

Establishing the Reading Habit in Standard One

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A child's interest in reading starts from a very early age. How his interest develops will however depend to a large extent upon the opportunities that exist for him to handle books and fortunate is the child who grows up in an environment surrounded by books and where reading is fun.

It is not unusual, for instance, for a baby to enjoy nursery rhymes at 8 or 9 months and by the time he is a year old he may even look at the pictures while the nursery rhymes are read to him. Soon he may even turn pages himself as you read to him and be able to notice any slip you may make and all this before he is two. All this while the child is learning to distinguish between sounds and is developing a sharper ear for differences and is indeed preparing for his reading later on. Yes, even while he is very young, a child may begin to understand the drama and delight that come from books and as you continue to provide him with these reading experiences his personality begins to expand and he is being helped to develop into a happy, self-sufficient person.

Very few Malaysian children however grow up in this atmosphere. Many of them may be aware of the significance of books before they begin school, but it is only when they come to school after their sixth year that most of them will encounter books for the first time. Not only will they encounter books for the first time but a good many will also be faced with the problem of a new language. Where does the teacher of English, who has at the most 5 hours a week to teach English as a compulsory second language, begin?

I feel that the teacher in her English lessons should attempt first of all to give them a feeling for the rhythm and the music of the English language through nursery rhymes and jingles and spontaneous conversation. There are many beautiful books of these rhymes with delightful pictures available in all sizes and all prices. Every school should have a collection of these rhymes also known as Mother Goose Rhymes. Here are some examples:

I've Got Ten Little Fingers

I've got ten little fingers.
I've got ten little toes.
I've got two ears,

I've got two eyes,
And just one little nose.

Rain, Rain, Go Away

Rain, rain, go away,
This is mother's washing day,
Come again, another day.

One, Two, Three, Four

One, two, three, four,
Come in please and shut the door.
Five, six, seven, eight,
It's time for school. You're very late.
Nine, ten, nine, ten,
Don't be late for school again.

When selecting them avoid the books that have a busy cluttered look. Preference should be given to those whose drawings are simple and the colours clear. I do hope that at least one book of nursery rhymes that is a thing of beauty is made available to each Standard One class. The children will be quick to sense the special quality of such a book and will soon learn to love it and handle it carefully. Through these rhymes the children will be able to distinguish between sounds and to develop a sharp ear for differentiating them. Through these rhymes too the children will be introduced not only to the English Language, but to the world of books and reading. It is far more important to give them this feeling for the rhythm and the music of the language than drilling them on a list of words and stunting their reading growth. It would be unwise to assume that the children would have already had these experiences and that it will be a waste of time especially when you have "so much to cover in their first year". Denying the children these experiences is one sure way of widening the gap that now exists between the "haves" and the "have nots" as far as the English language is concerned.

If most Malaysian children encounter books for the first time at school, it follows that it is the duty of the teachers to bring these two together -- children and books. The teacher of English would do well to remember her new role -- to prepare her children "to make effective use of all the unlimited wealth of science and literature books locked in our libraries" as Tuan Haji Hamdan puts it in

his message to the first issue of this bulletin. The teacher can do this effectively if she uses books and not just a book during the English lessons.

We all know for instance how popular animals are with young children. We are fortunate too that a wide variety of animals stories is available in our bookshops. Look out for books with realistic pictures of animals or better still for those with photographs and use them widely – to tell them stories, to read to them, to talk about, and to give them the opportunity to talk about them. The teacher of English in Standard one is not expected to use her 5 hours per week allotted for the teaching of English to teach the alphabets and to spend hours on copying sentences from the board to improve their hand-writing or to fill in the blanks in their English workbooks. The children must be able to talk first in the English language before they are asked to write English. Talking is also considered to be of great importance to intellectual growth. It is far better for the teacher to use this time to help the children to speak more distinctly and to do a lot more talking than to teach them to write. A child who talks easily in English will be better prepared to make effective use of books in the English language than we must give them every opportunity to use books right from the time they are introduced to the language. Extensive use of books should be preferred to intensive reading of a reader.

In this connection I wish to share an experience I recently had with a class of pre-school Tamil children. I was anxious that these little children should have some understanding of Bahasa Malaysia before they went into school the following year. So armed with an inexpensive but beautifully illustrated book of animals (with very few words) Toppan's Pee Wee Series, I entered this room of dirty bare-footed but bright beautiful-eyed children in bunches of all sizes and colours and gathering them around

me began to weave a story of a little child who went to the zoo to see the animals. Through this book I was able to introduce to them the Malay names of several animals found in the estate itself and a good many wild animals and the noises made by them. I also brought in common forms of greeting and used them repeatedly. Soon they were able to repeat it every time a different animal was introduced. By the time I had finished my story the children were anxious to help me re-tell the story using the new names and the correct forms of greeting. My day was made complete however, only after a rather shy and timid Nadarajah insisted on telling the whole story himself. Yes, I believe in getting the children to talk first. None of these children can read or write in any language but they can talk and one has to use what they bring with them – the ability to listen and respond spontaneously. Activities such as the above not only bring immediate satisfaction but also improve a child's talking and thinking which are indeed the steps to good reading later on. There are many such inexpensive books and it would be no trouble to introduce a new book each time. It is better to use books this way than wait for the pupils to master the mechanics of reading and then attempt to promote reading. Provide the background that will give meaning to their reading later. Then when they do begin to read on their own they will have much to bring to the printed page for by then they would have developed the habit of looking for new ideas and new experiences.

What a pupil needs in his first year is to get acquainted with books and to be prepared for reading but one should never try to push him into reading words from a ready-made list. At this stage one of the most important things you can do is to show that reading is fun. When the children are convinced that stories and books can bring great pleasure the teacher can be said to have covered the syllabus.