

A NEW APPROACH
TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH
TO FIRST GRADE MALAYSIAN SCHOOL CHILDREN

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In the village of Lenggong, Perak, Malaysia, nearly fifty per cent of the children in the Government English School fail all subjects by the time they reach fifth or sixth grade. The medium of instruction from grade one on is English--a second language. Malaysia has a multi-racial society. There will usually be three races represented in a typical classroom and as many as ten or twelve different languages and dialects. To bring such a diverse group of youngsters together to be taught in yet a new language is a momentous problem.

At present, inexperienced "temporary teachers" try to do their best using the procedures they experienced as students. Memorization, rote learning, unplanned lessons, lack of concern for the slow learner, textbook instruction from the first day in grade one--all these things are the hallmark of young teachers who fail because they know no alternative. Their attitudes become lethargic where their pupils are concerned and their pupils' motivation dwindles to low levels as they fall further and further behind.

While it would be foolish to suggest impossible solutions for this community, there are some practical possibilities that could be tried. If these teachers could, in a brief training session held locally, be acquainted with

the latest methods of second language learning, some improvement in the failure rate might be experienced. The audio-lingual method is held by authorities to be the best method known for teaching a second language. If Lenggong's teachers could begin by concentrating on just two of the principles of this method, the standard of education might rise considerably. The first principle concerns the order of the skills taught--listening, speaking, reading and lastly, writing. This is the opposite order they now use. The second principle states that the language is taught through carefully prepared and controlled pattern drills.

The teachers would need all the encouragement and all the persuasive techniques known if they are to become enthusiastic enough to change. The school administration must become totally committed to the new method so that it can always be nearby to praise, encourage and motivate, just as the teachers must learn to do the same with their students.

Practical suggestions must be given these educators, perhaps in the form of a prepared booklet. It must not just deal with the audio-lingual method in an academic manner, but also be filled with many examples of pattern drills and how and when to use them, as well as ideas on ways to motivate oral learning to keep a lively classroom. Demonstrations by a trained audio-lingual expert would be needed using local children so that the teachers could see for themselves exactly how to proceed.

Hopefully, the results of this program would raise the level of education in Lenggong so that more children would find success in their schoolwork and be encouraged to continue educational pursuits. Failure seems to beget failure. If the cycle can finally be broken, perhaps the next generation can continue on to advance the standards to an even higher level.