

ENHANCING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY THROUGH INTERACTIVE READING: A CURRICULUM PROPOSAL FOR PRIMARY YEARS PROGRAM STUDENTS IN AN IB BILINGUAL SCHOOL

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Abstract: This report proposes the development of a supplementary interactive reading program for Primary Years Program (PYP) students (Grades 1–5) at a private IB Bilingual School in Changzhou, China. Situated within a bilingual setting that integrates the IB curriculum framework and the Chinese National Curriculum, the school serves a diverse population of local and international students. While the current English program enhances basic language skills and prepares students for CEFR-aligned assessments, it lacks opportunities for interactive and purposeful reading experiences. The proposed curriculum change addresses this gap by introducing a weekly interactive reading class utilizing a variety of resources, including leveled books, Raz-Kids, and Renaissance myON® Reader, with flexible lesson planning to meet students' diverse needs. The initiative aims to strengthen students' reading fluency, comprehension, critical thinking, and communication skills while fostering interpersonal development through collaborative activities. Drawing upon Tyler's four-stage rationale for curriculum design, the program emphasizes formative assessment practices, promoting process-focused learning rather than solely outcome-based evaluations. Grounded in progressive educational theories and consistent with IB principles, the proposal stresses the importance of authentic learning contexts, emotional engagement, and the development of the IB Learner Profile attributes. By responding to the cognitive and linguistic needs of bilingual learners, the interactive reading program seeks to cultivate proficient readers, independent thinkers, and responsible global citizens. Ultimately, this curriculum development represents a well-informed, research-based innovation that aligns with current educational trends and addresses the evolving demands of 21st-century learning environments.

Keywords: Interactive reading program · Primary Years Program (PYP) · bilingual education · curriculum development · IB World School · language proficiency

Introduction

This report aims to explore and analyse the proposed curriculum development which is adding a supplementary interactive reading program for Primary Years Program (PYP) students (from Grade 1-5) of an IB Bilingual school in China. The focus is on enhancing the language proficiency, critical thinking, and communication skills of young learners.

Description of the Setting: Currently, my role as a primary homeroom teacher of Grade 3 students is at a private Changwai Bilingual School located in Changzhou, China. The school is an authorized IB World School featuring an integrated program of IB

STUDYING THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

curriculum framework (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2020) and the Chinese National curriculum (MoE, 2001).

Following IB standards PYP consist of ten classrooms (two classrooms per grade), each having around fifteen to eighteen students suitable for a higher increase in achievement among primary students (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2009).

Following the slogan “Think globally, act locally” the school makes great efforts for maintaining glocalization as it offers an integrated curriculum and serves both local and international students. At this moment, PYP contains 20% of international students with different cultural backgrounds and nationalities.

As an IB World School, all teachers and students strive to demonstrate the Learner Profile attributes identified by the IB to develop internationally-minded, respectful, and responsible members of local, national, and global communities (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2017). Following this students are encouraged to develop intellectual, personal, and social skills that can be applied to the world outside the classroom.

Curriculum: Currently, according to the existing curriculum of the English Program students are offered four English classes per week. Taking into consideration that students are categorised under English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) learners the set of international coursebook “Kid’s Box” by Cambridge English is served as an appropriate option as the main resource.

On one side, an existing program help students enhance the main four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) of language proficiency, on the other side, the curriculum focuses on preparing students for Young Learners English (YLE) exam which normally they take once a year to check their CEFR level. According to Little (2012), teaching CEFR has been constantly updated and becomes an important opportunity and innovation for language learners and teachers.

However, alongside building the foundation of language skills, it's equally beneficial to help students enhance learning attitudes and approaches using the English language as a tool. Considering this, students would greatly advantage from having an interactive reading program, which currently is not part of a curriculum. Unfortunately, for the last two years, Library classes have been also removed from the curriculum due to some internal adjustments.

However, it's important to have students carry on with reading, whether it's reading aloud or other forms of activities.

When it comes to the reading part from the coursebook, it doesn't provide different stories to comprehend which is very important for primary students. Generally, students have access to an online reading platform where they read books online by themselves, but they have almost no chances for purposeful peer or group discussions under the teacher's supervision.

Literature Review

Curriculum design is a crucial aspect of pedagogy, shaping the learning experiences of students and influencing their academic outcomes. This literature review aims to explore various perspectives and approaches in curriculum design highlighting the evolution of curricular theories and their impact on pedagogical practices as well as academic analysis of the proposed curriculum change.

The concept of curriculum has evolved, reflecting shifts in educational philosophies, societal needs, and pedagogical practices. Research shows many different dimensions, definitions and opinions about the curriculum and its role in pedagogy. One definition proposed by Dunphy (2008) is that "pedagogy" is the process of transforming the curriculum into activities of teaching and learning. The situation can be defined as the collaboration between a teacher or practitioner and a student, as well as the providing of various elements of the learning environment (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002:10).

This once more moves the focus from what goes on in schools to what happens in classrooms, specifically what is taught (the curriculum/content) and how it is taught (classroom pedagogy) (Siraj & Taggart, 2014).

Boyle and Charles (2016) point out that to support students' progressive and measurable progress within the range of various integration, comprehension, and challenges that may occur in the setting, the curriculum is intended to offer a breadth of structured learning opportunities and experiences. Marsh and Willis (2003, p20) support the ideas above: "The curriculum is the totality of learning experiences provided to students so that they can attain general skills and knowledge at a variety of learning sites."

Hilda Taba proposed a reverse approach, suggesting that educators begin curriculum design by identifying students' experiences and interests before defining objectives (Taba, 1962). Taba's model highlighted the significance of student input and engagement in curriculum development.

Drawing from critical pedagogy, advocates of social reconstructionism argue that curriculum design should address societal inequalities and promote social change (Kincheloe, 2008). This perspective underscores the role of education in fostering critical consciousness and empowering students to challenge systemic injustices.

Kelly (2009) brings up several parts (official, taught, learned, tested, hidden, null curriculum) of the curriculum that makes up the total curriculum. In my current setting, we have to integrate the IB curriculum framework and standards from the Chinese National Curriculum. At this point, there might be some differences between the implementation of official and taught curricula for many reasons. Taking into consideration the students and teachers coming from different backgrounds and cultures, the hidden curriculum plays an important role as well.

However, being an IB school, the mission of Changwai Bilingual School is to develop an open-minded learning and teaching community and create awareness of the hidden curriculum.

Feng (2006) explains the recent reforms in the Chinese National Curriculum advocate altering the role of students from passive recipients to active participants who engage in explorative learning processes. The curriculum is divided into three tiers: the national, local, and school levels. These comprise the national curriculum, local curriculum, and school curriculum, respectively. Despite these curricular layers are administered by the government, local authorities, and educational institutions, they must align with the standards of the national curriculum established by the central government. Schools develop their curriculum to address specific local needs and characteristics.

The Ministry of Education in China takes on a leadership and coordination role in implementing national curriculum reform, while local education authorities assume leadership and planning responsibilities for local curriculum reform. However, educators, researchers, parents, and various sectors of society are encouraged to participate actively in curriculum reforms (Feng, 2006). He outlines the following several points that grab the reader's attention:

- moving away from restricted classroom instruction and toward a focus on learning how to learn and forming good attitudes;
- moving towards a balanced, integrated, and selected curricular framework;
- changing the focus of the curriculum from outdated and excessively complex material to crucial information and skills for students' lifetime learning;
- the transition from passive learning to the development of information processing skills, knowledge acquisition, problem-solving skills, communication skills, and teamwork skills (Feng, 2006).

According to the progressivism philosophy, the curriculum is always updated as it's important to implement new ideas. In the process of making changes in the curriculum, it's important to evaluate and analyse the current education situation and approach in the school. The above are very strong arguments that add confidence in the proposed curriculum change and the way it's suggested to be implemented.

The process of learning to adapt is filled with uncertainty. Never let anyone trick you into believing that the change process functions as it should. For change to be successful, there must be anxiety, challenges, and uncertainty (Hanson, 2003).

As the school provides bilingual (Chinese and English) education, the research emphasizes the cognitive and linguistic benefits of learning in two languages, including improved executive function, cognitive flexibility, and metalinguistic awareness (Mukminin et al., 2019). Baker (1993) describes that traditional bilingual is typically taught in two languages, one for half of the day and the other. Cummins (1979) claimed that students' learning achievement may be boosted or diminished as a result of the exchange of different language codes when students speak in more than one language.

Growing a child's exposure to books is thought to be one of the key factors in developing and enhancing literacy skills (Juel, 2006; Mol, Bus & Jong, 2009; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Social interactions through interactive reading possibilities promote richer language exposure, the growth of spelling, the expansion of vocabulary, and the development of fundamental literacy abilities. Furthermore, interactive book-reading activity stimulates the areas of the brain responsible for understanding narratives and using the imagination (Merga, 2017).

Simply the advantages of reading, including read-aloud with students include the growth of book interest, soothing effects on behaviour, and general reading development (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). However, Dickenson (2001) examines a large body of research over the past 20 years has shown that read-aloud is most effective when readers provide kids with the chance to ask or reply to questions and make predictions about the material that is being read. At this point, the purposed reading program gets support from Dickenson. Children have the chance to concentrate and acquire new words while reading to them and participating in conversation, something they might not do when listening passively (Biemiller, 2001).

Reading can be utilized for leisure and personal development as a foundation for learning across all subject areas. It also enables young children to participate more fully in their families and communities (Van Staden & Bosker, 2014). Numerous studies have demonstrated that kids who grow up in literate environments are better readers and understand texts more readily than their counterparts who did not (Rosenhouse, Feitelson, Kita & Goldstein, 1997).

Implementing an interactive reading program will help bring literature from the print page into full expression. It should be a bit challenging for students to understand reading material so that they appreciate all the impressions they go through. Since word symbols that are just easy to transmit are not how actual literature reaches the mind, it is through the ear, not the eye. Teachers fail to recognize this fact far too frequently (Fisher et all, 2014).

Methodology

The English program plays a valued part in the whole curriculum of my setting. It is learner-centred, inclusive and to some extent flexible as leadership and pedagogical staff update it every year applying new methodologies, and considering learners' needs. Thus, according to research, partially it can be described as the Process model of education rather than particular learning outcomes becoming the primary focus (File and Mueller, 2019). Additionally, students participate more actively in their education and have a say in the tasks and environments they are exposed to (Meltzer, 2018).

However, the Product model is also integrated into the school curriculum and widely used with other disciplines and subjects. Especially, within the subjects such as Math, Chinese, and Physical Education that are focused on content and behaviour. So, when learning is a product, it's looked at it as a change in behaviour and the learning is

STUDYING THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

external, it's viewed as an outcome, and it's often measured. So that's a traditional kind of teaching model (Kelly, 2014).

Literature shows that the foundation of curriculum design can be traced back to the works of educational pioneers such as John Dewey, who emphasized experiential learning and student-centred education (Dewey, 1916). This approach laid the groundwork for later curriculum theories that prioritized active engagement and real-world relevance.

Dewey's philosophy is a clear connection with the IB programs which is famous for its rigorous and conceptually-driven educational frameworks (Sperandio, 2010). These programs are recognized for their effectiveness in fostering critical thinking abilities among students (Cole et al, 2015; Taylor & Porath, 2006) and cultivating individual research and diverse competencies (Bunnell, 2015).

However, Storz and Hoffman (2018) proposed that educators may have linked IB programs with elevated levels of critical thinking and challenging, which they believed were better suited for advanced learners.

The suggested formative assessment is described by IB as the ongoing process that teachers and students use to track student progress and inform instruction going forward. Wylie et al. (2012) maintain the statement by emphasizing that formative assessment should be used consistently and thoughtfully to enhance student learning. Additional support and more detailed further steps are stated in recent reforms in the Chinese National Curriculum. There will be three kits created for curricular evaluation tools. The first one will evaluate pupils' learning progress and results. The second one will assist teachers in reviewing and enhancing their instructional strategies. To continually change and enhance the curriculum, the third one will be applied to assess the curriculum itself by detecting and analysing implementation issues (MoE, 2001). The contradicting point is whether the implementation of these reforms can be applied successfully or not. As people who are in charge of making changes in their school come from traditional educational backgrounds.

Taking into consideration the specific environment of my setting Tyler's approach of curriculum design is prioritized. His influential model emphasized the importance of defining clear objectives, selecting appropriate learning experiences, organizing content logically, and assessing student achievement (Tyler, 1949). Above mentioned objective-driven approach laid the foundation for curriculum design frameworks that prioritize alignment between learning goals, instructional strategies, and assessments.

It's important to consider that most students in Changwai Bilingual School are Chinese nationals and English language is a foreign language for them. Some researchers indicate that demotivation in learning English as a second language still happens in public middle and high schools as their curriculum is mostly exam-oriented (Sakai and Kikuchi, 2009; Gao and Liu, 2015; Karaca and Inan, 2020).

The proposed supplementary intervention program is created to help primary learners achieve essential reading fluency as well as gain a balance of subject-specific knowledge. Primary Years Programme offers students a transdisciplinary learning method: a broad, balanced, conceptual and connected learning experience (Albright, 2016). PYP ensures that students should be able to transfer knowledge, concepts and skills through other subjects such as Unit of Inquiry, Science, PE, etc (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2018).

According to IB PYP language scope and sequence, language practices are changing and more emphasis is given to reading for meaning depending on students' interests, making diverse reading resources available, and facilitating students during the reading and research time using multimedia resources.

And before traditionally the focus was more on focusing primarily on accuracy when reading, providing print-only resources for reading, teacher-directed reading materials, having only monocultural reading materials available, standardized reading assessments. Moreover, the new supplementary reading program is a great opportunity for students' interaction leading to enhance their social skills.

Simon Davidson (2020) explains the importance of social skills. Excellent social skills enable students to succeed in groups and communities as agents. Because they care about and respect others, they behave ethically. Agents value collaboration and rely on it to complete tasks. They can work well together because they take ownership of their actions, are capable of handling disagreements, and can come to solutions with each other. Without the ability to establish and sustain healthy connections, there is no agency. When others are in charge, those with the greatest agency may step up and effectively function as team members. Teams and adult lives can be more fair and effective with the help of social skills. He also adds that the ATL skills serve as a means of ensuring that the Learner Profile is alive in the learning environment and across the school. How 'thinking capabilities' generate 'thinkers' is among the most eloquent illustrations of this. Thinkers know how to handle difficult issues and reason out moral choices (Simon Davidson, 2020).

Results

I would support Lofthouse (1995, p9) who points out that it's important to understand the current situation of the setting very deeply before making changes in the curriculum. According to Ofsted, the curriculum should be examined more specifically, and teachers should be considered as curriculum designers and makers. Keeping the point in mind and obtaining a voice for proposing a change in the school curriculum, the proposal would consider adding a supplementary interactive reading program once a week for PYP students.

Multiple resources are suggested to be used for the proposed additional interactive reading class such as levelled books in the school library, Raz-kids books (also available on an online platform), on the resources from the Renaissance myON® Reader (currently,

widely spread across China). Flexibility is encouraged when it comes to planning the form and content of lessons considering students' needs and interests. Additionally, there is a possibility to conduct lessons using digital tools and access the online library resources mentioned above as students are allowed to use iPads at school for learning purposes under the regulations of teachers.

For lower grades (Grade 1 and 2) school provides teacher assistants to support low-level students.

Purpose: Learning English as a foreign language shouldn't be based on content only, additionally, the focus is to help students develop their interpersonal skills and learning attitudes.

Language is learned better when it happens authentically within different approaches touching feelings and emotions. As most students in school do not face an English-speaking environment outside of school, they need more opportunities to express themselves in a foreign language. Besides, they do not have many options to use English for further discussions with peers and develop new perspectives. For example, reading the stories together in a circle, listening to each other and showing respect to different perspectives, at the same time, that's an opportunity for improving comprehension skills.

Cerpano (2010) stresses that children are more encouraged to speak another language when they are given different contexts and situations.

Likewise, teachers will advantage of assessing students reading fluency and comprehension.

For the current curriculum development, the Tylers (1949) four-stage rationale is considered to be applied.

Learning outcomes: As the name implies, outcomes often pertain to the conclusion of a learning activity and are expressed in general terms. As summarized by Spady (1994, p. 13), outcomes are those concrete activities that students can carry out in "real life" as a result of their learning. Considering this by the end of the program students will be able to:

- enhance reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills,
- differentiate and expand knowledge and understanding on various topics,
- evaluate the content of the book, make connections and conclusions,
- improve their creative and critical thinking,
- improve the learner profile attributes and appreciate values,
- develop social and communication skills.

Objectives:

- read words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs using correct pronunciation and intonation,
- investigate different literature/books,
- be involved in conversations and discussions,
- read and interpret books individually, in pairs, and in groups.

Assessment: When it comes to assessing student outcomes unlike the Product model (Kelly, 2014) which discourages creativity and neglects the process of how to learn, the Process model (Stenhouse, 1975; Plowden, 1967) is preferable. The Process model aims to emphasize learning experiences and students' weekly progress, and contribution rather than final results.

In this case, formative assessment in the form of rubrics, reflections, peer feedback, and keeping anecdotal records will be more prioritized than summative assessment. Summative assessment having less value (80/20 principle) proposed to be held internally once by the end of the semester. Students will be given the agency and encouraged to choose a book/story to demonstrate their final project. Project-based learning provides various ways to unlock students' potential and boost their creativity and enthusiasm. (Konecni, 2023).

The challenging moment is that making a final project requires more time, as students will meet with the program once a week they may struggle with the extra tasks at home or can work in groups.

The final results combining formative and summative assessments will be shared with parents and students so that they can set future goals for themselves.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the proposed curriculum development for adding a supplementary interactive reading program for Primary Years Program (PYP) students in an IB Bilingual school in China is deeply rooted in the specific context of the school and is supported by a comprehensive review of relevant literature. This curriculum change aims to enhance language proficiency, critical thinking, and communication skills while fostering a love for reading and authentic learning experiences.

The foundation of this proposal is built upon a solid understanding of the school's setting, encompassing its bilingual nature and the integration of both IB and Chinese National curriculum standards (Feng, 2006). The literature review reveals a rich tapestry of curriculum design theories and practices, showcasing the importance of student engagement, experiential learning, and the alignment of learning goals, instructional strategies, and assessments. Moreover, the research highlights the significance of addressing the cognitive and linguistic benefits of bilingual education, emphasizing active participation, and creating opportunities for social interactions through interactive reading.

The proposed curriculum change aligns with the progressive approach, championed by educational pioneers like John Dewey (1930) and is consistent with the IB program's focus on critical thinking and intercultural competencies. It takes into account the changing landscape of language education, shifting from an emphasis on accuracy to reading for meaning, and integrates the IB PYP language scope and sequence to provide culturally diverse and multimedia-rich reading experiences (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2018).

The introduction of an interactive reading program resonates with current educational discourse, acknowledging the value of formative assessment, student agency, and collaborative learning. By incorporating Tyler's curriculum design model, the proposed change ensures clear objectives, appropriate learning experiences, logical content organization, and effective assessment strategies (Black et al., 2003).

Importantly, the proposed program recognizes the social dimension of learning, aiming to enhance students' social skills, collaboration, and ethical behaviour. This aligns with the IB Learner Profile attributes, fostering internationally-minded, respectful, and responsible members of the global community.

Thao & Boyd (2014) stress that students, family members, and teachers are co-constructors of the learning process and reflective learners are viewed as social and active participants in their learning.

In conclusion, the integration of an interactive reading program within the existing English curriculum emerges as a well-informed, evidence-based initiative that responds to the needs of the students in Changwai Bilingual School and the evolving landscape of education globally and locally. Through this change, the school aims to nurture proficient readers, critical thinkers, effective communicators, and engaged global citizens, all while adapting curriculum design to meet the demands of the 21st century.

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Author Contribution Not applicable.

Data Availability The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The Changwai Bilingual School ethics committee did not make it compulsory, at that time, for individual research (i.e., without any form of funding) to get its approval. Nevertheless, as researchers, we felt that it was necessary to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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STUDYING THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

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STUDYING THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

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