

Teaching Practice in Malta

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As part of the staff development program, I was sponsored by Chulalongkorn University Language Institute to take a short course, "*Advanced Practical Certificates and Diploma in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages*," at the University of London, Institute of Education from January 13-March 26, 1982.

The option I selected was "*Classroom Management*." It was intended mainly for teachers who wish to enhance their practical classroom skills. The objectives of the course were as follows:

a) *To extend the knowledge of and ability to handle a range of ESOL techniques and procedures.*

b) *To elaborate in detail a scheme of work involving the selection and sequencing of these techniques and procedures as they are appropriate to particular circumstances (taking into account constraints of time, staff, availability of equipment, etc.) and catering for the needs of particular students of differing ages, languages and backgrounds.*

c) *To consider questions relating to the deployment of specialist staff, the provision of facilities (books, language laboratories, audio-visual aids, other resources and information) and to draw up a specification of requirements for a given set of circumstances known to the participants.*

d) *To carry out all or some of the scheme elaborated in (b) above in a supervised teaching situation.*¹

In the first five weeks of the term, students attended a course of lectures on: *syllabus design, scheme of work, lesson planning and course design*. They also had workshops on these topics. In addition, there were lectures on educational administration. They were mainly about *how to identify pupils, resources, staff training, time-table arrangements and evaluation*.

The final four weeks of the course (February 22 to March 19) were spent on *teaching practice in Malta*. The nine students who chose *Classroom Management*

¹ From a pamphlet of general information distributed by University of London Institute of Education, p. 6

as their option were assigned to do their teaching practice in different primary and secondary schools. I was assigned to teach English for two hours daily at *B'Kara Primary School*, situated on Brared Street, B'Kara. I taught English to 29 year 5 pupils whose ages ranged from 9-10 years (class A) for two weeks and then 27 year 6 pupils aged 10-11 (class B) for one week.

Malta is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea about 58 miles from Sicily and 180 miles from North Africa. It has a total area of 122 square miles and a population of about 300,000. Malta used to be under British control for more than a hundred years so it has used English as an official language for a long time. But since its independence in 1964, Maltese has been used and English now rates as a second language. Maltese children begin to learn English when they are 4 years old so when they are in primary school, they can speak English fluently.

Before I started teaching, I observed year 5 and year 6 classes taught by their usual teachers. The method used by *Mr. Vincent Pacé* who taught year 5 pupils impressed me greatly. He taught a lesson from the book *Game We Like* (Lady Bird). On that day it was about playing with balloons. Mr. Pacé let the pupils imagine that they had a balloon in their hands. They had to blow up their balloons, then pretend to tie them and play with them. They threw them into the air and tried to catch them. Some students also pretended that their balloons popped. Not only did they enjoy the lesson but they could also remember vocabulary used in it quite well. I realized that *"learning can be achieved through playing."*

In my first teaching hour, to be acquainted with the pupils, I introduced them to Thailand. I put posters on the blackboard: pictures of temples, dancing, beaches and elephants. I taught them how to dance Thai style which they enjoyed and they *"Ram Wong Wan Loy Krathong"* around the classroom. They were eager to know about Thailand and asked a lot of questions. During this hour I was observed by Mr. Peter Hill, my tutor and he gave the following comments.

"Learning names; a very important first step over which you took great care, and this was right. Your relationship with the children was delightful and the way you got them to do finger dancing most interesting. This was a real piece of culture teaching....You should have anticipated their questions about where Thailand was and how big it is. See if you can find a bigger and better map and devise some way of giving them a sense of scale. This was a very nice introductory lesson indeed. Next time get them to do some writing for you; you will find that is where they need teaching."

The students on teaching practice were visited by their tutor six times during the four week period. These visits were not announced in advance but it was said that the tutor was not an assessor. He was anxious to discuss their work with them on them on the same day as his visit. After the first week students had to plan out a scheme of work for the remaining three weeks. The tutor was available

for discussion. Students were also reminded that they should not feel that every lesson had to be a ‘*performance*’, the all-singing, all-dancing show. Students should work out their schemes of work with reference to the four “skills” and their assessment of pupils’ language needs in the light of what they could do in the time available. Students should feel that they could experiment. A bold attempt that could perhaps go wrong was surely more interesting and more of a learning experience than doing what they had always done though ‘what they had always done’ might also be useful.

Resulting from the tutor’s suggestion, I got the pupils to write a paragraph about a game they liked to play and I found out that although they were fluent in speaking, they had problems in writing. Therefore, I put more emphasis on writing. I had both year 5 and year 6 pupils write six compositions starting from controlled writing. The first one was *Barbara, a Baby Elephant*, the passage from Foundation Reading I, Unit II, Lesson 5. The pupils were given a short passage and they had to do three tasks. Firstly, they changed verbs in brackets into past simple tense. Secondly, they punctuated the sentences with full-stops and started new sentences with capital letters. Finally, they rewrote the passage by joining sentences with *and*, *but* or *so* where it was appropriate. The following is the passage mentioned above.

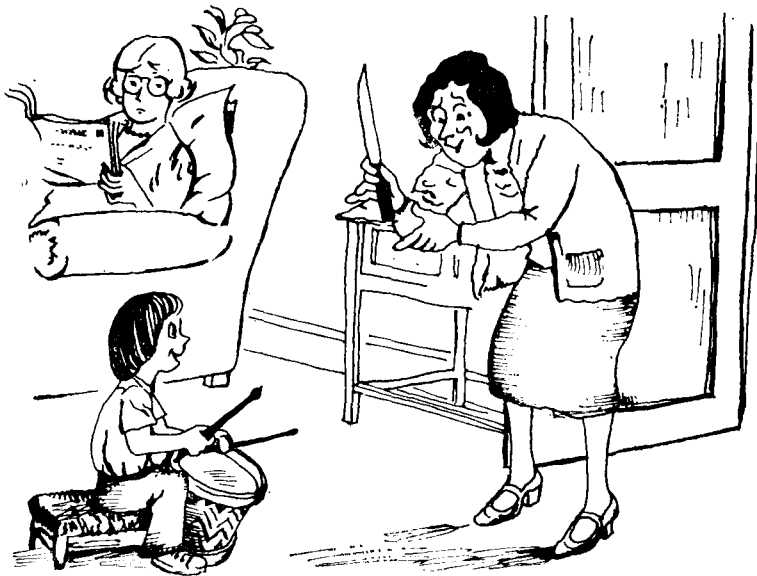
Barbara, a Baby Elephant

Barbara was bored she (*run*).....away from the circus yesterday she (*break*).....through a glass window of a house she (*race*).....from a corridor she (*knock*).....over a refrigerator she (*jump*).....over a table and (*run*).....into the street workmen from the circus (*chase*).....Barbara they (*throw*).....a rope around her neck they then (*pull*).....her towards a waiting truck they (*force*).....her up the steps and into her cage which they securely (*lock*).....the circus owner was delighted to have his star back he was not so pleased when he (*see*).....the bill for damages.

After that I gradually had the pupils write a composition on their own. When I compared year 5’s writing with year 6’s writing, I found out that year 6 pupils did not write better than year 5. They still had many common mistakes. They were confused about tenses, subject-verb agreement and spelling. They could write quite well if there were words to guide them but when they had to write in their own words, they got lost. This may be because their grammar and vocabulary was not good enough to write a total composition unaided.

The tutor always gave me good suggestions. He said, “*With young children you need to have lots of varied activities, prepared for them. Try to organize them in cycles, with some talk, some reading, some writing or drawing in each cycle. Avoid long stretches of the same activity.*”

I think that this technique can be used with students of other levels. Changing activities depend on their attention span which lengthens with age. I noticed that the young pupils I taught lost their enthusiasm if they had to do one activity for more than 20 minutes. Therefore, I tried to use the four different skills within the two hours. I had them read a passage, answer questions orally or write down the answers. Then I changed to listening. I read a passage to them and asked them questions about the passage afterwards to check whether they understood or not. Sometimes I told them a story. I found out that primary children like listening to stories. Anyway, choosing materials was very important. I used ones that were not structurally and syntactically complicated. The following is an example of the kind of material that I chose for the pupils. I took it from the book entitled *Elementary Stories for Reproduction* by L.A. Hill.



It was Jimmy's birthday, and he was five years old. He got quite a lot of nice birthday presents from his family, and one of them was a beautiful big drum.

Who gave him that thing? Jimmy's father said when he saw it.

'His grandfather did,' answered Jimmy's mother.

'Oh,' said his father.

Of course, Jimmy liked his drum very much. He made a terrible noise with it, but his mother did not mind. His father was working during the day, and Jimmy was in bed when he got home in the evening, so he did not hear the noise.

But one of the neighbours did not like the noise at all, so one morning a few days later, she took a sharp knife and went to Jimmy's house while he was hitting his drum. She said to him, 'Hullo, Jimmy. Do you know, there's something very nice inside your drum. Here's a knife. Open the drum and let's find it.'

First I wrote 5 questions on the blackboard :

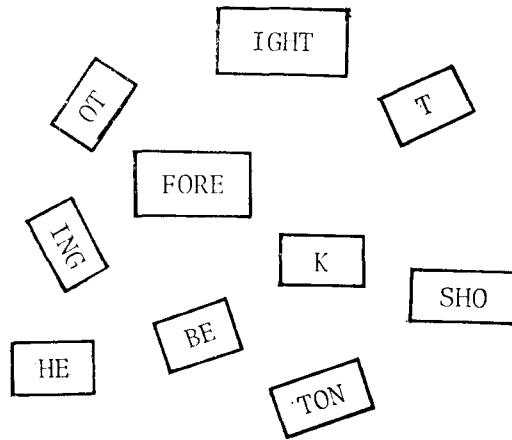
1. *When did Jimmy get the drum?*
2. *Whom did he get it from?*
3. *Why didn't his father hear it?*
4. *Why did the neighbour really want Jimmy to cut the drum open?*
5. *What did she say to Jimmy to make him cut it open?*

Then I read the passage once and showed the pupils the picture about the story and asked them to write down the answers. After we had checked the answers, I asked the pupil's opinions about the end of the story—*whether Jimmy would cut his drum open or not—why?* There was a discussion about this point and the pupils enjoyed giving their opinions. Some said that they would do it because they wanted to see something nice inside. Some said that they would not believe that ugly woman.

Playing games also helped the pupils to learn the language. Language learning is hard work : games make that hard work both enjoyable and efficient.² For this reason, I occasionally used games. I also took care when choosing the games for the pupils. The games should be appropriate to the class in terms of language and type of participation. It had to be made very clear to the pupils what they had to do or else chaos would occur. Some of the games that I used were : '*Simon say.....*', '*Pass the message*', '*Twenty questions*', '*Guess what I'm drawing*', '*What's the difference.*'

The following is a game called '*Broken words.*' The teacher tells the pupils that a man wrote something on a piece of paper for a spy. The spy read it, then cut the paper into pieces. Now every word is in two parts. The idea is to put the halves together, then to put the five words together to understand the spy's message.

² Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby, *Games for Language Learning*, p. 1.



Teaching practice in Malta was really useful. It gave me a wider teaching experience and made me feel more self-confident in the classroom. The techniques that I used in Malta can be applied to teaching English to Chulalongkorn University students. When I teach Foundation Reading I to the first-year students I, now try to add more activities. For example, instead of having students just read a passage about “*The Life-Cycle of a Plant*” on their own, I mixed up the sentences in the passage. Then I divided the students into groups and they helped each other reorder the sentences before looking at the passage. Sometimes I use listening skills too. For instance, when I taught a passage about Walt Disney’s life, first, I made sure that the students understood the vocabulary used in the passage. Then I read the passage once and got them to answer the questions. This is one way to test whether the students understood the story or not.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Hill, L.A., *Elementary Stories for Reproduction*, Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Wright, Andrew; Betteridge, David and Buckby, Michael, *Games for Language Learning*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- A hand-out of “*Malta schools attachment notes*” distributed by University of London Institute of Education.