

Reading in the Lower Secondary School

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The gradual change-over from English to Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools has necessitated a rethinking of the role of English in the educational system and of the methods by which it should be taught. It will no longer be possible for Malay pupils to achieve the degree of bilingualism they obtained in the past by undergoing Malay-medium instruction in the primary school and English-medium instruction in the secondary school nor will it be possible for non-Malays, who attended English-medium primary and secondary schools in former times, to achieve the same high standard of proficiency in English. Where

a child has been subjected to large-scale exposure to a new language, the language he is learning will be constantly re-inforced and extended and he will have a great deal of meaningful practice in its use; moreover, where nearly everything of importance that takes place in the school is in that language, the child will be highly motivated to learn it. This would suggest that we can expect a very high standard of Bahasa Malaysia from all our pupils but a much lower standard of English. Teachers of Form I classes in the former English-medium schools might have expected in the past that their pupils would come to them with a reading knowledge of

something like 2000 headwords but they must now be prepared to receive pupils able to cope with readers of only 450-750 or so headwords (Part One, Teacher's Handbook for the English Syllabus) or even less.

Although the new secondary English syllabus expects pupils to achieve a certain proficiency in all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, it could well be argued that the skill which the majority of pupils are going to need most after their secondary education is the skill of reading for various purposes. Their immediate post-secondary education will be conducted through the medium of Bahasa Malaysia and they will need English only for surveying or skimming through large amounts of reference materials or studying shorter extracts in depth. University institutions in Malaysia today are concerned about the lack of ability of many Malay students from a Malay-medium background to cope with the reading in English they have to do at tertiary level but it must be borne in mind that within five years all students, both Malay and non-Malay, could be facing the same problem.

There can be no successful English teaching in a school which does not have an adequate supply of graded readers for *extensive reading*, that is, readers which are appropriate for the pupils in terms of difficulty of lexis and structures so as to ensure rapid, easy, enjoyable reading. Suggestions of suitable titles and levels of difficulty of these graded readers for Forms I—III can be found on pages 43—49 of Part One of the Teacher's Handbook already referred to and it should be emphasised that these readers are not supplementary readers but are essential ingredients of the school's English course. Every class should have at least fifty and preferably a hundred of these readers which should be of varying levels of difficulty so that the best and the poorest readers in the class can always be given something to read of the appropriate level. To give pupils who are poor at reading books that are too difficult for them is to make nonsense of the whole scheme and this means that every teacher must make himself aware of the reading level of each pupil in his class and watch his progress carefully. These books will have to be read mainly in out-of-class time but they should always be brought to school so that the pupils can read them at any time made available to them by the teacher or when they have completed their classroom assignments. A chart can be put up on the classroom wall with pupils' names down one side and book titles or numbers running across the top, preferably

grouped in levels of difficulty. When a pupil has finished reading a book and the teacher is satisfied that he has grasped the essentials of the story, a star can be stuck in the space opposite his name under the book title or number and he can be given another book. The questions asked by the teacher on each book may be oral or written on cards but they should be simple and short and designed only to ensure that the main points in the story have been understood. The questioning should not take the form of a full-scale test going into great detail as this will detract from the pupil's pleasure in reading the book and force him to read slowly and carefully whereas the main idea of the reading scheme is to get him to read fairly quickly and for enjoyment. Each pupil should be able to manage about twenty books a year but some may read many more and this should be encouraged.

The English course should also provide opportunities for *intensive reading*. The method most generally adopted is that of using class readers, i.e. books of which each member of the class will have a copy, with the pupils being set chunks or chapters to read out of school. The teacher asks general questions on what has been set for reading to make sure that the pupils have done their work and that they have understood the sequence of the main events. Then the class examines closely a section of the story which has been selected by the teacher, the procedure usually followed being that described in the discussion on the intensive reading of passages which appears below. Then a new chapter or chunk is set for reading out of school and the same procedure is repeated. Pupils should cover about three or four books a term in this way throughout the first three years of secondary school.

The main problem for the teacher is to choose class readers of a suitable level. In any one class there will be a very wide range of ability in English and most teachers find that the easiest solution is to try to choose readers which aim at the middle range of ability of the class. The weaker pupils may find the readers a bit hard going but they will have the assistance of the teacher in class; the better readers may find the readers a little too easy but if they are reading books at a level appropriate to their ability in the extensive reading scheme, they will not always be reading books which are too easy for them. It is also possible to divide the class into three groups according to reading ability and to have three separate sets of readers at the same time. Each group will read a reader at an appropriate level out of

school and the teacher will not find it too difficult to spend fifteen minutes with each group during the intensive reading lesson. While the teacher is dealing with one group, the others can start reading the section which the teacher has set for next week's work. If this latter scheme is adopted, the teacher should test his pupils right at the beginning of the year so as to divide them up into the three groups. A cloze test is the easiest way for the teacher to decide which pupils should go into which group and this should not take more than ten or fifteen minutes to administer and about half an hour or so to mark.

The other use of intensive reading is to consolidate those grammatical and lexical items which have been taught in the Unit. It may be possible to select passages from a class reader or from the course book which are used but they may have to be constructed by the teacher. Careful selection by the teacher of the passage to be studied is extremely important and unless the course book follows the syllabus very closely indeed, unit by unit, the teacher will have to write his own passages as he will rarely find a passage in a class reader in which a sufficient number of the items being learned in a particular unit appear. The writing of these passages may be an arduous task at first for the teacher but once they have been written and proved successful, they can be used year after year. However, pupils should not only be given passages for intensive reading which are based solely on one unit but also passages based on groups of units which have been covered.

The first step in dealing with an intensive reading passage is to get the pupils to read through it silently. Then the teacher will ask questions on the passage — questions that he has carefully prepared before-hand and not just thought up while the pupils are reading the passage. A good plan is to follow the three stage questioning technique recommended by P Gurrey (Teaching English as a Foreign Language, pub. Longman). This method of questioning appeared in his book almost twenty years ago but it has stood the test of time quite well. Gurrey's Stage One questions are aimed to train pupils to note exactly what the writer has said and to give them practice in using the language that appears in the passage. They will consist of questions requiring a yes/no answer and wh-type questions (what? where? why? when? etc), all of which require answers that may be drawn directly from the passage being studied. Such questions should be delivered briskly with sometimes

two or three questions being asked on one sentence and pupils should be allowed to refer to the passage throughout. However, it must be pointed out that if this Stage One questioning technique is used with a passage containing a large amount of unfamiliar vocabulary, it is possible for pupils to answer correctly without understanding completely what they have read, provided they can recognise the linguistic patterns in the passage.

Stage Two questioning requires logical inference or deduction from the text. Such questions are not aimed at just what the text says but what it means. They try to make what is read more complete and more interesting to the pupils. Gurrey says that these questions ask, for instance, "(a) what the people and places and things mentioned in the text are like; (b) why this action was done and why that one; (c) what was the cause of this happening and what was the result of that; or (d) how this happened and how that".

Finally, Stage Three questions demand a relating of the text to personal experience. In this way, pupils can develop an independent use of the new language by making them relate the topic to their previous knowledge and personal experience.

When the passage has been thoroughly understood by the pupils, they could be asked to suggest a title for it. The various suggestions given can be written on the board and voted on by the class after discussion. This procedure gives the class practice in condensing into a few words what the passage they have read is all about.

If there is dialogue in the passage which contains items recently taught, the dialogue may be read aloud by the teacher and practised by the pupils, preferably first as a class chorus, then again as a class chorus with the speakers' roles reversed, then in groups and finally in pairs. Dialogues should be spoken at normal speed, avoiding any tendency to drag and attention should be paid to intonation and especially to rhythm, which may be assisted by the teacher beating out the time with his hand. Reading aloud in a foreign language may be considered to belong more properly to pronunciation than to comprehension. The skill of reading aloud cannot be practised with an unfamiliar text nor can it be taught satisfactorily by "reading round the class", which is simply a time-wasting device where only one pupil is actively engaged in practising the relevant skill. Practising reading aloud, then, requires a text

that has been thoroughly understood, detailed explanation and practice of particular pronunciation problems in the text and the use of group practice techniques. However, for the huge majority of pupils,

the importance of this skill in their later lives will be minimal and it should be confined to the practising and learning by heart of dialogues consisting of structural items recently taught.