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I'd like to teach the world to read

Reading a newspaper is the best way to hone one's English, says this teacher

Letter from Lee Hong Leong

SOME parents are apparently very unhappy over the fact that some pupils were given a seeming advantage in the recent English paper of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). A *Straits Times* article published three years ago was adapted for use as the comprehension cloze passage – a report which a few schools and tuition centres had recently used in their English language revision exercises.

While I do not know the exact questions that came out in the paper, I am pretty sure they could not have been exactly the same as those set by the schools and tuition centres. So, as I see it, the pupils who had used the passage for revision only had the advantage of knowing that the genre they were being tested in was that of a newspaper report. It is unlikely that any of them would have memorised the exact text of the article.

I have been the head of the English department at both primary and secondary

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level for more than 20 years in the course of my teaching career. It has always been my practice to get my students to read newspapers from as early as Primary 3, be it *Little Red Dot*, *My Paper*, *The Straits Times* or *TODAY*.

I got my students to keep a folder of newspaper cuttings and from this stockpile of reports set them exercises ranging from vocabulary tests to comprehension. Of course, I used the reports for cloze passages, too. I'm sure many teachers are doing the

same, rather than relying on just worksheets and workbooks.

I see this episode as a challenge to teachers, tutors and parents, in particular, to move away from the "worksheets and assessment books" mentality and cultivate in children the more rewarding pursuit of reading the news. The schools and tuition centres which happened to use the article in question as a cloze passage should be applauded for their initiative.

It is never too late to get students interested in reading the news and it always pays to do so. One word of advice, though: – do not force them to do so, but instead get them started by reading the bits they are interested in, before discussing the reports with them. There's no better way to teach life lessons and social skills to our youth than through newspapers.