

COMMENTS ON TEACHING ENGLISH TO SCHOOL CHILDREN IN
BRITAIN AND ITS RELATION AND RELEVANCE TO TEFL.

Gillian Fisher.

Colwyn Bay High School, Nth. Wales.

A short TEFL course I went on last year made me aware of the similarities between teaching English in Britain for G.C.S.E (the external exam taken by all 16 yr olds) and TEFL.

G.C.S.E and more recently, the National Curriculum, have altered the emphasis of what we teach, and more strikingly, the way we teach. Before these educational innovations, all lessons in secondary schools involved a great deal of written work. There was very little talking by the pupils - even in practical subjects; a silent class, whether students were writing, painting or conducting an experiment, was the mark of a good teacher. Teachers themselves talked a lot; giving instructions, dictating notes, lecturing, but the good disciplinarian had silent pupils. A class where pupils talked was judged to be indisciplined and

time wasting. Now oracy - speaking and listening - have been given equal weight with reading and writing. Teachers are no longer pedagogues but "facilitators". The emphasis is placed so strongly on the latter that initially one was frightened to "teach" the pupils!

Good practice in English recommends Literature as a starting point - a whole novel, a play, poetry, a short story. Literature is studied because it raises consciousness. It opens new vistas, it aids the pupil's emotional and intellectual development and can generally be guaranteed to touch on issues which concern, or will interest, the majority of pupils. Approaches vary; usually the teacher will read aloud, dramatizing the story etc., and will ask questions occasionally to test listening and understanding, but the idea here is that pupils enjoy the literature studied. Pupils might then be asked to discuss in pairs what action, what feelings they think a character from the novel might take or experience at a certain point in the narrative. This develops creativity, empathy and tests understanding. Pupils might, at the end of the narrative, be asked to re-interpret the story

through the eyes of one of the characters; this is a valuable comprehension exercise and it also gives scope for creativity and appreciation of the writer's style and method through imitation.

Other exercises could be to write an alternative ending, to discuss what would be the effects of removing a minor character, scene, or stanza.

This aids understanding of style and structure, or an extra scene could be written for a play, keeping to characterisation and style.

Pupils are encouraged to discuss the first draft of written work in pairs or small groups and then in the light of hopefully positive criticism, re-draft. The teacher intervenes at this point to suggest possible improvements in style, technicalities of grammar, spelling, etc.

Finally the written work will be commented on and graded by the teachers in the light of laid down criteria which should have been explained to the pupil in the initial stages.

Today the academic essay is rarely set eg: "Macbeth is a play about evil". Discuss how the title will help the less-able pupil make valid

comments. For example: "What have you found makes the play Macbeth to be full of evil? You might like to consider the following: the part the witches play; what Lady Macbeth does; the words Shakespeare has used; the contrast with "good" characters like Banquo, etc. The most able pupils have not been disadvantaged by this type of question or the empathy type such as "Imagine you are Lady Macbeth; write your thoughts. a) when you receive the letter from Macbeth; b) When the King comes to stay; c) at the feast which Banquo fails to attend." This approach makes even difficult literature accesible to all.

Written work for GCSE is divided into categories: that showing understanding; open or creative writing; and closed writing - the discursive essay and the informative piece. This last category requires pupils to show a clear sense of audience, to write in an appropriate register. Today pupils may be judged by a combination of coursework and examination or 100 percent coursework. Coursework is written in class over two years, marked by the teacher, moderated by the department in school and then moderated externally.

Unfortunately the present Government is insisting that the 100 percent is abandoned and all subjects must again be judged by some formal examination.

But even in formal examination there has been an encouraging change of emphasis because candidates are judged by what they can do rather than by what they cannot. Some argue that positive marking has led to a lowering of standards, but most, including myself, find it very beneficial to all - the top pupils are still required to write elegant, correct and logical prose.

Oral work, which is now an integral part of all the curriculum, is judged in English under "process" and "product" talk. For process talk the teacher will join a pair or small group of pupils and listen to their contributions. This might be the discussion of a poem which has been "clozed", or the stanzas re-ordered; a problem to be solved for a character they are reading about; a brainstorming session before creative work etc. Product talk can be judged when a pupil acting as spokesperson for a group reports back to the whole class; or "hotseating" when a number of pupils

become the characters from the play/novel etc., and are asked questions by the class. eg. "What did you think when?", "Why did you do this?", etc. Pupils give formal talks, using visual aids, for a given length of time on topical issues, hobbies, interests, etc. They prepare for this by making notes, writing headings on cards, giving the talk to a small group before performing in front of the whole class. The teacher marks oral work and an outside moderator will then visit the school to see a group of pupils in action and then judge the accuracy of the school's assessment.

When possible, tape recorders are used to encourage the development of oral skills. The most valuable part of this is playing back the tape and the pupils analysing their own performance.

Videos have been made of various grades of pupils and it is helpful for pupils to watch and discuss these so that they learn to appreciate the different levels or skills.

Most of our pupils spend much of their leisure time watching TV and video. Reading is not usually popular with children of eleven plus years old. In class therefore we encourage private

silent reading. This means each pupil reads a book of their own choice in silence in class for a sustained period of time. I have found that even less able children enjoy this and benefit from it if I also make it obvious that I am reading rather than marking, etc. At the end of the session, time is allowed for pupils to tell their group about their book. Teachers contribute to this too. It also works well if the teacher writes a story, poem, etc., when the class does and shares it with them.

All this has resulted in a different atmosphere in the classroom. For one thing there are few rooms now that have desks in neat rows. Now they are in groups of four with, where possible, a spare chair for the teacher to move around groups joining in, assessing, etc. It means that a teacher is able to see the pupils as individuals rather than a group of 30 plus.

I like the current methods. I find them challenging; they force me to be more innovative, imaginative. However, the imposition of the National Curriculum requires so much detailed assessment that it is rightly feared that much will

disappear under a sea of assessment and accountability - but-I am sure oracy will retain its importance for it is at last recognised in Britain that most of us conduct our lives through speech rather than writing and that communication can be improved. In this I think we have come closer to TEFL and have a lot to learn from it, but there also exists a large body of experience, ideas and materials in primary and secondary schools in Britain which TEFL, on its part, could take advantage of.