

Tom Cella & Sophie Minor – Report on Sri Lanka assignment

The workshops that took place in March 2013 that we took part in showed a mixture of results and abilities when focusing on spoken English and TEFL methods. Overall, the number of teachers that seem comfortable using TEFL lessons (learned from Mark's workshop in June 2012) seemed to be in the minority, but there is definitely cause for optimism.

We found that a small proportion were trying to implement teaching based on interactive conversation, but their insistence to focus on grammar inhibited free flowing conversation. Many teachers are intent on evaluating each activity in terms of what tense or language was being used, focusing on insignificant linguistic intricacies rather than free flowing spoken English. Unfortunately the vast majority of teachers is stuck in their old habits and was clearly not putting the new techniques into practice or adapting the ones learnt with Mark. This was clear as generally, once the resource people were told they would be required to help run the workshops, they were hugely unprepared, and merely came the next day with one or two activities each that were obviously material that Mark had used. Whilst it is good that it was being used, they had not been adapted as we saw the same activities repeated 4 or 5 times in as many workshops.

Furthermore, on our arrival, upon telling the resource people that they were required to run some sessions, their reaction of panic and unease at the prospect was quite revealing of the fact that they were not yet fully comfortable with TEFL teaching methods, and given that Mark's workshop was almost a year ago, it may be expected that these teaching methods would be second nature to such teachers.

At the first workshop we ran the first day. Despite the fact that we told the resource teachers that it should be them running it with our assistance, or at least a 50/50 split between us, they sat and participated in our activities, and on the second day they came up with one activity each and relied on us to fill in the gaps. However, the positives to draw from this particular workshop were that the teachers attending were hugely enthusiastic and interested by the new ideas we presented. This lead us to believe that there is scope for such methods to spread.

The second workshop saw much greater participation from the resource people. They also had a wealth of new ideas that they were willing to share. The majority of ideas came from Tamara, who is a very capable teacher if a bit ambitious, with her main message being to buy a laptop to use technology in the classroom.

The third workshop, was probably the best in terms of resource person participation as well as obvious use and adaptation of TEFL methods. They were unaware that they would have to run the workshop when we arrived, but they spent the entire first day planning, and took control of the second day very successfully. One huge positive from this particular session that we noticed was that despite the lack of resources available to some teachers they were happy to continue regardless. For example BLANK ran a listening activity by singing a song as the CD player was broken. We also found that the attendees were keen to speak English, even when on a break.

The fourth and fifth workshops were slightly disappointing. Our transport arrived about 2 hours late, and at the fourth workshop they gave us the news that the following day was cancelled. The fact that they were happy to do this, and not prepared to rearrange the cancelled day, was slightly worrying. Many of the resource people were of an older generation which highlighted a trend

that we picked up on throughout our programme. Many of the older teachers were not open to the new methods, and they expected us to run the sessions completely. The fourth workshop in particular saw a couple of teachers in particular sitting and watching the TV in the next room, with their primary concern being whether lunch was coming on time, rather than a strong desire to pass on their knowledge and experience.

It was a similar affair in fifth workshop, with the main concern being tea breaks rather than teaching. Again the older teacher involved came with one handout and relied on us to do the majority. Although we had just about enough resources to run a few hours, it was a shame to see a lack of enthusiasm from certain individuals.

However, one real promising prospect we saw was Chanika who attended both the fourth and fifth workshops. Her enthusiasm and ability to teach with a lack of resources was outstanding. She had clearly taken the TEFL methods, adapted them and thought of her own ideas which were very promising. She was also prepared to share her ideas with other teachers when they came unprepared to run sessions.

Overall, we feel that there was much promise with the younger teachers coming through, who were generally far more keen to learn new teaching methods and pass them on. The project as a whole definitely has the scope to really take off, with certain individuals as the backbone. It is a huge task to rethink teaching spoken English, but the fundamental problem is the insistence to teach grammar rather than build confidence through interactive speaking. Further follow up programmes could address the teachers' performance in the classroom, so to ensure that such TEFL methods were being used. Furthermore, a real problem is that the teachers have a real lack of resources; we were told that photocopiers are often hard to come by. Clearly, for the TEFL techniques to work, a wealth of resources needs to be available to teachers so that there is scope for them to adapt the methods learnt.

Overall we thoroughly enjoyed our experience, although finding it challenging at first it was an experience we will never forget. We believe it's a fantastic programme and feel very privileged to have been a part of it.