

Publication :	Straits Times
Date :	27 July 2006
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Headline:	Pupils take to novel English lessons

Pupils take to novel English lessons

30 schools have been on pilot English programme in Primary 1 since January

BY MARIA ALMENOAR

AT THE beginning of this year, the library corner at the back of a Primary 1 classroom in Princess Elizabeth Primary School had piles of books mostly unread on the shelves.

Now, pupils are scrambling to borrow books, on anything from giants to farm animals.

Teachers at the school in Bukit Batok attribute this love of reading to the pilot English programme their school has been testing.

It is one of 30 schools that have been trying out Strategies for Effective and Engaged Development in English, or SEED-EL, since January.

Said the English level head at the school, Madam Dalvinder Kaur: "About a quarter of the pupils start school with little knowledge of the English language. They come from non-English-speaking homes and most are reluctant to read.

"Now they are eager to answer questions and be heard in class.

These 30 schools will continue with the programme at Primary 2 next year, while another 30 will come on board at Primary 1.

The pilot schools have replaced their old curriculum with SEED-EL, which covers the pupils' 15 weekly English periods.

The programme is part of the Ministry of Education's English Language Review, the recommendations of which are likely to be out in October.

Said Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew at the launch of the Speak Good English Movement on Tuesday: "SEED-EL aims to strengthen reading skills and develop a positive attitude towards reading in the foundation years."

The programme involves three components: the shared book approach, the modified language experience approach and learning centres.

While these approaches are not new, the difference for teachers is that with SEED-EL they work with the children on one component and ensure they are proficient in it before moving on to the next.

Said Madam Chew Tuck Wah, 47, an English teacher at Princess Elizabeth Primary: "The new programme is more focused and structured. Pupils pick up basic reading and grammar skills first and with that knowledge they pick up all the other skills more quickly."

Under the shared book approach, the class gathers around a book to read stories.

The pupils also learn grammar rules, punctuation and answer open-ended questions while reading.

Once pupils have grasped some language skills through reading, they move on to the modified language experience, which includes activities based on the books they have read.

The final stage of the programme is the use of three different learning centres, in which teachers physically divide the classroom into different learning areas.

The more precocious pupils learn English independently with audio tapes and CD-ROMs, while the rest learn through word games or re-reading books.

Madam Sherly John, 32, a housewife who speaks Malayalam to her son Kevin at home, was surprised to find him speaking to her in English.

"He wants us to buy him books and go to the library. It's good that he gets to speak English a lot in school. That way he can talk to all his friends," she said.

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