

Narratives of Teacher Development

Reading and Speaking

Edited by Simon Borg



English Language Teacher Development Project

Volume 1

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Introduction

Simon Borg

Current trends in teacher development argue for a move away from excessive reliance on conventional models of standardised, course-based in-service training packages or products. This is not to suggest that input-based workshops and courses delivered by trainers cannot support teacher development; the point, though, is that this model has dominated teacher development for many years and there is increasing evidence that it often fails to generate the longer-term transformative changes in teachers' beliefs and practices – and ultimately in student achievement - that are hoped for.

In contrast, contemporary thinking supports the view that professional development is more likely to have transformative impact when: it builds on what teachers already know; promotes active learning; involves teachers in decision-making; is collaborative, job-embedded and aligned with the system teachers work in; is supported by school leaders, inquiry-based, and sustained. The English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP) in Malaysia reflects these principles and the teacher narratives we present in this volume demonstrate the value of this more organic approach to supporting teacher learning and educational change more generally.

An overview of the project is provided in the next chapter; in brief, though, this was situated within broader educational reforms taking place in Malaysia in which improving the teaching and learning of English in primary schools played a central role. The new national curriculum (the KSSR) promotes a communicative approach to language teaching which represents a significant move away from established practices; teachers (not all of whom had been originally trained to teach English) also needed to develop skills which would allow them to work effectively with young children who had no previous experience of or exposure to English; these children were in many cases also learning the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) in

addition their first language. ELTDP approached these challenges by grounding teacher development in the realities of teachers' own classrooms, schools and communities. Mentors were assigned to teachers not as trainers but as experienced professionals who could work with teachers in schools and support them in implementing, via reflective practice, changes in their teaching. The scale of the project - 120 mentors working intensively with 1200 teachers for up to three years – provided scope for widespread impact on children, teachers, classrooms, schools and communities – and the narratives we present here, all written by teachers themselves for an audience of fellow practitioners, provide insights into the range of impacts the project has achieved.

This is the first of three volumes in this series of publications from ELTDP and (following this Introduction and the background chapter which follows), the narratives we include here share a focus on supporting the development of reading and speaking skills in English. Each chapter is organised under the same four headings; Context introduces the setting for the work that will be discussed; Focus defines the particular issue that will be addressed; Activity is where teachers describe what they did to support the teaching and learning of English; and Reflections provides concluding thoughts on the impact of the activity and of any challenges the teachers experienced.

The first two articles by Annisha Binti Bai'e's and Cornelia Lawrence focus on the use of reading corners as a way of providing children with enhanced opportunities to enjoy reading in English. These accounts highlight the fact that lavish resources are not required to create an environment that is conducive to learning. The positive effect on the children of having access to reading material they can read for pleasure also emerges clearly here.

In their article, Nurhafizah Abdullah and Faisal Madzin provide further evidence of how the

availability of appropriate books in schools can contribute to positive attitudes to reading English among children. Collaboration – as in many of the accounts in this collection – is also a key theme here, and in particular the support of the school principal is highlighted as a key factor which supported the success of the reading initiative the teachers implemented. Exploration and reflection – also recurrent themes in this book – are evident too, as the teachers explain how they have tried out different ways of organizing reading in their classrooms.

The next article, by Vetonia Joseph, takes learning outside the classroom and illustrates how the wider community – in this case a local library – was used as a resource to support the process of learning to read (and perhaps, as importantly, the development of positive attitudes to reading among children). Taking children to the library also created links between the school and the library – a previously under-utilised resource – which provided excellent potential for on-going collaboration and learning.

Conventionally, reading in primary schools in Malaysia, in common with many other contexts, has been characterised by reading aloud, translation, and comprehension exercises. Silent reading was a less common activity and this is the focus of the account written by Shakira Jaafar and Siti Fatimah. Common themes again surface here – the discovery of an unused resource (in this case, a bank of reading books in the school library), inquiry, including getting feedback from children about their reading preferences, and carefully planned classroom practice supported by reflection. One key – and perhaps unexpected – outcome for one of the teachers here was a boost in her own self-confidence stemming from the realisation that she was capable of providing innovative learning experiences for her children.

Cynthia C. James' contribution highlights another theme of general relevance to the ELTDP – strengthening family involvement in children's learning. Cynthia tells us how she invited parents into the school and gave them the chance to talk while teachers listened – a reversal of the format parent-teacher meetings usually followed. Parents also became active participants in a project which enabled them

to support their children's learning at home by reading stories to them. Collaboration – this time between teachers and parents – emerges again here as a key factor in enhancing the quality of learning for children.

The final three articles on reading deal with phonics. Nurhidayat Abdullah explains how she motivated her children to read in English using a range of songs and team games involving a focus on phonics. Siam Ching Wah also narrates her experience of introducing and using phonics with her Year 1 pupils. She used a combination of songs, games and physical activities, all supported with a clearly planned classroom management system. In both these articles the teachers describe the positive impacts that their approach to phonics had on learning. Stella Ak Jocelyn Beduru also traces her experiences of learning to teach phonics; she provides an insightful account of the processes she and her learners went through as they engaged with this novel area of the English curriculum. The teacher also reflects on how combining phonics work with the reading of stories supported the development of reading in her pupils.

The final four contributions to this volume share an interest in promoting speaking skills in English and provide four very different perspectives on how this can be achieved in the primary school. Jong Sze Chun describes a voluntary after-school initiative in her school designed to make speaking English enjoyable rather than what she calls 'linguistic torture' for the children. This goal seems to have been achieved, as pupils responded enthusiastically to the programme of thematic game and activity based speaking activities provided for them.

Dayana Binti Nayan recounts her experience of using puppets to help pupils overcome their fear of speaking English and illustrates how this strategy did impact positively on the children's confidence. In particular, pupils overcame their fear of making mistakes and were more willing to try to use English to communicate. The children were also involved in making their own puppets and using them to practice dialogues and do role plays.

Still on the theme of talk, Joseph Ak Degat explains and illustrates his overall approach to the role of talk in teaching primary English. He

sees talk as a central communicative activity and, as he explains, he is constantly on the look-out during lessons for opportunities for interaction in English. His argument is a convincing one – that making talk a regular, positive and central feature of English lessons allows children to become more comfortable speaking English from an early age – and he reflects on the benefits of this approach he has observed with his own pupils.

The final contribution here is a narrative about an English Carnival – an event that revisits many of themes highlighted already – parental involvement, purposeful and enjoyable opportunities to speak English, and collaboration among teachers. Parents, children and teachers took part in a range of activities – including a jumble sale, language games and an English movie – which promoted the use of English. The feedback from everyone involved was positive, leading to plans for similar activities not just in English but across other subjects too. This is one example of a phenomenon noted in several schools – that initiatives introduced by ELTDP teachers were being adopted across other subjects too.

We hope you enjoy these stories. They provide vivid yet realistic accounts of innovative activities which other teachers can adapt in their own contexts; the narratives also serve as a source of inspiration, showing how with collaboration, commitment and appropriate support significant changes can be made to teaching and learning even in challenging circumstances.

THE EDITOR

Simon Borg (s.borg@education.leeds.ac.uk) is Professor of TESOL at the University of Leeds, UK. Full details of his work are available at <http://simon-borg.co.uk/>.

Introduction to the English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP)

Rachel Bowden

BACKGROUND

Language policy in Malaysia, seen as central to establishing national identity and unity, has proved polemic over several decades (Ali, Hamid and Moni, 2011). Post-independence (1957) Bahasa Malaysia (BM), the National Language, replaced English to become the medium of instruction in schools. This came in to effect fully from the early 1970s in West Malaysia and from the mid 1980s in East Malaysia. Although English remained a core subject within the curriculum, it is recognised that the demand for proficient English speakers (particularly in the private sector) has not been met by the state education system. National aspirations to move towards a knowledge economy and increase global competitiveness have lent increasing urgency to raising standards in English (Gill, 2005; MoE 2012).

In order to increase students' communicative competence in English it was decided to reinstate English medium instruction in all schools for maths and science, a policy which was enacted from 2003 onwards. However in the year after this policy was fully implemented (the first cohort having taken their end of primary examination, the UPSR) the decision was taken to reverse it. Beyond overall lower attainment by pupils under the policy, concerns focused on the unequal access to English between urban and rural pupils, and the ability of teachers to teach in English (Ali, Hamid and Moni, 2011).

Since this reversal the Malaysian government has introduced a new policy 'Strengthening English, whilst Upholding the Malay language' (MBMMBI). This has included, from 2011, a new primary school curriculum (KSSR), a 90 minute increase in weekly English lessons for all pupils, and an emphasis on the professional development of English teachers.

The focus on professional development within this policy reflects the widely accepted

understanding that teachers are 'the most significant change agents in (educational) reforms' (Villegas-Reimers 2003 p.7). Certainly it is teachers who must interpret the opportunities presented by the KSSR and increased lesson time into meaningful learning experiences for pupils. From 2011 the Ministry of Education launched the nationwide Native Speaker Programme, which was implemented in East Malaysia by the British Council as the 'English Language Teacher Development Project' (ELTDP).

INTRODUCING ELTDP

The English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP) was implemented on behalf of the Malaysian Ministry of Education in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan by the British Council from 2011-2013. Its aims were to improve (a) the quality of teaching and learning, (b) teachers' language proficiency, (c) teachers' ability to utilise teaching and learning resources, and (d) relationships between key stakeholders in and around schools. ELTDP was a mentoring project, with British Council mentors working alongside teachers in schools to develop their thinking, knowledge and practices.

THE FIGURES

- 600 state primary schools spread across Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan
- 1200 level 1 (Year 1-3) English teachers received a minimum of 75 hours mentoring support per year
- 2000+ other teachers involved in related school and district level activities
- 120 mentors on the project (each mentor worked with five schools)

Each of the 120 mentors worked with five schools, and districts typically had three mentors. All mentors were ELT professionals, had ELT qualifications, experience teaching young learners, and were educated to degree level. Many had recognised state education teaching

qualifications, post graduate qualifications and teacher development experience.

Each mentor worked with 10 'core teachers' from their five schools, usually two teachers per school. These teachers taught English at level 1 and were either 'optionist' (trained to teach English as a specialism) or 'non-optionist' (specialists in other subjects who also teach English). As the new curriculum (KSSR) was phased in from 2011 to 2013, mentors worked progressively with teachers from Year 1, 2 and 3. In addition mentors worked with other English teachers, teachers of other subjects, and school administration staff as well as facilitating work with local communities.

APPROACH

ELTDP's mentoring approach was based on an increasing body of work which shows that engaging teachers in reflective thinking, classroom enquiry and collegial collaboration supports sustainable change (for example see Villegas- Reimers, 2003; Ohata, 2007; Nalliah and Thiyagarajah, 2002; Kabilan and Veratharaju, 2013; Lee, 2002; Hayes, 1995; Pollard, 2008).

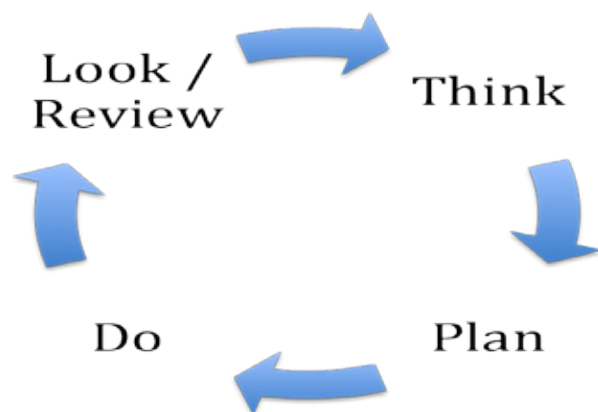


Figure 1: The reflective cycle

Developmental processes were conceptualised around the 'reflective cycle', (above) 'look, plan, do and review', where those involved:

(...) identify what the current situation is, and areas they want to learn more about or change (the 'look and think' elements of a reflective cycle). [Mentors] then work together with teachers to plan research, development or classroom intervention activities based on this (plan

and do), and then evaluate the success of the activities (look/review). Mentors and teachers prioritise objectives to focus on and decide how they wish to work in terms of interactions, tools and activities (ELTDP, 2011).

Classroom research methods were suggested as a means for teachers to gather and evaluate evidence from their own classrooms to inform further development (ELTDP, 2011; Hopkins, 2008). In addition to teacher enquiry, other elements of reflective practice, for example dialogue with colleagues, professional collaboration and accessing educational research were emphasised (Pollard, 2008).

In practice British Council mentors helped Malaysian teachers identify, investigate and address the needs and opportunities presented in their classrooms and schools. The project also prioritised collaboration with other teachers, with pupils, with school and district level administration, and the surrounding community. By supporting such processes and relationships we believe we built teachers' capacities to engage in meaningful development work well beyond the life of the project.

IMPLEMENTATION

With no standard training package, project activities varied from school to school and teacher to teacher. This flexibility meant activities could be selected based on the contexts, needs and priorities of specific teachers, classes and schools; an idea which is well supported in the literature (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). The wide range of models and tools which mentors and teachers used to support the process of observation, analysis, collaboration and evaluation included: classroom research and action research, reflective journals and learning portfolios; in-depth interviews, focus groups and group discussions with teachers and others; lesson observations, peer observations, video observations and 'blind' observations ; questionnaires and surveys; websites, blogs, journals and resource books; story telling and role play, drawings and diagrams. This variety enabled mentors, teachers and others (parents, pupils, school administrators) to be involved in the learning process, and to find what works best for them.

ACHIEVEMENTS

In one year of the project (2012), our mentors worked with 3,192 Malaysian teachers for a total of 116,624 hours using a variety of tools, methods and strategies. Over the year a total of 46,149 visits were logged - around once a week per teacher. Because of this high-intensity, regular support, we saw strong and tangible improvements in teaching and learning. This included evidence of a wider range of teaching and learning strategies, higher student engagement, more collaboration between teachers and other key stakeholders, and significant improvements in language proficiency.

For example, improvements in teachers' language proficiency (rated using the Common European Framework for language assessment (CEF) at the start of the project and again at the end of 2012) showed teachers improved at or above the rate expected from study for the equivalent number of hours teachers received through mentoring (Cambridge ESOL, 2013). These improvements were gained through teachers using English to communicate with mentors, colleagues and in the classroom as they focussed on improving teaching and learning; not by directly 'studying' English.

An independent evaluation of the project reported that:

"ELTDP has achieved an impressive level of 'deep' change within a relatively short time. This includes:

- Changes in the relationships between members of school communities (in and outside of schools)
- Changes in teachers' attitudes and practices to teaching and learning
- Changes in understanding about teaching, learning and assessment
- Improvements in students' and teachers' confidence in using English." (Kaplan, 2012 pp.3-4)

Moreover the evaluation noted that 'the accumulated mass of these small changes in school communities in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan, at the district and state level (PPD and JPN), as well as the KPM in Putra Jaya (Ministry of Education), support larger, more systemic

changes in how teaching and learning is understood, practiced and measured' (Ibid).

It must be stated that such positive change has only been possible based on the ongoing participation and support of our partners in the Ministry of Education Malaysia. This includes staff in the central Ministry of Education, in State and District Education Offices and in schools across Sarawak, Sabah and Labuan.

NARRATIVES OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

This publication is comprised of teachers' accounts of activities undertaken as part of ELTDP. In each article the teachers describe their particular contexts, the focus and process of work, and the impacts which have resulted. It is hoped that these stories will inspire fellow teachers and others as they see the professional commitment and creativity that these teachers have shown in improving the teaching and learning of English in their schools.

There are three volumes in this series:

- Reading and Speaking
- Stories and Songs
- Engaging young learners

All of the articles featured in this series are also available to download on the 'Engaging Malaysian Schools in English' (EMSE) website: <http://www.emse.com.my/>. This site also contains KSSR lesson ideas, forums for discussion, teaching tips and links to other useful websites.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND READING

ELTDP Symposium 'teacher as researcher'
In February 2013 ELTDP held a symposium in which 70 teachers from across the project came together in Kuching to present their work to an audience of peers and colleagues from within the Malaysian Education system. Many of the presentations, and more information on the symposium, are available here: <http://teacherasresearcher.weebly.com/index.html>

ELTDP PUBLICATIONS

Available to download for free at <http://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/english-language-teachers-development>

(ELTDP, 2011) Project Introduction
Guidance on the project approach and
infrastructure written for project stakeholders

(Kaplan, 2012 and 2013) Interim and Final
External Evaluation Reports
Outputs from the Participatory Impact
Monitoring and Evaluation (PIME) implemented
by EENET CIC

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THE AUTHOR

Rachel Bowden (bowdenrka@gmail.com)
worked as a Project Manager on the ELTDP from
2011 until 2013.

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Our reading corner is inspiring

Annisha Binti Bai'e

CONTEXT

SK Kampung Alit is a small school situated in a district called Kabong in Sarawak. The school has a population of about 120 students with 15 teachers and six other school staff. About 60% of the pupils come from the Malay kampung (village) and 40% from three Iban longhouses around the area. Most of the parents work as padi farmers, fishermen, factory workers, oil palm workers or work outstation in West Malaysia. The school sits alone on the beach facing the South China Sea. Our school library was destroyed during a sudden high tide in December 2004. The flood caused erosion and changed the geography of the place. About 15 years ago the school was about 200 metres away from the sea, but currently it is just less than 50 metres away.

FOCUS

Although some resources were saved after the 2004 flood, our school has not been provided with a new library or updated reading materials. This has affected reading activity in the school and in this article I discuss how we have used reading corners (an idea suggested by our mentor) to address this situation. I also discuss how the reading corners have inspired the pupils to engross themselves in books and to develop reading habits, and the big difference it has made to the pupils and their learning.

ACTIVITY

With a small budget and donations from teachers the reading corner was set up in Year 2. Teachers worked together to get shelves and baskets for the books. We also got a few baskets from our mentor, and old curtains and cushions from staff. We found a few exercise mats and a mat donated by one of the teachers. The reading corners were furnished with these mats and cushions, and with some toys which the pupils hug and hold as they listen to the teachers telling stories.

In 2012 we participated in the bidding for the Power of Reading project. Although we were unsuccessful we were grateful to receive a good supply of second hand books. We used the books for our reading corners. We also collected old magazines, newspapers and books saved from our previous library to add to the collection. Teachers in charge updated the reading books and materials every two months and kept a record of them for future reference. The setting up of the reading corner attracted the children to read books, flip through them or just look at the pictures in them. They started to enjoy independent reading and guided reading activities in the area.

The reading corner is a good resource not only for English teachers and the pupils during English lessons, but for teachers who came into the class for other lessons. We also included Malay language books to provide the pupils with a language-rich environment. If you have a few books and a corner you can start your first reading corner. It is an easy and simple thing to do.



The first reading corner at SK Kampung Alit

REFLECTIONS

Reading and writing levels improved

The reading corner in Year 2 became famous and was talked about by the pupils and the teachers. The remarkable success of the reading corner inspired other teachers to set

up reading corners in their classes. Reading levels improved among the Year 2 pupils: at the beginning of the year, the pupils were reading from baby books to level 1 and level 2 books. After 6 months about 8 out of 19 pupils in the class could read a collection of classic animal tales storybooks with 128 pages. As an English teacher, I was impressed by the great difference the children achieved in just 6 months. Soon, we had a reading corner in every class. "I am happy I like reading books" said Syafiqah, one of my Year 2 pupils. Year 2 are keen English learners who quickly use English they've learned and speak confidently. "I realized the pupils recommended to their friends the books they have read", said our Science teacher.

Every morning pupils come into the class and spend their time reading. Pupils read during their free time, after finishing their work, or in the afternoon; they also borrow books from the reading corners. Since then, the reading activity in our school showed a tremendous improvement. The latest reading report we made to the PPD (District Education office) was in May 2013. According to the reported result (Laporan status Nilam, a reading programme proposed by the Ministry) 289 books were read by Year 5 (20 pupils) from the months of January to April 2013. The results also showed an improvement in almost every class and the pupils too seemed aware of their progress: "I could write better since I've been reading", said Elveyana Bibi of Year 5.

Working more closely with parents

In March 2013, again encouraged by our mentor Sue Goodman, and building on the positive response to the reading corners, we organized a World Book Day celebration. One of the objectives of the event was to further enhance pupils' interest in and appreciation of books. Parents were invited to read stories to their children in front of an audience. Initially we were not confident about working with parents and the community because we did not know what to expect. Frankly, we had prejudices about working with parents. But all our worries went away when we saw such a positive response from the parents to our invitation. In preparation for the World Book Day event a practice session was held one afternoon with an impressive response from the parents from the longhouses and the Malay village. This practice session

ensured that the World Book Day event itself went very smoothly.



A parent reading a story during World Book Day

Sharing our work

My colleague and I organized a workshop about reading corners for other teachers. During the workshop, we took our colleagues to the reading corners and explained the activities we did with our pupils at the reading corners. Our mentor reported that the workshop had an immediate affect and other schools made book corners the next day.

Challenges faced

We have faced some challenges in setting up and maintaining the reading corners. We used some of our money to buy shelves, mats, stickers and cushions for the reading corners. We also had to drive up to Sarikei, which is the next big town to Saratok, to get the best price on the bookshelves. Records also need to be kept to ensure that pupils do not take or lose books, but we have been pleased that our pupils have shown personal values and discipline in using and caring for the books.

CONCLUSION

The setting up of reading corners in the classes provides opportunities for the pupils to have an area to enjoy independent reading activities and for teachers to read stories to children. Pupils come to their classes and choose to spend time reading. The teacher responsible for pupil behaviour says that the school is much calmer in the times before and after school because pupils are concentrating on reading. Level 2 teachers have noticed an improvement in pupils' writing, especially in Malay, which

has become influenced by what they have read. Level 1 pupils' reading and enthusiasm for reading has improved greatly and Level 1 teachers have downloaded and made guided reading books to use with pupils to maximize the benefits from their interest in reading. Reading corners have inspired teachers, pupils, parents and the whole school. Reading corners can be created by anyone who wishes to have a change in classroom management and to provide a language rich classroom.

THE AUTHOR

Annisha Binti Bai'e (annisha_baie@yahoo.com) is a teacher of English in Levels 1 and 2 and Head of English panel at SK Kampung Alit. Her mentor is Sue Goodman.

Using a reading corner instils the love of reading

Cornelia Lawrence

CONTEXT

SK Patikang Laut is a primary school located in a village in Keningau, 8 km from the town. The school was built in 1987. At the beginning there were only two buildings built by the Patikang Ulu community and there were only two classes – Year 1 and 2 and the school office. Teaching began in early January 1988 and 76 pupils attended. The first Guru Besar was Mr. Mohd. Jaffrin Abdulman and there were five teachers. Today the school is very different, it now has 12 classrooms, 181 pupils and 29 teachers and the Guru Besar is Mdm Chee Wee Liang. There are mixed ability classes in all subjects. The majority of pupils are Murut and Dusun and the minority are from other ethnic backgrounds.

FOCUS

My focus in this particular project was to improve reading skills because some of my pupils struggled with reading and I believe the enjoyment of reading gives a child the best start in life. This led me to do a classroom project where I created a reading corner to provide pupils with a comfortable and relaxing area to read once they finished their work.

ACTIVITY

In January 2012, I decided I wanted to create a reading corner in my Year One classroom. It was designed and painted by my mentor and me with the help of a few school gardeners over a week. This reading corner project was partly funded by teachers and by the school. In our reading corner, we used locally available resources – e.g. Malay and English books from the local book store. This project was focused on encouraging children to read in any language.



Our reading corner

We decided to add additional resources to the reading corner that the children could use if they finished their work early – e.g. spelling jars and board games. We also put up some posters and children's work in this area. Children often read books and completed a book review describing the book they had read. In the book review, they drew a picture of their favourite character or of a scene from the book. Children were proud to see their work displayed and showed their friends what they had drawn. Even parents got involved, as we asked each Level 1 parent to donate a book to the reading corner.



Children in the reading corner

In my opinion, it isn't difficult to set up a reading corner. All you need is a space at the back of classroom, a bookshelf, some storybooks and a mat for the children to sit on.

REFLECTIONS

The creation of the reading corner has instilled a love of reading for both my Year 1 and 2 classes and they now enjoy reading books. One day, Raynold, a Year 2 pupil said 'Teacher, please can you read us another storybook tomorrow?' Pupils have improved their reading skills and also pronunciation. I have noticed that the children now know more words. They know animals that live outside Malaysia through the reading of books like 'Monkey puzzle'. Children now feel confident conducting storytelling using simple storybooks, where the stronger pupils read to the weaker pupils.

Some challenges of the project were that children who can read are noticing and commenting on the children who can't read. I have told those children to be more supportive rather than critical of their friend who can't read. Pupils also finish their work quicker as they want to read their favourite book. It has made me realise that I need to build a routine of reading in class every day. I encourage pupils to finish their work and at the end of the class they will hear a story read to them in the last 10 minutes. I now want to investigate the use of the school bulk loan collection at Keningau District Library so that my children have more exposure to interesting English books and can read even more.

THE AUTHOR

Cornelia Lawrence (rieser81@gmail.com) is an English teacher in Keningau and has been teaching for three years. Her mentor is Susan Verghese.

The power of believing: How the Power of Reading program inspired our community

Nurhafizah Abdullah and Faisal Madzin

CONTEXT

It wasn't long ago that the mention of my school, SK Pulau Gaya, an island school just off the coast of Kota Kinabalu, might have been met with sneers and ridicule. Teachers from other schools breathed a sigh of relief they weren't posted there. Our school didn't have a great reputation. It was known for being a total nightmare.

Before, the building was old and in disrepair. It's a school built over the water and there were holes in the floorboards. The jetty had sunk into the sea. There was no electricity. No clean water. A lot of the students were illegal immigrants with illiterate parents who didn't place a strong importance on education. It was not a conducive learning environment.

FOCUS

Nowadays, things are different though. My school got a complete renovation and we launched the Power of Reading (POR), a program by the British Council to award chosen schools with a thousand new English books.

Faisal Madzin, my fellow mentee, and I were nervous when our mentor, Sophie Carozzi, came to us with the idea to apply, but we talked and we decided we might as well. What have we got to lose?

Since we were one of only forty schools to be awarded this program, we were worried in the beginning. We asked ourselves whether we would be able to make the program successful. We wanted the opportunity to change the negative perception surrounding English: that it is a difficult language to learn. We hoped that with this project the students would open up and embrace English instead of running from it.

ACTIVITY

Although Faisal and I were responsible for the Power of Reading coming to SK Pulau Gaya,

it was far from a two-person project. Once we were granted the program, everyone actively participated. This was the first time the entire English panel worked together. Because of this program we became a team and we grew stronger. We were also lucky to have the full cooperation and support of our non-English teachers, senior assistants, administration, and especially our headmaster, Jasmen Elahan. Mr. Jasmen has been instrumental in ensuring that the Power of Reading succeeds. His passion and determination to rebrand SK Pulau Gaya from a school that has always scored in the bottom percentile to a school of prestige that puts education first has been an inspiration to the entire staff.

The availability of books has allowed us to experiment with different ways of using reading in our work. Some of the new reading strategies we've tried include:

- Paired Reading — a stronger student reads to a weaker student.
— an older student partners with a younger student.
- Shared Reading — the teacher uses books to introduce new vocabulary in context.
- Guided Reading — students read in groups while the teacher observes and assists when needed.
- Active Storytelling — the teacher uses a variety of voices/actions/sounds to attract the students' interest. The teacher also involves the students in the story process by asking questions throughout which allows the teacher to gauge the students' comprehension level.



Active story-telling

REFLECTIONS

The books arrived four months ago and already we've seen a noticeable change in the students' attitude and interest. Before POR, the process of learning was what we liked to call, "chalk and talk". It was the traditional approach where the teacher would write a word on the board and the class would repeat. It wasn't very stimulating to the students. Since POR started, we've gained a lot more knowledge on different teaching methods, and we've been able to incorporate new activities with reading. The students are more focused and excited. This program has helped us to become better teachers.

So far, our goal to encourage students to embrace English through storybooks is working. They love the books. Even though many of them can't read yet, they love to just flip through them. The curiosity is there and that's just the spark we need to attract their interest and desire to learn English.



Children reading together

Another added benefit is that suddenly the parents are interested! We'd thought the parents were mostly illiterate, but recently we've learned that some can read and that they want to participate. They see how hard we're working to teach their children English. Before, the parents pretty much ignored us. They didn't know who we were. Now they know we're the English teachers and they want to help us. We hope to encourage them to read to their children using the storybooks. The process of learning used to only happen at school, not at home. Now it seems possible the process can begin in the home.

The success of the program has instilled confidence in Faisal and me. We want the program to continue to grow even after us. More books and more students who are not only able to read but also enjoy reading. We want to make sure this opportunity not only benefits the students but also the entire community of SK Pulau Gaya. We hope the school and the parents from the local villages can collaborate and work better together. We want to break down walls and build a bridge of English learning.

THE AUTHORS

Nurhafizah Abdullah teaches at SK Pulau Gaya and has been on the ELTDP since 2011. Faisal Madzin teaches at SK Pulau Gaya, and has been on the ELTDP since 2011. They have had two mentors; Sophie Carozzi and Sarah Katin.

Enhancing reading skills through local library trips

Vetonia Joseph

CONTEXT

St. James is located 20 km from Keningau town, it is a mission school and was founded in December 1946. The majority of students are Dusun and Christian and most parents are farmers and paddy field workers. There are 12 classes, two of each year group, 186 pupils and 26 teachers. There are approximately 30 pupils in each class. Outside school, children's only exposure to English is through TV and radio.

FOCUS

In this article I discuss how I worked on improving the reading skills of my Level 1 class through local library trips. I focused on reading because it can enhance pupils' vocabulary and help them improve other skills such as their speaking and writing.

ACTIVITY

In October 2012, I borrowed 55 storybooks from the Keningau District Library to use with my Level 1 classes. The books were kept in the reading corner. I used them daily and students read the storybooks once they had finished their work. With the books, I conducted storytelling and storytelling activities related to the book. In class I asked my Year 3 students to talk about their favourite characters or scene from the book. They also bought dictionaries to help them look up any unknown words.

Borrowing books from the District Library prompted me to investigate what English books were available at the local library near my school. In August 2012, I went to survey the local library with my mentor and talked to the local librarians. I discovered that there were so many books there; fiction and non-fiction books written in Malay, Chinese and English. There were too many books in fact and not enough space to put them on the shelves. This resulted in many of the books being stored in boxes.

In March 2013 I organised a trip with Year 3B to the local library. We walked 0.5 km to the local library, I talked about things they could see along the way i.e. the church, the local shops. The librarians gave a welcome talk about the library and I read a short story to the children, which they enjoyed. They loved joining in with the actions in the story. During the last activity, students got the chance to pick their own book and did some silent reading.



Walking to the local library

REFLECTIONS

Visiting the local library has resulted in increased pupil motivation to read English storybooks and pupils want to go to the library again. One pupil of mine, asked me 'When can we go to the library again Teacher?' All the pupils thoroughly enjoyed the local library trip. Juliana, the local librarian also remarked, 'Thank you for coming to the library, you made the library come alive.'

I want to conduct a local library trip with all my classes as the trip has been beneficial to the pupils. I have noticed the benefits of doing regular reading. The weaker children are much more eager to read English books than before. Prior to this they only read Malay books. It has also motivated me to use more storybooks in class



Children reading at the local library

This visit to my local library has also made me think that local libraries are not being used enough. This then gave me the idea to run a local library workshop with two other mentees and the support of my mentor with all local librarians and library supervisors in Keningau, Nabawan, Tambunan and Tenom. The workshop was held in May 2013 and was a huge success as the local librarians who rarely come together had never received a workshop quite like this. The librarians were able to see what the three schools had done at their local libraries. We hope the other local libraries will go out and promote themselves to their nearest primary school. We ended the workshop with Sabdin, a teacher from SK Meninipir demonstrating some lively storytelling techniques to the librarians for them to try out in their local libraries.

We really want many more local libraries to be visited and many more books to be taken out of boxes to be borrowed and read by children and adults.

THE AUTHOR

Vetonia Joseph (debelle21@gmail.com) is an English teacher at SK St James, Keningau and she has been teaching for 11 years. Her mentor is Susan Verghese.

An experiment in silent reading

Shakira Jaafar and Siti Fatimah

CONTEXT

SK Menunggu is a small school just outside Kota Belud, which is about 90km north of the capital of Sabah, Kota Kinabalu. The majority of the community are Bajau, with some Iranun, Dusun, Suluk, Pakistani and numerous other ethnic groups. Most people are self-employed, running small local businesses. Pupils generally have little exposure to English other than at school, though increasingly children are coming into contact with it through television, computer games, the internet and songs. The class 3Amh are the strongest of the two classes I teach, with 30 children who have been learning English for three years. A few are struggling to read at their level, but all are active and eager to learn.

FOCUS

I was interested in trying out a silent reading activity with this class as an extension of my previous storytelling lessons. The class had enjoyed them and were keen for more stories. I was interested to know whether they could read English books independently.

ACTIVITY

Gary, my mentor at SK Menunggu for the last 2 years, managed to find 100 low level storybooks in the school library. During a regular teacher meeting he put the books in front of myself and Siti, who was a new English teacher in our school. Gary asked us what the school could do with all these books – so we brainstormed ideas and activities.

The key idea we had was taking books into the class every week for a silent reading session. We wanted the students to focus on the books and create their own understanding and imagination, without discussing with their friends or teacher. We brainstormed what a silent reading session might look like, but there were questions we still had regarding how the children would choose a book, how they should sit, (e.g. with friends or

individually) and whether they would actually read or not. These were questions we could not answer without first experimenting. So we invited several boys to join us during the teachers' meeting. We told them to choose a book they liked and to read it – they were given no other instructions. We then let them get on with it, while we observed and took notes for 5-10 minutes. Afterwards we interviewed the boys to build up an idea of how they interacted with the books and each other.

We found that how the pupils like to read depends on the book they are reading: some such as comics they love to share, laughing and enjoying the story with their friends, while other more serious books they prefer to read alone. They don't like to read too many in a session – three at most. Pupils prefer to choose their own books, using the cover, pictures, title, size of the books and their friends' suggestions to help them.

We felt that the feedback from the four boys gave us useful information to understand what might happen when we used the books in the class. The experiment helped us get to know their pupils better. It also gave Siti and myself the confidence to try out silent reading the classroom

So one day I took the books into class. First I gave clear instructions so the pupils knew exactly what to expect during the class. Next I explained the rules and procedure – pupils were to come to the front 2-3 at a time and choose a book. They were not allowed to open or read it till everyone got a book, though they could look at the title and picture and try to guess what the story was about. Next I asked them why and how they had chosen their books. The answers were exactly the same as four boys earlier. Afterwards the pupils all started reading at the same time, roughly for five minutes. The books were only simple storybooks, but the children read happily and really enjoyed themselves. After five minutes they were told to retell their

story to their friend/partner, either in Bahasa Malaysia or English. I stressed the importance of being good storytellers, as if they were telling their sister, using actions, changing their voice for characters, intonation and stress. The pupils really tried, taking their time and enjoying the process. Once they had finished they changed books with their partner or found a friend to swap with. The pupils enjoyed this. For 10 to 15 minutes they read as many books as could. They often moved to be with friends, discussing and sharing their stories.

REFLECTIONS

It was great to be able to give pupils the freedom to enjoy books and exposure to quality low level English books - something they did not previously have. The children also loved the process of finding suitable books and experiencing something new in their class. I feel this is something a teacher can do once a week, possibly with the pupils bringing their own books. It is a great way of building up their confidence in reading and their enjoyment of books. Giving pupils the freedom to read in groups also encourages them to interact, through discussing the language, sharing and enjoying stories, laughing together and creating their own understanding or stories.

The success of the silent reading work also made me realize that I had underestimated myself and my pupils for long. I had been unwilling to experiment with new ways of teaching, but the success of this activity dramatically changed my attitude towards innovation. As for my children, I had never believed that they had the ability to make productive use of independent reading; my attitudes here too have been significantly changed.

Classroom management may be an issue in reading activities of this kind. I did not experience any problems though and this was partly because I had planned the lesson carefully and also explained to the pupils very clearly what they were expected to do and what the 'rules' were. Careful planning is thus essential when we are introducing new and more learner-centred classroom activities of this kind.

THE AUTHORS

Shakira Jaafar has been teaching English for 15 years in Sabah, the last two of which have been in a rural school. Siti Fatimah teaches at SK Menunggu and has been working on the ELTDP project for 7 months. Their mentor is Gary Robert.

Family involvement in English language learning

Cynthia C. James

CONTEXT

SK Kunak 2 is a government primary school located in the small district of Kunak on the east coast of Sabah, Malaysia. It has around 400 pupils and 30 teaching staff. The families mainly work as fishermen, labourers, general workers and factory workers. The community comprises mainly Muslims from the Bajau, Bugis and Suluk ethnicities. It is a friendly, sociable community that loves social gatherings.

FOCUS

I had taught English in SK Kunak 2 for eight years, and yet progress was very slow. Learning was still considered not important by most of the pupils. They did not do their homework, skipped school frequently, and failed their examinations. Through conversations with them and a few visits to their homes, I learned that many of my pupils lacked the family support that they needed.

I attended many school-organised meetings with the parents in the hope that they would lead me to something. The parents had always been cooperative, yet I felt like something was missing. I noticed that there was a gap. In every meeting with the parents, teachers and school administrators would lead and dominate. We would talk and talk, while the parents would just sit and listen. All throughout most meetings, most parents were silent.

I really wanted to know what the parents were thinking. Perhaps if I could get them to open up more, I would be able to know why some of my pupils behaved in a certain way. Could it be due to some problems at home? Was there anything that I could do to help? As the Head of English Panel for my school, I was determined to change the way we work with the parents. I wanted to get to know the parents and to explore how we could work together more effectively and to help our pupils.

ACTIVITY

First meeting – An eye-opening experience

Together with Justyna Skowronska, the ELTDP mentor, the English Panel organised our first meeting with the parents on 3 August 2011. We started by introducing the ELTDP to the parents. Then, we put the parents into smaller groups and sat down with them. We talked about their children and how they learned English at home. We talked about the English language – its importance and how the parents felt about it. We talked about homework. We talked about school. We talked less and the parents talked more. Everything was conducted informally and in a more relaxed manner. It was a truly eye-opening experience for me. I believed I learned more about the school and my pupils during that one-hour meeting with the parents than in my eight years of teaching put together.



First meeting with parents

Second meeting – An introduction to the LearnEnglish Family (LEF) workshop

LearnEnglish Family (LEF) is a series of workshops that help parents get more involved in their children's literacy practices. I saw that as another opportunity to work with the parents. After several discussions with the head teacher and the members of the English Panel, we agreed to share the idea with the parents and see what

they would think about it. We conducted our second parents' meeting on 21 September 2012 and at this meeting we introduced LEF and explained how it could help their children to learn better. It was another successful meeting. Many parents signed up for the first workshop.

LEF workshop 1 – The fun begins!

On 28 September 2012, we conducted our first LEF workshop. We introduced the parents to rhymes and explained how they can be used to teach language to children. We discussed some of the rhymes that we have in Bajau (a local dialect), English and Malay. The highlight of the workshop was presentations by the parents.



LEF Workshop 1: Parents performing English rhymes

They got into small groups and performed some rhymes. We were really impressed with the parents' creativity. They did some actions to go along with the rhymes and some used musical instruments to make their performances more interesting. We had the chance to see the parents from a different perspective. I noticed that they were a bit more relaxed now. They were no longer just sitting in the audience listening to teachers. They got up and got involved. Encouraging feedback from the parents gave us the confidence to carry on with the next LEF workshop.

LEF workshop 2 – We started to bond

We had our second workshop on 16 October 2012. In this workshop, we talked about stories and how we can use them to encourage reading habits among children. We conducted a storytelling demonstration, and discussed some storytelling techniques. As in the previous workshop, we gave parents the chance to do presentations in their small groups. I had

tremendous fun conducting the workshop, and I could feel the positive energy from the parents as well. Parents were starting to be more open in approaching me and asking me questions. It was another successful workshop, and I surely learned a lot.



LEF workshop 2: Active parent participation

REFLECTIONS

What the parents think about it

I am very happy to know that the parents found the meetings and workshops as beneficial as I did. Most parents believed that the meetings and workshops had helped them realise the importance of better communication with their children. In the words of one of the mothers, "The LEF workshops have changed the way I bond with my son. He used to prefer studying with his father, but after LEF, he prefers studying with me. Because of LEF, I know how to make learning more fun for my children".

How it benefited the children

Children's views about reading changed significantly after the workshops. Through their parents, the children learned the concept of reading for pleasure. The pupils are now more interested in books, and are less intimidated by English. One Year 1 pupil said to her teacher, "My mother can speak English now, so it's easier". Parents are starting to buy storybooks for their children and read with them at home. The attitude towards learning and homework has also changed. Pupils are now more interested in learning English.

My reflection

She is the mother of one of my pupils.
I smiled at her and she smiled back.
I wanted to talk to her, but I bit my
tongue. She didn't trust me. I could see
it in her eyes. (From my personal journal,
22 April 2011)

Working with the parents has been wonderful,
yet it was not without challenges. The hardest
part was to get people to drop all negative
assumptions about each other and to start
building trust. Teachers had always been
perceived by the parents as distant and
unapproachable, whose main interests were
finding fault with the children and their parents.
Parents, on the other hand, were seen by
teachers as uncooperative and uninterested
when it came to improving their children's
academic performance. The meetings that we
conducted managed to change the parents'
perceptions of teachers, and allowed the
teachers to get to know the parents better and
understand their problems and concerns. It takes
a lot of courage to start it all, but in the end it
was all worth it.

The whole experience has taught me that
success, especially within the school context,
is not about a single person. It is about the
cumulative contributions of many people who
work together for the common good. I realise
that in order for me to really see progress, I have
to work with everyone – the teachers, the pupils
and the parents. And to work well together, we
need to have trust in each other. We need to tear
down all walls and drop all baseless negative
assumptions about one another.

From my part, I can see the start of an exciting
journey together with the parents. I can see
teachers and parents working together towards a
common goal – that is, to provide the pupils with
the best opportunities to learn. I hope and pray
that this partnership and collaboration with the
parents would continue, and I aim at spreading
the message to every teacher in the school. This
can be a start for a new way of working with the
parents for my school. I am very positive that if
this continues, we will soon be able to see the
progress that we have been dreaming of for so
long.

THE AUTHOR

Cynthia C. James (cindybj79@yahoo.com)
teaches English at SK Kunak 2 in Sabah. Her
mentor is Justyna Skowronska.

Motivating pupils to try and read English

Nurhidayat Abdullah

CONTEXT

My school is in an area where many parents are not confident with English and there are not many resources for helping children learn it. The children do not have Bahasa Malaysia as a first language and have struggled to develop their reading and writing skills. Studying English on top of this can seem like a very difficult or impossible task for some of them. This is compounded by the fact that many parents' English level is low and there is zero exposure to it outside school. In the teachers' view, motivating children to learn English has always been difficult. This article focuses on teaching English phonics to Year 1 to Year 3 pupils in SK Tanjung Bijat, in the Sri Aman division of Central Sarawak. Their starting level of English was relatively low by the standards of Sarawak.

FOCUS

I wanted to develop activities which would improve letter recognition, sound recognition and matching letters to sounds. Learning these skills was the first barrier to the children learning to read in English. I also wanted activities which increase pupil involvement in lessons and improve motivation. I developed the activities by observing pupils' performance in class and deciding what they liked to do most. I tried to notice when pupils' participation was good and work out why. I learnt that the pupils all loved to do activities in groups, singing, making sounds and being physically active. I worked to develop co-operative activities that involve touching things and moving, such as team games, to help children learn phonics.

ACTIVITY

In class, I demonstrated activities by using actions, not lengthy explanations, and this helped the pupils understand better. All the activities are easy for children to understand by watching people doing them. Most activities were aimed at mixed ability groups so the more advanced

pupils could help their friends. These are the activities that the pupils enjoyed most of all.

For remembering letters, blending, segmenting and spelling:

- Palm writing and back writing: writing letters and sounds on your body – the pupils really enjoyed that, to prepare for writing on paper and also in games.
- Actions and songs to go with letters and their sounds: – when children begin learning phonics they learn the most common sounds and associate letters with them, for example 'a' as in 'ant' or 'f' as in 'fish'. These sounds and letters can be coupled with actions and songs to make them more memorable, for example singing 'A, a, ants on my arm' to the tune of 'Skip to my Lou' whilst patting your arm and pretending ants are climbing up it or 'Hear the aeroplane, nnnnnn, hear the aeroplane, nnnnnn, making lots of noise' to the same tune, whilst pretending to be an aeroplane. The system that I used 'Jolly Phonics' which can easily be found on Youtube. Using the same actions and songs in every class is helpful. The pupils remember and enjoy it as it is very interactive.
- Simple phonics activities: – action songs, matching letters and sounds, picture matching, pelmanism/memory game – stick words or letters on paper plates, flip them over and try to remember which is which.
- Activities for lower level pupils: – arranging words written in large print on paper, arranging letter cards to spell words, circling letters in texts. Higher level pupils could also help with these activities.



Phonics work using paper plates

FOR ENCOURAGING TEAM WORKING AND COOPERATION:

- Team games where pupils worked together to match letters and sounds. For example: listen to sounds and throw a ball at the letters, listen to sounds then run and touch the letters, listen to sounds and say words with that sound, look at letters and guess words using the letter, make words on a washing line using letter cards, play the 'snap' card game co-operatively, matching letter/word cards together. The stronger pupils helped weaker ones, even holding hands for writing. Sometimes they let the weaker ones copy their writing. I chose working groups carefully using pupils that I can see work well together.
- Competitions: – group games, mixed ability, even weak ones can get praise.
- Points and rewards:– praise for all and involve all. All pupils are in teams. I display points on the board on a chart and update it every day.
- Preparing materials: – colourful to attract attention, ask children to help in making them. The pupils love using materials they have made.

REFLECTIONS

Teachers and my mentor observing classes have all noticed that the atmosphere in classes has changed. All pupils enjoy using letter sounds and actions. The phonic awareness

activities are good for involving and motivating all levels. Every pupil takes part in them.

The weak pupils want to try during all activities now. Previously the weakest pupils would be unresponsive or uninvolved in written work or reading and it was difficult for the teacher to interact with them during these parts of the class. Now it is totally different. All pupils are keen.

Using team games and positive reinforcement has worked to motivate all the pupils, regardless of level. They all like winning games, getting points and being praised. Strong pupils and weaker ones enjoy the class activities. This has led to improvements in behaviour and participation. Classroom management and class control has improved, I feel able to do more in class. This is because the pupils are happier and more enthusiastic.

THE AUTHOR

Nurhidayat Abdullah is a teacher at SK Tanjung Bijat, Sri Aman. She has been teaching since 1988. Her mentor is Tim Hughes.

Learning phonics is easy and fun using phonic songs

Siam Ching Wah

CONTEXT

I teach at SJK Chung Hua Roban, a rural Chinese primary school in Sarawak. Although it is a Mandarin medium school, the pupils are very mixed and have a variety of mother tongues. This means that with Mandarin, Malay and English as compulsory subjects, the majority of the pupils are learning at least three languages at the same time. Exposure to English outside of school is almost non-existent in rural Roban. Pupils may see one or two English language television programmes, but the majority of their exposure is in school during English lessons. This context is a challenging one for the pupils and teachers when learning and teaching English.



SJK Chung Hua Roban

FOCUS

My previous KSSR class had 34 pupils in Year 1. They found it very difficult to remember their phonics, and had often forgotten the sounds I had taught. As a result, they found it difficult to do sequencing and blending sound activities and I could see they got bored very easily during phonics lessons. I have tried many different activities to help my class learn phonics. In this article I would like to focus on the use of songs, in particular the song “A is For Apple” by A. J. Jenkins (Appendix 1; see also

<http://tinyurl.com/6c9pcnf> for a video of the song). I have used it this year with two Year 1 classes. I carried out the same activities with both classes, a total of 34 pupils.

ACTIVITY

Before teaching phonics I first played the pupils an alphabet song. The children were told that this song is about the ‘names’ of the letters. Next, the pupils were introduced to the concept of ‘sound’ of the letters by referring to what they had learnt about the names of animals and the sounds they make. I showed them a few letter flashcards, asked them the names of the letters and demonstrated the ‘sound’ it makes. Once they understood that they had only learnt the name of the letters so far, they were curious and wanted to know more about the sounds the letters make.

The first time the phonics song was introduced, I asked all the children to sit quietly and listen to the song with their eyes closed. After listening to the song, pupils were asked to guess the sounds of the letters to see how far they could understand and remember the sounds of the letters from the song. Then, the pupils listened to the song again and tried to find out the sounds.

The phonics song was played to the pupils once a week when teaching reading skills so that they would become familiar with it. I printed out pictures (Appendix 2) from the song to support their learning and appeal to different learner styles in the class. I used these to help the pupils to orally revise the sounds by showing for example the picture of the apple and saying “A is for apple”. The pupils would then answer “/a/ /a/ apple” (Appendix 1). This became a classroom routine and in time the pupils took turns to lead the routine. We also added actions to the routine to reinforce their memory. For example they mimed eating an elephant for /e/.

A variety of activities were carried out to

practise the sounds, supporting learning and getting them used to the sequencing and blending of sounds for reading. For one of these the pupils had to take turns to walk on letters that were written on the floor by the teacher. While stepping on the letters, they had to say the sounds, for example 'm-o-p'. After that, they had to blend the word and say it - 'mop'. If the pupils said the sound wrongly, I would immediately remind them using the lyrics of the phonic song. I was helping them to use the song as a tool by linking one activity with another. For example, 'm is for monkey' and the pupils would remember '/m/ /m/ monkey' then they would say the sound of m. Each pupil who managed to do it was given a star as a reward.

Furthermore, a wall chart with pictures from the song was displayed in the English Corner in the class for pupils' revision when they had completed their work or during recess.

REFLECTIONS

As a result of using the song mentioned, together with the activities, the majority of pupils were able to master Year 1 phonics in a very short time. They were also very interested in the sounds of words and realised they had acquired a tool to read, being able to recognise simple words. Furthermore, they were able to write out the correct spelling of the words by listening to the sounds.

Even though the same activities were carried out in both classes, not all the pupils showed the same results. Some of the pupils caught on immediately after listening to the song, while some needed the support of the pictures and/or the actions. Some who still need help are receiving it from other pupils in the class, acting as 'little teachers'.

Using the phonic song "A is For Apple" by A. J. Jenkins as a tool in teaching phonics really helps pupils to memorize the sounds of the alphabet. When they say the sounds wrong, we as teachers can remind them using the lyrics of the song. They seem to be able to use the song to recognise and repeat the sound and they seldom make mistakes. They can even use it to practise phonics at home. I have learnt that a teacher has to be confident and consistent in teaching, especially in teaching phonics. A teacher has to be very sure of the sounds they

are going to teach so that we don't confuse the pupils. Otherwise, it will affect their learning progress.

In this respect, the song has also helped me a lot to teach phonics. As a teacher, I became very confident in pronouncing the correct sounds of the letters by remembering the song. This song is very useful for guiding beginners to learn phonics. Most children learn the names of the letters when they are first introduced to them in their family and in preschool. So, this song is a very good guide to link name to the sound of the letters, using what the children have already learnt as a platform to the new things they are going to learn.

THE AUTHOR

Siam Ching Wah (Melisa66siam@yahoo.com) is currently Head of English Panel and has been an English Teacher for the last five of her 20 years in teaching. Her mentor is Kerry Carruthers.

APPENDIX 1

Lyrics of the phonics song "A is For Apple" by A. J. Jenkins

A is for apple, /a/ /a/ apple,
B is for ball, /b/ /b/ ball,
C is for cat, /c/ /c/ cat,
D is for dog, /d/ /d/ dog,
E is for elephant, /e/ /e/ elephant,
F is for fish, /f/ /f/ fish,
G is for gorilla, /g/ /g/ gorilla,
H is for hat, /h/ /h/ hat,
I is for igloo, /i/ /i/ igloo,
J is for juice, /j/ /j/ juice,
K is for kangaroo, /k/ /k/ kangaroo,
L is for lion, /l/ /l/ lion,
M is for monkey, /m/ /m/ monkey,
N is for no, /n/ /n/ no,
O is for octopus, /o/ /o/ octopus,
P is for pig, /p/ /p/ pig,
Q is for question, /kw/ /kw/ question,
R is for ring, /r/ /r/ ring,
S is for sun, /s/ /s/ sun,
T is for train, /t/ /t/ train,
U is for umbrella, /u/ /u/ umbrella,
V is for van, /v/ /v/ van,
W is for watch, /w/ /w/ watch,
X is for box, /ks/ /ks/ box,
Y is for yellow, /y/ /y/ yellow,
Z is for zoo, /z/ /z/ zoo.

So many things for you to learn about,
So many ways to sing a song,
So many things for you to learn about,
So many ways to sing a song.

APPENDIX 2

Picture cards from the song for classroom routine



Some reflections on teaching reading

Stella Ak Jocelyn Beduru

CONTEXT

I teach at SK St Christopher in Debak, a small town near Betong in Sarawak. About half the pupils are boarders as they are Iban and come from longhouses out of town. Very few of their parents speak English and, in fact, general literacy levels amongst adults are low. Not only do the pupils come from poor families, SK St Christopher, being a Mission School, does not receive much financial support. For example we do not have a computer lab and our library is very small with very few books. Although I have been teaching for about 16 years, I did not start as an English optionist (i.e. specialist) teacher, but upgraded by taking courses including one for English optionist teachers in 2009. Furthermore, most of my prior experience has been teaching Level 2 (Years 4-6).

FOCUS

Currently I am teaching Year 1 and 3 classes. This article refers to my time with my Year 3 pupils, who have been with me since they started school. I look back on it as a challenging, but wonderful, journey which has been one of self-learning, as well as teaching.

I was very nervous when I started with this class, facing a much younger age group than I had been used to and a syllabus suggesting approaches which were completely new to me, especially phonics. I felt that the only way that I could tackle it successfully was by making sure that I was always well-prepared with lessons that contained a mix of activities to keep all the children motivated. I think it is my detailed lesson planning and time spent making resources, particularly for phonics, that has provided a firm learning base for the increased emphasis on reading which is taking place with the Power of Reading project. However, the project has highlighted challenges resulting from placing an emphasis on phonics (decoding print) without sufficient accompanying attention to meaning. It has also, despite my attempts at

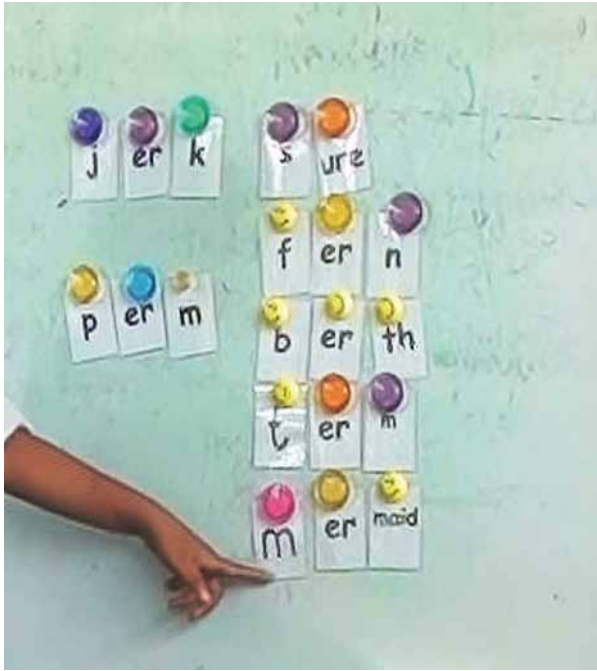
differentiation, drawn attention to disparities in ability.

The focus of my article, therefore, is threefold:

- 1) To explain how, through good planning and preparation using phonics, I have provided a solid foundation for reading, and attempted using differentiated activities to allow for mixed abilities.
- 2) How, nevertheless, the Power of Reading project has caused me to reflect on the limitations of a phonics approach when insufficient attention is paid to comprehension and how it has further highlighted different ability levels.
- 3) How I am attempting to modify my approach to take account of the above.

ACTIVITY

Planning and preparation was especially important when teaching phonics as this was not only completely new to my pupils, but to me as well. I struggled with such things as blending, and segmenting and also with my own pronunciation. I recognised that doing phonics could become very boring and repetitive, so in order to make it more interesting, fun and effective I spent a lot of time preparing and laminating word cards, sound cards and grapheme cards. I also devised and used a lot of games for group and pair work and used phonic songs which I downloaded from YouTube. The children seemed to enjoy the activities very much and many of them soon got used to the concept of segmenting and blending.



Laminated cards to support reading

I felt that the creation of a language-rich environment was important. Although a classroom solely for Level 1 English classes was made available, the room was quite dilapidated; this gave me the opportunity to use the resources I had created for lessons to make displays to create a more productive learning environment where I could constantly use the resources for revision.

Creating effective lessons for a mix of abilities amongst 30 pupils was very challenging. I wanted to ensure that I involved all pupils so that the less able children would not feel left behind. To cater for this differentiation of ability, I often made different worksheets based on pupils' capability. For example, in one reading lesson there were three worksheets which involved a) a word search (easiest) b) rearranging words to form correct sentences (moderate) and c) completing sentences using the correct phrases (more difficult). In addition, when doing group or pair work I varied the composition of the groups and pairs, sometimes mixing bright pupils with weak pupils/moderate pupils so bright pupils could guide them, but also taking care to try ensure that the more able pupils did not always dominate.

My planning and preparation paid dividends and I was pleased with the progress that the majority of my pupils showed in reading out

loud. Apart from the odd occasion when I used a Big Book, however, I was solely using the text book as we had hardly any suitable story books in the school. This changed, however, when our school was selected to take part in the Power of Reading project. We are fortunate that the British Council has given us about 300 story books to help improve the pupils' literacy; we use the books both to teach reading and to encourage a desire to read. So that we can fully exploit the books and pupils can get full benefit, I attended a course on 'Approaches to Teaching Reading' which was very important to me because I had no experience of teaching reading using story books.

REFLECTIONS

My increased use of story books as part of the Power of Reading project has proved to be a significant milestone in my journey with my pupils as they have moved from Year 2 to Year 3; it has also created challenges:

1. It has indicated that my teaching of phonics has, with most pupils, been successful in that they showed confidence and skill in reading out loud. However, I discovered that this often masked weak comprehension ability. It confirmed what I read in the book, 'Teaching Early Reading and Phonics' (Gough & Lambirth 2011) which my mentor lent to me. These authors suggest that decoding print should be a means to understanding rather than an end in itself.
2. Despite having used differentiated activities matched to pupil level, shared and especially guided reading activities highlighted the marked disparity in ability between the more self-motivated, able pupils and those who are less able and are still struggling with basic texts.

I am now trying to turn these challenges into opportunities. I feel that my detailed planning and development of resources to practise the use of phonics has paid off, especially the preparation of games and activities to maintain motivation. Now, with Year 3, much of my planning is centred upon preparing reading lessons using books for both shared and guided reading activities. Importantly, when teaching reading, especially in small groups, I am now able to build upon the skills my pupils

have already learned and to focus more on developing their ability to read for meaning.

The Power of Reading project has provided me with the opportunity to plan differentiated activities in a more effective way than previously because after the school's selection to take part in the project, the School Management granted us funds to convert our dilapidated Level 1 English classroom to make it attractive, comfortable and child-friendly. The front part of the room is used for conventional lessons and studying and the rear area has a separate, partly partitioned off, library/reading area. For example, when doing guided reading activities, I divide my pupils into three groups based on their abilities. While I am focusing on less able pupils, using either shared or guided reading in the library area of the classroom, the other groups may be using worksheets, doing creative writing activities, role-play or reading independently. Now I am able to get much more closely involved with my children's learning, helping the slower pupils and developing the more capable ones even more.



Our refurbished classroom

I feel that now, nearly six months into the third year with my class, with their enthusiasm for reading and their enjoyment of doing lessons in their own English classroom/resource centre, their self-assurance and progress is accelerating. Of course, ability still varies within the class, but I like to think that I am succeeding in giving all of them the opportunity and motivation to experience the fun and rewards to be had in learning English. Of course, my reflections on the experience gained with Year 3 are now also helping me in my approach to teaching Year 1. I shall continue to develop the pupils' ability to use phonics effectively to aid their reading, but with the experience I have

gained, and with the Power of Reading project, I shall be sure also to extend their ability using shared and guided reading to try to encourage in them a love of books.

THE AUTHOR

Stella Ak Jocelyn Beduru (endun67beduru@yahoo.com) works at SK St Christopher, Debak and has been teaching for 15 years. Her mentor is Steve Ellis.

Chinese whispers: Speak up!

Jong Sze Chun

CONTEXT

“Chinese Whispers: Speak Up!” is an on-going programme which began in 2012 and takes place at SJK (C) Pada, a school which is 20 minutes’ drive from Tenom, a small town located in the interior of Sabah. The community around the school consists mainly of Sabahan natives with a small percentage of Chinese settlers, all living amidst patches of fruit orchards and palm oil plantation sites. As more and more youngsters leave their village and head out to the city in search of better job opportunities, the community population has dwindled over the years. Now, my school has a small pupil population of only 80 students and 15 teachers, with an average class size of 13 pupils. Due to cultural reasons, the local community has very limited, if any, exposure to the English Language. Thus, pupils that I encountered when I was first posted to the school were mostly apprehensive about acquiring the language. To them, the English Language is foreign and they do not see the point in learning a foreign language without any use of it in their daily lives. Even the teachers were starting to admit defeat at the seemingly impossible task of teaching this foreign language to the disinterested pupils with only minimal contact hours within school time (two hours per week).

FOCUS

Owing to the fact that pupils in my school were found to be hesitant to explore the English Language, my mentor and all the English teachers in my school agreed upon the birth of this programme – “Chinese Whispers: Speak Up!”. We set up this programme to help pupils focus on the communicative aspect of English language acquisition and to learn to overcome their shyness and lack of confidence in exploring and employing the use of English in their daily lives. To put it plainly, the core purpose of this programme, which the pupils attend voluntarily for an hour on a weekly basis, is to provide them with communicative activities

which will help them to see that English does not have to be a form of linguistic torture, but can be great fun to learn. We hoped that by providing entertaining activities, the children would think more positively about English, and develop a greater enthusiasm for acquiring some kind of proficiency in it. As the KSSR curriculum, with its increased emphasis on communication skills, is gradually unrolled in primary schools, we think it is vital that the children learn to be comfortable with speaking English, which is a much-neglected skill in the average classroom.

ACTIVITY

This programme was initiated by our ELTDP mentor, Barbara Milburn, who offered to help with the facilitation of the sessions, while we the English teachers assist, observe and learn how to offer encouraging learning opportunities for our pupils now, and also in the future. During each session, pupils from Year 4, 5 and 6 gather together for an hour weekly, either in a classroom or an open space outside the classroom to participate in communicative language activities.

For each of the weekly sessions, we would plan out a main theme for carrying out appropriate and suitable activities according to the interest and proficiency of the pupils involved. One of the most popular activities we have devised, a human-sized ‘snakes & ladders’ game, involves incorporating target vocabulary in the form of different types of questions and tasks, which the children have to complete in order to advance across the board. As pupils are involved physically and mentally in the game by answering questions and acting as game ‘counters’, they are enjoying themselves while subconsciously acquiring and/or practising the English Language. This activity proved so popular that we have repeated it, since the range of activities which can be used with it is fairly limitless.



Snakes and ladders board

Another popular activity is the theme of songs. As we all know, children love listening to and singing songs, be it nursery rhymes, children's songs, pop songs or even oldies! This time, we chose an oldie ("Hello, Goodbye" by The Beatles) to incorporate the learning of antonyms. As the lyrics are arranged in such a way that words of the opposite meaning are sung at the same beat at different lines (e.g. I say **hello**, you say **goodbye**), it is suitable to blank out one of the words for pupils to learn the other opposite word. When this activity was carried out, pupils were required to first guess the words in the blanks, then listen to the song several times while trying to complete the blanked out words with opposite meaning words. Lastly, pupils can enjoy a sing-along session to consolidate what they have learnt for the day.

In addition to the two activities described in some detail, we have organised many more, for example: a treasure hunt, creating story books, running dictations, picture dictations and role plays.



Creating storybooks

REFLECTIONS

So far, it has been an eye-opening experience for me to be involved in this programme as the activities carried out have proven to be a great boost to the pupils' interest in the English Language. It must be remembered that attendance is on a voluntary basis, and 27 out of 36 pupils signed up immediately, and continue to attend regularly. Several of those who did not sign up have since begun to attend. Their active participation in the programme and increased confidence in speaking to the mentor, who does not speak Bahasa Malaysia, demonstrates that we are succeeding in our objective of helping them to feel more comfortable using English in normal, day-to-day situations.

However, not all the processes that we went through were smooth sailing. There were also obstacles and challenges along the way that we had to fight through and overcome to achieve what we wanted to strive for. Finding a suitable time for the programme was the biggest hurdle we had to overcome even before its planning could begin. We had to obtain special permission from the school principal to conduct an after-school activity, and also had to agree to take full responsibility for ensuring the pupils' safety while they are in the school compound. After much persuasion and assurance, we finally had permission to launch our programme. Transportation was also a big problem for the pupils as most of them had no transportation to get home after the activities. Some pupils live quite far away from the school and if they



Pupils enjoying English

miss their school bus, the only way for them to go home is on foot. Due to safety concerns, we agreed to sacrifice our own time and use our own transport to deliver the pupils to their homes after the day's activities have finished.

Though there have been these and other issues, the final outcome after each session is smiles from the pupils and satisfaction for the teachers. We may not have facts, figures and graphs to prove our case, but as pupils excitedly chatter about the activity they have just participated in, or sing English songs in the car on the way home, we teachers know that we have come a long way towards getting those shy, timid pupils to open up, explore and discover the wonders and the fun side of the not-so-foreign English Language!

Using puppets to promote pupils' confidence in speaking English

Dayana Binti Nayan

CONTEXT

This activity was carried out in SK Kuala Penganan, Limbang, with a Year 1 class consisting of 17 children. All of the pupils speak Iban as their first language and they have no or little exposure to English at home. Consequently school provides the only place and opportunity for them to practise English. Generally, the pupils are quite good at reading but they have low self-confidence when it comes to speaking English.

FOCUS

The focus of this article is the use of puppets to increase the pupils' confidence in speaking English. I decided to investigate the teaching of speaking because I noticed that my pupils are most intimidated by speaking activities. I found they are less interested in participating in speaking activities compared to reading and writing activities. For example, I always get volunteers to do a task in a reading activity but when it comes to a speaking task, the children often give me a cold response. This issue affects me as a teacher as well as I feel demotivated to do speaking activities sometimes.

After casually talking with the children about their dislikes in speaking activities, I found out that their main problem is lack of confidence to communicate in English. They do not want to pronounce words wrongly and get laughed at by their friends. In addition, they also mentioned that they don't know what to talk about and where to begin. It is very difficult for them to use English to communicate if I do not give them something to memorise and which they can then use in the speaking activities. This disappoints me as I would like them to speak for their own reasons, not merely because I have asked them to.

So, I started to bring puppets into the classroom and using them as my teaching aids during speaking activities. I was inspired

to use puppets when I saw how attentive my class were as I showed them a song clip of puppets singing. From there, I started to find information about using puppets in English lessons and stumbled upon articles (e.g. <http://www.hlomag.co.uk/mar01/sartmar017.rtf>) about how other teachers have successfully used puppets in their teaching. Therefore, I wanted to experience first-hand the result of using puppets to help my pupils improve their speaking skills.

ACTIVITY

I introduced two puppets Jenny and Gary as new class members. This means that Jenny and Gary will be with us in every English lesson. I emphasized to the pupils that Jenny and Gary are not from Malaysia so they can only understand English. This means that the children have to use only English when they are playing or talking with Jenny and Gary. I also provided a permanent place for Jenny and Gary to sit. I put them in a box and put the box in the corner of the classroom. I told the pupils that they can tell the puppets about everything. For example, they can tell them if they have any problems or they can talk about their new pencils, erasers, etc. The purpose of doing this is to encourage the children to use English for everyday conversation. In addition, the puppets also serve as a vehicle for the pupils to engage in authentic communication.

Apart from using ready-made puppets in my lessons, I also taught the children to make their own puppets from recycled materials such as old newspapers, used boxes, papers and bottles. Role-playing is a great activity that I did with my class using the puppets. After making the puppets, I asked pupils to introduce their puppets to each other. Then, they did a role play activity based on the topic in the textbook. In pairs, I gave dialogues for them to practise using their puppets. During the first few lessons using puppets, I provided simple dialogues to teach them basic interpersonal language skills.

FOR EXAMPLE:

A: Hello. Good morning. I am A.

B: Hello. I am B. How are you?

A: I am fine, thank you.

B: Where do you live?

A: I live in Taman Jaya.



Year 1 pupils of SK Kuala Penganan using puppets to do a role-play

In addition, we also made puppets that represented some characters from a story that we have read. Then, I adapted dialogues from the story for the children to practise. In groups, they did a role play based on the story in front of the class using their puppets.

In another activity, I paired pupils up and asked them to find their own spot in the classroom. I gave them the freedom to talk to each other using their puppets about anything they wanted to talk about. I found that they tried to use English all the time during this activity by repeating the dialogues that we have learned in previous lessons although they knew that I could not monitor them closely all at once.

Reflections

From my observations, I found that children are less shy and less conscious about making mistakes when talking using the puppets. Although their friends laughed at them when they mispronounced some words, this did not hinder them from finishing the speaking task that they were doing or trying out the activity again. This was different to when I did the same activity without the presence of puppets. If their friends started to laugh at them, some of them especially the shy ones immediately stopped talking and did not want to continue the activity

anymore. In my opinion, this is because the pupils feel that when talking using the puppet, their friends are actually laughing at the puppet not at them as it is the puppet that makes the mistakes.

The use of puppets also makes the speaking activities feel “more friendly” to my class. The puppets serve as a platform for more natural conversation during English lessons. Although sometimes I provide dialogues for the pupils to read using the puppets (which is not really a speaking activity), I noticed that they did not read it in a “staccato” tone. They read it in a conversational tone instead and they made different voices to suit their puppets. But, if I ask them to read the dialogue without using the puppets, they automatically read it in the “staccato” tone.

As my class become more comfortable speaking English, using the puppets day after day, they are actually experiencing a sense of success. I believe that this increases their self-esteem. They have started to believe that they have the ability to use English for communication and they can succeed in carrying out a speaking task. As a result, their confidence in speaking English has increased. They have started to use English more often in the classroom without me giving a specific instruction for them to do so or organizing a particular speaking activity. Sometimes, I have overheard them talking with their friends by uttering chunks of dialogues we learned using the puppets.

In conclusion, the use of puppets has had a positive impact on my pupils’ confidence in speaking English. They have become more comfortable expressing themselves in English. As a result, they have started to speak English more often in the classroom and there is also a significant improvement in their participation during speaking activities.

THE AUTHOR

Dayana Binti Nayan is a teacher of English at SK Kuala Penganan, Limbang. Her mentor is Lis Da Rocha.

Fostering parent and child relationships through a creative puppet project

Khamisa Awang, Jorinah Sulah and Sargius Michael

CONTEXT

SK Bulu Silou is a primary school located in a small village close to Keningau town. It was founded in 1967 and there was only one building at that time, two classes and 40 pupils. Over the years, the school has grown and there are now six buildings. About 80% of the villagers work as farmers. There are 389 pupils in the school with on average 24 children in each class.

FOCUS

In early March 2013, we organised a puppet competition for all pupils. The aim of this competition was to improve parent-child relationships - we thought it would bring parents and child closer as they would have to communicate and talk to each other while making the puppet. We were interested in running the competition as it was a fun and creative project that both parents and Level 1 students would enjoy working on and it would also allow us to use some interesting handmade puppets as a teaching resource to motivate our students to speak English.

ACTIVITY

Level 1 English teachers wrote an invitation letter to the parents. Pupils were really eager to enter the competition as the head teacher, Suriaty Ramat announced that the best three puppets would win a special prize. The children were given about a month to make their puppet and were given a few rules to stick to. We also showed them some puppets and gave them some ideas to get a clearer understanding of what to do. Throughout the competition, we were delighted to see so many interesting and creative puppets being sent to us. Some pupils even sent us two puppets. However, there were a few children that bought puppets instead of making them. We didn't enter those puppets into the competition but we still used them as teaching resource.



Puppets made by children and parents

REFLECTIONS

We believe that young learners learn best when they feel appreciated and have fun. As a result pupils were really motivated to be involved in this competition. We believe this puppet competition has created a stronger bond between parents and their children. Year 3 pupil, Yoel really enjoyed taking part in the competition and said "I liked cutting and sticking the pieces onto the puppet". One parent remarked that "this puppet competition gave me a chance to get involved in my child's education and it was a great experience making puppets for the first time". The pupils also feel more confident when speaking to the puppet than their teacher. Pupils are proud to see their teacher using their puppet during the lesson. It makes them eager to have a turn to speak to the puppet or have a go at being the puppet. We have noticed that pupils remember and understand the language better when they interact with the puppet. Year 1 pupils were able to follow simple instructions by one pupil coming to the front and using the puppet to say 'Touch your nose' and the others would follow the instruction. We have experimented with puppet activities such as 'Musical Conductor' and used puppets during storytelling. We have taken ideas from Carol Read's website at www.carolread.com/ideas.html.



Puppets help pupils speak English

Our mentor Susan Verghese loved the puppet competition idea and it has now spread to the other four schools she is working with. All four schools have made some amazing puppets and we will be sharing our idea of running a parent-child puppet competition with other schools and districts at a Mini Symposium.

In our school, we are now keen to run other parent-child projects to further motivate parents and children to work together. Year 3 teacher Khamisa is now running a parent-child scrapbook project after the success of the puppet project. Our advice is not to underestimate what the parents can do and to always motivate them and involve them in their children's learning. Children really love working together with their parents. We recommend that you try this puppet competition in your school - your kids and their parents will love it!

THE AUTHORS

Khamisa Awang (khamisa_awang@yahoo.com), Jorinah Sulah (jorinah71@gmail.com) and Sargius Michael (sargius62@gmail.com) are English teachers at SK Bulu Silou in Keningau. The teachers' mentor is Susan Verghese.

Talk, talk, talk!

Creating communicative lessons

Joseph Ak Degat

CONTEXT

My school, SK Nanga Gayau is near Debak, Betong, Sarawak in a rural area where the general standard of living is very low. Literacy levels are poor and very little English is spoken. There is no village, the children are Iban and come from 25 longhouses in the surrounding area.

FOCUS

I would like to describe my approach to teaching Years 1 (22 pupils) and 2 (22 pupils). This places great emphasis on my talking to the children, them talking to me and the pupils talking with each other. I believe that to be interesting and enjoyable lessons for young children should be communicative in nature throughout. Of course, that involves listening too; listening not only to me, the teacher, but to each other.

My mentor has encouraged me to write about my approach as he feels that I have been successful with it over the past two years. Interestingly, he pointed out the distinction Widdowson (1978) makes between the four terms speaking, talking, hearing and listening, where speaking and hearing, he suggests, are linked to language usage, while talking and listening can be said to be manifestations of language use. Widdowson reminds us that talking is by nature reciprocal because it takes the form of a language exchange between two or more speakers.

So basically, it is this reciprocation I aim for. Below I describe the talking activities I use and encourage and how they are informal in nature. They are designed to develop pupils' desire to use English orally, to build up their confidence and are more concerned with use than usage, fluency rather than accuracy – the ability to communicate, even if grammatical mistakes are made. After all, in Years 1 and 2 we are using set patterns and chunks of language – grammar has not yet been introduced.

ACTIVITY

I aim to get the pupils talking from the minute I walk into the classroom. Young children, like adults, sometimes like to have a moan about things or each other. My pupils certainly do and sometimes when I enter the class, I find them wanting to have a grumble about what or who has upset them. I decided to use this constructively and told them it was fine to do so, but they had to do it English. I listen to their complaints, trying not to interrupt them too much by correcting mistakes as long as the rest of the class is listening and understanding. If what they say really is not intelligible, I help them by rephrasing the sentences and encourage them to repeat the complaints using my model. I ask the children questions about what happened even if it means mild arguing or refuting what others are saying. The complaints are always very minor and I do not take them too seriously - maybe some gentle admonishment if appropriate. The main purpose is to get them talking. This activity really helps to make them open their mouths and talk – even the normally quiet ones dare to talk if they feel that they have a grievance so they can get it off their chest!



Pupils complaining in English

My lessons proper usually start with an 'Asking and Answering Activity'. The theme and topic varies and is often based upon what they have previously learned. I also vary the type of questions I ask, from the familiar ones to more difficult ones depending on the pupils' ability. I sometimes substitute subjects/vocabulary. So, for example, they might have already practised responses to "What food do you like?", so I ask them what 'games' or 'animals' they like. I mix open and closed questions and lead from one question to another. e.g., "what do you like to eat?" The pupils' responses may vary between "I like chicken", "I like to eat chicken" or just "chicken", which leads to "why do you like it?". They may respond simply "it is delicious" or more ambitiously, "I like to eat chicken because it is delicious" or maybe "it is my favourite food".

I continue with talking activities throughout the lesson, interrupting my pupils with questions any time I feel it useful to do so to make sure they understand the content of the lesson. I do not believe a teacher should just sit comfortably behind their desk marking homework while the children are doing written activities, so I walk around asking questions about what they are doing. Even if the textbook indicates a focus on reading or writing, I still talk to my class all the time as I believe talking helps to make them aware, attentive and interested and prevents lessons becoming boring. In any case, I cannot just rely on the textbook. Often the text is too challenging, so then I simplify and rephrase it to suit their ability. Often I put a text into dialogue form with repeat sentence patterns used. This makes the lesson more interesting as the pupils then love to talk, using the dialogue.

I do not solely focus on teacher-pupil-teacher talking but also encourage and plan for pupil-pupil talking, for example, seeking information from their friends by using the sentence patterns learned. Mingling activities give the children the opportunity to circulate and ask their friends for the information they are seeking for. For example, in the topic of animals, a pupil with a word card each will go around to ask their friends what they are e.g. "Are you a cat?" Depending on what card they have, the child may reply "Yes. I am a cat" or "No. I am not a cat. I am a hen". Another example of pupil-pupil activity is where some are restaurant owners and others are customers. e.g. "What do want to order, Sir?" Reply, "May I have a chicken rice and Milo, please?"



Children role play a restaurant scene

Sometimes, I get them to do group work where one starts the conversation using sentence patterns on the board and asks others in the group questions. Another way is when the conversation (question- answer-question) is done in chain (one after another) within the group. I guide them to ask their friend a question and the friend responds then asks another child a question. The activity will go in chain.

REFLECTIONS

I choose to make my lessons communicative in nature because I strongly believe that it helps to make them more interesting and enjoyable. As I have explained, even when focusing on other skills, talking still features strongly in the lesson and, I believe, in this way becomes a natural part of the children's learning. In this way, they are more motivated to learn and to talk in English.

I feel that evidence of the children's motivation is that when I ask a question to the whole class, rather than the children being reluctant to speak, it usually results in a chorus of "Me, teacher, me" as they raise their hands, eager to answer. They are also eager to talk to me in English – and to my mentor when he visits, without prompting, using sentence chunks they have already practised and showing evident delight in using them. The language may be simple, but it demonstrates that they are enjoying learning and are keen to show off what they have learned. My mentor was delighted last year when he entered the class and one little boy, unprompted, immediately said, 'Good morning, Mr. Steve. Are you happy today?' Quite recently, a little girl came up to him on Teachers' Day and presented him with a card, saying "I made this for you". I think this also demonstrates motivation and confidence.

In Years 1 and 2, I allow a lot of lee-way if they make mistakes in accuracy. Obviously, I do correct the students, but not to the extent that it will discourage them from trying to speak in English. I believe my approach works as even the quiet or shy ones show some eagerness to use the language. They are willing to take part in the learning process because they enjoy it and I let them see that I appreciate they are trying. As I stated earlier, I believe that language acquisition starts from listening and speaking so I choose the communicative approach as the main focus of my teaching in order to encourage my children to use and learn the target language in a natural way, free from insecurity and with the love and care I try to give them. It is not always easy. In their enthusiasm, the children can get a bit noisy and occasionally the situation seems a bit chaotic. But it is not difficult to regain control. I prefer to have some noise and hear English being used, rather than seeing a class of docile, bored students.

We will continue to talk, talk, talk ...

THE AUTHOR

Joseph ak Degat (josephdgat@ymail.com) works at SK Nanga Gayau, Debak and has 19 years' experience of teaching in the primary school. His mentor is Steve Ellis.

This volume contains teachers' accounts of development activities they have undertaken in Malaysian primary schools as part of the English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP). The stories provide vivid yet realistic accounts of innovative activities which other teachers can adapt in their own contexts; the narratives also serve as a source of inspiration, showing how with collaboration, commitment and appropriate support significant changes can be made to the teaching and learning of English even in challenging circumstances.

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