

NEWS CLIPPING

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Ang says that you can't really compartmentalise learning when you are teaching young children.

Ang (right) conducting a "circle time" with her students during the microteaching session.

By KANG SOON CHEN

THE simple request by school children for permission to use the washroom – a common refrain heard in classrooms every day – is replete with English lessons.

"Teacher, may I go to the toilet?" or "Teacher, toilet!" Certainly, pupils tend to be economical with their words when the call of nature is hard to ignore.

During the microteaching session at the English Enrichment Training Programme organised by the Guinness Anchor Berhad (GAB) Foundation recently, teacher Tan Li Kang poked fun at the antics of a "pupil" who frequently asked for permission to use the washroom.

The participants had a hearty laugh when Tan mockingly asked the pupil: "Why do you have to bring your friends along when you go to the toilet?"

This jovial exchange in a typical classroom setting provided the context for English language teachers to engage their pupils in a bit of grammar lesson.

When the teacher corrected the ungrammatical "Teacher, can I go toilet?", pupils

learnt that "to" is the preposition to use when a place is the object in a sentence. Furthermore, the school of thought in the social interactionist theory is that children acquire a language through communication with others.

The light-hearted dialogue between teacher and pupils not only highlighted the correct uses of the wh-question words, but also helped to build the pupils' confidence in speaking English.

Tan was one of 70 English teachers who participated in the four-day English Enrichment Training Programme held during the recent school holidays. The teachers were selected from 50 vernacular schools in the interiors of Perak, Negri Sembilan, Malacca, Sabah and Sarawak to undergo a refresher course in English and several workshops on presentation skills in classroom, lesson planning and teaching techniques.

After the completion of the training programme, the teachers returned to their respective schools to conduct supplemen-

tary classes for a target group of students.

A programme under the GAB Foundation initiative, the supplementary English classes conducted over 15 weeks till the end of the year, will benefit some 1,500 pupils from the schools selected.

GAB Foundation director Renuka Indrarajah said initiatives that are structured and sustained for long-term impact are important to ensure that both teachers and pupils benefit.

Being child-centred

Trainer Vennila Veerapan praised Tan for using a child-centred teaching method by regularly prompting his pupils to speak up in class.

"There is a fine line between the teacher-centred approach and the child-centred approach. Teachers must not have the impression that giving their pupils a task to do in the lesson is being child-centred," said Vennila.

She told the audience of teachers in the training camp that the key to being child-centred is asking pupils questions, questions and more questions in the classroom.

"In the instance where the teacher questions the pupil's need to use the washroom frequently, the teacher is showing that he is concerned with the pupil," said Vennila.

Tan, who teaches in a pre-school attached to SJK (C) Phin Min in Behrang Stesen, Perak, said he picked up several child-centred teaching methods to teach English from the training sessions.

Although he was not trained to teach English, Tan said he was very interested to learn how to teach the subject effectively at the pre-school level.

One method which caught his interest was "circle time", demonstrated by trainer Penny Ang.

"I think my pre-school pupils will love it when I sit them in a circle and play games with them at the beginning of a lesson. It will be a good way to draw their attention," said Tan.

Ang said "circle time" in class may not be something new or significant but it helps teachers ease tension among their pupils.

"Young pupils like to have a consistent routine; the objective is to make them feel comfortable in the classroom. Besides, you can't really compartmentalise learning when you are teaching young children. The problem in the classroom starts when pupils fail to pay attention to their teacher," she said.

Indeed, Ang and her "mature" pupils in the microteaching session got everyone's attention when they did a little jig on stage.

In her session titled *Teaching With a Difference*, trainer Andal Krishnan turned on some music and led the teachers back to the classroom.

The roles were reversed this time as the teachers became pupils again and were asked to participate in activities most loved by pupils – singing and acting on stage!

Flapping his arms vigorously, SJK (T) Mahathma Gandhi Kalasalai teacher S. Mahentran was a convincing rooster as he and his team mimed the story of *The Rooster and Its Friends*.

It was a return to the golden era of disco when the teachers took to the stage later to present their version of Abba's *I have a dream*, with a slight twist to the lyrics.

Andal encouraged the teachers to be less reserved and more lively in the classroom.

"If the teachers feel self-conscious about trying out songs and drama in the classroom, the pupils could feel even more shy," she said.

During the workshop, she helped the teachers overcome any shyness by giving them a step-by-step guide on activities, and suggested that teachers do the same with their pupils.

"Teachers and pupils will feel more self-assured when they know how the activities are to be carried out. Given that there is no right or wrong in theatre and dance, cheers from their classmates and teachers will help to build up the confidence of the pupils," Andal added.

On-going learning

Participants in the training programme each took home a teaching module complete with lesson plans designed by the trainers. The trainers would continue to support the teachers with their feedback via e-mail and online forums.

In addition, the performance of the pupils is being monitored through on-going assessments, while the teachers are required to submit a report on their test scores.

Trainer Amy Bala advised teachers to limit their classes to less than 20 pupils to facilitate teaching-learning activities.

"Language enrichment activities demand a lot of interaction between teachers and pupils. The objectives of the programme can only be achieved when the teachers are able to work with smaller groups of pupils," said Amy.

SJK (C) Yu Hwa teacher Lim Siew Lin said the success of the programme depends a lot on support from parents.

"As the extra lessons are held after school, some pupils face problems in attending the classes because their parents are too busy working to send them to school," she said.

The teacher from Malacca has been teaching English in a Chinese primary school since 1989 although she was trained to teach Mandarin. When she first started teaching English, Lim said she adapted the methodologies she had learnt for teaching Mandarin.

She added: "Of course, there were pupils

who did not like to learn English, but there were ways to get them interested. For pupils who did not understand English, I had no choice but to communicate with them in Mandarin.

"Young children pick up language easily. Within a short period of time, the pupils would know simple instructional phrases in English and I would slowly use more English with them in the classroom."

As a resourceful teacher who took time to learn phonetics on her own, Lim said it is important that English teachers strive to improve their command of the language.

"The English refresher course was really helpful because it helped us improve on grammar and pronunciation," she added.

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