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English with a smile

In a unique teaching exercise the use of a parachute allows the children of Gaboraya village to "learn how to be cooperative instead of competitive, as there are no winners or losers."

by *ROHAN CANAGASABEY*



Running with a smile and the hat in his hand

Being able to speak and understand English is the key to employment or business opportunities in the urban commercial sector. But in Sri Lanka's archaic learning-by-rote system, learning is

not usually associated with fun and enjoyment.

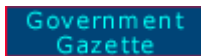
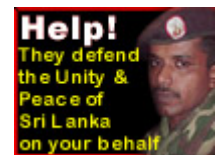
So when one sees giggling children running around a multi-coloured parachute as part of their English lesson, it is certainly worth investigating.

With the southern boundary of Wasgamuwa national park just behind them, a kilometre away, and with the peaks of the Knuckles mountain range, north of Kandy in sight, the children of Gaboraya village have for the last eight weeks been learning English the fun way, with two retired teachers hailing from the county of Hertfordshire, England.

Carole Bennett and Roberta Bird were here on a self-financing voluntary project organised by www.travellersworldwide.org of the UK, which was facilitated by the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society's (SLWCS -



Enjoyment is written on the face of the child as



www.slwcs.org) he runs, while Roberta Bird looks on with a smile Saving Elephants by Helping People programme. The connection between helping to conserve elephants and teaching English is understandably not obviously apparent. Gamboraya, like the other villages in this area, is a relatively new farming settlement, established in the last few decades, and consequently part of the human-elephant conflict zone, with the associated crop destruction and occasional tragic human deaths.

The main focus of SLWCS's work here is to maintain and continue expansion of solar-powered electric fences around threatened villages, whilst also researching wild elephant numbers and roaming patterns outside of Wasgamuwa national park nearby.

Facilitating the learning of English, argued SLWCS Project Director Chandeep Corea, gives farmers' children the option of seeking a livelihood other than through farming, thus eventually reducing the demand for cultivated land in this human-elephant conflict zone.

Though Ms. Bennett and Ms. Bird were not English teachers as such, at this level, when even native English speaking A-level school leavers are placed on voluntary teaching projects in many villages throughout most of Sri Lanka, they have brought a wealth of experience, particularly Ms. Bennett, who was involved in teacher training in the UK.



Carole Bennett (left) and Roberta Bird (right), collecting the ribbons that identified which team each child was in, at the end of the lesson.

And the use of a parachute, said Ms. Bennett, has been employed for some time in the UK, progressing from a single-colour military parachute to a specifically designed multi-coloured one, as it gained in popularity as an innovative method for teaching, at the basic level to young

children.

Here in Gamboraya, the parachute was used in the under-12 class. It begins with the distribution of different coloured ribbons corresponding to some of the colours on the parachute. With Ms Bennett and Ms Bird at the helm, the children respond to instructions, which apply to one set of children at a time, depending on the colours of the ribbons given to them.

The actions asked and conducted by the children can range from running around the parachute, to running back and forth under it in the fastest possible time, sometimes after

picking up a hat.

At the end of the session, which included keeping a red ball in the air with the parachute, they all huddled together for a few seconds under it, in quick response to an instruction.

And afterwards the children continue to linger, having enjoyed this once weekly novel teaching experience, as the other afternoon classes during the week are conducted in the classroom.

These two foreign volunteer teachers were assisted by local youth employed by SLWCS as field scouts, who in the morning conduct research into wild elephant roaming patterns a few kilometres away. Watching the young children of Gamboraya laughing and enjoying themselves, through this English lesson, on an overcast day recently, left me wondering if this was playtime or an actual lesson.

But there is serious side to this fun. As Ms . Bennett explained, the use of the parachute allows the children to "learn how to be cooperative instead of competitive, as there are no winners or losers". In this case, it is achieved when children with one set of coloured ribbons have to cooperate, to complete the tasks.

The different coloured teams are created only to manage numbers, as they do not compete against each other. The other point, apart from encouraging cooperation instead of competition, is the obvious one, as "it is fun way to learn, using colours and numbers as well as enabling the children to understand and follow instructions", said Ms. Bennett. In the next class for the older children, Ms . Bennett and Ms. Bird also used role-play.

This for example, meant one of them holding their stomach and acting out being in pain, while the other went around the class with a card on which was written the words stomach ache. The children clearly enjoyed watching their teachers act out different words. Another method used in the classroom was interactive learning, and as it implies, an actively participatory way to learn English.

Whilst Ms. Bennett and Ms. Bird have finished their time here in Sri Lanka, and will very shortly be returning to their respective families in England, they leave behind with the children of Gamboraya, an eagerness to continue learning English, and hopefully, said Ms. Bennett, with other volunteer teachers from Travellers Worldwide.

On the question on what they had achieved in their eight weeks of teaching, both said that they had succeeded in giving the children confidence to speak in English, which they had already learnt at school, but were previously

reluctant to use.

Perhaps there are lessons here in the teaching methods used by these retired teachers for the school teaching profession in general in Sri Lanka, that the Education Department should consider incorporating, as, a cooperative, fun and interactive way to learn could be achieved, with or without a parachute.

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