

Changing teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning social studies through implementing “Multi-text Reading Instruction Model”: A design-based approach in Taiwan junior high school classrooms

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General description

From the past, the instruction of social studies in Taiwan has been dominated/ occupied by “authoritative-text” or “transmission” teaching models/theories. The social studies are considered as “content-driven” subjects, which ask the students to acquire the existing facts and rules about our living worlds. Therefore, the goal of the instruction of social studies at Taiwan junior high schools is to equip the students with huge amount of information and rules introduced by the textbooks. In this context, the social studies teachers are supposed to be good “knowledge providers”, who transmit the knowledge of social studies to their students.

However, this traditional approach of “teacher as transmitter” was challenged by the new belief of social studies education during the educational reform movement in 1990s. According to the Grade 1-9 Curriculum Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2008), the goal of social studies was transferred to constructing students' abilities to relate themselves to others and the society. Based on the above goal, social studies at junior high schools are supposed to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that students need to explore the worlds and exercise their civic duties as citizens of the country and the world. From the point of view, a teacher is supposed to be a “facilitator” of students' learning process, rather an authorized “knowledge transmitter” in the classroom. In addition, after Grade 1-9 Curriculum was put into force in 2001, the instructional time of social studies was reduced to 3 periods per week. In this situation, it is impossible for the teachers to cover all the contents of textbooks in the courses of social studies. Last but not least, Taiwanese students have reading problems when they study the curricular materials in social

studies. According to results of PISA 2006, many Taiwan students have difficulties in dealing with new concepts and vocabulary, extracting information from long narrative or expository texts, and retrieving information from books, internet, newspapers or other supplement materials (Taiwan PISA National Center at National University of Tainan, 2009). In other words, reading problems hinder the students from using the textbooks or other curricular materials as tools to find information, solve their problems and construct their knowledge. For these reasons, the instruction of social studies must help students acquire some target learning skills to learn by themselves, especially the reading strategies for multiple texts. Teachers should also reconsider how the varieties of students' backgrounds of their literacy levels, learning interests, and school/home learning experiences affect students' learning in social studies.

To address the problems mentioned above, five social studies teachers at Taiwan junior high schools are invited to a 2-year project for designing and implementing "Multi-text Reading Instruction Model" with our research team at National Taiwan Normal University. During their participation, the changes of teachers' beliefs, their perceptions of adopting new teaching strategies, and progress of their professional development are documented and analyzed.

Methodology

Recognizing the complexities of teaching practice, a combination of design-based research (DBR) (Brown, 1992; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003) and multiple case studies (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2008) was used in this investigation. We adopted DBR because we wanted to "increase the impact, transfer, and translation of educational research into improved practice" (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012:16). Using this developmental research method, the researchers invented a culturally responsive model of teaching reading strategies and multiple texts for the collaborative teachers to enact in their social studies classes. Then we documented all the processes of the interventions and responses of these teachers and students to find out possible problems and solutions, figure out the interactions of the interventions and outcomes, revise our design units, and try out the revised-design all over again. As The Design-Based Research Collective (2003) pointed out, we hope to "produce robust explanations of innovative practice and provide principles that can be localized for others to apply to new settings" (p.8).

There are five teachers willing to collaborate with us in this research. They are from two different junior high schools— one is Flying School (pseudonym) with 3 teachers and 2 G8 classes in New Taipei City, and the other is Challenge School (pseudonym) with 2 teachers and 2 G7 classes in Taipei City. We chose these two schools because most of their students are from low-SES families. These teachers do care about their students' learning situations and achievement gap between them and other students in Taiwan (see Table 1 for brief description of these two schools). So they responded our call for paying attention to students' reading comprehension strategies while learning the contents of social studies textbooks. Together, we started our inquiry in April 2013 and will keep our DBR process going until we find satisfactory answers for this inquiry. Figure 1 shows our research progress from April to October 2013.

In addition, the adoption of the methodology of multiple case studies allows the researchers to document the changes of our five collaborative teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning in

social studies, which may reflect the struggles that the Taiwanese teachers faced when they adopt the “Multi-text Reading Instruction Model”.

Table 1. Brief description of two collaborative schools

Schools	Flying School	Challenge School
Location	New Taipei City, near an industrial zone	Taipei City, up in a mountain area
Teachers	geography teacher: teaching for 18 years civics teacher: teaching for 14 years history teacher: teaching for 2 years	geography teacher: teaching for 7 years civics teacher: teaching for 10 years
Students	G8, 2 classes, 58 students	G7, 2 classes, 33 students

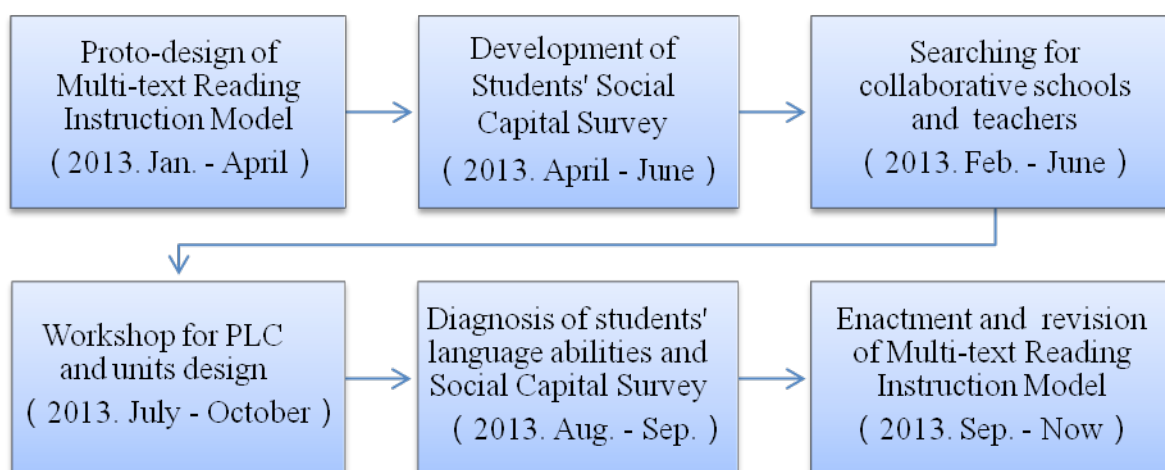


Figure 1. Research progress from April 2013 till now

Data were and will be collected between April 2013 and December 2014, including video-taped courses of social studies, audio-taped teachers’ interviews, the standardized tests of students’ reading performances, self-edited questionnaire about the students’ cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1984), the students’ think-aloud tasks of their reading strategies and all kinds of sheets, concept maps, homework, and on-going assessment, and journals of participant observations and teachers’ reflections. With long-termed participation, various kinds of research data, thick descriptions of our cases, systematic analysis and triangulating multiple sources and data, we hope to ensure the reliability and validity of this DBR research and gradually evolve the design principles of “Multi-text Reading Instruction Model of social studies” in Taiwan.

Two standardized tests of reading performance were conducted to assess the students’ language abilities . Juvenile Reading Assesment on Arguementation and Reading Comprehension (JRAARC) measures the sentence and passage comprehension (Ke & Chan, 2006). The students need to have rich knowledge on conjunctions in order to complete the sentences. Vocabulary Test measures the amount of vocabularies in different grades (Hong, Wang, Chang & Chen, 2006). The

raw scores of two tests were transferred to percentile rank (PR) compared with nation-wide norms. The results of JRAARC test is presented in Table 2. It can be told that in Challenge school, there are about one-third students failed to pass the cut points of the test; in Flying school, there are one-fifth students failed to pass the cut points. The results of the test partly predict students' reading difficulties in reading textbooks.

Table 2 Results of JRAARC test

	Numbers of Students	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Numbers of students passed the cut points (PR 25)
Flying School	58	4	18	13.28	3.355	47
Challenge School	33	3	17	11.67	3.411	20

In Figure 2, the distribution of the percentages of the PR scores is shown. According to Figure 2, students in Flying School outperformed the students in Challenge School.

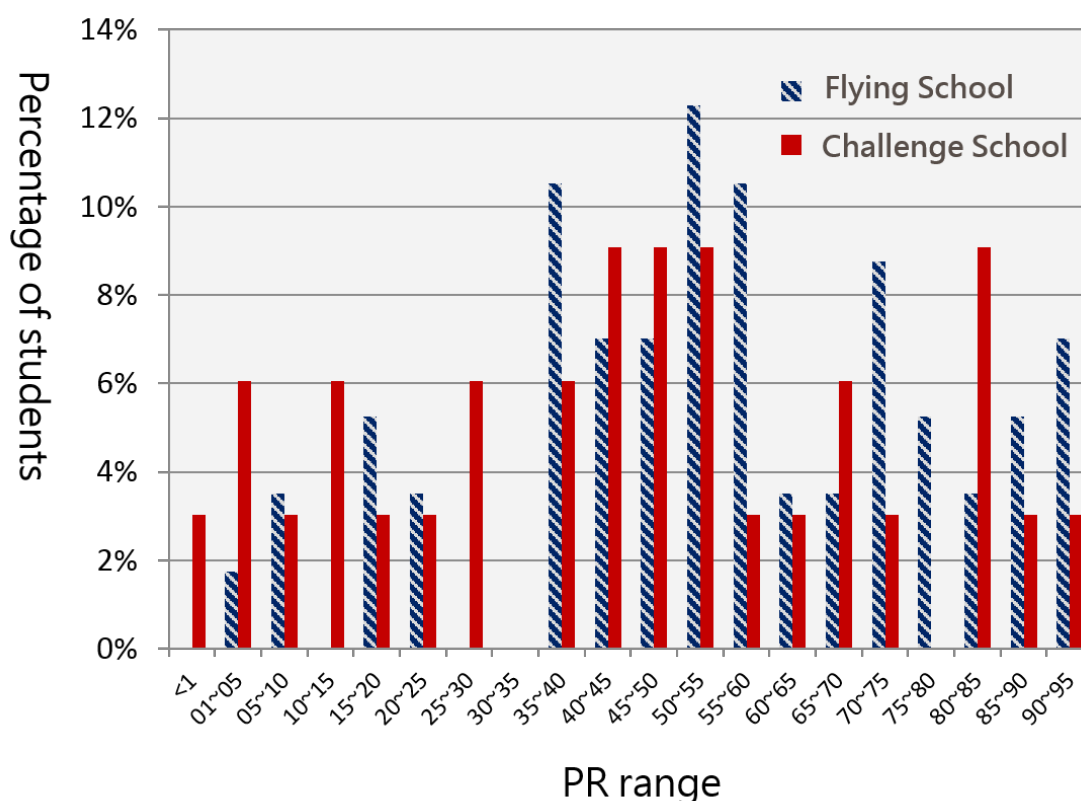


Figure 2. Distribution of Percentile Rank scores of Vocabulary Test

Results obtained/expected

The preliminary results show that the DBR design involved these five social studies teachers in the progress of teaching practice on more student-centred, culturally responsive curriculum design. To better illustrate the changes of these teachers' positioning and professional development, the framework of Darling-Hammond, Bransford & LePage (2005) was adopted. In the framework, the social studies teachers' pedagogical knowledge are comprised by three general areas of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that any teacher should acquire (p. 10):

1. Knowledge of learners and how they learn and develop within social contexts.
2. Conceptions of curriculum content and goals: an understanding of the subject matter and skills to be taught in light of the social purposes of education and
3. An understanding of teaching in light of the content and learners to be taught, as informed by assessment and supported by classroom environments.

First, we will discuss the second part about how these teachers' concepts of curriculum content and goals gradually changed, which might be the causes or consequences of the first part—seeing and knowing students in their reading and learning processes.

Becoming critical of social studies textbooks

In Taiwan, we have a textbook censorship system. The Ministry of Education invite university scholars and experienced teachers to form Reviewing Committees of all kinds of school subject textbooks from G1-12. The publishers send their preliminary textbooks to the Reviewing Committees to review and judge the qualities and quantities of the learning content and activities design. Then the Reviewing Committees offer their suggestions for revisions and adjustments to the publishers, who in return might revise their textbooks or argue with reasons why they design this or that. The reviewing and revising cycles might go on more than twice or three times until the Reviewing Committees are satisfied with the qualities of textbooks and approve the publishers' certifications to publish official textbooks for schools to choose. This censorship system seems to guarantee the qualities of textbooks. Therefore, almost all secondary teachers in Taiwan just choose one edition out of 3 available editions, which appear to be alike, familiar, and without distinct characters. Taiwan teachers used to let textbooks decide their goals and objectives of curriculum and teaching, put most of their efforts in planning activities, tests and exams based on the textbooks and try hard to make sure their students memorize and know the facts and details to cope with all kinds of tests and exams to get high scores and good grades... In other words, most of our teachers are true believers (or forced to become believers) of textbook authority and diligent transmitters of textbook contents.

To make things worse, ever since the Grade 1-9 Curriculum Reform in 2001, the total number of social studies periods has been reduced from 5-6 periods to 3 per week. Traditionally divided as History, Geography, and Civics in Taiwan secondary education, Social Studies (in the Grade 1-9 Curriculum Guidelines) asked three kinds of different subject teachers to “integrate” curriculum goals and content for students' meaningful learning. However, the social studies textbooks didn't live up to the expectations of curriculum reform and our schools had a very hard time to re-allocate class periods among teachers. Finally, the textbooks arranged 3 subject matters into 3 Units in a whole book and the content were written as shortened and condensed as possible to fit in the class time-frame, just like catalogues of Chinese History, World Geography, and Government Organization. Then, our teachers divided the class periods into one period per week for one subject. Now we have a lot of social teachers complaining about the time and coverage and classes they

have to cope with every week, leaving no time to know every student's name and pay attention to students' learning...really a tragedy for social studies teachers and their students.

Fortunately, the collaboration between the five teachers and the researchers inspire the teachers to rethink the role that textual materials play in teaching and learning social studies. They also identified that the vocabulary instruction is one of the deterrent characteristics of how useful the materials are, especially for students with lower reading achievements (see also Lenz & Shumaker, 1999). And they started to criticize the way the textbooks introduce new and important concepts and the de-contextualized writing style. Together, we are searching for more appropriate texts (to replace or supplement textbooks) for students to read, think and summarize the essential and key concepts. Our goals are to free ourselves from merely being transmitters of textbooks, to become transformers of the Grade 1-9 Curriculum Guidelines and to bring students real-life, meaningful, and integrated social studies learning.

Seeing students in their learning processes

Secondly, the process of implementing “Multi-text Reading Instruction Model” in their classrooms trigger the dialogue on when and how they should teach students to use reading strategy. Due to the limited instructional time and the cultural contexts in Taiwan junior high schools, the teacher adjusted the ways of teaching reading strategies. Their adjustment also shed light on how cultural contexts can affect the successful adoption of new teaching strategies in social studies.

Last but not least, the implementation of “Multi-text Reading Instruction Model” inspire the teachers to detect their students' learning problems by assessing their target skills of learning social studies, including reading, writing, and some interpersonal skills. They also recognized that to help students learn better, the teachers need to help students acquire the ability of self-monitoring, self-adjustment, and self-detect their reading problems.

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