Tutors' Views on Adult Literacy 1990-91

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Introduction

A basic literacy programme, run by the Fiji Association of Non-Formal Education, has been set up to meet the needs of adult learners. These classes cater for functional literacy in Fijian, Hindi and English. As tutors in this programme we are involved with the teaching of English skills at the YWCA building in Suva.

Methods

Because we are teaching functional literacy we use methods in our lessons which we feel are appropriate for our students. Teaching functional skills will facilitate their learning and understanding of the English language. For example, in our classes following the instructions on the milk powder box is more suitable than following the instructions on the way to operate a microwave. We often apply a thematic approach whereby we base our work on a topic which we expand to cover the reading, writing, speaking and language skills. Some examples of themes which we have found successful are as follows:

> Making and following instructions on cooking a curry, making a lovo, changing a washer on a tap.
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> Writing a letter/addressing an envelope - to a friend, for a job interview.
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> Filling out bank forms, job applications, personal forms.
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> Local festivals e.g. Hibiscus Festival, Diwali.

Local happenings, e.g. Suva's new one-way road system, cyclones, sporting highlights.

Food - health and nutrition.

Health - exercise, no smoking, medicines (natural and bought).

Local myths and legends.

How to use the telephone book.

Motivation

A common problem faced by teachers is how to motivate their learners but with adult learners we do not find this a problem. The students who participate are highly self-motivated people, seeking to increase their knowledge and abilities in English. This, they believe, can lead to an enhanced self-concept and possibly an improvement in living standards by the acquisition of better jobs. As well, the participants begin to realize how better English skills will facilitate their understanding of the total living environment, right from the corner store to the doctor's office. Particularly in bicultural Fiji, many participants also want to learn English so they may communicate with neighbours who speak a different tongue. Obviously then, we are fortunate as tutors to have students who are so keen and interested, and this in turn motivates us.

From our perspective, we gain a great deal from meeting with these people on a weekly basis and feel a sense of community involvement and achievement. The age range is a wide one, with participants from 16 to 87 years taking part. Also, the students come from different cultures and backgrounds, including Fijians, Indo-Fijians and immigrant Chinese. This diversity serves to enrich the programme through the exchange of ideas and provides a rich source on which to draw when planning lessons. The high point of each course is a ceremony where participants are awarded certificates of achievement, and this proves to be a rewarding experience from our viewpoint.

This ceremony is of great importance from the participants' view, as it provides public recognition of their persistence and hard work. Students feel a sense of accomplishment following the completion of the course and it certainly gives a boost to their self-confidence. From our experience, the majority of learners are eager to continue with the programme and feel that it is a worthwhile pursuit.

Issues in conducting voluntary adult literacy programmes

Having expressed the positive attributes of such a programme, other aspects must also be considered to give an accurate picture. Although the diverse backgrounds of our students are enriching, their varying levels of ability make it difficult to reach everyone at any given time. Some of the older students have visual and hearing difficulties, with no financial resources for corrective aids. Punctuality is an ongoing problem.

Programmes such as this are often beset with problems relating to the fact that co-ordinators and tutors are volunteers. Full time or even part time employed co-ordinators are able to ensure that programmes run without long delays between terms. Employed co-ordinators are also able to ensure that materials and resources are available for tutors. Where all work is done voluntarily, adult literacy workers can find too many demands are made on their time. While problems do exist in voluntary programmes, they can be overcome and, in fact, make for an even more challenging teaching situation.

The co-ordinators can be hired to advertise and administrate programmes. They can collect resources and communicate with staff. Co-ordinators can act as liaison persons between the tutors and funding agency, informing both of current developments.

Resources should be collected continuously to ensure their suitability and they must be readily available to all tutors.

Suggestions for programme improvements

The programme discussed earlier should run a year at a time, with holidays coinciding with school holidays. This would provide continuity for both

learners and teachers. Regular brain-storming sessions would allow tutors to exchange ideas and discuss problems. On-going evaluation by tutors would also serve the students' best interests as this would make each tutor critically consider the appropriateness of methods used and the progress being made by the students. Goals should be agreed upon by all involved, and a mid-term assessment on the progress towards those goals.

Tutors are a valuable resource and should share their knowledge by providing summaries of their lessons for future reference. These summaries should describe the learners it was used with, the materials needed, and how successful it proved to be.

Finally, the programme should be evaluated by the learners and tutors, and these evaluations should be taken into consideration prior to the beginning of a new session.

Conclusion

In literacy programmes such as the one we work in, it is crucial to be aware of the tutors' and learners' needs and wants. Everyone wants to feel as though their efforts are worthwhile, and therefore careful thought must lie behind all that is attempted. By keeping the lines of communication open between the agency, tutors and students, such a programme should evolve to suit the needs of all.

Literacy is a vital and dynamic aspect of life and should be offered in exciting ways, that motivate learners to pursue their own levels of excellence and exert greater control over their lives.