the case study would flourish as the case study developed (Bell and Waters, 2014).

The benefits of this method are varied, but also are downsides. The documents were selected from accessible, convenient and free-of-charge sources, such as the school archive, the university library, and the EDB (Hong Kong Education Bureau), but only some of the documents were entirely suitable

for the school context. A study purpose comparison exercise was required to adequately use it for the case study intentions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Another advantage is the method value in terms of ethical guidelines, as the data already exist and ethical considerations were taken into account. Nevertheless, BERA guidelines (2018) underpin the ethical considerations for this case study, which was clearly explained to the staff in charge of the intervention to obtain the requisite permission, and it was assured that no disruption or interference would occur (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Moreover, all the participants involved (the school, the teachers, and the students) were treated with respect, confidentiality and anonymity (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

## **Data collection, analysis and discussion**

### **Semi-structured individual interviews**

The data collected in the interviews was transcribed to a computer document using an electronic device while the interviews were taking place. This collection method means that the information was interpreted while the teachers were talking, and the facts were changed from an oral to a written form, and although accurate information was recorded in written form, it can also be a loss from the original data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

The two interviews with the EAL teachers involved made clear that thanks to the school students' interview and selection process before entering the school, the leadership team and the school staff in charge of the intervention are aware of the student's English needs and provide the resources available, always connected to the school's values, ideas, vision and mission (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) to help students to develop English literacy skills.

The EAL coordinator described the demography of the EAL class during the interview. The students are from two different nationalities: two are from Hong Kong and one from Japan, with their mother tongues being Cantonese and Japanese, respectively. She stated that these students took the school interview and English test before they were selected to enter the school; however, due to COVID-19 measures and school closures, they could not attend the enhancement English course that takes place in the school before students enter Form 1 (Learning and Teaching Policy B12, 2022). This means that the students did not have the opportunity to improve their English skills before starting to study in an EMI (English Medium of Instruction) school for the first time in their school life. Moreover, it was also a disadvantage from the school's point of view as the EAL staff team was not able to quickly identify those students that would take part in the EAL class in Form 1, and they needed to wait until the school year started in order to select the students.

COVID-19 has also affected regular school procedures and resources. Lessons are shorter than they used to be before the pandemic, and there is a lack of teachers with suitable qualifications to cover EAL lessons. Both facts restrict the possibility of continuing with a small-group pull-out EAL intervention in Form 3 and senior forms. The EAL teacher coordinator mentioned in the interview that taking into account the School Development Plan for 2020 – 2023, the school should continue with the EAL program after Form 2 to extend the benefits of small classes to improve EAL students' literacy skills as part of their in-depth and all-round support for students' growth (School Development Plan, 2020 – 2023).

### **Lesson observations**

The EAL lessons for this small group of Form 2 students take place in the EAL room every Friday, and due to the time available for the research, the conclusions were obtained after four consecutive observations. The EAL classroom is decorated with posters where vocabulary, grammar and structures are shown in a remarkable and flashy way that help students focus their attention on and develop their four primary English skills. Visuals, such as images, graphs and videos, are solid tools to

activate students' memory, interest and prior knowledge and engage them before, during and after the lesson (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 2016).

During the observations, it was noted that the teacher always shared the lesson objectives with students to introduce the lesson targets and help students to realise the outcomes of the lesson. The teacher always used positive communication with the students highlighting the importance of their first language as part of their identity. This reinforces students' self-esteem and confidence and helps them to remain in contact with their first language and feel proud of their bilingual and/or trilingual skills and heritage (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 2016).

Another interesting finding was that although the EAL Teacher Coordinator shared the importance of student development in the four key areas of English language learning, the lessons were focused on listening comprehension and speaking interaction. This also contrasts with the EDB Secondary English Language Curriculum promoted since 2017, where the focus is on developing literacy skills to promote language across the curriculum (EDB, 2017). It is also important to remember that when it comes to internal and external exams, they are always prepared in a written format, and students must use their literacy skills to answer all the questions (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, 2016).

### **Secondary data**

Although not all the secondary data used in the research is based on Hong Kong educational system, findings and conclusions were extracted and extrapolated to regional peculiarities to provide quality sources for the case study. For example, teaching methods and classroom tools provided in Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Secondary Booklet have been proven to work in the EAL lesson context independently from the social context.

Moreover, Hong Kong Education Bureau has extensive literature on how to teach English education as a second language because English is not the first and primary language of the region. Therefore, not only do EMI (English Medium of Instruction) schools follow and apply the policies and strategies established by the government, but also the CMI (Chinese Medium of Instruction) schools comply with the regulations when it comes to English language subject.

In summary, and with reference to the literature on EAL secondary schools' interventions, the findings from interviews, observations, and secondary data show that the pull-out EAL intervention in this Hong Kong Direct Subsidy School is partially effective in supporting a small group of Form 2 students who needed extra English support to develop further English rhetoric to success across all subjects' curriculums.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the main findings of the case study reveal the importance of school policies to provide the same opportunities to access excellent school education to all the students accepted in the school independently of the level of their English skills when they join the school in Form 1. On the other hand, the interviews also revealed the downside of the EAL intervention after Form 2 due to the inability of the school to continue the EAL small group lessons. The consequences of this decision are visible in Senior Years when students need to prepare for their public exams.

Moreover, the small-group teacher-led EAL intervention is a crucial support for the students' development of English literacy in order to study in an EMI school. Although there are possible improvements to the intervention in terms of time and teachers available, the advantages surpass the limitations. The interviews made clear that the continuation of the intervention is vital for the students' further progress and excel in their studies.

Furthermore, the lesson observations provided the necessary understanding of the lesson style that defines the intervention and, more significantly, the student-teacher relationship needed for

students' self-esteem and confidence reinforcement. They also showed that lesson activities focused on listening and speaking skills and that reading and writing tasks must be further developed and implemented. Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Secondary Booklet has adequate and exciting activities and in-class teaching techniques, such as writing frames, classroom buddies, moving images, detectives and cloze etc. The school could implement any of these ideas into the EAL lessons to continue helping the three Form 2 students taking part in this intervention to develop the four key areas in English and access excellent cross-curricular education in the school.

A final recommendation would be using ICT (information, communication and technology) tools in the EAL classroom. The Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Secondary Booklet has stimulating online tools that can help students to develop soft skills as well as motivate them to further study at home. Due to COVID-19 circumstances, these tools are currently more relevant in the school context because the pandemic forced teachers and students to adjust to online learning quickly. A COVID-19 blessing in disguise is that technology teaching methods have been found to be also helpful during face-to-face lessons.

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