

TRAINING INDIGENOUS SECONDARY TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
IN PAPUA - NEW GUINEA

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The training of secondary teachers of English in Papua-New Guinea is fraught with problems and here I shall have time to describe only a few of them. These are simply the ones which have caught my attention during my brief stay here. Possibly I will get my emphasis wrong, and possibly I will make suggestions that are quite impracticable. What follow are merely the comments of somebody who has been training secondary teachers of English at Goroka for the last two years and is to some extent influenced by comparisons with similar situations in Africa where he worked for ten years.

Two of our most serious problems arise from the situation in the schools. The first problem our graduates from Goroka encounter on taking up positions as English teachers is the lack of colleagues who have some knowledge and experience of the teaching of English as a second language. I have not seen any statistics on the qualifications and experience of the teachers of English in Papua and New Guinea - and I am not aware that anybody has ever compiled them - but I have met many of the expatriate English teachers in the Goroka, Lae, Rabaul, Port Moresby, Kavieng and Madang areas, and I can say, quite frankly, that most of them would not be in a position to offer much guidance to our graduates. It is sad to report that some of these teachers seem to be unaware of the fundamental difference between teaching English as a first language and teaching it as a second language. On the other hand, the growth of branches of the Association of Teachers of English in Papua and New Guinea - ATEPANG - in Port Moresby, Goroka, Lae, Madang and Wewak shows that English teachers in this country have considerable enthusiasm for their work. 150 teachers - most of them in secondary schools - now subscribe to English in New Guinea, a journal produced at Goroka for ATEPANG.

The need for in-service training on a large scale is acute. Although teachers are obviously benefiting from the meetings of branches of ATEPANG and, I hope, from reading English in New Guinea, one cannot rely on voluntary action of this kind to solve

the in-service training problem. Indeed, one suspects that the people who attend meetings and read the journal are the ones least in need of in-service training. How can we ensure that some improvement takes place in the standard of English teaching in the next few years? The handful of Goroka graduates who have had some preparation in TESL at secondary level will not make much impact on the schools if they have to work in Departments of English in which most of the other teachers are ignorant of the fundamentals.

I do not believe that the necessary programme of in-service training would prove expensive, although it cannot, of course, be carried out for nothing. I would suggest that every teacher of English in high schools who has not had some preparation in TESL or relevant experience in a similar situation in another country should, in his or her first year of teaching here, be given at least a one-week (but preferably a two-week) concentrated course in TESL. I suggested to the Department of Education in 1969 that such a course should be given to teachers on arrival, but this suggestion was turned down - rightly, as I now understand - on the grounds that when teachers first arrive here they are inevitably pre-occupied with such matters as finding a house, travel etc., and that, in any case, it is probably desirable that teachers should have several weeks - if not months - in schools to understand the situation here so that they can extract something practical from the in-service course when they eventually take it.

It is most essential that these in-service courses be of a practical nature. Abstract theories presented by erudite linguists are not called for. There is nothing very esoteric about the task of teaching English in secondary schools here. What teachers would find helpful is a series of talks - followed by classroom demonstrations - on such topics as the teaching of structure, controlled and guided composition, oral work, intensive and extensive reading, the place of literature, and assessment. Such a course was given in Madang in August 1970, and, judging by the reactions of the participants and the Regional Secondary Inspector, it succeeded in its aim of encouraging teachers to use methods suited to Papua and New Guinea.

Another way of improving the standard of English teaching in our high schools here would be to appoint as Heads of Departments in the major secondary schools men and women who are specialists in TESL. I should add that a person does not become a specialist in TESL

by teaching English badly for several years. There are in the world - and in Papua and New Guinea - people who know what TESL is about, and these are the people who should be Heads of English Departments, given that they also have the necessary organising ability. In Ethiopia, where I worked before I came here, the British Council, at the request of the Government, appointed a number of people of this calibre as Heads of English Departments, and this had very beneficial effects on the teaching of English

A second serious problem confronting indigenous secondary teachers of English is the shortage of appropriate textbooks and other teaching materials. I should point out at once that this shortage is due entirely to the fact that suitable books have not been ordered - it is not due to the failure of textbook writers to produce the books. This problem is, of course, partly a result of the first problem: inexperienced and unqualified teachers do not ask for the right books. On my visits to schools I have been depressed to see that a lot of money has been spent on books that are hardly likely to help the teacher of ESL. They are often books intended for the teaching of English as a first language. I shall refrain from mentioning any titles. Nobody can enjoy English - leave alone acquire any facility in the language - using such books. Not only have unsuitable course books found their way into the schools - there are also stacks of unsuitable readers. The ordering of unsuitable books is a major and most expensive mistake.

In the last few years numerous English textbooks and readers have appeared which could be made good use of in our high schools. Books written specifically for Papua and New Guinea might be preferable to books written for the ESL market in general, but this is a Utopian ideal. It is unlikely that the best writers and publishers will be prepared to produce books for the few thousand pupils in high schools here - especially in the senior forms. At Form 1 level a useful book written for Papua and New Guinea has appeared in the last year - Speak for Yourself, by Jane Everingham, published by McGraw-Hill, but I understand that it is not the beginning of a series.

In any case, it is not necessary to produce books specifically for secondary English in Papua and New Guinea. There do exist books that could, if properly used, do much to improve English in our high schools. The alternative to bad books is not no books at all. I do not subscribe to the view that teachers should produce all their own materials. I can

understand that the teachers who pretend to teach history by reading sections from a textbook, varying his technique by having pupils read sections aloud and silently, cannot be considered an educationist by any definition. But where English is concerned the printed word is important and a teacher of ESL at secondary level without any suitable books is not likely to achieve a great deal. This is especially the case if his own English has limitations, or if he has not received any training in TESL, or if he has to take some thirty periods a week in addition to all the other duties of a schoolteacher. Fortunately only a few of the English teachers here are at present in the first category, but most are in the second, and all are in the third.

I would go further and suggest that a basic course book is highly desirable. I am not advocating that our teachers should be told to work through a course from cover to cover. The better course books usually contain a recommendation to the teacher to use the material selectively and not slavishly. What a teacher of ESL requires is passages for comprehension work and for the contextualised presentation of structures, good exercises for practising those structures, speech work exercises, and composition topics related to the work done in the other English lessons. These are precisely what are to be found in the best English courses. In particular I believe that Practical English, Vols 1 - 5, by P.A. Ogunjide and P.S. Tregidgo, published by Longmans, would be found to be a most useful series.¹ These books were written for West Africa, where English has a similar position to what it has in Papua and New Guinea. Possibly some of the material could be rewritten and a special edition prepared for this country. But even as it stands the series would fill many serious gaps.

In order to encourage teachers to make use of the many excellent simplified and abridged readers published by such companies as Longmans, Oxford University Press, Nelson and Macmillan, work has been done at Goroka and the University Materials Centres on an evaluation of over 200 of these readers. At secondary level the greatest improvement in standards of English comes not from hours of drilling and the writing of structured exercises - although such activities do have some place - but from extensive reading on a large scale, say, forty books by each pupil each year. It would be futile for the method lecturers at Goroka Teachers' College to encourage our trainees to use this approach if the readers were not to be found in the schools. It is for this reason that Ralph Wingfield and I have initiated

the reader evaluation project. We hope that it will help teachers to make a better selection of readers.

The work of our graduates is being facilitated by two panels of English teachers meeting periodically in Konedobu. The English Syllabus Panel has recently produced a new syllabus for Forms 3 and 4, based on modern but well-trying approaches. Work will soon begin on a new syllabus for Forms 1 and 2. The English Evaluation Panel now sets examinations which incorporate new methods of English examining. Now, although a great deal of good work is being done by these two panels, I do not think that the direction of English teaching should be left to them. There is a need for a person in the Department of Education who would give all his time to the co-ordination of English teaching in this country. This suggestion was made by teachers who participated in the Madang in-service course in August, 1970. They suggested that what they called an English Curriculum and Methods Officer should be appointed by the Department of Education. His job would be to co-ordinate all aspects of English work, both at secondary and primary levels, to visit schools, to advise on implementation of the syllabus and the ordering of books and materials, and to carry out the hundred and one other tasks that would soon suggest themselves. Such a person would be of great help to our graduates from Goroka.

We do, of course, have what we might call our intrinsic problems. Not all of the students taking English as a method subject have the standard of English we would like them to have, although there are some who have a very good command of the language. This situation should improve if the quality of work in the high schools and our entry standards can be raised, but I think that it is inevitable that for some years - if not forever - there will be people teaching English whose own English leaves something to be desired. Providing their English is not very deficient I do not think that they would prove as useless as some expatriate teachers who speak the language perfectly but have not the first idea of how to teach it. One solution might be to send some of our future indigenous English teachers to Australia for a year to improve their English in the same way British teachers of foreign languages go to the continent for a year. At tertiary level the improvement one can effect by formal means - even (or perhaps especially) by the use of expensive equipment such as language laboratories - is very limited. Living in a completely English-speaking

atmosphere is the obvious solution, but it is probably prohibitively expensive.

These then are some of the problems of training indigenous secondary teachers of English in Papua and New Guinea. I would suggest that if they are dealt with immediately they will ultimately appear insignificant by comparison with the many other problems they could lead to

FOOTNOTE

1 Reviewed by Gabrielle Schmidt in English in New Guinea, No 3, April 1970.