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Developing literacy among young learners in Mauritius through a context based approach

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INTRODUCTION

The need to develop literacy skills is constantly emphasised, especially in the Mauritian context where English is not the Mother Tongue. Though Mauritius can boast of a commendable level of literacy (Education Strategy Plan 2008-2020, Ministry of Education and Human Resources), the rates of failure in English or poor quality of results at CPE (Certificate of Primary Education) level, limited proficiency in the language added to a lack of motivation to learn it make the teaching of English particularly challenging, more so at early primary level where the dependence on the Mother Tongue is prominent. Moreover, it is still alarming to note that a high number of children complete six years of primary schooling barely literate.

PROJECT RATIONALE

The aim of the Literacy Pack Project was the development of curriculum materials that would support the development of literacy in English among young learners. It can commonly be observed that, with regards to literacy development, the tendency is to focus mainly on teaching strategies. Without disregarding the importance of the pedagogical element, in this project, the focus was shifted to the use of appropriate curriculum materials- a factor that is fundamental to successful learning experiences. Though the market is flooded with materials and there is no dearth of reading materials, one cannot but note that most of them are produced in foreign contexts and are thus cut off from the reality of our children. It was thus considered essential to firstly develop materials that young learners could relate to and then use these in the classroom through specific teaching strategies, so that the development of literacy skills took place successfully.

Thus the underlying philosophy of the Literacy Pack Project was that the successful development of literacy could be achieved if:

- Planned intervention took place during the early years
- Appropriate curriculum materials were used, and
- Teaching took place through a judicious choice of approaches.

Albeit the fact that language is acquired more easily from the age of two till puberty, research shows that reading problems for the vast majority of children can be prevented if they benefit from adequate support right from the beginning of their schooling:

... most recent research overwhelmingly suggests that for the vast majority of children reading problems are preventable if they receive additional support in the form of an effective early literacy intervention. (Cassidy Schmitt, M & A.E. Gregory, 2005)

This is acknowledged in the Education Strategy Plan 2008-2020, Ministry of Education and Human Resources, wherein it is stated that:

Access to education is no longer enough. Strong foundations at lower levels of the system must ensure that all children acquire confidence in their learning abilities to ensure that they will succeed at the higher levels of the system.... (p. 13)

Hence, intervention during the early years would enable the establishment of a solid foundation for immediate and eventual success in literacy development, instil a taste for reading right from the beginning and promote a positive attitude towards the English language. The last two factors are of great importance in the Mauritian context where there is a lot of apprehension vis a vis the English language which is the medium of instruction and one of the most important subjects in the curriculum. As far as reading is concerned, it can be argued that though the lack of a reading culture has long been decried attempts to revive the love for reading have, so far, not shown consequential results. Reading would thus support the learners' language development by making up for their limited exposure to the target language- a current feature of ESL/EFL (English as a Second/Foreign Language) contexts.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The twofold objectives of the project were:

- To develop appropriate materials that would support the development of literacy in young learners
- To heighten awareness of possibilities for cross curricular literacy development

CHOICE OF APPROACH FOR THE PROJECT

A number of approaches were used during the development and implementation of the project, namely the Context-Based approach, Spiral approach,

Integrated Curriculum approach, and Shared Reading approach. It was deemed that a well thought-out mix of approaches would be more sound and fruitful. By being eclectic and opting for a variety of approaches, one can evade the risks of falling short of the objectives due to the limitations that may crop up.

The main approach that guided the study was the Context-Based approach. As mentioned earlier, resources or materials readily available may not necessarily suit the learners' needs. The same may be said when it comes to pedagogical orientation. Studies have revealed that imported pedagogy often clashes with local conditions. As stated by Hoa Hiep (2005), "pedagogy imported from abroad conflicts with the social, cultural, and physical conditions of the recipient countries." Holliday (1994) concurs with this view as, according to him, "technology transfer" can turn out to be detrimental to language learning. The context-based approach was considered as being most appropriate for this study as it takes into account the learning context, individuals and classroom culture and local culture (Palmer, 2008).

The Project centred around the development and use of curriculum materials that are in keeping with the Mauritian reality. Since materials developed locally could be tailored to the needs and experiences of our children, it was believed these would be more effective than foreign materials that are anchored in another reality. The developmental level of the children targeted as well as other areas of the Primary Curriculum were key factors taken into account. These are of prime importance to curriculum developers and determine how suitable the end product is.

The Spiral approach was also used since it allows for new concepts to build up on previous knowledge while gradually reinforcing and expanding the knowledge base*. As Wertz (1997) explains, 'individuals construct new knowledge from their experience through the process of accommodation and assimilation'. Hence the materials and instructional strategies advocated in the implementation of the project were in line with the previous and current experiences of the learners in relation to the themes identified, the teaching strategies (to which they had been exposed in pre school), and concepts (which they met in other subject areas). Additionally, the themes were linked to topics that would be taught to pupils eventually, when they graduated to higher levels of primary schooling. Hence, just as the Project built on the "known", it also threw the foundation for new knowledge.

Given the way in which the materials produced were closely interwoven with other subjects, adopting the Integrated Curriculum approach became inevitable, indeed advantageous. According to Shoemaker (1989):

an integrated curriculum (is) education that is organized in such a way that it cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association to focus upon broad areas of study. It views learning and teaching in a holistic way and reflects the real world, which is interactive.

(in Benson, T R in

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/earlychildhood/articles/integratedunits.html>)

Krogh (1990) further brings out the advantages of such an approach:

These benefits include more adequate coverage of curriculum, use of natural learning, building on children's interests, teaching skills in meaningful contexts, more flexibility, and an organized planning device (*ibid.*).

The language teacher can plough into the whole range of subject areas outlined in the curriculum and use these as the basis to develop literacy skills. Additionally, when the medium of instruction is English, while teaching History, Mathematics or Science, the teacher is furthering language development despite focussing primarily on concepts that are directly relevant to the subject. The development of literacy in the Mauritian educational system thus takes place across the curriculum; relegating it solely to the English lesson would imply adopting a myopic vision of the issue. Thus, the project was also driven by the premise that discrete elements of a subject could become a vehicle for the development of literacy skills (Lewis and Wray 2000). Besides, knowledge must not be compartmentalised since cross curricular integration aids decrease the teaching/learning bulk. The recognition that literacy development does- and should- take place in different areas of the curriculum, can lead to a decrease in the teaching/learning load which is a common cause of contention among teachers. In fact, curriculum integration also allows repetition, hence reinforcement of previous learning.

Finally, for the conduct of the literacy sessions in the classroom, the Shared Reading approach was opted for. It is an approach most teachers are familiar with and that has met with success in other countries, such as New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom, where it is commonly used. The Shared Reading approach typically involves a teacher and a group of children sitting closely together to read enlarged texts. In the course of the lesson, the teacher explicitly models the strategies and skills of proficient readers. Literacy sessions carried out through this approach provide children with enjoyable reading experiences and also encourage participation and interaction.

It must be brought out that the choice of this approach did not rest entirely on its success elsewhere but mostly because it was seen as an ideal way of shifting from current practices at classroom level where frontal teaching is highly prevalent. The Shared Reading approach transposes the learner in a different learning environment simply through a change in the seating arrangement. The teacher

provides opportunities for the learner to become an active participant by inviting and encouraging interaction rather than by merely giving instructions and explanations. Literacy development does not take place through drills but through language use- an element one cannot stress upon enough since it is a requisite to move from what Chomsky describes as “competence”, (i.e. knowledge of language rules), into “performance”, (i.e. concrete instances of language use) (Johnson, 2001:50). Interaction is thus of utmost importance in the FL/SL (Foreign/Second Language) classroom. On the basis of research carried out since the 1970’s, MacLure (in Stierer and Maybin, 1994) asserts that children learn best when they are actively involved in exploring ideas and creating meaning. With reference to research findings from known scholars like Bruner and Well, she states that active communication from an early age leads to huge learning gains. In fact, the National Literacy Strategy that was introduced in the UK in 1997 with the aim of raising standards of literacy in all primary schools laid much emphasis on oral skills:

Good oral work enhances pupils’ understanding of language in both oral and written forms and of the way language can be used to communicate (Standards and Effectiveness Unit, 1998, p. 3).

Thus, in the Project, the use of the Shared Reading approach would allow learners to be placed at the centre of the learning process by getting them involved in authentic and meaningful communicative situations. In the tenets of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, this is one of the requisites for language learning (Brown 1994 & Nunan 1989 in Hoa Hiep 2007).

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

The project was planned and carried out in three phases, namely (i) production of curriculum materials, (ii) consultation and teacher training and (iii) piloting of the materials and data collection.

Phase I : Production of Curriculum Materials

In the first phase of the project, six Big Books were produced. Big Books were considered to be the ideal choice due to the fact that, in the Mauritian primary schools, classrooms can accommodate more than 40 pupils. Apart from capturing and maintaining the children’s interest, the Big Books would ensure that they could easily see the illustrations and texts and thus remain on task. Furthermore, Big Books are commonly used in the Shared Reading approach.

During this first phase, careful thought was given to the selection of the content of the Big Books. To make pupils relate to the texts easily, their expe-

riences and environment formed the basis of the content. Thus, each of the books dealt with a specific theme and the six topics were as follows:

- Discovery of the island
- Diverse origins of the people of Mauritius
- Means of transport in Mauritius
- Festivals in Mauritius
- The environment
- Animals and plants of Mauritius

The texts were short, that is 10 to 12 pages in length, with one or two sentences on each page. These were written in simple English. Occasionally, compound sentences and simple questions were included to expose learners to the variety of structures in the language. The vocabulary was simple. New words were highlighted so as to draw attention to them during instruction. The message in the books was supported by colourful semi realistic illustrations that had the key function of transmitting the written message. Based on the belief that meaning and learning are intimately connected to experience, the texts were anchored in the local context and dealt with the reality and experiences of the children, it was expected that these factors, added to the illustrations, would facilitate understanding.

Since the cross curricular approach had been adopted and one of the objectives of the Project was to introduce concepts from other disciplines, terms and notions from History and Geography were included in the books. These were words that children came across at a higher level and which proved to be difficult. The idea of integrating concepts from another subject area in literacy material is not new. In fact, this is the driving philosophy in Content Based Teaching. Hughes (2000: 23) notes how 'a surprising amount of history comes into word level work in the literacy strategy at early key stage'. Examples of words used in the Big Books produced are those that relate to the passing of time and which require pupils to have an understanding of chronology- 'a long time ago', 'before', 'after', 'yesterday'.

Each book was accompanied by a set of explicit guidelines to help the teachers conduct the lesson and two activities, one oral and the other creative. The oral activity aimed at the consolidation of concepts and vocabulary newly acquired. To that effect, picture and word cards were included where required. The second activity provided learners with the opportunity to express their understanding of the concepts taught and to relate the content to themselves.

Phase II: Consultation and Teacher Training

It must be brought out that informal consultations took place throughout the process of material production. Constructive feedback was obtained from

subject specialists and teacher trainers as well as teachers. This helped refine and improve the books continuously. However, more formal consultations were held during a half day workshop for which six teachers from selected schools were invited. The purpose was to obtain their views and suggestions on the suitability of the themes, text and illustrations of the material for Standard I pupils with a view to improving these. It was also to train the teachers in the use of the Big Books and the conduct of literacy sessions. The teachers were therefore apprised of the philosophy of the project, the materials and the activities.

Phase III: Piloting of the Materials and Data Collection

A sample of standard I classes in six different schools, both rural and urban, were chosen to pilot the materials for this project. Each teacher was given one Big Book to work out. As the materials were piloted during the third term, it was considered inappropriate to burden the teacher with the whole pack. This might have led to the latter rushing through the material due to time shortage. Focussing on one book, on the other hand, would enable the teacher to fully exploit the material provided.

During this phase, the teachers were monitored and observed while conducting the literacy sessions. The data was collected through classroom observation and teacher interviews.

INITIAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Initial findings show that, when the materials were aptly used, the aim of the project could be achieved. It was observed that the Big Books caught the attention of the children and aroused their interest. Moreover, since they could relate to what they saw in the illustrations, they participated willingly and shared relevant personal experiences, such as travelling by aeroplane and being caught in a traffic jam. There was also a good level of response to teacher initiated interaction, especially when they recognised places, like the Cyber city at Ebene, or features of the island, like Pieter Both mountain. Since the intent was to draw pupils into the lesson and support literacy development, incorrect use of English and responses in Creole were also accepted in order not to dampen their motivation. Moreover, in line with the Communicative Language Teaching approach where the emphasis is on fluency rather than accuracy, errors and code switching were considered as a stepping stone towards correct language use. The findings provided additional validity for Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Johnson, 2000) since the level of learner participation was equivalent to the amount of interest and enjoyment they demonstrated.

The material was equally well received by all the teachers who were as eager as the pupils to use them. They stated that such materials are more appropriate than textbooks for young learners. Textbooks could be quite bulky and uninspiring for this age group whereas Big Books and an activity based approach appealed to them more. This supports the notion that the Context Based and Shared Reading approaches are suitable for young learners. Familiarity with the content, coupled with the use of attractive materials, ensure that learners are more involved in the learning process. One of the teachers was in fact quite innovative and used the Big Book to introduce the concept of transport which was in the textbook. According to her, this facilitated the teaching of the concept and vocabulary. Thus for effective teachers, the materials can be quite versatile and support learning in more ways than one.

However, teacher resistance was a notable feature of the findings. Despite the training session, some of the teachers failed to grasp the notion of developing Literacy across the curriculum. They considered the Big Books as being additional work both for themselves and for the children and put forward the excuse that they had to complete the syllabus and could not find sufficient time to work on the Big Book. Consequently, it was not possible to observe them in the classroom due to constant postponing of visits. As Clandinin & Connelly (in Lewy, 1991:363) assert, the “teacher is an integral part of the curriculum constructed and enacted in the classroom”. S/he being the main actor in the classroom and a key person in the instructional process, it is essential that s/he be convinced of the validity of pedagogical orientations if these are to be successfully implemented.

Another significant aspect of teacher resistance was seen in the difficulty of shifting from the traditional approach of teaching to a more learner centred one. During the observation of one teacher in particular, it was noted that excessive use of the Mother Tongue was made despite the briefing on the importance of exposing learners to English. In an ESL context, the necessity of creating what Brandl (2008) refers to as “a rich input” in the language classroom by using the target language as a means of instruction cannot be brought out strongly enough. As he goes on to argue, under the “maximum exposure” hypothesis, learners require as much exposure to the target language as this will lead to greater gains in the new language (ibid).

Moreover, it was noted that the same teacher taught concepts rather than focused on the “story”. In doing so, she digressed into aspects deemed to be unimportant, such as religious beliefs of different ethnic groups. She also encumbered the children with Geographical notions that were far from being the focal point of the lesson.

Finally, it became evident that frontal teaching was another habit that teachers found difficult to depart from. Despite the guidelines on the conduct of

literacy sessions given in the Books and the discussions during the workshop, the teachers did not change the pupils' seating arrangement- even when the space was available. It becomes evident that if teachers do not espouse the theories underlying the Project, they cannot translate these in their practice. Departing from traditional methods of teaching into which they are deeply anchored requires a radical shift in perception. The findings support the view that the teachers' openness to new ideas plays an important role in the instructional process and influences students' achievement and attitude (Tschannen-Moren et al, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Though the Big Books were piloted in a small number of schools, it was obvious that materials conceived and developed in context can lead to the development of literacy skills in young learners. Children were more easily drawn into the lesson and participated enthusiastically when their interest was aroused and they were familiar with the content of the text. Yet, since teachers determine how effective instructional strategies are, it was noted that improvement could still take place at the level of implementation. There is an urgent need for teachers to revisit their understanding of language teaching and literacy development. There is also a need for a radical shift from traditional methods of teaching towards more learner centred approaches in the classroom. However, this would require a change of mindset.

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