KBSR SEMINARS FOR PRIMARY TEACHERS MARCH/APRIL 1984

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The seminars, in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bharu and Kota Bahru respectively, were for teachers of English at Standards 1 and 2 concerned with learning more about the communicative approach to the teaching of language in the light of the changes brought about by the implementation of the KBSR. Sponsored by MELTA, which invited Janet Higgins and myself as visiting tutors, the seminars were staffed by a team consisting of local tutors and ourselves, helped in the event by a number of Key Personnel in each place. Although participants themselves, the latter were nevertheless able to act as group-leaders and catalysts in one way or another and were a very valuable part of the whole. Our own visit was made possible by the British Council.

The emphasis throughout was a practical one. The hub of the five-day seminars was the work-group where the teachers made materials, and the input from staff was aimed at guiding this activity. This input took the form of lecture, video and demonstration. At each place a class of children was available for demonstration of approach and techniques but also work of this kind was carried out with the participants themselves. Broadly, we endeavoured to give the teachers ideas for teaching English to six and seven-year-old children in a lively and interesting way. We dealt with the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and we considered the problems of large classes, the need for group work, and the difficulties of creating materials on a limited budget. The KBSR was our 'base-line' but it did not dominate. We discovered all kinds of ways of adapting and devising in line with the principles laid down there. We also found ourselves returning to the same things again and again so that learning points were constantly revisited. This demonstrated a useful methodological principle in itself. Our strategy was to set out with a number of areas or strands of work to be covered, such as 'the language of young children', 'providing for oracy skills', 'teaching of reading' etc., and to weave these together into the total fabric of the seminar. In this way, everything was carried forward on a broad front and developed gradually rather than dealt with discretely (though on occasion certain items were given more treatment in depth).

We started with a premise which seemed important. Children need experience in order to acquire and develop language: children need language to cope with new experience. It was decided that a good story offered the kind of experience to stimulate language development and that we would use this as a vehicle for all the aspects of English we wanted to work on. This is a version of the thematic approach to learning but a particularly useful one as the 'staging-posts' of the good story offer a helpful structure to the theme, enabling the learner to remember better and the teacher to plan and develop materials in a more systematic way. It is possible, for instance, to extend the children's experience by elaborating at these points within the story rather than by 'adding on' material at the end or by using some other equipment altogether. This is good pedagogy. It also illustrates how the same set of materials can be used more than once and for many different purposes, a useful economy in these stringent days.

Let us now look at the work-group task in more detail and the kind of teaching aids which emerged. It is important to bear in mind as we do so that the story and all its accompanying kit is not something extra to the syllabus but an approach to it. We believe that the content of the syllabus can be better taught by using a strategy of this kind. The first part of the task was to select an appropriate story and several criteria for doing so were offered. The story had to be interesting and enjoyable for the children. It had to provide meaningful input. There should be a strong narrative line offering those clear staging-posts referred to above and encouraging prediction, an important reading skill. In addition, it would be helpful if it had the potential for incorporating sections of repetitive sequence which the children could learn as a 'package' of language, perhaps in the form of a dialogue. And an exciting denouement right at the end would keep the listeners agog and involved all the way. Finally, it might be important in a country like Malaysia to select stories from different cultural traditions. All the groups had much to offer and through story children could learn about the traditions of others.

The second part of the task concerned the language in particular. The teachers were asked to write a text at a very simple level using the staging-posts as guidelines (texts at different levels of difficulty were illustrated and discussed later and it was pointed out that this exercise in itself could make an interesting theme for a linguistic seminar). It was noted that there would be times when vocabulary and structure not yet covered in the syllabus would need to be used because of the demands of the story. This was no bad thing provided it kept within bounds and that the illustration and presentation were clear. Much depended on the teacher's skill as a story-teller, something which was focussed upon and discussed at some length. Now, still with language, came another very important part of the task, the business of weaving into this story language that was part of the syllabus. For example, the language of greeting could be used by the characters in the story. Even those items of vocabulary which come under the heading of 'word-attack skills' can be given meaning and life by the skilful teacher using the story vehicle.

So the teachers gradually made and collected their story kits, working mainly in small groups, sharing the ideas and the work. Having selected the story and written the text as outlined above, the next thing to be done was to design and make materials for illustration of the theme and for aiding the language learning in all its aspects. Options of things to make were offered at three levels. (see my book, *Breakthrough to Fluency*, Blackwell 1976). At the 'initial orientation' stage the story is merely presented without question and answer or drilling of any kind. The children simply enjoy the experience, acquiring from it what they may. The second stage, which I call 'cracking the code', is where the teacher focusses on the learning points and opportunities are given for lots of revision and practice in ways appropriate to the young child. Finally, there is the 'breakthrough to fluency' state when the children are helped to move on to using their new learning creatively.

Options offered at stage 1, for example, were a picture book with separate text, or a set of figurines for the magnet-board with suitable background sheets. A set of loose pictures could also be used or pictures fixed to flip over. At level 2, a whole range of interesting and exciting materials are possible: things to illustrate songs and rhymes, puppets, board games and other kinds of games and equipment for re-telling the story (another of the stage 1 options could be used for this). The strategy here is to offer lots of different ways of going over the same level of difficulty. The children are kept interested because there is plenty of variety. At the same time and in all kinds of 'subtle' ways, they are having lots of practice both functional and structural. Finally, for stage 3, the concept of 'funny visuals' was introduced, the idea being to extend the children's language by offering a slightly and increasingly greater challenge through the experience presented. For instance, in one story which the teachers worked on, the set of animals, which would now be familiar to the children through the first two stages, suddenly exchange parts. The duck has a dog's head, the elephant's trunk appears on the tiger, etc. The children enjoy the fun of this and struggle to explain what they are experiencing. That is when they are ready to learn some new language such as 'instead of'. This use of the incongruous is only one illustration of the general point that new experience creates the need for new language. The skilful teacher knows how to balance the two, not too much experience without adequate language and not too much new language without meaningful experience. The teacher must build gradually on the child's knowledge and skill and constantly be thinking of new and exciting ways of providing an environment in which the learner can be encouraged to 're-combine' his learning in new patterns.

At each stage then, the teachers selected and prepared their materials. During the first two days of the seminars the concentration was mainly on the skills of listening and speaking and during the next two on those of reading and writing and the materials were made accordingly. Throughout, attention was given to the fluency/accuracy dichotomy and the techniques and materials suggested reflected both. The fact that one is using a functional syllabus in no way diminishes the importance of 'correct' structure. For example, with the fun of an 'information gap' activity where the children are using various question forms to find out 'real' information, the teacher can enter the group and quietly put a structure right by supplying the correct model herself, not necessarily by correcting the child at that time. What is going on is communicative but the teacher is aware of what may be inaccurate. She is assessing and intervening where appropriate. She may also, at a more appro-

priate time, make a class lesson out of the error without picking on any particular child. Several ideas were given in the seminar for communicative games and demonstration of these was offered both on video and with the children and participants themselves. We were fortunate to have the classes of children so that the techniques and materials being advocated could be put into practice with the age-group they were intended for.

To sum up then on the work-group task, the teachers having worked through the three stages ended with a prototype story kit complete with notes for usage which was placed in a see-through plastic bag for quick recognition of content. The idea was that the story done in this way offered a pattern which could be repeated with any number of stories. A school staff-room could have these story kits up round the walls for any teacher to use and the beauty of keeping text and illustration separate is that the same stories could be used for the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia. It is worth stressing that the story kits are likely to be beneficial in this way to the degree that they are the outcome of team effort. The teachers in the seminars worked in groups and were encouraged to share ideas and materials. Everyone took away a set of the materials worked on but also the text at least of other people's stories. It was hoped that this material would in turn be shared with colleagues who had not attended the seminars. On the last day of each seminar, the participants were able to see the work of all the other groups at an exhibition where spokespersons demonstrated with their materials and explained the rationale. This was a particularly valuable part of the whole operation, making clear yet again to all of us just how useful the story vehicle is for containing and 'mopping' up all the aspects of language we are concerned about.

The completed work also demonstrated the value of concentrating on the practical in small groups. The work-group used a large part of the time allotted. But the input was also important and the occasional discussion period in plenary session or group. The first hour of each day was used as lecture time. During the later part of the morning after the work-group, came the demonstration with children followed by opportunity for discussion. And in the afternoon people came out of work-groups in turn to watch video and to participate in a number of communicative activities for themselves. The idea was that all of the input and activities should, as it were, feed the work of the groups so that the materials being made would reflect all the strands and objectives of the seminar.

A number of issues seemed to crystallize over the course of the work. One was the matter of getting children to ask questions as well as answer them. The teacher nearly always does all the asking. Apart from traditional classroom technique, could there also be a traditional cultural thing at work here? In some cultures children do not question adults. If the learning of the question is to be truly communicative and not just a matter of learning the form, then ways of dealing with this appropriate to the culture may have to be carefully considered. One obvious ploy and a justification for group-work, is to see that children have the opportunity to talk together. Another issue which kept recurring was the use of Bahasa Malaysia. The teachers were surprised at how easily the children responded in English when taught by someone — Janet or myself — who had no Bahasa Malaysia. It was decided that there were both assets and liabilities in the teacher of English being bilingual. Bahasa Malaysia could be used if it helped to clarify, for instance in the matter of instructions, but it was recommended that English be used as far as possible even here. When children are working together Bahasa Malaysia might well be used by them, at least at first in the management language of the activity. The important thing was to be sure that the English of the lesson *was* being practised and gradually to try and help the children to use English for the supportive language as well. Finally, the handling of error became a talking point. Reference has been made already to fluency/accuracy debate. It was suggested that error can be important as a learning 'step' and 'symptom' indicating where the learner was and what might need to be done. There were times when not to correct. The teacher had to be sure that both fluency and accuracy were being catered for but also to be clear about which was the particular aim at any point in time.

It was generally felt that the seminars had been successful. With hindsight one always sees things which could have been done better but on the whole the approach seemed to work. We would, however, like to recommend that more time be given in future to the learning and teaching of reading, leading on into writing. It is important to

remember that three skills can also be approached communicatively. It is all too easy to see communicative competence in terms of oracy only. Also, the connection between the teaching of reading in Bahasa Malaysia and that in English would bear some study. The two languages differ in the extent to which they are 'phonetic'. In other words, what is said in Bahasa Malaysia can be written as it sounds. This is sometimes possible in English but most of the time it is not. We should imagine that his fact suggests differences in methodology. The transfer of reading skills from one language to the other may not be as simple as it seems and the teacher of English should not presume that because the child can read in Bahasa Malaysia he is immediately ready to read an English text. Also many of the children starting English in Standard 1 may not yet be readers in Bahasa Malaysia. What does seem certain, however, is that story-telling, if done well, is a useful pre-reading strategy for both languages. It should help the child to understand what books are about, it should motivate and excite and help to form the skill of prediction which is so important to reading. These things are common to both. It is the particulars of the 'decoding' which need to be looked at a little more closely. These may need different handling. It may be that teachers need to come together more to discuss these matters so that the child's total 'lingualism' is catered for in an integrated and cohesive way.

In conclusion I should like, on behalf of my colleague Janet Higgins and myself, to thank the MELTA committee for inviting us to help with these seminars and the British Council for its support. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience for us both and a learning one. Much fine work was produced and many good ideas engendered which we hope to disseminate. Perhaps these sessions were as much a point of departure for further work as training in their own right. Our best wishes for the future.