

SPICE PROGRAMME REPORT

23rd September to 20th October 2013

First Five-Day Programme – Tangalle – 30th September to 4th October

Second Five-Day Programme – Mannar – 14th October to 18th October

Short Programme over Two Days at the Carlton Pre-School, Tangalle –
2nd and 3rd October

Short Programme over Two Days at the Presidential Secretariat, Colombo,
9th and 10th October

The first three days of my time in Sri Lanka was spent at S. Thomas' College, Guratalawa where an ex-colleague was teaching English and coaching Rugby. I was warmly welcomed at S. Thomas' where Richard Boustead had been teaching for some three weeks, which gave me the ideal opportunity to learn about the importance of spoken English in the curriculum in schools in Sri Lanka. It became clear that presently examinations are almost completely in written English with some emphasis on literature and grammar, although I understand that from 2015 there will be an examined element in spoken English. This was a useful time to talk to pupils about their hopes and aspirations and their thoughts concerning their own learning of English. The Headmaster, Father Nihal Fernando, was also very helpful in evaluating the history of English teaching in Sri Lankan schools and his hopes for the future.

The five day course in Tangalle was attended by some 22 teachers of English, a good number. The downside, however, was that some of them had attended a similar course previously and some were senior teachers for the district. This vast range made it very difficult to adhere to the course programme while keeping them all interested and the material useful. The majority of the participants were highly motivated and engaged well with the content. The questionnaire, which they all completed before the programme started, enabled me to address their needs and requirements, as well as to understand some of the difficulties and problems they encountered in a wide variety of situations. In the rural areas there appeared to be less availability of equipment and resources to help in the teaching of English. Universally, there seemed to be a very limited period of time allocated for the teaching of English. These problems were exacerbated in rural areas often by absenteeism, without support from the home environment. There is also, clearly, a shortage of English teachers and a major disadvantage for everyone is exposure to the mother tongue. The feed-back from the majority of participants was very positive, for whom the material was fresh and innovative. They were able to use the new methodology in their own classroom situations, which were many and varied.

We were very grateful for the hospitality and support afforded us by the First Lady, staying at the residence at the Carlton Pre-School. I was enabled to spend some time with the staff, who were very enthusiastic and it was a pleasure to see them so engaged. We spent a lot of time on pronunciation and repetition of key English words and phrases, learning some new games and nursery rhymes, including their actions, which they would be able to use in the classroom. My especial favourite was the Headmistress' involvement in "Oranges and Lemons"!

On returning to Colombo, it was a sheer delight to spend a couple of days with the Presidential Secretariat, working in an office to encourage and improve the use of spoken English. It was particularly pleasing to be able to acknowledge the considerable help and support of the Hon. Namal Rajapaksa and the co-ordinator at

the Tharunyata Hetak, the “Spice” partners in Sri Lanka. I was extraordinarily well-received by Mrs. Savithri Panditharatne from whom I learned a great deal about the necessity for spoken English in Sri Lanka, the multifarious programmes in operation all over the country being advanced by the Government from her office. The two days spent in the Secretariat were, I felt, particularly successful since all the participants were especially keen and very engaged, always very willing to ask questions and to be specific about their own requirements. It was very helpful to meet the British High Commissioner in Colombo - and to take tea with him - from whom I was able to receive another perspective of the necessity for spoken English in Sri Lanka. I was also glad to meet some of his staff, in light of next month’s Commonwealth Head of Government meeting.

The second five day course in Mannar was, I felt, particularly successful due to several factors. The co-ordinator was especially helpful, organised and himself eager to participate in the programme. All the other participants, although in varying degrees, were of a very similar standard and eager for fresh methodology and new teaching techniques. Despite two holidays occurring during this period, their attendance was unaffected. They proved all to be very good story-tellers, which was very helpful in constructing drama and especially innovative dialogue. Several members of the group had a natural talent for “character acting” and entertaining the rest of the group. These talents came to the fore at the end of the week when several plays were performed, and after the Prize Giving they produced a fabulous impromptu Concert including much singing and dancing.

A by-product of my time in Sri Lanka was that I was able to take many, many photographs, as well as having my sketch-book and paint with me. I am, therefore, hoping to produce a series of pictures of my time in Sri Lanka “My Impressions of Sri Lanka” which I will, hopefully, be able to display on my web-site, www.mjov.co.uk thus furthering the aims of SPICE, founded by Mohan Samarasinha, whose tireless enthusiasm and dedication was an inspiration throughout my time in Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, I was impressed by the warmth and hospitality of all my hosts in Sri Lanka, the enthusiasm and optimism at the present time for the future. Everyone I met wanted to share their enthusiasm for their country and expressed this in a very warm and positive way. It is my hope that the SPICE Programmes are a starting point for a cascade of such workshops, so the use of spoken English can improve and develop with the many agencies involved working together towards their common aim.

Martin Valentine

October 2013