

MAKING DO

Heather Lotherington-Woloszyn

Current approaches to language learning in the primary school emphasize using the whole language, rather than tearing language up into the little analytical bits of grammar and minimal pair spelling tasks, repetitive reading of structural patterns and mindless drills which characterised the primary language curricula of the 60s. Increasingly, our children are learning language through activities that incorporate their own experiences and focus on meaningful communication and enjoyment, rather than on correct form. In classrooms across Fiji and in several other countries of the Region, teachers are doing their best to engage their young learners in shared reading, purposeful writing activities, rhymes, games, and songs. Language is being integrated with arts and crafts, merged with real life situations.

As a result, primary school teachers are beginning to see a difference in children's interest and motivation in the English class. Recent teachers' college graduates are seeing children delight in shared readings of their handsome hand-made blown-up books. Children are chanting rhymes and singing songs and drawing pictures of their language experiences. Language is allowed to be meaningful and enjoyable for at least part of English instruction.

But teachers in some countries are still hampered by a primary curriculum which, while nominally espousing the aims of a "whole language" approach, is providing incompatible structurally-orientated materials: readers which emphasize repetitive structures and minimal pairs in spelling (such as: cat/hat/bat; bed/bad/bud; mat/map/man); oral work based on rote

learning and mindless repetition; sentence-level language exercises of marginal relevance to children's interests. How are teachers expected to cope with the conflict of trying to teach whole language with structured language teaching materials?

I recently visited a rural school in Vanua Levu, Fiji, where the teacher offered a lovely shared reading lesson with her Class 2 pupils. However, in this small plantation school there were none of the glossy books that typically provide the stories for shared reading, and the teacher had no blown-up books available either. But she did have Ministry of Education supplementary readers, and used these. But it was because she was able to put new life into these rather tired stories that the lesson was successful. After listening to the story, the children went off to recreate the characters they had heard about with their modelling clay. The teacher used what materials the school had, but they were used in accordance with whole language tenets; a story was shared with children sitting on a mat, and the children went off to develop that shared experience in art and craft.

"...he drifted back towards repetitive tasks even from his whole language materials after finishing the story, and the enjoyment of the beautiful book dissipated as children began to repeat and recite decontextualised little bits of language."

In another classroom in a school in a small town in Viti Levu, I listened while a teacher read to his Class 2 from a beautifully hand-made blown-up book. The story was engaging, the art work was excellent and the children enjoyed the shared reading experience. However, he drifted back towards repetitive tasks even from his whole language materials after finishing the story, and the enjoyment of the beautiful book dissipated as children began to repeat and recite decontextualised little bits of language.

The moral of these stories 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.

So what do you do if you have not enough of the right kind of books in your classroom? You make do with what you have; you make your own books and rhyme posters. Every teacher can create colourful, imagina-

tive language teaching materials with simple and available resources such as cardboard packets, butcher's block paper, coloured pens, dried plants, and string. Teachers who are able to adapt and create teaching resources to support a sound approach to language learning will succeed. What is important is not having good resources; it is using your resources well.