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PUPIL REACTION TO NEW METHODS IN ENGLISH

ROBERT HEATH

“Of course that won’t work here”

“We have to stick to the syllabus”

“Our students can’t catch fast spoken English – you have to speak slowly and provide a text”

“Chinese-stream pupils won’t speak English in class”.

We are all familiar with these reactions by *teachers* to new methods in English. There is much interest today, however, in what the *learner’s* experience of language learning is. A Pre U1 class of 20 Chinese-stream pupils who had just converted to English-stream was taught for six months using a variety of methods that were new to them. In themselves the methods were not radical but they were perceived by the pupils to be different from their past experience of learning English. At the end of the six months they were asked to write what they thought of the methods. Their comments are reproduced here without alteration, even when the English is incorrect.

1. **Fast unseen dictation**

The pupils had previously done only prepared “seen” dictations, delivered slowly, with punctuation dictated, and the sense-groups repeated numerous times. One of the pupils put it this way: “In our previous school we remembered the dictation passage very hard so that we don’t listen to the teacher”. In the new arrangement pupils did not see the passage beforehand. The passage was read once fast (about the speed of a Singapore television news-reader); each sense group was read fast once only; a time was given for checking; and then the passage was read fast again. Initially, all of them complained at the speed. At the end of the time seven still said it was “too fast to catch”. But 17 made positive comments and only 3 were negative.

- "It is very challenging. I am used to it now".
- "It's very helpful to us specially Chinese stream".
- "It trains us to listen to fast, fluent English".
- "Although I have been studying English for 10 years I can't understand the English news on SBC. So this type of listening comprehension is good".
- "I like to see the passage first. I can write better than unseen".

2. Self-correction of written work

The pupils were used to the system in which the teacher "cancelled" the error and wrote the correction over the top. In the new arrangement the errors were underlined in red and a symbol put in the margin. Some symbols were sp = spelling, t = tense, Δ = word missing, art = article. When written work was given back the pupils, without the dictation text, they had to put the correction over the top themselves in pencil or blue ink. Mostly they did it themselves but they could ask a neighbour or the teacher for help. 20 made positive comments about this system:

- "This system gives me encouragement because the page is not covered with red ink".
- "We can avoid the mistakes in future works".
- "The symbols are useful and clear as I can easily spot out my mistakes".

3. Speaking in pairs

The pupils were used to the system in which the teacher asked an individual a question and the individual replied. To give more speaking practice the pupils were frequently divided into pairs, taking turns to speak. In particular the "Ask me a question" sections from L. G. Alexander's *Question and Answer* were done this way. There were 17 positive and 3 negative reactions:

- "I honestly say that I like it very much".
- "It provides a chance for classmates to speak to each other in English".
- "We can tell what mistakes our friends have made or we ourselves have made".
- "This is boring because our conversation is usually the same".

4. Speed Reading

The pupils had acquired some bad silent reading habits such as finger-pointing, lip-moving, reading with rulers and so on. They had also been encouraged to stop when they came across a word they did not know. Twice a week the 20 pupils were given speed reading passages from *Speed Reading* by Quinn and Nation. Their average reading speed increased from 230w.p.m. to 350w.p.m. in the six-month period. The silent reading faults were soon eliminated. Positive reactions were given by 18, negative by 2:

- "I have improved a lot in effective reading".
- "I love to do the speed reading".
- "I think it helps a lot in improving English".
- "Sometimes I am so tense I didn't know what I am reading".

5. Extensive Reading

Most of the pupils read little or nothing in English in their leisure time. Some said they had never read an English fiction book right through. The class was given a selection of 50 paper-back fiction books, quite short, and with attractive covers. They were asked to read one each week. The only record was one line in their English books stating date finished, author and title, and their opinion on an A – E scale. The books were taken into class each lesson and some time was given to read and exchange books. As a system this proved very successful and about a third of the pupils read several books a week; a third kept to the target of one per week; and a third fell behind. Positive reactions were 19, negative 1.

- "It is good for the student who do not like to borrow book from the library. I enjoyed it the most".
- "I enjoy it. That is the first time I have read story books in English
- "It inspired me to read more and fast".
- "It is not useful. I only like to read my textbooks".

It is hoped that teachers who are a little nervous about new ideas will take courage from the responses of the pupils. A key point is not to be put off by initial reactions but to persist

and to see a programme right through in a regular, consistent fashion.

[Note: The author has not altered the students' comments, even when the English is incorrect.]

References

Alexander, L.G. *Question And Answer: Graded Oral Comprehension Exercises* (Longman, 1977), p.3.

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