

RCDT ENGLISH TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMME

Introduction

The Ruhuna Children Development Trust (RCDT) in the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka was set up by Mohan Samarasinhe (MS) in 2002 under the patronage of the late Professor P P G L Siriwardena, to help children in the villages of the Ruhuna to further their education and be in a position to compete with their counterparts in the larger towns and cities, particularly in the employment field. Having successfully completed the redevelopment of 10 neglected schools in the province under a USAID programme, the Trust diverted its efforts to improve the standard of 'Spoken English'. With this in mind, a pilot programme was initiated at Detagamuwa KV, Kataragama, where 2 English teachers were employed to conduct classes after school. However, it was evident that due to the lack of appropriate training, the teachers were more or less adopting the only method they seemed to know - teaching English in Sinhala and Tamil, with the odd song and phrase used repeatedly. The programme was therefore put on hold and replaced by the current one to train the teachers in the modern methods of teaching the language, with the emphasis on the spoken element.

'Prof. P P G L' and MS had meetings with British Executive Services Overseas (BESO) which proved keen to help. An MOU to initiate the teacher training programme was signed. BESO would provide travelling expenses as well as an allowance to the trainer and RCDT would finance the local expenses. BESO subsequently assigned Mr Clifford Farthing (CF), a former British Education Ministry OFSTED Inspector and Headmaster for the project that was to be held in Matara for 30 teachers in February 2005, but had to be abandoned following the tsunami. Shortly after the 2006 programme, BESO merged with VSO, who decided to terminate all the highly successful BESO projects and concentrate their efforts elsewhere; CF was offered an assignment by VSO to set up an identical programme in Ukraine, which he refused in preference to the RCDT project.

Description of initiative

The concept of the programme is 'total immersion' and consists of a two weeks residential training course at the end of the August holidays, followed by a further two weeks of support in the classroom environment. CF conducts the programme from 09:00 until 20:00 each day and the teachers are encouraged to communicate with CF whenever further support is required.

In June 2006, eighteen teachers met at the Wackwella Management Development and training Centre for a very intensive two week course in the teaching of 'spoken English'. Each day began at 9am and finished at 8pm! The teachers were first taken through the theory of each lesson having a very small number of clear learning objectives, and also how to manage and organise their classrooms to maximise speaking opportunities for their students. After that they had to participate in all the sessions. This was to demonstrate that students make better progress if they are involved in their learning. All the teachers took part with tremendous enthusiasm. The activities were always geared towards the development of spoken English. They ranged from reading, writing, drama, singing to grammar. The teachers also had to teach their colleagues in short sessions to check if they had understood what was expected. After these sessions, CF gave them comments on what they had done well and how they could improve. All the teachers responded in a very positive way to the comments. This showed in the way they progressed in their changed approaches to planning and teaching over the two weeks.

During the course everything had gone well, but the real test would be when the teachers had to face their classes in school. So, for the next two weeks Cliff and Mohan visited everybody and watched them in the classroom. It was heartening to see how all the teachers were trying to implement what they had learned. Three were outstanding and in CF's opinion, would bear comparison with any teachers in any part of the world. However, everybody had taken on board at least three ideas from the course.

The second residential programme was held in the second half of August 2007 and was preceded by a four day refresher course for the last group. The main activities carried out by CF were:

- Involving the teachers in what makes a good teacher, a good lesson and how to organise and manage class rooms
- Helping the teachers plan clear/appropriate learning objectives
- Giving model lessons
- Giving/sharing lots of songs, games and drama
- Observing micro-teaching so that teachers know their strengths and they have to work on through feed-back sessions and their own written evaluations

Overall objectives

- Assist teachers of rural school improve the students' skills, thereby promoting the use of English.
- To encourage them to converse with each other and develop their confidence so that they will be better placed to compete for the more lucrative jobs.
- Establish a common medium of communication between the different communities in Sri Lanka which in turn will help, I believe, to create a better understanding of each other.
- To establish a programme to carry out intensive courses in 'Spoken English' for university graduates, particularly in the outstations.

Current status

- Preparations are in hand for RCDDT to conduct its next course in August 2008 for a fresh batch of up to 20 English teachers and will be preceded by a refresher course for the 2007 batch and any from the 2006 group, funds permitting.
- MS has had 3 meetings with Mr Lalith Weeratunga, Secretary to HE The President (with CF being present at one of them) at his request and a proposal for a pilot project to train 10 English Language Co-ordinators, together with an estimated budget, has been submitted to him. A decision on it by the Ministry of Education is expected shortly. The basic concept of the programme is to train the English Co-ordinators of the RESC Groups and some of the very good teachers who have participated in the programme to follow a specially designed one week intensive course and thereby create a bank of 'home-grown' trainers. They will then go out in groups of 3-5 and conduct courses for English teachers, similar to those we have been conducting. CF, MS and two other qualified British trainers, who have agreed to join our team, will support the groups during this period and further advise them if necessary.

Next phase

- It is the intention of the British team to recruit more English trainers from overseas and extend the programme to other regions of the country, including the East and the North.
- Conduct 2-3 months intensive courses for university graduates whereby they will be better qualified to secure more remunerative employment in the private sector.

Financial requests

- Whilst RCDDT has been able to sustain the current programme with funds raised by MS and CF in the UK and Sri Lanka, it is now necessary secure funding for the extended programme that is planned for the future. Each programme costs in excess of GBP3,000 and the UK team is now in search of partners who would help with donations towards the required finances. Whatever assistance you and/or your contacts could provide in this regard will help us to continue with our efforts to make a meaningful change in the lives of our future generation, especially the children in rural Sri Lanka.
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Note: It should be mentioned that neither CF nor MS have neither requested nor received any remuneration for their work. BESO and BCCT (British Consultancy Charitable Trust which was formed by the former BESO Directors) have found sponsors for CF's airline tickets. CF paid his wife, Muriel's air fare when she accompanied him to help in the project and MS has paid for his airline tickets.

Mohan Samarasinha
Founder/Chairman
The Ruhuna Children Development Trust

6th February 2008