IMPROVING THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN FIJI

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INTRODUCTION

In this article the state of English in Fiji Primary Schools will be reviewed (using as a guide the research conducted by Elley and Mangubhai, 1981), certain areas of weakness in the programme and its implementation will be discussed, and ways of overcoming these weaknesses explained. Although this study refers to Fiji Schools it may be of equal interest to other countries of the USP region where similar programmes, and similar problems, exist.

The basic course materials for English have been in schools for almost fifteen years. These consist of the Oral English Books 1 to 14 (G.M. Tate), the SPC Readers, and supplementaries. It will be appropriate to begin by looking at the results of this programme.

THE TATE PROGRAMME EXAMINED

An important source of information is a national reading survey conducted in 1979 by the Suva Institute for Educational Research (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981). Of the Class 6 children they tested, it was found that approximately one quarter of them were unable to read simple English prose, with enough understanding, in order to cope with daily classroom tasks. A similar figure was found in another survey conducted for the Ministry of Education (Elley and Achal, 1980) and several small scale surveys using cloze tests have shown large numbers of children who are unable to independently read their textbooks and other materials designed for them (Stamp, 1979; Elley, 1980).

These results are also borne out by the comments of the examiner of the Fiji Secondary Schools Entrance Examination English 1 paper of 1983: “There were 20 questions in this section (Comprehension) each worth one mark. Analysis of a representative sample of 400 scripts produced an average score of 11 marks which was fair though not as satisfactory as it might have been if the candidates' level of reading comprehension had been generally good.” And of the composition, the examiner writes: “The language was the weakest aspect of the essays. Candidates found it difficult to write clearly, coherently and accurately. There were, of course, some very good attempts with exceptionally good choice and
use of vocabulary and very well constructed sentences, but unfortunately, such essays, were the exception rather than the rule. The main weaknesses were in tense sequence, verb phrase structures, subject-verb agreement...” (Examiners Report, 1983, p.1-7). These test results indicate that the Primary English programme may be inadequate for the teaching of English as a second language.

This is a serious situation because English provides a link between the different language communities in Fiji and a good knowledge of it is required in almost every career a child wishes to pursue. Generally speaking linguists agree that the younger years are the years when a child is best able to learn a second language. It is therefore important to take full advantage of these primary school years and enable pupils wherever they are, to achieve a satisfactory standard of English.

There seem to be weak links in the English programme, both in its methodology and in the implementation of the methodology. The Oral English Books 1 to 4, written by G.M. Tate, provide the oral component of the English course. These books have been in use since 1968. Over the last fifteen years, however, the English language has changed - certain structures have gone out of use and vocabulary items have altered in meaning. For example, in an oral lesson in Book 14, “Used to behave well?” and “What used our people to eat?” is taught. Fortunately there are not too many examples of this extreme, but it may be an appropriate time for a language group to go through the 14 books of the course and suggest to teachers those lessons which are outdated and should be deleted.

**ORAL LEARNING**

In any second language programme it is generally envisaged that a beginning will be made in the oral learning of the language. This is particularly so in the Fiji bilingual situation where reading in the second language cannot be introduced too early or it will cause interference in learning to read in the mother tongue. The oral programme is devised so that the children hear an English sentence pattern, see it enacted in a real situation, learn it through a series of drills and then apply it to new but similar situations. This is all done in relation to the teacher. Responses are made to the teacher, the new language is used on the teacher.
Two things are wrong here. The least important first. Teachers seem to stop at the drilling stage and do not go on to the final stage of setting a similar situation and allowing the children to use the new structure as a response to that situation. This leads to learning ‘parrot fashion’ without the language being a thoughtful response to a living situation. In many Fiji classrooms can be heard children repeating the same sentence over and over again in loud sing-song voices.

What is more important is the point that all responding is done to the teacher. The aim is, however, for children to use this new language in natural situations with their peers. But they have only practised it in relation to the teacher: an adult in a position of authority. They have not practised it with each other. This is where the major breakdown in the oral programme comes. The children are introduced to a new structure, practise it on the teacher, and then use it in their reading. They do not practise it in simulated situations among themselves. Thus they do not get used to using the language in natural situations.

Here is a simple illustration to make the point clearer and to indicate how this use of language among pupils could be achieved. Imagine a teacher is introducing the present perfect tense of the verb draw - 'I've drawn'. The children practise the new structure; drill it usually in different persons, e.g. 'I've drawn', 'you've drawn', etc. Then that is the end of the oral lesson. An alternative would be for the teacher to ask the children to draw something and then have them say to each other (in a chain drill or in groups). 'I've drawn a boat', 'I've drawn a man', 'He's drawn a car', 'She's drawn a doll'. This pattern is far more likely to occur in the pupils' language in a similar situation (not specifically engineered by the teacher) when talking to someone about what he or she has done.

Each major oral lesson should be followed by some group work where the teacher devises a situation in which pupils will have to use the newly learnt sentence structure with one another. This can be done by using games, work cards, chain drills, drama etc. Thus each child is provided with the opportunity to use the new language with fellow pupils. This new language can then be used in its written form and the completion of this process is much more likely to bring about the learning of the new structure.

Three areas within our oral English programme therefore need particular attention:
1. Revision of the Oral English books in the light of changes in language.
2. The parrot-like drilling of oral lessons.
3. The lack of opportunities for pupils to use the new language they have learnt, with one another.

READING

The reading strand of the English course requires study. Much has been written in recent years about the nature of the reading process. Debate has generally centred on the visual aspect of reading and the assumption has been that reading is stimulus-based and that identifying the letters or words on the page is the core of the process. The theory of learning underlying this is 'behaviourism' where the stimulus is seen as a memory impression, the response being a clearly identifiable overt behaviour which is strengthened by reinforcement. Those who accept this explanation regard reading as a direct perception process. However with the work of Piaget came a new awareness of the processes within the learner which affect perception and influence meaning. This has led to a different theory of the reading process.

This theory advocates that it is not the visual information on the page that is seen as driving the process of reading. As Jean Otto (1982) puts it, "The reader is seen as having a growing store of knowledge about what is meaningful and what is grammatically possible as well as information about the visual stimuli on the page. All of this knowledge is used to hypothesize about what is on the page. Comprehension is therefore described as the core of the process and already part of the process before the eyes look on the page. Decoding is not seen as the primary or first step in reading. The reader, therefore, is seen as creating what is on the page as much as analysing it. This new approach has been summed up as follows: It is what the eye says to the brain" (Smith, 1975). An exponent of this theory, Professor K. Goodman is reported to have said, "When we teach people to read we aren't teaching them letter/sound relationships or word names or sets of skills. We are helping them to develop strategies to get the meaning from print which parallel and draw on the ones they use to get from oral language to meaning." (Drummond and Wignell, 1979, p.65).
FIJI READING PROGRAMME

The reading programme in Fiji is based on the assumption that the child's main task is to identify the words and letters on the page. The basal reading texts are carefully controlled language which has first been introduced orally and the reading material is worked over thoroughly so that children can respond to the stimulus and the words they learn can remain in their memory through reinforcement. Should this programme be changed in the light of new research based on Gestalt principles? This is the question which we need to consider carefully. However, the debate on reading has not been settled. E.B. Huey (1980) once said, “And so to completely analyse what we do when we read would almost be the acme of a psychologist’s achievements, for it would be to decide very many of the most intricate workings of the human mind as well as to unravel the tangled story of the most remarkable specific performance that civilization has learnt in all its history.” However, it is possible to cater for both reading approaches in our programme, thus providing our children with different methods in the hope that they may learn to read. To quote Dr. Clay, “So for the present let us not take these theories as opposing points of view. We regard both seriously without adopting either exclusively.” (Clay, 1979, p.2).

What change will be necessary? It will be important to supply our children with more uncontrolled material, material that is interesting and meaningful so that they have more opportunities to build up their knowledge of what is meaningful and grammatically possible. To quote Herbert Kohl: “The learner should read a lot. It is important to shower learners with printed material on any subject, to let them explore the unfamiliar and guess at words and meanings. Encourage them to be bold enough to make many mistakes and learn how to correct themselves. At this point in mastering the skill of reading (just beyond the beginning level) a grading system can devastate the learner. It is as if a child who has just learned to take a few steps were punished for falling.” (Kohl, 1974, p.65).

Does this approach work in a second language situation? Research has already been done in Fiji which indicates that such an approach allows children to make vast gains in their reading. Elley and Mangubhai in a follow-up of their reading survey conducted a Book Flood project in the Nausori area in 1980. There were twenty-four classes in all at Classes 4 and 5 level, sixteen of which were flooded with books and the other eight
used the normal Fiji English syllabus books. The researchers found that the average pupil in the Book Flood programmes made the equivalent of 1½ year's progress in 8 months compared with the controlled group.

In case such gains were the result of the novelty of the situation or due to an artificial spurt, Elley and Mangubhai did a follow-up study of the same students (now in Classes 5 & 6) and they found that the gains these pupils made had continued. Progress was particularly evident in Class 6 where Book Flood pupils, who sat the Fiji Intermediate Entrance Examination, had a pass rate of 75% compared to the control group’s pass rate of 37%, which is also typical of rural schools. Particularly significant was the use of the Shared Book method as devised by Don Holdaway, which used real language situations. There is now evidence to show that children's reading in their second language does improve if they are exposed to a variety of uncontrolled materials which have high interest levels.

The research carried out by Elley and Mangubhai during the period 1979-1981, and more recent research in schools by Lautoka Teachers' College final year students, not only identified a large number of students who were reading below their age level but also emphasised the lack of attention being given to them. A number of teachers have indicated that they do not know where, or how, to begin to help these students; others say that they lack time, and still others are not particularly concerned. English Teachers Association, both in Suva and Lautoka, have worked jointly with the Fijian Education Department’s Curriculum Development Unit to run Remedial Reading seminars with the assistance of Mrs. Barbara Moore, Project Fellow of the Institute of Education, the University of the South Pacific. This is in recognition of the importance of equipping college students with a sound knowledge not only of the reading process, but also of remedial reading techniques.

**COMPREHENSION**

Another significant development in reading has been in the area of comprehension. Taba, Levine and Elzey (1964) found an almost perfect relationship between the levels of comprehension students display in their answers and the types of questions asked by teachers. Studies by Guszak (1967) suggested that from 50-75% of questions asked during a reading lesson are of the recall type and they pointed out that most of these questions were so trivial that they actually led students away from the basic understanding of the story. Mark W. Aulls (1978) further
explains how a teacher can devise questions which will help to enhance their students' comprehension growth.

A quick review of our English textbooks reveals a predominance of the recall type of question which does not involve higher thinking skills. This has revealed a further weakness in our English language programme. There seems to be a need, therefore, to diversify reading methods, to develop a closer relationship between thinking and comprehension skills, and to develop remedial reading programmes.

**WRITING**

Writing is another important aspect of the English Language Programme. This does not refer to a pupil's ability to form letters and write in good cursive script but rather their ability to put their ideas down on paper in idiomatic English. Why is this a problem? Mina Shaughnessy, active in the big remedial writing programme that has been going on in the United States since the late 1960s says, “Many of the pupils' writing problems are reading ones. Increased reading results in improved writing.” (Walshe, 1979, p.53).

These statements are supported, in our local situation, by the Follow-Up study by Elley and Mangubhai (1981). In the 1981 Fiji Intermediate Examination composition section the most frequent score of ten Book Flood children, particularly those using the Shared Book method, was 9 out of 10. By contrast the most frequent mark of the Control Group was 2 out of 10. The effects of the Book Flood reading programme had carried over into the children's ability to write correct idiomatic English. R.D. Walshe states the “a steady quantity is the necessary pre-condition of quality.” (Walshe, 1979, p. 13). There is tendency among teachers to be satisfied if the children write something once a week. Pupils have not generally been given opportunities to write regularly, to draft, correct, redraft etc.

**INTEGRATION WITH OTHER SUBJECTS**

The developing of language skills in Fiji has been confined to the language period. English is kept to English time and there is little thought given to the possibility of having work in another subject area used as the basis for further language practice. An example will perhaps clarify the point.
Supposing that a language term to be dealt with is that of comparison: 'John is bigger than Mary', 'Peter is the biggest!' Perhaps in Science the topic may deal with plants and the way they grow. An alert teacher can exploit this science lesson and have children compare plants using the language of comparison. This can lead to writing these structures down as a description of what they observe. This may be followed by an imaginative story about some plants and the way each tries to become the tallest, the prettiest, the greenest, etc. There are many ways in which work can be integrated so that reading and writing skills can be developed across the curriculum.

TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES - LAUTOKA TEACHERS' COLLEGE

This discussion has dealt with difficulties in some areas of the Fiji oral, reading and writing programmes. The programme at Lautoka Teachers' College now seeks to cater for the training of teachers, not only in the curriculum used in primary schools, but also in the areas of weakness already discussed. In their first semester at College students are introduced to the theoretical bases of language acquisition and language learning. They look briefly at acquiring a first language so, that when they proceed to a more detailed study of second language learning, they can view it in the total context of language learning. This approach is specifically related to the unique situation in Fiji and stimulates discussion on such topics as 'when language learning should begin in Fiji', 'what sort of language policy Fiji should have', 'the status and importance of English in Fiji', and other related matters.

With the background of the theoretical bases of language learning, the College course leads to Papers 2, 3 and 4 which deal with 'Teaching Oral English', 'Reading' and 'Writing' respectively. In the Oral English paper the students learn the methods of teaching the Tate English through lectures, demonstrations and video presentations. Later, they practise Oral English lessons in classes in our demonstration school. It is here that an attempt is made to correct the first weakness in our Oral English programme mentioned earlier and that is omitting the generation stage of the Oral English lessons and drilling the children in parrot-like fashion. Students are now required to move to the final stage of working with a new item, and allowing children to use the new item in a situation similar to the one that has been used for drilling.
The second item noted in this review was the need for pupils to use the new language items in situations among themselves. After viewing a film, kindly loaned to us by the British Council, College students are asked to prepare group work as a follow-up to selected oral lessons.

Paper 3 on the Teaching of Reading begins with a discussion of the reading process which includes an examination of the current debate on reading. It then examines the content and methodology of the reading materials in use in primary schools. Brief reference is made to other approaches to reading but a more comprehensive exposure is given in Paper 5 in Semester 2 of the second year.

Paper 5 entitled ‘Language Arts : Current Methodological Practice’ has been designed to expose our students to other ways of teaching English as a second language. This paper examines the local research done on reading, using as source material DIRECTIONS, a bulletin issued by the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific. Current research into reading such as the way in which the Book Flood, organised by Elley and Mangubhai, brought about better reading results is studied. The work of people such as Jane Ricketts, (an English lecturer at the University of the South Pacific), who is currently doing research into the effect of listening to stories on comprehension and reading achievement, is also discussed and evaluated. Related to this is our hope that a library programme will carry a unit on methods of storytelling and on selecting good children’s books. The students through lectures and demonstrations are also taught how to use the Shared Book Experience also known as Co-operative Reading.

Paper 5 also deals with Remedial Reading and the College is indebted to Mrs. Barbara Moore (Institute of Education, USP) for her help. Mrs Moore has had extensive experience in this field and has conducted Remedial Reading Projects in the Suva area. In order to gain the most from this course, the students are asked to study the reading behaviour of a child who is reading below his expected level. The students do this during School Experience which helps develop awareness of the specific difficulties children might have. Students are then more able to discuss intelligently the measures Mrs. Moore suggests.

Another topic dealt with in this paper is that of the relationship between thinking and comprehension skills and the designing of questions which would enable pupils to develop thinking skills. Students are given
practice in drawing up such questions to supplement the questions already contained in the current reading texts.

As far as the integration of language skills with other subjects in the curriculum is concerned, we are indebted to the British Council for the use of films on this topic. Students are able to view an integrated programmes in progress. Working in groups, they are expected to write up a series of lessons using an integrated approach.

The programme outlined above is a very full one with a heavy emphasis on methodology. However, it is important that those who implement these methods have a good standard of English themselves. This is a difficult undertaking because teacher trainees at the primary level are themselves second language speakers and are only too aware of their inadequate mastery of the English language. It is an acknowledged fact that many teachers of English in primary schools in Fiji (and in the South Pacific) have an imperfect mastery of the language (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981). Students therefore need to be helped to improve their own English through assignments and tutorials. However the time available is limited and a three year teacher training programme would be more appropriate. What is done at present is done in haste because of the constraints of time. Three years would allow time for the student teachers to develop their own language skills as well as to become acquainted with the methodology of second language teaching. It would also give the students more opportunity to trial some of the ideas mentioned above in a school.

CONCLUSION

The importance of teacher education can be summed up in what Dr. C.E. Beeby said at a Seminar on Regional Co-operation in Teacher Education held in Apia, in 1981, “If you are trying to bring about major changes in a school system, I don’t think you can separate in-service training from pre-service training. If you try to make the change by saying, ‘We’ll change the people in the training colleges and their students will go out and reform the system’, you’ll be disappointed. Change in education doesn’t happen that way because the conservative forces in most school systems are too firmly rooted to be changed by young beginners going in at the bottom. If you send isolated graduates, full of bright new ideas, out into thoroughly conventional schools where senior teachers have had no introduction to those ideas, their efforts will run away into sand. Only the
most courageous will be able to hold their own against the opposition or the inertia of their elders." (Beeby, 1982, p. 3).

The seriousness of the English language situation in Fiji primary schools is such that all those involved in teaching English need to work together on finding solutions which affect, not only teaching itself but also in-service, as well as pre-service, teacher education.

REFERENCES


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