

The Zanzibar English Reading Programme

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The brief ELT background and description of the reading programme's design and aims are first given. The paper then identifies the main problem areas in implementation and describes the broad approaches used to address them. Specific problems and the programme's responses to them, relating to both Class Readers and Class Libraries are examined. Finally some conclusions are reached in the light of our experiences, which may have implications for the design and implementation of similar programmes.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Concern has been voiced for many years in Zanzibar over the declining levels of English Language (EL) proficiency within the education system, where the medium of instruction at primary level is Kiswahili, but switches to English at the start of secondary. A five-year English Language Improvement Project started in 1989, the broad aim being to raise the levels of English teaching and learning at all levels of the formal education system. A major component of the project has been the introduction into secondary schools of an English reading programme using graded readers.

The islands of Zanzibar contain nearly one hundred schools with secondary sections, entrance to which is not selective or dependent upon success in the end of primary examinations. Universal education ends after three years of secondary, when students are selected to study for the equivalent of first certificate. Approximately 50% of secondary students attend large schools in Zanzibar town, the other half are scattered in rural schools throughout the two main islands. Class sizes in the town can be up to seventy students, whereas rural classes are smaller, rarely exceeding thirty students per class. Classrooms contain no furniture other than desks and chairs, which students frequently share, and a blackboard. There is a great paucity of resources; schools have no budget allocation for the purchase of books or materials, and only a few urban schools have any reprographic equipment on which to produce teaching materials.

Results of extensive testing have shown that almost all pupils leaving primary school have only a low elementary proficiency in EL, nowhere near the level necessary to embark on EL medium education. Many secondary teachers have an insufficient command of English to teach effectively through it, and very few use English outside the classroom. The secondary curriculum is mainly delivered through a combination of spoken Kiswahili and written English, with all examinations in English.

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ZANZIBAR

The English syllabus, at both primary and secondary levels, is structural. The dearth of suitable texts, especially appropriate reading materials, over the last three decades, has led to teaching methods becoming highly didactic, reinforcing the strongly held belief that the teacher alone is the agent of learning. There is a shortage of suitably qualified teachers, especially in the rural areas where 50% of secondary EL teachers are either untrained or trained only for the Kiswahili-medium primary sector. A large amount of EL class time is spent by teachers mechanically exemplifying English structures and students performing very rigidly controlled exercises. Such an approach to EL teaching makes little demand on teachers' own language competence, requires minimal preparation time, and can be performed relatively easily by reference to a single copy of a standard teaching grammar. Consequently, students develop some ability in manipulating the forms of the English language, but lack the skills necessary to use English in any meaningful or useful way. In particular the vital skill of reading has received little attention.

READING HABITS AND SKILLS OF ZANZIBARIS

There is no available research on the reading habits of Zanzibaris, nor have there been any studies of first language (L1) reading skills. The paucity of reading materials, both within and outside the education system, has applied equally to Kiswahili and English. It is unlikely therefore, that many students' L1 reading skills are strongly developed during primary school, and the first real exposure likely to affect reading skills now occurs at secondary level through the English reading programme.

Outside schools the opportunities to read are severely limited. There are a few very small retail outlets for reading materials, dealing mainly with newspapers and magazines. The few books for sale are, in relation to earnings, very expensive, and are restricted in the main to standard educational texts, in both English and Kiswahili. Zanzibar opened its first Public Library in 1988 and there are two small children's libraries, all with expanding membership. Until very recently however, most Zanzibaris have attached little importance to reading, and the restricted access to suitable reading materials has not encouraged change.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ENGLISH READING PROGRAMME

Being able to read well in English is a prerequisite for studying through the language, and the value of using graded readers to increase reading fluency as well as to improve overall language proficiency has been widely acknowledged. Thus, the reading programme has two main objectives – to develop learners' English reading skills and to use graded readers as a springboard for a variety of activities to raise overall EL proficiency and so remove some of the mist that currently obscures the

secondary curriculum for the majority. A third, wider objective of the programme is to awaken a positive book habit, where teachers and students feel comfortable handling, choosing, rejecting, and discussing, as well as reading, plenty of books.

THE READING PROGRAMME – DESCRIPTION

The reading programme has two components: sets of Class Readers (CR) are used to generate EL learning activities in the classroom, as well as to develop EL reading skills, and Class Library (CL) boxes provide learners with a gateway to individualised reading practice and language reinforcement through wide selections of graded readers of the appropriate level, used out of class and school.

The Readers are selected using lists provided by the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER), based in the Institute for Applied Language Studies at the University of Edinburgh. EPER surveys all major series of graded readers and classifies them into eight universal levels of reading difficulty that cut across individual publishers' own stages or levels. Two levels of graded readers are used in each year; CR are always at the higher of the two levels and CL boxes are provided at both. Care has been taken to provide readers of an appropriate level and interest to students, as well as to ensuring sufficient numbers to allow frequent borrowing and efficient class use.

The reading programme was first introduced into Form I and has progressed in successive years to the end of secondary schooling in Form IV. Each annual phase has been preceded by a pilot year where only a selected number of schools received books and materials in order to try them out and provide a basis of experience on which to draw in subsequent years.

A first priority was to ensure that a secure place was established within the secondary EL syllabus for use of the graded readers. Three out of seven weekly periods of English are officially designated for use with graded readers, two lessons for CR and one for the CL. This provision has ensured that the programme does not rely on extra-curricular commitment on the part of teachers.

BASIC PROBLEMS

Teaching on Zanzibar is conditioned very heavily by the examinations students sit, and the terminal English exam is weighted in favour of a knowledge of structural forms. Only 20% of assessment is based on reading skills, examined through a single traditional-style comprehension passage. The extensive reading programme was in an anomalous position, occupying 3/7 of timetable space, but having no direct reflection in the examination. Teachers were reluctant to invest in preparation and classroom time in the absence of any recognizable examination component, and the argument that exploiting the readers fully would lead to improved overall

proficiency was not generally accepted. At the time of writing the terminal secondary English examination is being revised to match the 40% syllabus weighting on reading. Candidates are required to read a 1500 word passage from a graded reader (not a CR) at an appropriate level and respond to it in the same way as they do in many of the activities promoted through the teaching guides. As teaching is so oriented towards examinations, it is anticipated that the changed examination format will have beneficial effects on teaching and increase the reading programme's classroom credibility.

There was an initial degree of apprehension amongst the majority of EL teachers concerning the programme. Teachers were concerned at the possible demands the influx of books and materials might make on their time and professional competence. The majority of teachers do not read extensively; very few showed any personal interest in the books and did not read them themselves. The previous unavailability of suitable books meant that teachers' own education lacked any emphasis on reading, and their training included no reference to using graded readers in the EL classroom. Understandably, many have been slow to see the value of the reading programme.

Teachers did not readily accept that students' progress in language could be affected by anyone other than themselves, so the reading programme, with its strong elements of self-access and learner-centered activities, was at odds with convention. Consequently, the graded readers were at first used only in ways that conformed closely to current practices and teachers' conceptions of good EL teaching, and their full potential as vehicles for more innovative and imaginative language learning was left untapped. The physical limitations of local classrooms, together with prevailing teacher attitudes and teaching techniques, make for an austere and barren rather than what Hafiz and Tudor (1989) describe as a "relaxed environment in which learners (are) able to develop and maintain a pleasure-driven and interest-driven attitude to the reading materials provided".

IMPLEMENTING THE PROGRAMME : TEACHER SUPPORT

To help create the right environment and to address the problems of teachers' apprehension and unfamiliarity with using graded readers, a systematic teacher support programme has been introduced. This has three components:

- the production of handbooks and teaching guides to accompany the graded readers;
- regular in-service teacher development workshops focussing on key aspects of the programme;
- the creation of part-time teacher-advisers to provide regular in-school support for teachers in using the materials appropriately.

In addition small groups of teachers have completed the three-month *Certificate in the Teaching of EFL Reading* at the International Education Centre (INTEC) at the College of St. Mark and St. John, Plymouth. This has provided intensive training for key EL teachers who on their return to Zanzibar have become involved in various aspects of the teacher support programme.

Teaching Guides

Teaching guides offer a series of lesson activities, methodological suggestions and information on planning work for each CR. They have been written by groups of teachers at INTEC and in Zanzibar, with editorial guidance from the programme's coordinators. The classroom activities in the guides are largely modelled on those found in Greenwood (1988).

Teacher Workshops

Workshops for serving English teachers have been held regularly to promote the materials and methods advocated in the teaching guides. As well as presenting classroom activities found in the guides, emphasis has been placed on developing teachers' skills in adapting and transposing activities from one CR to another. In promoting these activities a variety of techniques has been used, including the use of local classroom video footage, teaching demonstrations, and peer teaching. Throughout the workshops a groupwork approach has been used in many of the guides' activities.

Part-time Teacher-advisers

The heart of the teacher support programme has been to establish a scheme involving the training of a group of ten teacher-advisers who have embarked on a systematic peripatetic programme of school visits to support neighbouring teachers. Each teacher-adviser has been selected as being a classroom teacher of merit, and has completed the INTEC course referred to above. They remain classroom teachers for four days a week, implementing the reading programme in their own schools in the same way as the teachers that they then counsel one day each week. Their school visits follow a careful routine of discussion and observation of the practices used by teachers in implementing the reading programme, and their 'voice of experience' is used to make alternative suggestions when poor practice is in evidence. This dimension of regular in-school support for teachers has done much to promote the use of the graded readers, both CR and CL.

CLASS READERS

As well as helping develop basic reading skills that enable learners to move towards greater reading fluency and independence, the CR is intended to be exploited for the development of general language skills through reading related activities.

Reading in the classroom

All CR used in the first year of the programme are at the elementary level, and are between 300 and 2000 words in length. This allows them to be read entirely in class under the control of the teacher; an important consideration as early steps towards reading fluency are taken. How teachers initially went about this reading however showed little variation and did little to develop reading skills.

Each CR was read aloud, sometimes by the teacher, but usually by the students themselves in two basic routines. Firstly, individual students would be asked to stand up and read aloud until the teacher intervened. The interventions would often be continuous, and many developed into little sub-routines for pronunciation or vocabulary teaching before the reading continued. The second method involved all the class reading in unison. One of Williams' (1986) principles – making reading the primary activity of a reading lesson, and avoiding “a welter of peripheral supportive activities” – was being violated. Students found following the text difficult, often failing to register when reading had stopped and some correction or reinforcement of a particular language item begun.

Providing a model approach

Teachers saw a main purpose in the CR as being to teach pronunciation, and did not naturally see the value of students reading silently in class. Many had reservations about silent reading, claiming that they had no way of checking whether the students were reading or not. Many developed cunning ways of satisfying themselves that reading was actually taking place in the silence. They would watch intently, often at close quarters, for lip and finger movement. Some would request individual students to whisper the words to them as they crouched beside them. Teachers took every opportunity to interfere in the process, and felt this an appropriate role. Often, after an episode of silent reading, the first or second routine, described above, would take place.

Providing a clear alternative model for teachers to follow that decentralised the role of the teacher was identified as a helpful approach to classroom reading. The alternative model involves the teacher dividing each CR into ‘readable sections’, that is, how much text students should read uninterrupted before some reinforcing activity takes place. At the low elementary level a readable section might be as little as twenty words, extending as reading fluency grows to single chapters of 500+ words of the longer graded readers. Students first read the section silently; this is followed by a few oral questions from the teacher designed to reinforce or predict key elements of the storyline, after which the section is re-read aloud by the teacher or one or two students who offer and can read aloud well. This approach is repeated until a sufficient amount of the CR has been read to allow for a reading-related activity to be done (see below).

Promoting the model approach

The model approach has been promoted through the teaching guides and workshops, and the school visits from the teacher-advisers have encouraged teachers to adopt this model, or close approximations to it. Teachers' own descriptions of how they approach reading, discussion of lesson plans, and classroom observations provide the teacher-advisers with the basis from which to suggest alternatives in cases where particular teachers cling to their old routines. This one-to-one counselling has proved the most valuable agent of change in approaches to classroom reading, and the teacher-advisers have been very effective in getting teachers to try things out, by praising teachers when they do, and negotiating change when they don't. There is now a far greater acceptance of silent reading and recognition of the need to develop fluency by allowing learners to focus on sections of text rather than individual words. More time is now spent in EL reading rather than simply making EL noises.

Reading-related activities

Subjecting learners to agonizing reading routines was demoralising and consequently fostered a negative attitude to the graded readers which was reinforced by time then spent performing dissections of the CR in follow-up activities. In this way short 300 to 400 word readers, intended to be used for a few lessons, were often spun out to ten or more lessons through a series of monotonous reading routines and repetitive reading-related activities.

Initially teachers adopted activities that fitted in with their understanding of what EL teaching and learning is, and what they felt was appropriate teacher and student behaviour. High on the list was a regular routine of question and answers, both oral and/or written, requiring students to recall or locate details of the part of the story read. Many readers come with questions at the back, and teachers tended to view these as an essential part of using the CR. Teachers remained bound by their predilection for the teaching of structure, so dismembering the text to exemplify aspects of structure was likewise popular. Spending forty-five minutes picking out as many possessive pronouns as you could find in a section of a CR was deemed an appropriate activity.

Emphasis has been placed on the kind of activities found in Greenwood, and the teaching guides offer a refreshing variety of activities that challenge the endless routines of question and answers for which teachers showed an initial preference. Teacher guides also contain basic methodological notes related to topics such as silent reading, using groupwork, and making schemes of work for the CR.

Teachers at first favoured those activities in the guides which were closest to their existing teaching norms, or could be easily adapted to such. Thus reader-based activities such as completing a summary by gap-filling, identifying true and false

statements, or arranging a sequence of events into the correct order, were popular. Teachers tended to adopt one or two of these activities and use them repeatedly as they progressed through each CR. Teachers were hesitant about developing a wider repertoire of activities involving the less conventional activities offered in the guides. Activities involving unusual representation of information, such as completing character grids, crossword puzzles or anagrams proved too radical and awkward for all but a few more adventurous teachers. It was not so much the low EL ability of the students that prevented such activities being used, but more the restricted way that teachers taught, and their own EL weakness. Observation has shown that teachers who have a limited command of English opt to teach very didactically, ensuring that they retain a tight control over everything that happens in the classroom, and confine their teaching to routines that are safely predictable in terms of the language used (e.g. question and answer routines, grammatical expositions etc.). Activities that involve unpredictable outcomes (e.g. predictive questions, character assessment etc.) and use methods that allow students to work together rather than through the teacher, are more threatening to a teacher's own language competence. Where tried, the content of the more unfamiliar activities was often stifled by a teacher-directed approach.

There were at first some grave reservations about using groupwork or games in the EL classroom; it was a new dimension to teaching and not within most teachers' repertoire. Initial classroom observations showed groupwork to be simply an awkward physical arrangement of the class. Teachers were clearly timid about groupwork approaches, as evidenced by one teacher telling groups of students to "discuss it silently"!

Promoting variety through the teacher support programme

The problem of expanding teachers' repertoire of activities and loosening their rigid approach to classroom teaching has been tackled through provision of teaching resources, workshops and school visits.

The absence in schools of teaching materials and any reprographic facility to produce teaching or learning aids has meant that teachers have come to rely very heavily on the blackboard as the sole means of conveying written information to their students. Activities requiring groups of students each to have access to a particular piece of information, the clues and skeleton of a crossword puzzle for example, absorb a lot of class time if written on the blackboard to be copied down by students. Teachers, and students, were naturally reluctant to attempt unusual tasks in this way, and teachers reasonably judged the amount of work involved to bring a low level of return for their effort.

To facilitate the more learner-centered classroom approach of activities presented in the teacher guides, supplementary resource packs containing multiple copies of material are now produced for teachers, reducing reliance on the blackboard. These resource packs thus make a greater variety of the activities in the teaching guides more 'user-friendly' to both teachers and students. Provision of basic duplicating equipment to the teacher-advisers has also enabled a similar production of classroom resources where teachers themselves are keen to exploit lesson activities they themselves have created.

Workshops have focussed on presenting the new activities of the teaching guides and raising teachers' awareness of their potential. Emphasis has been placed on classroom practice involving micro-teaching, where groups of teachers simulate lesson activities. Video recordings of such simulations, and 'real' classroom practice have allowed for further analysis of materials and classroom techniques. Workshops have also focussed on improving teachers' ability to design similar activities to those in the guides by adapting the models presented from one CR to another. This has proved particularly valuable for the more unfamiliar types of activity, especially language games and puzzles, as teachers are often more enthusiastic to try out an activity that they themselves have purpose written for a CR.

But just as the provision of books does not ensure reading, so the provision of classroom ideas and resources does not ensure their use. It has been through the counselling of teachers by the teacher-advisers during their school visits that changes to classroom practices have been effected. Supported and encouraged by regular visits from the teacher-advisers, teachers have felt more secure as they embarked on a period of intrepid exploration of the graded readers and supporting materials. As with the approaches to reading, observation followed by reflection and discussion have allowed these alternative language activities to be promoted, and gradually teachers are increasing the ways in which they use the CR.

CLASS LIBRARIES

The project has supplied sufficient boxes of CL books to all schools for a weekly lesson in which every student can borrow a graded reader to read out of school. The purpose is to provide individualised reading practice that is essentially enjoyable, through which basic language forms encountered in class are reinforced.

The three-part process

The Class Library is a three-part process that involves the student in choosing, reading and responding to each book. Giving students a free choice from an ample and appealing selection of readers at an appropriate level is likely to enhance their enjoyment of reading and motivate them to read more. The central part of the process is each learner's reading of the chosen book. This is done individually, out of

school and at their own pace. The third part of the process involves the student in responding to the book read, by answering a few questions on its content and expressing some opinion about it. The nature of this task and the way in which it is performed influences reading, and students' attitudes to the CL.

The first and third parts of the process, which have considerable effect on the central activity of reading, have been the most susceptible to teacher mismanagement. Initially use of the CL was restricted by teachers' unfamiliarity with its purpose and administration, as well as a basic philosophy of education that places the teacher centre-stage. This resulted in teacher over-involvement and misplaced emphasis.

Choosing books

Two problems were identified connected to the choosing of books by the students. Firstly, the physical condition of classrooms here in Zanzibar limits the nature of the CL. Most classrooms are built with half-walls to allow light and ventilation, and have no doors or windows. This openness precludes shelves or display racks, making any permanent presence of books impossible. There are no secure cupboards to accommodate books, so 'library corners' are not possible. CL boxes have to be brought from the store, staffroom or office to the classroom for each CL lesson, and displayed on tables. The logistics of this means that the CL can only be used during its designated weekly period, and not as a more frequent part of other English lessons. At the start of the project, very few schools had a functioning library, so there was no experience on which to base the practice of regular book borrowing.

Initially CL lessons were very similar to the standard text-book issuing routine, as this was the only existing model for allocating books to students. Teachers were naturally apprehensive about potential losses of books, having been made aware of the need to protect against it. Often students were simply given a book by the teacher and its loan dutifully recorded, or the names of students were called out from the class list and one by one each came forward to take a CL book. Rarely were students given time or encouragement to choose a title themselves, and teachers saw no necessity for students to browse through books as part of a selection process. When groups of teachers themselves were asked to choose readers from CL selections, they too showed a marked reluctance to browse. There was, therefore, no real recognition of the significance of this prelude to reading.

The distribution of books in this way proved time consuming for teachers, who frequently complained that a single lesson was insufficient especially with class sizes of over thirty students. They were unenthusiastic about the task of checking books in and out every week. Consequently CL periods were not at first held on a regular

weekly basis as teachers felt that it was more trouble than it was worth. On average students read about one CL book every three or four weeks in the first year of the project.

Time has been spent in workshops and during teacher-adviser visits raising teachers' awareness of this aspect of the CL process and encouraging them to allow students freer book selection. The result has been a gradual increase in the rate of use of CL readers and a similar improvement in student attitude to the CL.

Student "Class Library Monitors"

To reduce teacher control and lessen the administrative burdens of the CL lesson, emphasis has been placed on encouraging students to take on the responsibility of supervising the weekly borrowing and return routines, with teachers taking on the role of 'managers'. A teaching guide covering basic information regarding the CL, together with a simple training manual for monitors have been produced and introduced to teachers through workshops that involved demonstrations and simulations of model CL routines.

The teacher-advisers, during school visits, are able to offer close support to teachers who struggle with their CL and find difficulty in converting theory into practice. Frequently the teacher-adviser will assist the teacher and CL monitors during an actual CL lesson, offering step-by-step guidance as the model routines are worked through. In this way attention can be given to finer detail, and 'hands-on' guidance given in the specific problem areas of display and selection. Throughout, the emphasis is on increasing student activity, encouraging them to share ideas and opinions about the books they have read, and also to exchange books during the week on an informal basis.

The majority of schools now use student monitors, and teachers have been rewarded by seeing an increase in students' enthusiasm and a greater interest in the whole process of regular reading through the CL. Initial scepticism about student monitors' unreliability and fear of book losses have been dispelled as book losses have decreased.

Response to reading

Just as students were not at first being encouraged to read extensively from the CL by rigid book issuing practices, their motivation was being further impeded by having to perform a written task in response to each CL book read – the third part of the process. Students were required to do two things after reading a CL book – to answer questions on an accompanying workcard, and to register an opinion of the book by grading it from A ("I like it very much") to E ("I found it boring"). The latter task proved no problem, but the answering of questions proved less popular with teachers and students.

Workcards, designed by EPER, are provided for each CL reader. Intended primarily as a check on understanding, each contains a uniform series of questions requiring a short response using a single word deletion from a sentence, focussing on key pieces of information related to story-line and character. All workcards follow the same basic format and this lack of variation has not appealed to students.

However, it was the emphasis that teachers placed on these workcards, rather than their intrinsic merits as suitable response to reading tasks, that was the main problem. The successful answering of the questions by the student was taken to indicate (wrongly) that reading had been done and the book 'understood'. Teachers saw the workcards as a chance to assess; in certain cases if a student did not answer the questions correctly he/she was made to read the book again and then repeat the workcard. Teachers were initially reluctant to allow students to check their own answers using the answer cards, partly because they felt that students would prove unreliable and "cheat", but also they saw correcting students' work solely as a teacher activity. Thus, the self-inflicted burden of marking made teachers reluctant to use the CL, and the scrutiny of the teachers reduced the likelihood of students reading for enjoyment. The inevitable effect was that students saw the prime purpose of the CL books as providing answers to a comprehension exercise, rather than providing pleasurable and private reading practice.

Even when self-checking by the students was introduced, the logistics involved in using the workcards continued to impose an added complication to the CL lesson. The unfamiliarity in Zanzibar of using class time for choosing, borrowing and returning books required the process to be as simple as possible if it was to be accepted. The peripheral activity in the workcards was obstructing and defocussing the primacy of reading, and consequently the workcards did not stimulate interest or enthusiasm for the CL.

The cards have now been designated an optional extra to avoid defocussing the reading element, and many teachers and students no longer use them. CL lessons concentrate more on simple returning and borrowing of books, administered by the students themselves. Informal sharing of ideas and opinions between students is encouraged, and the only formal response required of students is to record the title of each book they have read and award each a grade from A to E, according to how much they liked it. The overall impression gained from these responses is that students do enjoy reading the CL books available to them.

SUMMARY

There are no instant results attached to the reading programme; improved attitudes to books and reading, increases in reading fluency and the gradual improvement in overall language proficiency that these bring, do not manifest themselves quickly

through conventional testing instruments. Teachers in Zanzibar like the visible results of a vocabulary list learned, words pronounced correctly, answers rightly given and drills accurately performed. In comparison the more indirect and slower skill building of the reading programme carries less classroom credibility.

Allocation of specific class time to the use of graded readers has assured them a fixed space in teaching schemes. Maximising this space is being achieved through the teacher support programme.

Teachers have often been slow to see the true purpose of the programme, and gaining experience through trial and error has been important in developing their understanding of the language learning potential of graded readers. Giving support to teachers, who found the whole concept and administration of the reading programme to be a radical departure from existing teaching conventions, has ensured that experiences are nurtured and developed. Ample and appropriate teaching resource materials, workshops to float and promote these materials and methods, and sensitive in-school support have all proved essential to effective use of the graded readers.

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