Cultivating Young Learners to be Student-researchers in Language Lessons

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Abstract: This article looks at the possibility of instilling the idea of cultivating young learners to be student-researchers in language lessons, with a focus on the educational setting in Hong Kong. Traditionally, training students to be researchers are to be done at undergraduate level. But in these recent years, educators have pointed out that this research practice can in fact be carried out in much earlier stages. Up till now, however, not a lot of researches have been carried out in relation to the output and effectiveness of this kind of research-based learning (RBL) opportunities specifically in the Asian regions, so, this article would like to address this issue based on the empirical experience carried out in my own class. From the researches done by other researchers and my own school experience, it's found out that through this in-class RBL approach, students can become more independent learners and critical thinkers.

Keywords: Research-based Learning, Learning Motivation, Young Learners, Student-centred Learning, English Lessons, Cross-subject Learning, Student-researchers, Learning Motivation

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1.Introduction

Have you ever thought of having a chance to do subject-related research works when you were in primary school? I am a primary school teacher and I find that a lot of students, even junior primary students are actually very interested in carrying out small-scale research by themselves, so as to look for answers to their topics of interest. Of course, the kind of research that they do would not be similar to the ones that are published in academic journals; the research that they do is often rather general, it may just involve searching the internet, asking other students of the school to complete questionnaires and cast votes etc. But through this type of research opportunities in class, students can be trained to become independent learners and critical thinkers, because in the process, students have to gather, filter and analyse the information, and they also have to come up with a logical conclusion based on the all the information in hand.

2.Literature Review

By looking at the existing research literatures in relation to teaching ESL/EFL, we see a large amount of studies have already been done from the adults' perspectives (Pinter & Zandian, 2014), many of which put a focus on analyzing the four language skills of the students. Although some of the researches aim at improving the quality of teaching and learning in a language lesson, most are related to task-based learning or assessment strategies, so, rather examination-driven and teacher-centred. And often even we see a significant improvement in students' results in assessments, we don't see such approach can help much in enhancing the students' learning motivation. While on the other hand, as we have been talking about student-centred learning approaches (Froyd & Simpson, 2008) in recent years, many teachers have in fact tried out such approaches through games in their own lessons and are seeing positive results (Perrotta, Featherstone, Aston & Houghton, 2013), because of this, some researchers have been suggesting the possibility of a purely student-centred research-based learning opportunity in-class, and this should hopefully serve as a platform to shape the students to become future researchers, or at least, co-researchers of teachers (Katz & Chard, 2000). At this point, some may wonder, what is the difference between this so-called research-based learning approach and the enquiry-based learning that has been widely adopted in many western countries?

According to some educators (Healey, 2005; Rosenshine, 2012), research-based learning (RBL) can broadly be classified in the zone between the approaches of enquiry/ inquiry-based learning (E/IBL) and the features of undergraduate research done in college. E/IBL can generally be considered as an umbrella term, which according to Hutchings (2007), to be 'covering a range of approaches to learning that are driven by a process of enquiry'. In that sense, such approach would

include problem-based learning, project work, field-work, case studies etc. Undergraduate research on the other hand, refers to research carried out as part of the university undergraduate curriculum, and it should have the following criteria (Healey & Jenkins, 2009): learning the epistemologies and forms of discipline-based inquiry learning particular disciplinary research methodologies, which links the questions and forms of inquiry explicitly to academia research interests in the disciplines; and work that mimics the forms of knowledge creation and dissemination in their respective disciplines and professional areas should be produced as the final learning outcome.

According to Healey and Jenkins (2009), while E/IBL models may contain some or all of the above-mentioned characteristics, in undergraduate research programmes, these features become central elements of the educational set-up. By choosing to frame the lesson as research-based learning approach, it implies a stronger relationship with the methodological outlines of discipline/subject-specific ways of knowledge-making than merely the E/IBL, and can well extend beyond the subject-based curriculum. That is the ultimate target of launching the RBL lessons in school.

3.Methodology and Pedagogy involved as in Hong Kong

So, in short, RBL and E/IBL are in fact quite similar, it's just that the research-learning approach should be regarded as more advanced, as the students really have to start the research study from scratch, which may often involve doing questionnaires and interviews, and these may not be included in a normal subject-based enquiry project, so in terms of complexity, the research-learning approach should involve more components and hence, should be more detailed and complicated.

Although the idea of E/IBL has been quite widely adopted in many areas, many schools in the Asian region, especially for those education systems which have obvious and competitive public examinations, such approach could hardly be implemented, since most of the lesson arrangement for the class has had to be examination-driven (Ho, 2009). But it seems that in these couple of years, the situation has been improving and many parents and people in the society are accepting and hoping to see a more diverse and new teaching methodology which can provide a better learning environment for the students, so as to elicit their learning motivation and bring some "fresh air" to the class.

I have to say the idea of RBL has rarely been raised or applied in real lessons here in Hong Kong, so it is still rather experimental from a teacher's perspective. The reason that I would like to explore this field or this teaching and learning approach can be summarized as a lack of learning motivation and a gradually dull learning atmosphere, as reflected by more and more students in the class.

Some teachers and educators may wonder how this can be integrated into a normal class setting, and which subject can it be well-incorporated into. Maybe my experience of holding in-class research sessions, which are based on the above-mentioned RBL framework and are elaborated in the next

section, under Case Study: Own school Experience, can help answer some of the questions and clear the doubts that you have towards this teaching-and-learning approach.

4.Case Study: Own School Experience

In the past year, I was responsible for teaching students in the English Enhancement Class. The students that I met were all quite good in English, their speaking and listening skills were fine, but their writing still needed some brush-ups. In the beginning of the term, I gave them a topic and asked them to write a short essay within the time given, so, it's like an intensive writing practice during every single lesson. Because I believed that as you practise and practise, you must have improved at least to a certain extent along the way. But not long after the beginning of the term, although I could already see some slight improvements in their writing works, I started to sense from the facial expressions of the students that they already hated this mode of practice.

In order to keep their positive learning motivation in my class, I had to come up with other ways/modes of lesson delivery that can help build a suitable learning atmosphere, because or else, I was gonna to expect a group of students completely lacking interest towards the language and especially the writing element, that is the least I would like to see as a language teacher. Later in a conversation with the General Studies teacher, an idea popped up in my mind, and I was wondering whether I could create cross-subject project-based learning opportunities in my enhancement class. The lesson design was that students had to brainstorm and came up with a topic of interest which they had to do research on. Take note that the whole process could hardly be completed within a single lesson which lasted only for an hour, so normally, this would last for around four lessons, but could take up to eight lessons to complete, depending on the complexity of the topics and the format the students chose to present their final outcome. In order to keep students having certain writing practices every single lesson, I would ask them to hand in a reflective journal at the end of the lesson, and they have to briefly describe what they have learnt and accomplished in that lesson.

This practice has worked quite well so far, and I have seen some interesting and creative research topics being raised by the students, such as a study of parent-children relationship and a study on the eating habits of the teachers and students of the school. For the team doing research on parent-children relationship, they first came up with multiple key factors that may affect the relationship between the two parties, for instance whether both parents are working, the size of the family etc. And I was surprised as I saw in first-hand how logical and critical my students were, and it's hard to believe that at such a young age, they already had such high-order thinking skills with them. When it came to the preceding stage of data collection, I asked the students to search on the internet and to look for suitable designs for their questionnaires. After taking a look of the different references, they began to be aware of the importance of a simple and clear questionnaire layout, and

they also spotted that the language use had to be straightforward, and in this particular part, I could offer them some advice as a language teacher. I could thereby introduce the concept of simple and complex sentence structures, and I told them that for questionnaires targeting their peers, the questions should better be in the form of short sentences that only requires providing simple information, so better start with 'What', 'who' and 'Where', while for the adults counterparts, they can generally be able to tackle with more complex sentences or questions that involve higher-order thinking, like the 'Why' and 'How'. The following is a list of focus questions that have been raised by the students in the group.

For peers:

1. What do you like/dislike most about your family? (This question looks for answers that relate to students' sentiments based on their own family situations)

2. Where do you live? (This question aims to collect the geographic location of students' homes, and this helps to find out whether there is a correlation between this and the parent-children relationship)

3. When can you normally see your parents when you reach home? (This question aims to find out how often and how long can children normally communicate with their children, i.e. the time that the family as a whole can spend with each other)
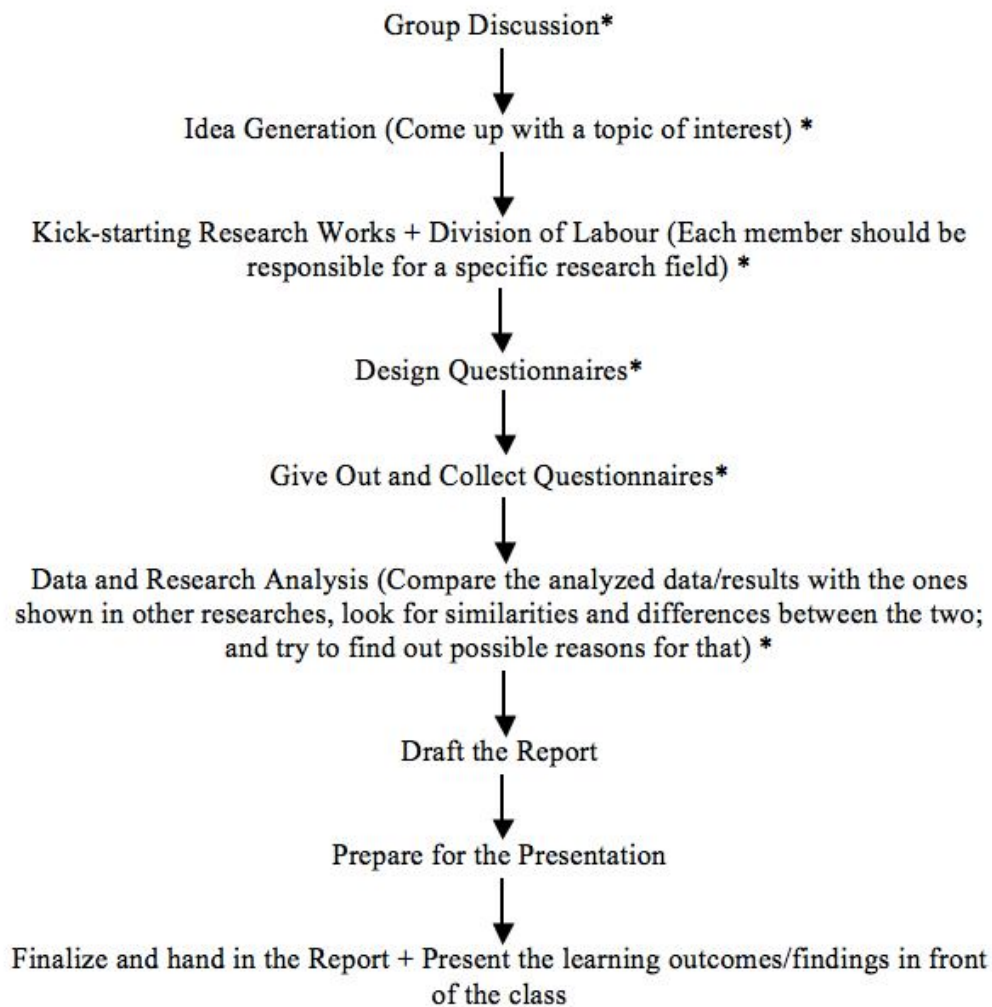
For parents:

1. How do you find your children? (This question looks for answers that relate to parents' sentiments in relation to their children)

2. Referring to the above question, why do you have such feeling(s)? (This question wants to look for the reasons why parents are having the above sentiments towards their children. The students anticipated that work pressure and not enough time for proper communication are the two major reasons that undermine parent-children relationship)

3. Do you view your relationship with children as a positive/negative one? How do you think that can be improved? (This question wants to collect raw data to see whether the pool of positive parent-children relationship or negative one is larger, as viewed from the parents'

perspective; and the follow-up question is designed so as to see whether the parents are aware of any possible solutions to fix/improve the relationship with their children)

Based on these, they have come up with a very nice questionnaire with good layout and at the end, they collected all the data and did a detailed analysis on the issue. At the end, they had to give a presentation to the class so as to share the learning outcome with everyone and a written report to be handed in to me to detail the learning progress and results obtained after the analysis.

The following flow-chart diagram summarizes the flow of in-class research-learning carried out during my lessons:

Group Discussion*

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Idea Generation (Come up with a topic of interest) *

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Kick-starting Research Works + Division of Labour (Each member should be responsible for a specific research field) *

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Design Questionnaires*

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Give Out and Collect Questionnaires*

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Data and Research Analysis (Compare the analyzed data/results with the ones shown in other researches, look for similarities and differences between the two; and try to find out possible reasons for that) *

↓

Draft the Report

↓

Prepare for the Presentation

↓

Finalize and hand in the Report + Present the learning outcomes/findings in front of the class

*On-going in-class written evaluations for every single lesson

Figure 1. A Flow-chart Diagram Showing the flow of RBL in my class

5. Findings

The majority of the students have given positive feedback regarding the use of the RBL approach in class, many find themselves being more attentive in the lesson and willing to take an initiative to search for relevant information online, which many of them would not do so beforehand. They also find that the design of such lesson approach is very good as it would provide more opportunities for them to discuss and learn from their peers. The followings are some of their comments which I directly pasted from the course evaluation forms that the students filled; I haven't made much alteration, because I would like to retain their meanings as much as possible:

1. Student A: I love this way that the teacher teaches the class, it's nice and I think I've become more creative and logical than before.

2. Student B: I didn't expect we could have English lessons in such a fun and creative way before.

3. Student C: This way of "experimental-like" learning has enabled myself to be a more independent and critical thinker, and I now would approach an issue from more than one perspective.

Apart from the logical and critical thinking skills, I found out that the language ability of the students has also been improved along the way. After all, I was having English language lessons with them, the main focus of my lessons should still be related to language elements, and I definitely hoped that they could pick up the language skills, especially on writing, after they went through the literatures/papers that they had to look for on the internet and also after the in-class written evaluations that they had to complete independently every time to reflect what they had learnt or come up in that particular lesson.

The following diagram published in the article "Engaging students in in-depth English language learning experience through project learning" by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (HKEDB, n.d.) summarizes the language skills and generic skills that were involved in the project about Tourists in Hong Kong, done by the more advanced primary four students as initiated by the teachers at Mission Covenant Church Holm Glad Primary School as a trial scheme.

Communication Skills
- communicate with speakers of English clearly, loudly, confidently and courteously
- communicate with group members effectively
- communicate effectively using the skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing

Reading
-Textbook text
-questionnaire
-presentation script
-Information report

Self-management Skills
-finish set goals for project
-be responsible for the part assigned

Speaking
-Interview tourists to get information
-Present information using English

Collaboration Skills
-Make comprises in group work
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of group members (English Skills Vs computer Skills)

Tourists in Hong Kong

Listening
-Listen to tourists
-Listen to teachers' instructions
-Listen to classmates' presentations

Writing
-write a questionnaire
-write an informational report of interviews
-write a script for presentation

IT skills
-Use Powerpoint in presentations
- Use Word to write a simple informational report

Numerical Skills
- analyze data collected in interviews
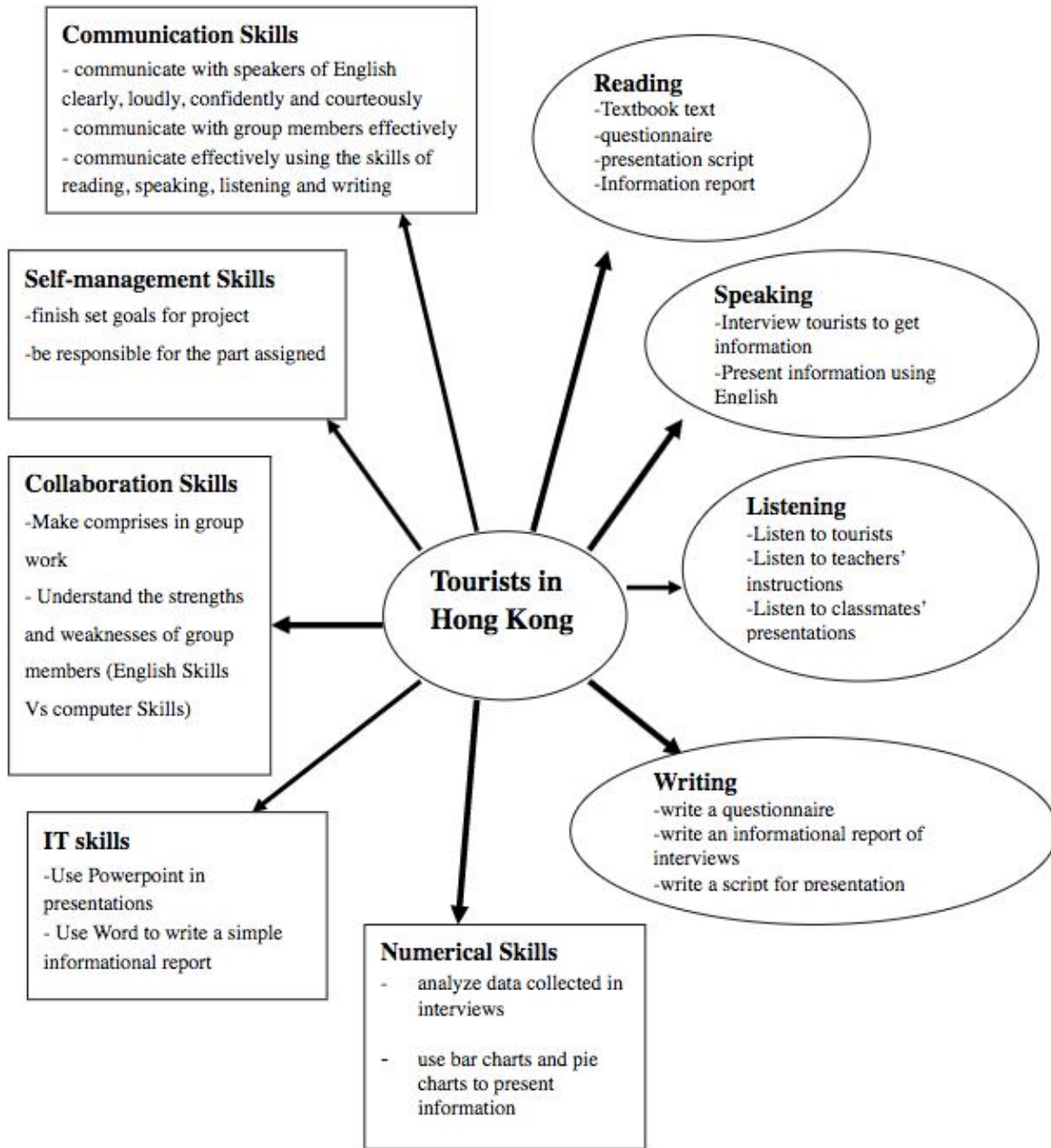- use bar charts and pie charts to present information

Figure 2. A Mind Map Diagram Showing the language skills and generic skills trained during the RBL progress.

Some people may find it strange to get to know that the students can actually improve their language standard in such a non-language focused/centred learning approach. Of course, superficially, this approach involves more thinking, discussing and researching, but one has to take into consideration the fact that through these channels, as well as the in-class written tasks, I am essentially creating a platform to drill their English skills in a multi-faceted way, which touches on all

the four targeted language abilities, i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking, and creates room for myself to cater for each learner's diversity as I have more time for observation as a facilitator. More importantly, as this approach is fun and not really exam/score-oriented, the students like it and this helps to further improve their learning motivation.

6.Conclusion

I was amazed by the potential of the students; and my experience of turning my own class into small-scale project-based learning sessions has reminded me that it's through learning by doing that the students can learn the most out of a subject context, and this has also proven to be valid in other literatures as well (Pinter & Zandian,2015; Green, n.d.), So, instead of teachers doing all the teaching in a traditional teacher-centred classroom, we should work towards providing a learner-centred lesson, in which the teachers would then become facilitator and students would take on more important roles and become independent learners and critical thinkers.

However, there is also an obvious drawback in relation to the implementation of the RBL approach in class, and that is this approach is rather time-consuming; as the curriculum of most of the schools in Hong Kong are chapter/course-book-based, many teachers already have a strong feeling of rushing through lessons so as to be on schedule with the planned scheme of work. So, it may not be easy for teachers to work this plan out in their very own lessons.

Apart from the above, I think it's not easy to put the idea of RBL forward in a traditional school setting because of another reason: if it's only one subject bringing this approach to class, there can hardly yield any successful learning outcomes, so this means that the RBL would normally require cooperative planning and re-designing of the school-based curriculum across various subjects. In light of this, we need the support from the principals, the curriculum development team of the school districts and also our colleagues so that we can work towards achieving the same goal.

Acknowledgements

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