

Composition in the Primary School— 1

SUZEE LEONG WENG FON

S.R.J.K. (Inggeris) Jalan Brickfields (2), Kuala Lumpur

From my seven years of experience in teaching English in both primary and secondary schools, I have noticed a lack of emphasis on, and effective use of, vocabulary taught to the pupils. Some classes do have a period set aside for dictionary work or vocabulary work in which only a few words and meanings are formally dealt with. This seems to place the teaching of vocabulary in a separate entity. Vocabulary is the main ingredient in good expression. What I am about to suggest as a great help to the writing of composition is “Topic Vocabulary”. It is definitely not something new but it is something that has not been sufficiently utilised.

The writing of composition is always based on a given title. This is where Topic Vocabulary comes in. A list of words, familiar or new, is built up under a heading e.g.

The School

headmaster	blackboard	
staff	exercise books	
pupils	subjects	
classrooms	interval	
prefects	assembly	etc.

Aims and Procedure

1. Pupils are encouraged to come to the board and write down the words they can think of, relevant to the topic under discussion.
2. This involves active teacher-pupil participation.
3. An exercise in spelling is automatically effected.
4. The teacher introduces words which pupils may have omitted.
5. The teacher reads through the list with the pupils, ensuring correct pronunciation, and reinforcing comprehension.
6. Pupils copy this into a notebook in which they could also compile lists of similes, expressive phrases or useful sayings that they might have come across in their reading.
7. These lists of words could be utilised for written spelling exercises.

Not every period of composition need involve a written piece of composition. Topic vocabulary should be alternated with it. When a period of Topic Vocabulary has been covered, the next period for composition is a follow-up, using the words from the list to help in that

topic to be used for written work. You'll be surprised and pleased to know how happily and readily the pupils use this as a guide and how many spelling mistakes are avoided.

When carrying out such exercises, it is best to do so according to the ability of the pupils. For average to good pupils it would be wiser to have a brief oral exercise first, getting a few of them to stand up and put into proper sentences what they might write about. Then pupils set to work, making eight to ten sentences on the subject. Better pupils might attempt a short paragraph, or paragraphs. For weaker pupils, it might be better to use the filling in of blanks method which is too simple and unimaginative for the better classes.

Some useful headings for Topic Vocabulary are:

A Picnic, Hobbies (from which children write on: My Favourite Hobby), Fire! The Market, How To Describe

People (from which they can write: My Best Friend, My Mother, etc.), At A Fun Fair, An Accident, Sports Day.

The above is of course only suitable for upper primary classes. For lower primary classes which employ the use of Picture Dictionary, the same idea could be adopted under headings like

Fruits, Birds, What we wear, Things in the classroom, Parts of the body, Colours, Things in the garden, At the sea-side.

From single words, the pupils slowly graduate to forming a sentence for each word learnt.

You will soon build up for yourself lots of topics for this form of vocabulary work will assist you greatly in the teaching of composition.