

The English Language Reading Programme

DAVID HILL

THREE years ago I wrote an article in *The English Teacher* about the reading programme that we had begun the previous year in Form One at Sekolah Seri Puteri, Jalan Kolam Ayer, Kuala Lumpur, and which was that year being introduced by Schools Division into other residential schools. I started by giving an account of the books written in simplified English that were available on the market and by describing the grading scheme that we had devised for classifying these books. Then I explained how we had arranged the timetable in such a way that all the Form One classes had English at the same time, so we could rearrange the students in sets according to their proficiency in English. Finally I described how we gave each set the books that matched their standard, and used the books as class readers with each student having his own copy of the same title, and as library readers with the students borrowing one book each week from a box containing 50 assorted titles.

Since then that reading programme has become the English Language Reading Programme (ELRP) and been greatly improved and extended as a result of work done by teachers at residential schools. There are many lists of books: of simplified books arranged in boxes according to levels of difficulty, of titles recommended for use as class readers, of unsimplified books for junior secondary forms, and (in preparation) for senior forms. Reading Aids consisting of an introduction, questions and answers have been written and printed for over 200 titles and Teaching Files containing help for teachers using a title as a class reader are being duplicated for 30 titles. By no means least, guidelines on organising the ELRP in schools and using the books in the classroom have been written and revised so that they apply to both residential and day schools.

This year 53 day schools are joining the ELRP and Schools Division has already begun the process of choosing another 50 schools to join the programme in 1980. The response from teachers in the 53 schools has been so enthusiastic that it is likely that more than 50 schools will be wanting to join in 1980. The purpose of this article is to give teachers in schools some idea of what joining the ELRP involves.

Library Boxes

It is the policy of Schools Division that a school joining the ELRP should begin by using library boxes of simplified books in Form One only. Then it should extend the programme into Form Two the following year. This is because the library boxes give the students the best chance of reading a large number of books, the greatest need is for simplified books, the problems of administering the ELRP in one form are not too great, and the experience of dealing with one form will make the work of operating the scheme in more than one form comparatively light.

So the schools that are chosen to join the ELRP will be asked to guarantee that they will start with Form One and extend the scheme upwards year by year, that they will set all forms in the scheme for all English periods, and that they will spend approximately \$200 for each Form One class each year.

Then the teachers involved will be given instructions on what to do and asked to attend a two day training course. They will have to administer the Cloze Test (which measures proficiency in English), arrange the students in sets, work out a reading syllabus, calculate the number of boxes required, run the scheme in the school and operate the programme in the classroom.

Schools will send their orders for boxes to Schools Division who will check their calculations and pass the total and individual orders on to the supplier. The books will be supplied already sorted into boxes. The boxes will be wooden and contain 50 books, all with their spines reinforced with cloth tape and all with reading aids stuck onto the inside covers. They will also contain the answer cards for each book.

Schools will receive from Schools Division a ready-made-up accession register so they will not need to write the details of every book in their own register. They will, however, have to prepare a register of borrowers and a reading chart for each box according to instructions given by Schools Division. When the boxes are ready for use, the teachers will take the box assigned to their set once a week. During that period the students will borrow the books, check their answers against the answer cards and fill in the reading chart. The teachers will check the books for losses and damage and collect the reading notebooks every two or three weeks to see that reading is being done and that the questions are being answered properly.

At the end of each term, schools must record the number of books read by each pupil and adjust the reading syllabus in the light of the progress made by each set. At the end of the year, they will be asked to write a report for Schools Division on the running of the ELRP in their school.

Unsimplified Books

Schools Division is now preparing two lists of unsimplified books, one for use by Forms One to Three (junior) and one for use by Forms Four to Six (senior). These lists will not be arranged by boxes and in many cases will not give the titles of books but simply an author and the publisher. Books will be excluded if they cost more than 46.00 if they are long or difficult or immoral, and if they deal with sensitive issues. As far as possible the books recommended will have been tried out in a school and found to be enjoyable. Such information as is available on the suitability of a title for one form rather than another or for boys rather than girls will be given on the list. Of course this is a vast undertaking since there are so many books available but even professional lists will help schools to classify the books they already have and to build up their stock.

So when schools are ready to use unsimplified books, schools division will provide them with the lists and give broad guidelines on what they should do with their unsimplified books, probably on the following lines. First schools should examine what they have already got in the English Fiction section of their library, and using the lists

classify the books into three sections, junior, senior and unreadable. It is likely that the unreadable section will be largest. At Kolam Ayer we put this section into a large cupboard and were fortunate enough to have the cupboard invaded by white ants which kindly reduced them to dust. Next schools should try to build up their stock of books, with the help of the lists. This need not be too expensive an operation since many of the senior books may be found on second hand bookstalls and even in the homes of teachers and parents. Then schools should mark the books clearly with senior and junior and write any information about the suitability of a book for girls or boys or for a particular form on the inside of the cover.

Finally the schools must decide how the books will be borrowed. Certainly students will read more books if library boxes are used. This system means that a teacher draws out of the library on permanent loan some 50 books and puts them in a box which he takes to the class once a week. On the other hand schools may feel that they have so many boxes full of simplified books that they prefer to take the students to the library once a week and supervise the borrowing of books from the appropriate section of the fiction shelves in the ordinary way. Each school must decide its own policy.

Class Readers

In the case of class readers, Schools Division have prepared lists of titles recommended for use as class readers. Teaching Files are being written for many titles to help teachers use the books. The teaching files assume that the set will read the book for four weeks, and provide the teacher with notes on the background of the book, a lesson plan for the first lesson, one test of ten questions on each third of the book, and a lesson plan for two discussions or activities. The teaching files for class readers at the lowest two levels suggests ways of helping the students cope with specific difficulties in reading such as the reference of pronouns and deducing the meanings of words from the context.

When schools feel that they are ready to use class readers, perhaps when their library boxes are running smoothly in two or three Forms, Schools Division will supply them with the lists and files, but probably advise the to start on a modest scale at the lower levels, where the books are less expensive and where the work done on the class reader will do most to help students read the books from the library boxes.

The Future

Research and development will have to continue as long as the ELRP lasts. Books will go out of print and new books will be written, especially we should hope by Malaysians. All the lists will have to be revised, and the unpopular books weeded out. More teaching files will need to be written and existing ones revised. If the files now being written for the lowest levels prove successful, it may be worth revising existing files to include the teaching of language points and reading skills. Much has been done, and much remains to be done.

Summary

And what is the purpose of it all? Although books are not cheap, reading a story book is the cheapest way of being exposed to English and it is also enjoyable and easy to arrange. The chief aims of the ELRP are to ensure that the students are given the right books to read and to help them learn as much as possible from their reading. ●