

“CUSTOM STORIES”: AN EXPERIMENT IN THE TEACHING OF READING AND LANGUAGE.

**W. Alan Roberts,
Ministry of Education, Vanuatu.**

INTRODUCTION

Using local legends for children's reading material in Primary Schools in Pacific Territories has been tried before in a variety of ways, usually with mediocre or disappointing results. When I proposed using local legends as reading material in the then New Hebridean Primary Schools, I could have been easily discouraged by the vast amounts of "finished" material which had already been produced but had never been successfully used or implemented as part of the curriculum.

My objective — to simply provide something for young children to read, something which was interesting, well-produced, exciting and related to their culture and their environment — led me on to pursue the type of project which had failed before. During the development, however, these basic aims became more complex and ambitious.

After eighteen months we now have the first six of a series of twenty-four "Custom Stories" printed with a teacher's handbook, and these are being trialed in selected schools. The subsequent eighteen stories are in production, and should be available for classes 4 — 6 of Anglophone Primary Schools in Vanuatu in 1982.

I believe the series to be a success if the manner in which the first six stories has been received is a satisfactory method of evaluation. Of course such an evaluation is insufficient and we are proceeding with a mere objective assessment, but the 'fun' and excitement which has been generated in the classrooms where these books have been used has been sufficient for me to be confident about continuing with the production of the whole series, with a view to creating another parallel series when the production process has been assimilated by our curriculum development personnel.

RATIONALE

When I first encountered the New Hebridean Anglophone Primary classrooms as Senior Inspector/Adviser, one of the most difficult aspects to accept was the manner in which English language and reading is taught. The lack of provision of acceptable reading material, which I as a metropolitan Primary School educator considered to be essential for language development, was difficult to understand. The manner in which the key subjects of language and

literacy were being taught have produced some absurd results in the classrooms. It is not uncommon, for example, to find children who are capable of reading only the pages in their reading book which have been 'taught' to them.

Children's verbal ability is inhibited both by the scheme used and the manner in which it is taught. I now find myself agreeing with the protagonists who maintain that it would be better if we ceased to *teach* English but simply teach *in* English to promote language acquisition. At least the children would learn forms of English which would be of use to them.

Against this 'grey' background I had the notion that we in Vanuatu could produce some stimulating language material which would use "real" English, would be of immediate use to the children, and would be enjoyable. The element of pleasure seems to have been omitted from our present language curriculum in favour of a process of grim repetition.

My main interests in Primary Education have always been in language development, literature and the expressive arts. On encountering the rich culture of Vanuatu, strong in an oral tradition of "story telling", I felt sure we could produce something equally as good as, if only as a supplement to, the existing material.

PROCEDURES

The process we adopted was to transcribe the recordings made of story tellers on tape by Radio Vanuatu, from Bislama (Vanuatu Pidgin) into English. Without this collection of tapes made and collated by Paul Gardissat of Radio Vanuatu the project would never have begun. The tapes were copied on to cassettes by Ms. R. Tor (who had experience before in a previous project for Schools' Broadcasting) and then a team of teachers and advisers wrote the words of the story teller in English.

The first editing process took place at this stage with wholly unsuitable stories being rejected. Some of the stories are very sexual and even pornographic and were not considered suitable, although they provided great amusement at the time (and could be the source of a best selling collection).

On reviewing the transcripts it was clear that at this stage the project could fail completely. The stories told by "old" men in the comfort of the village were rambling, repetitive and often confused. If these stories were to be reproduced verbatim then they would have been unsuitable. However, many of the stories contained all the very best elements of good children's fiction. There were devils, giants, mystery, adventure, humour, conflict, and heroism. What

we had to do was to "retell" the stories to suit our educational purposes. Since it was clear that every story teller who had told these stories before had changed them as they were passed from generation to generation, I saw little harm in further modifications as I produced them in English.

In all the stories some changes had to be made, but in none were the fundamental elements of the stories discarded. I introduced some elements such as conflict, suspense and repetition. I changed endings of some stories to produce climaxes, and edited out episodes of meaningless violence. Without such editing the bulk of the narratives would have been bald. I could be criticised for Europeanising the narratives, or tampering with 'Custom', but I am convinced that neither Melanesian nor European children like boring stories.

GRADING THE STORIES

Having "rewritten" about thirty of the stories, I then had the task of ordering the stories in levels of "difficulty" to make the series "progressive" so that a scheme of teaching reading and language could be devised.

Firstly, I grouped the stories by interest levels, with simple animal fables forming the starting point, through to complex legends involving the supernatural and horror at the end of the series. Fortunately language structure and vocabulary tended to be of a simpler nature with simpler stories. Moreover, applying the "Fog Index", "Elley Noun Frequency Count", and "Fry Readability Tests" I was able to rewrite and re-order the stories based on interest and readability levels.

As a result of this process, I was able to identify four different difficulty levels, each containing six stories. Thus the series contains 24 stories with six at each of the four levels. A, B, C and D.

In writing and ordering the stories according to levels of difficulty I was careful to avoid the restriction of "using only those language structures" which the children had been introduced to in their Oral Language Scheme. My instruction was to ensure that the texts would contain language as it is actually used, not in the over-controlled manner which produces artificial language which no one uses and is found only in formal language and reading schemes. Thus, even in the earliest books, idiomatic expressions and vocabulary are used which will be the child's first experience of such expressions and vocabulary. Next language will be acquired through reading.

TEACHING METHODS

Having decided on this course of action, a definite teaching method had to be prescribed for those teachers who would have difficulty in handling material

which introduced such structures and vocabulary in an unsystematic manner. For help in designing such a method I am indebted to Peter De'Ath for his help and the experience he gained producing the Fiafia Readers for Niue. The method is based on Don Holdaway's approach with the "Shared Book Experience". However, I was designing material for classes of older children, and was able to allow more sophisticated and complex activities than those intended for very young children.

Thus, the text is introduced to the children in a "group" situation similar to the "Shared Book" environment, where *all* the children are *actively* involved in the reading process with the teacher. The text and illustrations become a stimulus for discussion, and later for allied classroom activities. The children become actively involved in the stories through stimulating their creative imaginations. Art, craft, custom craft, drama and music making are expected to be encouraged after the story has been introduced to the children. After a few days or a week, the story is read again with greater emphasis on vocabulary, structures and comprehension.

Throughout, it is hoped that reading is an *active* process where children are introduced to new language forms in meaningful narratives, which are compelling to read in order that they can be *assimilated* rather than taught.

This approach is, of course, akin to the method of language acquisition of English as a first language, but not yet a universally accepted method for second language learning. (For the children in Vanuatu, English is a third or even fourth language). The success of the method with the Fiafia Readers in Niue has led me to believe that it will be valid in relation to these "Custom Stories". In the hands of a sensitive teacher, such material is proving to be highly successful and the children are more ready to transfer such skills as they acquire to "metropolitan" texts. Previously the language of such texts appeared as a "foreign" language. The language of the normally-used texts in the early books is so limited that it does not allow easy transference at Class 4 level to "other" books. In the hands of a less able teacher the texts at least provide a source of enjoyable reading for both teacher and child.

PRODUCTION OF THE STORIES

In order to promote children's active involvement in the texts, illustrations were of paramount importance. Working closely with Tassau Tassale, we were able to produce a series of high quality black and white drawings which not only support the text but stimulate visually the children's imaginations and are "talking points" for the pupils and teachers. With such quality of illustration the emphasis falls on the books becoming sources for the promotion of *real* language use not just texts for passive reading.

Illustration and book production often become the major headache of any such project. Without Tassau Tassale we would have produced the first six stories in the usual style: poorly-printed, scantily produced text in an inappropriate type face. As more of the stories came to book production level the process of preparation was obviously beyond the capacity of our printery resources. I was fortunate in having the assistance of Vicky Hayward who is an experienced editor and "book producer" to ensure that a high standard of production was maintained for the remaining stories.

For anyone else embarking on a similar project, it should be noted that we were able to make the illustrations of Level B and C stories a project for Malapoa College and Vanuatu Teachers' College art classes, through the help of Mr. John Broad of Malapoa College. This seemed to be a highly suitable task for trainee teachers to undertake, since they could want no better introduction to new material than to be integrally engaged in its production.

The production problems which remain are largely practical, and are based on the capacity of our Education Printery resources.

CONCLUSION

The time involved from conception of the project to its possible implementation in the classroom will have been almost three years. The success of the scheme will depend greatly on the expertise of the teachers involved in using the books. For those who have a sensitivity for the manner in which children acquire language it will be a success. In any case my original aim, to provide material which is both relevant, useful and fun to read for the children will have been achieved.

The natural development of the project from this "first series" stage would be to produce a second series in parallel and then to produce material of a similar nature for the first three years of the Primary School. By providing sufficient supplementary material of this nature the basic language and reading material could be allowed to take its present course towards redundancy and thus be replaced as a gradual and natural process. One plant should be encouraged to grow and thrive while the other is dying or fossilising.

I am aware that other territories are engaged in similar supplementary language and reading projects. If enough concerted effort was made in the region perhaps sufficient energy and expertise could be mustered to produce material on a regional basis to allow developments in language and reading teaching techniques to be adopted. At present there is no point of access for innovation other than in a fragmented manner. For every English speaking territory to evolve its own language teaching syllabus would be, in my opinion, an unnecessary duplication of resources. As the need for revision of the regional language curriculum is becoming increasingly recognised, perhaps the time is now here when such a concerted effort is made.