



Excelling at English with Oral Buddy

1. BACKGROUND

In 2009, after observing that their students seemed to have trouble expressing themselves during their oral examinations, particularly in the picture discussion component, West View Primary School (WVPS) turned to Marshall Cavendish Online's (MC Online's) Oral Buddy programme to overcome this challenge. The outcome of the integration of Oral Buddy's activities into English oral lessons was so successful that it was implemented throughout the entire school, and a research paper was written and presented at various educational platforms. Special thanks to Mdm Reina Aslinda, Senior Head (Languages), and Mdm Sharmilla Singh, Senior Teacher (English Language) for sharing their research paper and background of implementing Oral Buddy in WVPS. The study examines the impact of Oral Buddy on students' oral skills, and features their personal experiences of using Oral Buddy.

2. INTRODUCING ORAL BUDDY

In 2009, recognising Oral Buddy's potential in improving students' oral skills, WVPS worked with an experimental group of 83 Primary 6 students in Oral Buddy activities during their oral exam preparation lessons for a period of four weeks before their mid-year oral examination.

Accessible through MC Online's learning portal, Oral Buddy consists of interactive multimedia practices that equip students with clear strategies to tackle the three components of English oral – reading aloud, picture discussion and conversation. Through guided practices that are accompanied by audio recording capabilities, Oral Buddy's step-by-step approach, coupled with its ability to help students listen to, practise and play back recordings, enables students to easily acquire oral skills and gain confidence.

To measure the difference Oral Buddy had made, a control group of 82 Primary 6 students (40 from an average-ability class, and 42 from a high-ability class) was used as a basis of comparison, with the coming mid-year oral examination to be used as a test of Oral Buddy's effectiveness. Both the control group's and experimental group's picture discussion scores from their mid-year exam were compared with their Primary 5 end-of-year picture discussion scores, and the results were overwhelmingly positive.

Organisation

West View Primary School

Solution

English Oral Buddy

Users

All Primary 1 – 6 students

Outcome

- Increase in students' interest in oral components
- Stronger student motivation to learn and practise oral skills
- Improvement in oral examination scores

Date

2009 - ongoing



3. IMPLEMENTING ORAL BUDDY

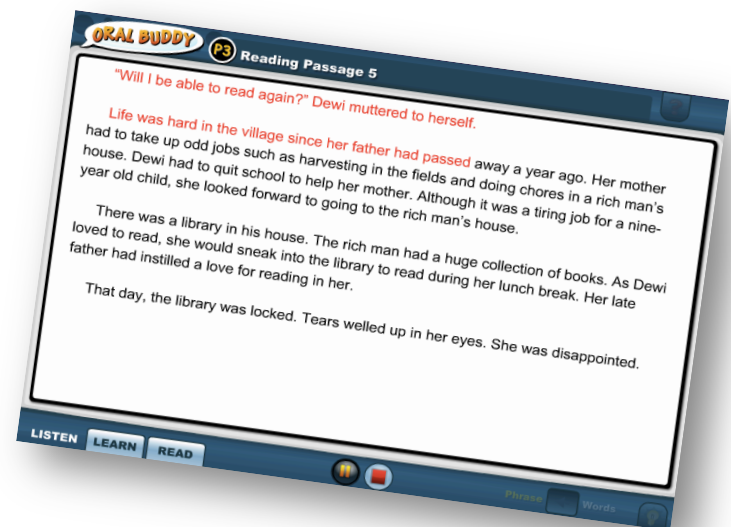
Traditionally, there was no focused lesson for picture discussion in WVPS. Students brainstormed for ideas on a picture stimulus as a class, and were expected to practise independently at home – this was the routine the students in the control group followed.

On the other hand, the experimental group was introduced to Oral Buddy's DaRT strategy – a focused approach to tackling the picture discussion component of the oral examination. An easy-to-remember abbreviation for 'Details, analyse, Reasons and Thoughts', the DaRT strategy provides students with a step-by-step guide to dissecting the big picture: First, highlight details seen in the picture, then analyse them, explain the rationale behind this analysis, and give opinions on it. Students were then brought to computer labs where they could put into action what they had learnt in Oral Buddy's online practices.

4. OUTCOME

With colourful and interactive multimedia practices to engage in, students were easily absorbed in applying their knowledge to the tasks at hand. Oral Buddy's recording function was also a plus as it enabled the students to record, play back and listen to their recordings, allowing them to evaluate themselves independently. With the recordings, students could also engage in peer assessment, resulting in more active participation in their English oral lessons.

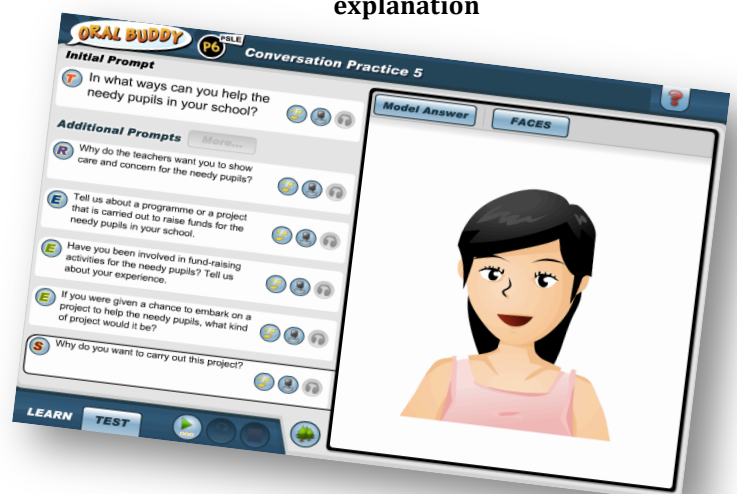
The DaRT strategy in particular, was extremely well-received by both teachers and students. The strategy empowered teachers with a structured approach to teach picture discussion, and helped boost their students' confidence.



Listen, learn and read to improve pronunciation, rhythm, fluency and expression



Learn to structure detailed responses through systematic interpretation and explanation



Learn to engage listeners in conversation through clear and articulate responses

5. PROVEN RESULTS

For students, they could now organise their flow of thoughts better, and structure their answers more clearly and coherently.

Students in the experimental group commented that with DaRT, they now knew what to say, and were able to be more detailed and systematic when describing the picture; they even felt that they could make the examiner enjoy their discussion.

Overall, teachers felt that Oral Buddy's DaRT strategy was an immense help in motivating students and increasing their confidence levels such that when their Primary 6 mid-year picture discussion results were compared with their Primary 5 end-year picture discussion results, it was found that the students in the experimental group had progressed more, and scored higher than their peers in the control group.

Average-ability students and high-ability students in the experimental group experienced a mean increase of 1.17 and 1.05 marks from their past-year exam results respectively. In contrast, their average-ability and high-ability peers in the control group only experienced a 0.45 and 0.14 mean increase from their past-year scores.

When comparing the scores of their Primary 6 mid-year picture discussion results only, the average-ability and high-ability students in the experimental group did better than their peers in the control group – average-ability students in the experimental group had a 0.75 mean lead over their peers in the control group, and high-ability students in the experimental group had a 0.96 mean lead over their control group peers.

With such a phenomenal outcome, what had started out as a study soon turned into a full-blown school-wide implementation, and WVPS has been an active user of Oral Buddy ever since.



Students engrossed in Oral Buddy practices listen to audio recordings of sample reading passages

Excelling at English with Oral Buddy

6. CONTINUING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Teachers now use Oral Buddy more frequently, assigning the ready-made practices as homework for students to learn on their own, and testing them in class afterwards. This has resulted in an increase in self-directed learners who come to class ready to practise and apply what they have learnt.

Mdm Chua Kiat Eng, a Primary 4 English teacher, noted that her pupils frequently engage in self-directed practice of oral passages, playing back the passage in sections to listen and read silently on their own. This then makes it easier for her to test them on fluency afterwards. She observed that her students enjoy the interactive lesson materials, and are able to use the DaRT method more consistently.

With the success of the DaRT strategy in improving students' picture discussion responses, teachers have seen the expediency in using other Oral Buddy strategies such as TREES to aid their teaching of the other oral components. A simple strategy to help students give their opinions in the conversation component, TREES stands for 'Thought, Reasons, Examples, Experiences, Suggestion' and has proven to be a great help to students in structuring their conversational responses.

Ms Haryyanny Awang, a Primary 5 English teacher who introduced both the DaRT and TREES strategies to her students, noted, "My students are more confident in using the TREES strategy to structure their conversation – they now know how to start the conversation based on the type of question given. The TREES strategy gives them a guide on how they can tackle any conversation topic with structure and relevant points. They are more engaged and sure about what to say for the picture and conversation components through the audio that supports the text. In this way, they can see how ideas can be structured, especially for these two components, and they become more confident in using the strategies to tackle the oral examination."

Having experienced the benefits of both strategies to similar effect, Mdm Chua added that she too now uses Oral Buddy's lesson materials to model the teaching of the DaRT and TREES strategies.

7. NURTURING CONFIDENT LEARNERS

Students have also found Oral Buddy to be an immense help in improving their oral skills. Before they were introduced to Oral Buddy, many students commented on their lack of interest in studying for their oral exam, mainly because they did not know exactly what to study, and found it boring to refer to books and practice papers for guidance. With the implementation of Oral Buddy's interactive activities, they could now have fun learning with the proper models set in place, motivating them to engage in self-directed practice more frequently.

Said Koh Jia Yi, a Primary 6 student, "I find studying boring so it was hard for me to concentrate before using Oral Buddy. Now, I use Oral Buddy every weekend! I like being able to practise the Oral components without the presence of a teacher. It has helped me by providing the model answer when I did not know how to generate ideas for oral. My knowledge of vocabulary has also improved!"

Valerie Quek, fellow schoolmate, concurred, "I found studying for oral a little bit boring before using Oral Buddy as it was all books and practice papers. Oral Buddy has helped me by giving me useful tips like DaRT, and model answers. I also like that we can record our voices when we are testing ourselves so I can spot my mistakes and brush up on them before PSLE."

The added practices and resources available in Oral Buddy have made students surer of themselves and their abilities in tackling the oral examination.

Angel Tan, a Primary 6 student who uses Oral Buddy twice a week commented, "Before using Oral Buddy, I didn't really know what to study as I could not find the resources to practise for Oral. With Oral Buddy, I've expanded my vocabulary and feel more prepared for oral exams."

8. ACING ORAL EXAMS

Many students are already reaping the benefits of Oral Buddy's sound pedagogy, and are elated at the sheer improvement in grades at their oral examinations:

Sri Vikass, a Primary 6 student who uses Oral Buddy two to three times a week, commented, "Oral Buddy is interactive and fun. It has a lot of examples and model answers that are excellent. I used to spend almost the whole day studying oral, but now I only spend two to three hours! After using Oral Buddy, I scored full marks for my Primary 5 and 6 oral exams!"

Schoolmate Darren Tay who uses Oral Buddy at least once a week added, "Oral concepts have always been hard for me to grasp, but with Oral Buddy, it was easy to understand as it had clear model answers. The recording feature helped me correct my own mistakes and be more reflective. By providing clear steps on how to master oral skills, Oral Buddy has greatly improved my oral results.

Mrs Judy Chew, Head of Department (English), and her colleague Mr Uresh, a Primary 6 teacher attest to the amazing progress their students have made.

"Pupils have made an effort to make use of the important points highlighted in Oral Buddy, and majority of them have shown improvement in their oral marks," said Mrs Chew.

Mr Uresh proudly affirmed, "There were 100% passes in English for the Oral component in my form class. 33 out of 43 students scored at least 7 marks or more for Reading and 37 out of 43 pupils scored between 7 to 9 marks for their picture discussion. My EL group saw 12 students improving by at least 2 marks for the Picture Discussion component."

WVPS' students have indeed progressed by leaps and bounds with the help of Oral Buddy. Spurred on by the success of the digital curriculum, WVPS is exploring the implementation of more of Oral Buddy's tools such as a peer-to-peer evaluation feature to further enrich their curriculum with.



Students taking an active role in learning enthusiastically contribute their ideas in class



WVPS students embrace learning with ICT through MC Online