

Reflecting, shaking and being shook: Resistance in a primary classroom

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ABSTRACT: Jason Loh, an experienced primary school teacher and a teacher educator, discovered a powerful way of using pictures with children's spoken and listening vocabulary to build their reading and writing vocabulary. The transformative moment for the writer occurred during his secondment to the sole, teacher-training institute of Singapore, the National Institute of Education, during an encounter with a Canadian colleague. That encounter prompted a decision to utilise this learning strategy, the Picture-Word Inductive Model (PWIM), in his lower primary class when he returned to the school system. This narrative relates his experiences as he used PWIM in his primary 1 class in a new school, and the resistance he met as a result.

KEY WORDS: Literacy, picture-word inductive model, reflective practice, resistance, vocabulary development.

PROLOGUE

It was a Tuesday in 1994. It was the second day of my teacher training at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's sole teacher training institute. As I strolled into the LT1 (Lecture Theatre 1), I was struck by the size of the largest lecture theatre on campus. It was the first Education Studies module out of many over the span of the four years of teacher training. I wondered what this module was all about. I understood that the Curriculum Studies modules were about pedagogical skills, but what about Education Studies? I searched for faces that were familiar to me; we only met the day before, on our first day. I sat with them. We made small talk, asking each other about the other modules we took and the impression we had of our professors, while we waited for the lecturer for this module to appear.

A tall, wiry and gaunt-looking Caucasian man with dark brown hair and moustache walked in. He was evidently not a student teacher. He looked to be in his early sixties. There was not a smile on his face. He did not even spare his audience a look, an audience made up of four-year Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science students. He seemed detached. He took out his stack of overhead transparencies from his tan brown leather briefcase and placed them on the lectern. Then he turned his head up to look at us. He scanned the entire lecture theatre, from left to right and then from right to left. Voices slowly died down.

"You are all regimented clones!" His loud booming voiced resonated throughout the lecture theatre, even though physically he did not seem capable of doing that. We were shocked! There was an uncomfortable silence.

That was my first Education Studies lecture. The professor, with his thick, Welsh-accented English, was well liked and respected by his students. His exclamation shocked us into listening. His accusation that we were "regimented clones" made us more ready to listen to what he had to say about the nature and value of education,

more open to new ideas in the field of education and more willing to try new pedagogical, research-based practices. “‘Regimented clones’ was one of my favourite expressions as I think we were all victims of a particular type of teaching and learning” (personal communication, January 13, 2010). He had used the phrase to illustrate how student teachers in general were conditioned to play a particular role imposed by those in authority. That was my first real day of teacher training.

AN EPIPHANIC MOMENT

“Wow! What are those? How do you use them?” I asked Barbara. Barbara Spilchuk had been an elementary teacher, a secondary teacher, and a school principal for many years in the province of Alberta, Canada, before she became a teacher-educator. “These?” She pointed to the charts pasted all over her office walls. They were filled with words and pictures. “These are called PWIM charts. Haven’t you used them before?” I shook my head. “What’s PWIM?”

“PWIM? That’s Picture-Word Inductive Model.” She took one down and showed me how it was constructed. She taught her student teachers this model of teaching vocabulary. “What better way to teach them than to construct that knowledge themselves,” Barbara said.

Barbara believed in the learning theory of constructionism (Papert, 1980). She believed firmly that her students learned by constructing actual objects during her lessons, and so after she demonstrated how a Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) chart was used, she planned for her student-teachers to create their own PWIM charts.

The Picture-Word Inductive Model (PWIM) “focuses on learning to read and write through inquiry” (Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins, 2009, p. 54). This model was originally developed by Emily Calhoun (1999); she has been “using and teaching this model since 1976” (p. vi). Basically, this model utilises a picture as a starting point. The students are led to inquire about the picture and identify what they see in the picture. The teacher then labels the picture by drawing a line from the identified object or area, says the word and writes the word; the words are thus “shaken out” (Calhoun, 1999 p. 22). The teacher then asks the students to spell and read the word out loud. The teacher does the same for each of the words or objects identified. The teacher subsequently leads the class to read and review the picture word chart (also known as PWIM charts). In the lessons that follow, the students will “use the picture word chart to read their own sets of words, classify words according to properties they can identify, and develop titles, sentences, and paragraphs about their picture” (Calhoun, 1999, p. 22).

In the classification phase, the students group the words “in terms of phonetic, structural or content properties and share their categories and why they put a particular set of words together” (Joyce *et al.*, 2009, p. 64). This activity happens several times during a PWIM cycle and each cycle can last from five days to two months (Calhoun, 1999), depending on the “richness of the picture, the reading level of the students and the curriculum objectives of the teacher” (Joyce *et al.*, 2009, p. 64). The cycle usually ends after the paragraph development stage.

The benefits of PWIM are that it builds on the students' listening and speaking vocabularies. The students hear and see the words read aloud and spelled correctly several times, the students participate in the reading and spelling aloud of the words identified, the students see a direct sound-symbol correspondence, and the PWIM chart serves as an immediate reference (Calhoun, 1999). This model enables the students to build their sight vocabulary substantially in a non-threatening and enjoyable manner. In the words of Calhoun (1999), the students "enjoy finding objects and actions in the picture, seeing the words and sentences they generate expressed in print and becoming part of the curriculum, classifying words and sentences, and discovering useful language concepts and generalizations" (p. 24).

Some recent research studies (Calhoun, Poirier, Simon & Mueller, 2001; Joyce, Hrycauk & Calhoun, 2003; Swartzendruber, 2007) on the use of PWIM as an instructional strategy showed an increase in sight vocabularies on the part of the students. In Joyce and colleagues (2003), the mean percentage of words recognised increased from 30% to 90% after 3 cycles of PWIM. In Calhoun and colleagues (2001), the average gain of the average subgroup of end-of-first-grade students was 2.1 compared to 0.25 for the past 4 or 5 years. In Swartzendruber (2007), the quasi-experimental study revealed that the students in the experimental group (that is, using PWIM) outperformed those in the control group in the vocabulary knowledge assessment.

This made perfect sense to me. It was so simple, yet so powerful. Basically, the children create their own class-illustrated dictionary, and even their own individual illustrated dictionaries through this model. The major principle of this model is "to build on children's growing storehouse of words and syntactic forms to facilitate the transition to print" (Joyce *et al.*, 2009, p. 60). After all, the development of a sight vocabulary is crucial in a child's journey to literacy (Ehri, 1994). More than two decades ago, Saville-Troike (1984), using a standardised test of English reading, had already demonstrated the importance of vocabulary development on the second to sixth grade English learners' performance in her study. As such, using PWIM as a teaching tool to develop the child's vocabulary made perfect sense.

I was convinced of PWIM's value as an instructional tool for the teacher and as a learning tool for the children. I was excited about using this model to teach my future students. In the past eight years of teaching in primary schools, I had taught only the upper grade levels of five and six. Thus, my understandings of teaching had "grown up around the repetitive experiences of specialised practice" (Schon, 1983, p. 61). I would soon be teaching a class of primary grade one in four months' time. Thus, in order to make "sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness" (Schon, 1983, p. 61), I thought about my past and current teaching practices and reflected on how I could use what I had just learnt to teach the lower primary grades. I decided to share this model with the principal and the teachers of the new school I would soon join; my secondment¹ to the NIE was ending in four months' time. As the new school was going to start its academic year in January 2008, Barbara and I decided to share

¹ Secondment: A two-year deployment to organisations outside the Ministry of Education to develop Education Officers (that is, teachers); the organisations (in this instance, the teacher training institute, NIE) also benefit from having experienced practitioners from schools teaching in their various programmes.

PWIM with the teachers before the academic year started and early enough so that the teachers could plan and prepare. The date chosen was November 26, 2007.

ORIENTATION

It was early in the morning. It was bright and hot. I rushed from home to reach the training venue at a neighbouring school early. I wanted to be there early. I was nervous about meeting my new colleagues for the first time. The humidity was high and I was already perspiring through my shirt, even though the training room I was setting up was air-conditioned.

I was busy setting up the room, arranging the tables and chairs, distributing flipchart paper, colour markers and pictures to each of the cluster of tables and chairs. I was thinking about what I would say to my new colleagues later, when my wife, who was helping me to set up the room, exclaimed, “Barbara’s here!” My heart leapt for joy when I heard that. A familiar face, friend and confidante had come.

A sense of calm and composure descended on my palpitating, anxiety-filled heart when I saw Barbara’s smile. “Are you ready?” Barbara asked. I gave a resigned smile. “As ready as can be” I thought to myself. “Ya, guess so,” I told her.

Minutes later, I introduced Barbara to the principal and the teachers, and shared with them the history of PWIM and how I became interested in it. Barbara took over from me after my sharing. She taught them the “moves” of PWIM and how to “shake out” the words from the pictures. She had them practise and present their PWIM charts, before leading them in the planning of a unit of work around PWIM. The teachers were surveyed after the workshop and they all agreed that they could apply what they had learnt. The comments given by the teachers were generally positive: “PWIM is effective as a tool for the pupils to recap their work”; “Easy to apply PWIM”; “Good strategies to take away”; “A good teaching strategy” (personal communication, November 26, 2007).

COMPLICATION

“Why are you using this method? You could use the “word frame”² to teach vocabulary. It is found in the lesson plan.” (Mentor A, personal communication, February 19, 2008)

Mentor A was a retired teacher hired by the department to oversee the implementation of a country-wide, recommended literacy programme. The school I was posted to was in this programme. This recommended literacy programme required the lower primary teachers to use a certain set of teaching strategies, namely Shared Reading (Holdaway, 1979), a modified version of the Language Experience Approach (Stauffer, 1980), and the use of learning centres. In addition, the school-teachers in this programme were provided with detailed scripted lesson plans and weekly monitored training to ensure that every teacher could use the strategies and resources

² Word Frame: A piece of rectangular plastic with a rectangular opening in the centre functioning like a photograph frame; its main purpose is to focus the students’ attention to a chosen word by blocking out the surrounding words.

effectively. Furthermore, a mentor would be assigned to observe the teachers of the school that was in the recommended literacy programme. The mentor's role was to provide aid and guidance, so that the teachers would be able to implement this recommended literacy programme effectively and correctly.

Instead of the recommended "word frame", I had used PWIM to teach vocabulary, to highlight the words in the Big Book. Even though there was a list of pre-selected words to be taught for every Big Book in this literacy programme, my pupils usually "shook out" more words than in the pre-selected lists. The pictures I had chosen from the Big Book were rich and detailed enough to allow this. I had not adhered to the scripted lesson plan and recommended strategies; thus, Mentor A made that remark to me.

The person in charge of all of the mentors in this programme, Mentor B, had received feedback from Mentor A about my lesson. Every mentor had to report to her about each individual school's progress in implementing this new literacy programme. Mentor B sometimes accompanied the programme trainers during the training in the various school districts. Later that same year, at a District training session, Mentor B highlighted the importance of "framing" the pre-selected words vis-a-vis the use of other non-prescribed strategies. She was evidently not pleased with me for using a teaching strategy not prescribed in the programme, as noted by the fact that she chose to target me and my use of PWIM in front of a large group of other teachers from various schools for doing something different, going against the grain, choosing not to be "regimented" in the use of the "word frame" strategy:

This programme is very effective. We have used it to train teachers in our neighbouring countries. The feedback from the teachers has been very positive. The children are enjoying their English (language) lessons and they are doing well. (Mentor B, personal communication, March 18, 2008)

As Mentor B said this to a group of 50 teachers from various schools in the programme, she turned to look at me and added: "It is not a good idea to have other strategies alongside this programme. Just keep to this programme and do a good job with it."

I was puzzled. I had not stopped using the programme; in fact, I continued using the recommended strategies of Shared Reading and Language Experience Approach as prescribed in the programme. However, I added PWIM as a method with which to teach vocabulary instead of using a word frame to highlight certain vocabulary to be taught. The inductive way of teaching through PWIM was more interesting for the children and it utilised what the children already had – their prior knowledge and background experiences. My choice of using PWIM, after reflecting about the best way to teach vocabulary, seems to have posed "a potential threat to the dynamically conservative system" (Schon, 1983, p. 332) in which I lived. Schon (1983) pointed out that "the freedom to reflect, invent and differentiate would disrupt the institutional order of space and time" (p. 333). This was borne out again when Mentor A, my school's assigned mentor, said to me later that year: "It is so much better to use the programme's guidelines. It is spelled out clearly in the lesson plans." (Mentor A, September 23, 2008)

My choice to use PWIM seemed to "disrupt the institutional order" of the recommended literacy programme.

EVALUATION

Studies in the past thirty years (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Saville-Troike, 1984; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Garcia, 1991; Day & Bamford, 1998; Proctor, Carlo, August & Snow, 2005) have demonstrated the importance of vocabulary in children's academic progress. The gains in vocabulary will contribute to the children's reading comprehension, grammatical knowledge and writing skills. A recent review of vocabulary instruction research (Manyak & Bauer, 2009) highlights the benefits of instituting "well-designed vocabulary instruction" (p. 175) for English learners. In addition, Manyak & Bauer (2009) have recommended that "vocabulary instruction for all students should be multifaceted in nature, involving not only the teaching of specific words but also ...the use of visual images ... to enhance the meanings of unfamiliar words" (pp. 175-176).

Instead of just framing a word to highlight the isolated word and teach it, PWIM is "multifaceted" in that it utilises the "visual image", the spoken and listening vocabularies of the children, and the children's own lived experiences to aid them in their learning. Is vocabulary development of the children not more important than dogmatically holding a teacher accountable to a fixed set of teaching strategies within a programme?

CONCLUSION

The education system in Singapore is encouraging teachers to be more reflective; in fact, to be reflective practitioners. All novice teachers since 2006, upon completing their pre-service training, have to attend a compulsory Beginning Teacher Reflective Practice workshop in their probationary first year. This was mentioned by the then minister of education at the Teacher Investiture 2006: "Beginning teachers are being provided with continuous training in areas such as Basic Counselling, Classroom Management and *Reflective Practice* [emphasis mine]" (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Schools and teachers are encouraged to be reflective as well. As far back as 1997, the Teacher's Network was conceptualised to "build a fraternity of reflective teachers dedicated to excellent practice" (Teacher's Network, 2009). More recently, the senior minister of state for education, at the Opening Ceremony of the 2nd Asia-Pacific Educational Research Association Conference 2008, told the educational research community that "for teachers to develop and implement classroom innovations, we need them to be reflective practitioners" (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Yet, in so doing, the system must be aware that:

The tensions inherent in the bureaucratisation of professional work tend to amplify when professionals seek to become reflective practitioners. A practitioner who reflects-in-action tends to question the definition of his task, the theories-in-action that he brings to it, and the measures of performance by which he is controlled. (Schon, 1983, p. 337)

For the education system as a whole to be reflective, the education system has to allow its teachers to "question" certain of its current practices. A reflective system must place "a high priority on flexible procedures", "differentiated responses", and "make a place for attention to conflicting values and purposes" (Schon, 1983, p. 338).

Insisting on a strict adherence to a set of teaching strategies as well as frowning on other practices not prescribed in the programme's pedagogical package does not demonstrate any willingness to have "flexible procedures", "differentiated responses" and "conflicting values and purposes". It seems that, in my instance of using PWIM, reflective practice does not seem to be encouraged in actual practice.

As I reflect upon this experience, my education professor's exhortation not to be "regimented clones" comes flooding back and I am left to wonder whether it isn't easier for many teachers to just conform to prescribed practices within the school or within the literacy programme they are situated in rather than question those practices. Perhaps that is the reason why my education professor felt he had to shock and challenge us to repudiate his description of us.

EPILOGUE

Teacher A (personal communication, October 19, 2009):

I do find the PWIM useful in the following ways: It will develop the pupils' vocabulary. This is essential and helpful especially for their oral skills and written expression. Our pupils enjoyed doing it as a class as well as individually. From their individual work, I am able to assess their ability to write associated words in relation to the picture. Besides that, I am also able to see how observant our pupils are. They must be able to pick up details from the picture.

Teaching Grammar using PWIM is very interesting. I remembered using it to teach Preposition, our pupils were very excited as they were asked to state the position of the specified item in relation to other items in the same picture. I carried out this activity after getting to contribute all the nouns in the picture.

Teacher B (personal communication, October 11, 2009):

I like PWIM. Thinking back of my childhood, I used to flip through Picture dictionary just to see the pictures and make stories from the pictures even though I didn't know the words. I think it benefited my class a lot. It's something my class and I have enjoyed so far. It helps them in their vocabulary. ... Seeing their word bank book filled with pictures and words give me/us a sense of achievement.

Teacher C (personal communication, October 9, 2009):

I have tried PWIM and I find it useful, especially for the middle progress and low progress pupils. It is like a mini pictorial dictionary for these children. The thing is that the teacher must remind them to refer to it when they cannot spell the word or when they need to use it in speech or writing. I tried extending to adding adjective to each noun identified when my class did the PWIM as I find that will increase their vocabulary further and reinforce what is an adjective. So from just a single word, it has become a short phrase. It can also be used for phonics but I use it for incidental learning. It is beneficial to the children.

Teacher D (personal communication, October 7, 2009):

I feel that PWIM is useful in exposing to more vocabulary words to the lower primary pupils (P1 and P2 pupils).

ENDING IN GRATITUDE

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all the children in my primary one class who made each and every PWIM lesson a success. Thank you for enjoying the lesson, “shaking out” all the words from the pictures and revising the PWIM charts weekly. Thanks to the parents who came forward and remarked that this mode of teaching was very innovative, very useful and that they even used it at home to help their children and their siblings to learn. Thanks to the principal who was courageous enough to allow me to use PWIM within the recommended literacy programme. Thanks for encouraging me to reflect on my practices and allowing me to be a reflective practitioner. Finally, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Barbara for introducing me to PWIM, and for encouraging me to reflect and pen my journey as a teacher.

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