

Whole Language Philosophy: Its Practical and Effective use in the Classroom

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We are all familiar with the Grammar Translation Method of teaching, where students are expected to memorise grammar rules and long lists of words with emphasis being placed more on the written rather than the spoken language (Brown, 1987).

I can still vividly remember my school days where oral drills were the order of the day in English lessons. Like drugged zombies we would shout, "The flower in Sorowaqali's hand is white." This would go on for fifteen minutes followed by an exercise on "filling in the blank spaces using the correct prepositions" totally removed from the previous oral drill or Sorowaqali's flower. I even wrote a short story (Veramu, 1989: 76-77) based on my experiences as a primary school pupil. Here is an excerpt from it.

In one week [the teacher] would ask the students to bring tea for lessons in English Grammar. Each of the forty students would bring a little tea which he would place in three jars, one small, one medium and one large. He would then point to the bottles and ask, "What are these?" We would answer, "Those are three jars of tea." "Are they of the same quantity?" Again in a chorus we would say, "No, they are not." After ten minutes of this meaningless grammar lesson he would beam with satisfaction, give us a written exercise from our Oxford reader (totally different in nature from what we had been doing) then place the jars of tea in his bag for his personal use. The following week it would be sugar, then salt and then rice.

Fortunately, the development of the whole language philosophy to language teaching and learning has breathed fresh air into our Pacific classrooms.

Whole language is an approach to teaching communication skills—literacy—in a holistic natural way. Language is a living process—there is joy in learning when language is taught in meaningful ways (Zarry, 1991).

A good example of a whole language lesson was demonstrated by Mary Nauer (Robert Louis Stevenson School) at Apia, Western Samoa. This was during the EDC53 Summer School where students had to prepare a short lesson of 15-20 minutes.

Her lesson was for 20 minutes and the resource she used was the story book *Maui and the Sun* for children of Year 5.

The teacher started off her lesson asking children to mime certain activities like:

- Father working in the taro patch.
- Mother cooking tea.
- Boy preparing an umu.

She then introduced the legend *Maui and the Sun*.

She asked the children to talk about legends they knew that told of "special events or happenings". They talked about some well-known legends of Samoa.

She then showed the book *Maui and the Sun* and proceeded to read the story. It was read clearly and with feeling.

After this she smiled and told the children that she would retell the story but this time the children would act out certain parts of the story as it was retold.

It went something like this:

Words

Actions

Dinosaur	Roar
Warrior	Bend knees and clap thighs
Three brothers	Stalk with spear
Sun	Arms in the air and wriggle fingers

Hunt, fish and play Children change seats.

After these very enjoyable children's actions to the teacher's retelling of *Maui and the Sun*, the students did a short drawing/writing activity, which was carried over into the next lesson.

Another interesting micro-teaching lesson was conducted by Angela Molloy. This was an introductory lesson to a writing activity.

Before she started her lesson, Samoan artefacts and pictures (travel posters, a map, wood carving, basket-work and a book) were put on display. Smiling, she asked the following stimulus questions:

- (i) What is unique to Samoa or at least very important here? (She pointed at the display)
- (ii) Where is your favourite spot in Western Samoa? Why? (The map was alluded to where necessary.)

After this interesting short introduction, she continued; "You arrive home from school today and your mother greets you smiling and waving a letter excitedly. The big news is that your cousins from New Zealand are coming to visit and they've never been to Western Samoa before. Your entire family is excited and eagerly making plans... Now, you have a chance to show your New Zealand cousins what life in Western Samoa is really like."

On a vanguard sheet she had written the following questions:

- (a) What would you show them?
- (b) Where would you take them?
- (c) What would you explain?

The class discussed these questions in groups. Their ideas were then shared and written on the board.

There was a simple analysis of the similarities and differences in the groups' suggestions. The various ideas were then organised into major headings. In the next lesson, the students wrote personalised visitors' brochures (with text and drawings) to show the highlights of Western Samoa (Molloy, 1994).

Some of the teachers at the 1994 EDC53 TESL Summer School told me that they were using the whole language approach in their classrooms. Others said that through the Summer School they had learnt of the beneficial effects of the whole language approach and would certainly adopt this approach in their classrooms.

I end this short article with a cautionary tale on whole language. Dr Heather Lotherington-Woloszyn recalls listening while a teacher read a beautiful handmade blown-up book to his Class 2 pupils. The children thoroughly enjoyed this shared-reading experience. The teacher then went back to repetitive tasks where the pupils began to repeat and recite decontextualised bits of language. Dr Lotherington-Woloszyn adds "The moral of this story is plain. Not only do progressive language teaching materials in themselves, not ensure good language teaching, but even the most promising teaching materials can be badly used" (Lotherington-Woloszyn, 1992).

References

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