

SPICE Report.

Teacher Training Workshops in Jaffna and Mannar February 2014.

The first of the two SPICE/Tharunyata Hetak Teacher Training Workshops, supported by the British Council, commenced in Jaffna on Monday 17th February. The venue was Jaffna Central College and the Spice team was hosted there by the Old Boys' Association of the school. The central liaison was Mr. Mohan Rajankumar. The Old Boys generously provided the participants with lunch and other refreshments over the five training days.

There were 28 participants for the SPICE spoken English programme along with three assistants (mentors) who had previously attended the Mannar training in October 2013. These teachers were Thamilla, Ajanthu and Thushy.

- After a brief opening ceremony and introduction of the team to the participants, the day shifted to examine some of the problems encountered by teachers in Sri Lanka when it comes to teaching spoken English. Happily Government policy has decreed that one 40 minute period per week be devoted to the teaching of spoken English. This is laudable, but sadly misses the point. Because it creates an artificial distinction between listening, speaking versus reading and writing. In my opinion all four skills require included in a balanced lesson. Another problem faced by the teachers is English is not considered to be a compulsory subject in the curriculum. This gives it diminished status, particularly in the more senior secondary levels. Problems need to be acknowledged but the lion's share of time needs to be devoted to finding solutions, because all challenges have solutions, it is merely a question of finding them!
- All language is a medium of communication. This makes it a tool and not an intellectual exercise. Sadly the exam industry has turned language learning into an academic pursuit. All too often that produces students who can parse a sentence but not utter a word as a means of meaningful communication. As long as people understand, you are communicating; communication being the goal of any language be it spoken or written. Thus students need to be encouraged to throw inhibition generated by the desire to be 100% grammatically correct to one side and become encouraged by the results they get by simply communicating.
- To successfully teach students to speak any language means the teacher needs to create a high energy environment that makes the experience fun. The student is interested and thus he/ she is motivated to learn. This is a far cry from old fashioned chalk and talk. The teacher encourages the students to talk and stands back to let this occur. An ideal ratio is 25/75%. In other words the students speak three times more than the teacher! Such a teaching style requires, imagination, energy and above all else dedication. It is hard work to teach in this style and much easier to plough through the text-book to the exclusion of everything else.

In many areas the English teacher is the only person many children have ever heard speaking the language. The teacher is the English speaking model for his or her students.

- It behooves the teachers to be a model of excellence. Any mistakes the teacher makes will be magnified many times by the students, themselves. Sadly the role models are themselves often weak in spoken English.
- Part of the teachers' development requires frequent up skilling trainings, similar to the one offered by SPICE. Inevitably it is the Zonal Education authority's task to present such training, but the teacher, too has a personal responsibility. To be an effective requires the individual to be interested in his/her subject, because then it is no hardship to continually up-skill by reading books and newspapers and regularly watching television programmes and entertaining films in L2. Teachers in Jaffna are fortunate as the British Council and USIS provide many events that the teachers can attend! Once the teachers adopt these useful habits, they can encourage their students to follow suit.

The early part of the Jaffna training focused on "ice-breaker" exercises so participants could get to know one another and dispel any inhibitions about speaking to each other. In such situations we need a willing suspension of disbelief.

- Yes, the tendency in monolingual classrooms is to revert to L1 because that is the natural thing to do. However, such a tendency must be discouraged at all costs. The English Classroom is an English speaking zone and that has to be rigidly reinforced by the teacher. In some schools this migrates from the classroom to specific days where the assembly is conducted in L2 or to an English speaking day in the school. This involves other teachers and can be a rewarding exercise if supported by the school's administration.
- There is only one rule..."No L1 in the Classroom" (the Zone).
- In my opinion learners thrive when rewarded for their efforts and not by being humiliated for their mistakes. Therefore, it is everybody's task to encourage the student "to have a go!"

In Jaffna the English speaking zone included the teaching hall, the surrounding area and extended all the way to the lunch venue which was located in the cafeteria in the magnificent Jaffna library. Overall the scheme worked well, and not much Tamil was to be heard. Sadly, however, one of the principal culprits for speaking L1 during the training was one of the mentors!

- Groups are the most successful way of handling larger classes. So the Jaffna teachers self-divided into teams. A spirit of excitement and co-operation can be engendered by allowing the teams to compete with one another. All activities are awarded points. The group works together as a team which means the members help and support one another. This creates a more sophisticated and in my view a more effective "buddy system", whereby the weaker students are coached by the more able. There is a scoreboard and the team scoring the highest number of points becomes the winner. Weekly prizes can be awarded to the winning team and a bigger prize awarded to the most successful team at the end of each term. Conversely the system can also be used to reinforce desired behavior. Points are deducted for those speaking L1 in the English speaking zone. Peer pressure will usually ensure compliance.

In Jaffna the five teams were:

Sunflowers

Beetles

Lions,

Venga Boys

and Rainbow.

Three of the teams were assigned mentors. Mohan Samarasinha was loosely associated with Lions and Alister with the Venga Boys. The Venga Boys had an added advantage as an English as a Life Skills Master Trainer (Vasanthi) was part of the team.

- Teachers were urged to adopt the team concept in their own classrooms because aside from anything else such a division makes teaching easier. Team leaders can be allotted tasks like writing the date on the B/B (whiteboard!) which eases the teacher's load.

On the first day the teams were told that they were required to come up with a brief entertainment which would be the end point of the Spice training on the Friday afternoon. Time would be given for them to prepare their entertainment and points would be awarded for their efforts. The day concluded with dramatisation exercise that would give the attendees some ideas about creating something original themselves.

- On the second day differing methods of correcting students' mistakes were discussed. All agreed it was demotivating, inhibiting and counterproductive to continually correct students as they speak. The object is, after all to reward and not to punish. A preferred option was for the teacher to make a note of mistakes and then use the errors as teaching points at the end of the lesson.
- Also on the second day, attendees were introduced to the concept of differing learning styles with special reference to the sensory sub-modalities namely visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Students do not all learn in the same way. They learn according to their most dominant sensory perceptions. If they are visual they need to see things, if auditory to hear and if kinesthetic to feel things. Visuals tend to be quick learners and soon get impatient when slowed down, notably by kinesthetic who are slower
- Once the teacher understands and can recognize the different types then can he reconcile his style to include all three, whilst understanding he must include visual material (pictures and flash cards), auditory realia (listening, speaking, songs, sounds and drilling) and kinesthetic experiences (doing and actions). All lessons need to be punctuated with several items taken from all three lead sub-modalities for effective learning to happen.
- The teachers were introduced to the concept that to secure attention and above all interest it is recommended to start the lesson on a high energy note. Every lesson needs to start with a 10 minute warm-up. Good "warm-ups" often comprise a game or song. An activity that prompts the class to speak to one another. Such a technique affords an interesting way of presenting the material that constitutes the subject of the lesson.
- As an introductory task the teams were all given several letters from the alphabet and asked to teach them as a "warm-up" activity. Later they were asked to design their own warm-up activities, which were then demonstrated to the group.

- On another note, many lessons start with songs, but these songs don't appear to have any bearing with the material that is later taught. Teachers were urged to make songs relevant to the goal of the lesson.
- On the third day the focus shifted to teaching practice. The teams were each given a structure around which they were to create a lesson. The starting point of every lesson is the "lesson-plan".
- Lesson plans are not there for the benefit of the inspectorate but are invaluable guides to the classroom teacher. A lesson plan is a map that is followed, point by point in order to construct an effective lesson.
- It is essential to start with a goal. The goal is the end in mind of the lesson. Teachers were shown a short-cut plan and then urged to follow suit in order to create their own.
- The first step is always the planning stage and the lesson plan provides the template for what is to follow. The aim of the lesson is the starting point of the plan. If this is a structure it needs to be defined and target language highlighted.
- The lesson itself begins with a warm-up of no more than 10 minutes. Followed by the presentation (the warm-up and presentation can be one of the same). This is followed by practice and finally production. The warm-up and presentation focus on listening and speaking skills. In order to speak students have to listen.
- Listening is usually much under-rated as many people are too busy thinking of what to say next and pay scant attention to what is actually being said.
- Students have to be taught effective listening skills because without listening they will be unable to speak meaningfully.
- Practice and production will probably take up half the lesson and will shift the focus to reading and writing. The recommended plans were more concise than the lesson plans required by the Sri Lankan education authorities but are more likely to be used consistently by classroom teachers because they require less preparation time. The feedback on this was by and large positive.
- The teaching practice meant that each team was required to plan and demonstrate a micro-lesson which was then demonstrated to the group at large.
- Evaluation is an important part of any lesson plan, so the groups were asked to evaluate each other's lessons. All criticism had to be constructive; Alister made comments and awarded points. Suresh of Lions Team always had a comment or at least something to say and the Master Trainer Vishanti was also asked to give input which she did from time to time.
- Playing the role of the student is good for teachers. It gives them a better understanding of some of the difficulties faced by students
- The importance of visual aids was always emphasized and marks were always awarded to those who had gone to efforts to produce these aids.
- Another unfolding activity was the General Knowledge "Knock-out" Quiz, which was given as an example of an exciting warm-up activity. The quiz itself was based on the "Noughts and Crosses" game. The teams competed against each other and the losing team was required to provide the questions and the quiz master for the next day's competition. Some of the questions were extremely hard. I am still trying to puzzle out what a chain has to do with the wickets in cricket!

- Another successful high energy warm up was “The Treasure Hunt”. Teams were charged with finding 10 items from inside or outside the classroom. The first team home with all the items is the winner. This is a useful vocabulary building exercise.
- In order to preserve a conducive learning atmosphere, participants were encouraged to stand up, breathe and perhaps have a quick round of “Simon Says” when classroom energy appeared to be flagging.
- Another area of focus looked at out of class activities that included the “English Club” and the “The English Camp”. Teachers who had experience in setting these up were asked to speak of their experiences and then provided a network focus, which meant they were available to offer help to their colleagues who wished to follow suit. It was encouraging to notice how these activities were gaining foothold in many of the schools in the region.
- The importance of networking was emphasized to the groups. It is not necessary to re-invent the wheel each time a new activity is taken up. Those with experience are encouraged to share their knowledge with those who might not have the same level of expertise in a given area. Such sharing can extend to successful lesson plans, visual aids and hand-outs.
- Other areas covered in the Training included ideas on testing spoken English. If it is spoken it has to be tested by speaking, too. The 5 criteria that were being tested were elucidated. These included accuracy, audibility, pronunciation, fluency and understanding. Each category was awarded a maximum of four marks. Groups were then asked to design and demonstrate their own tests. On the final day they tested themselves in pairs. The test comprised two pictures that pairs had to speak about for the minimum of 3 minutes when they then awarded themselves marks.
- The text book is the most valuable teaching aid there is. Participants were asked to bring text books to the training where less conventional usage of the course work was discussed. The text book always provides pictures and material that can be used as teaching aids outside of the usual curriculum context. Sadly time was running out and there was far too little time available for this useful activity.

The training ended when each the teams presented their skit/ dramatic presentation for the entertainment of their colleagues. The “dramas’ ranged from a virtual field trip that visited some of the principal tourists attractions in Sri Lanka, to a song satirising the Spice Training Programme much to the delight of the Spice Team., as well as a comic drama showing the difficulties faced by a country lad when he started to attend English classes in a new school and so on. The overall winner was the Beetle Team ably captained by Jessie. The winners received shopping vouchers by means of a prize. Feedback forms were collected, certificates were handed out, photographs taken and then all enjoyed soft drinks and a piece of cake.

Mohan and Alister stayed on in Jaffna for an extra day to further enjoy the delights of Gnanam’s Hotel and to take the opportunity to do some sightseeing on the Jaffna Peninsula. They drove off out of Jaffna town all the way to Punkuduvitu, itself an island in the Palk Straits but connected to the mainland by causeway. Nainai Nagapoosani Amman Hindu temple and the Naga Viharai Buddhist temple need a ferry to reach the island upon which they rest. The outward journey was in a biggish boat where everybody had a comfortable seat. The return journey was in a much smaller vessel where everybody was squeezed below decks in a sealed compartment which could well have become a coffin had the overloaded boat overturned.

On Sunday the 23rd February the team departed Jaffna for Mannar.

The Mannar Training opened at the Provincial English Support Centre (PESC) located in the Tri-Lingual Resource Centre on Monday 24th February 2014. The Centre is headed by Anthony Rajan Croos; it provided one of the better training venues that the Spice Team have come across in Sri Lanka.

The Mannar numbers were fewer than Jaffna. It will be interesting to see just how keen the teachers are to attend trainings like these during their free time! It will show the committed and the keen and surely it is these people that SPICE wants to work with.

- There were 20 participants. Two were not teachers at all, but volunteers from Diaspora Lanka (Australia) and there were three mentors who had attended previous trainings, bringing the effective numbers down to 15. Lai Van Huyen a volunteer from Vietnam and her colleague Grace, both from Diaspora Lanka added enthusiasm, maturity and valuable support to the training and this went a long way towards being responsible for the success that it was! Huyen suggested that a short time at the end of the training day be given over to reflection so the participants could pinpoint what had been outstanding for them over the course of the day. She emphasized this exercise was more effective if practised at the end of the training day, rather than being held over to the following day.
- The programme in Mannar followed the same outline as Jaffna. The advantage that accrued to Mannar was in the shape of Rajan Croos's fine Resource Centre. The seeds were sown to turn this into a teachers' material and ideas hub for the entire area. SPICE donated books and DVDs to PESC, thus starting a library that can be of benefit to all schools in the Mannar and Maddhu Zones. Rajan Croos has also expressed his willingness to continue the work started by SPICE by providing back-up and further trainings to benefit the local English teachers.
- Lower numbers meant there were only three teams. The influence the Catholic Church has on local education was demonstrated by three "religious" being present at the Workshop. These were Christian Brother Sega, Catholic Priest Father Arul and Sister Mary Joseph.

Brother Sega, full of energy and highly competitive was the lynch pin of the Pearl Team. He got easily upset if his team performed badly. Father Arul was the team leader of Rainbow and Sister Mary Joseph worked well with the Diaspora Lanka members in the third team.

- One word dialogues were taught more extensively than in Jaffna. For these to make sense students have to think quickly. They are invaluable for pronunciation and intonation practice.
- As a homework exercise the participants were required to listen to the nightly English language news on TV or Radio. (Rupavahini broadcasts in English) and make a report of the featured items on the following day.
- The end of week entertainment had an interesting tone of social concern. Father Arul's group showed the harm man was doing to the animals and their natural habitat whilst Huyen and her team looked closely at the environmental issues facing Mannar, itself. Khan's portrayal of a Mannar donkey with an authentic bray was show stopping! However, Brother Sega's Pearl Team came with full musical accompaniment in the form of an electronic

keyboard to the tones of which they performed a satirical song constructed around “Brown Girl in the Ring”, in this case it was “white man in the ring!” Their song was a great hit and everybody joined in. The points they gained meant they won the competition, which was just as well as Brother Sega would have been angrily disappointed if they had lost. Happily they were all awarded with a prize and went away contented.

The certificates were issued, fewer photographs were taken and everyone enjoyed the by now traditional piece of cake and soft drink, that brought the proceedings to a fitting conclusion.

The team left for Colombo at 3pm in preparation for Alister’s departure for home on the Sunday evening.

In conclusion, I think it is safe to say this was the most successful training I have seen during my association with the SPICE Training Programme.

Alister Bredee

Koh Samui

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