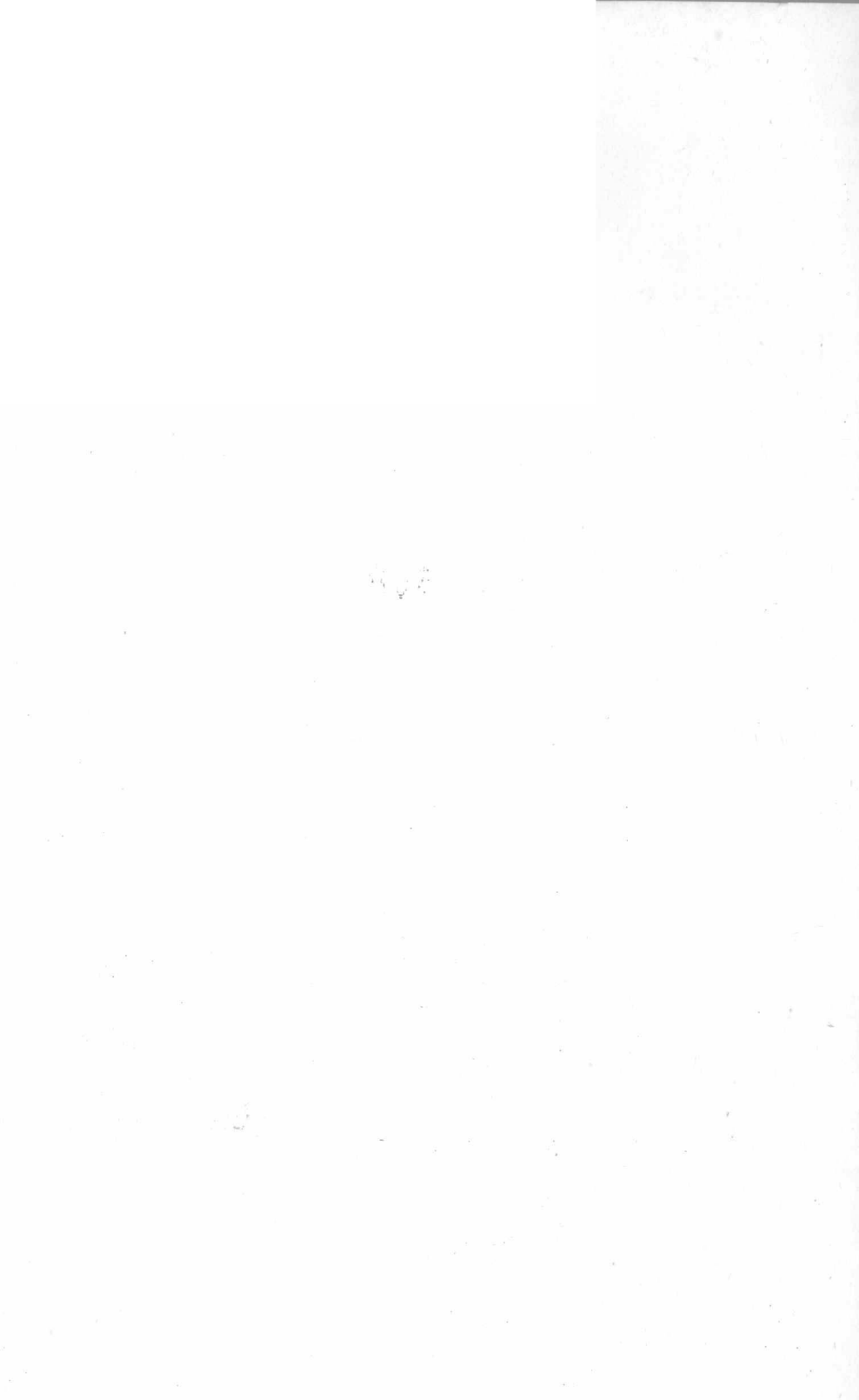


**ENGLISH  
TEACHING  
IN  
SOUTH EAST  
ASIA**

**by**

**KENNETH ROBINSON**

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IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA



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by

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## INTRODUCTION

How is one to teach a language? Old-fashioned teachers simply "teach the book". That is to say, they give out textbooks to the class and make every pupil keep his eyes on the text!

This sort of teaching has been out of date for fifty years, but can still be found.

Over the last half-century new methods of teaching languages have grown up, and where English is concerned they have been worked into "systems". *So-and-So's System of English Teaching* is simply a reasonable amount of the language spread out in a series of textbooks in such a way that the teacher can use up-to-date methods on it.

Jespersen, Ogden and Palmer pointed the way to a better understanding of English teaching, and many others have followed. Each system at birth is described as new and "scientific", for in this century a thing must be called scientific in order to attract attention.

Yet the principles of good language teaching remain what they have always been—to teach one thing at a time; to teach things in a logical order; not to teach too much too quickly; to give plenty of practice; to make sure that the class are interested and so on.

New-fashioned teachers no longer "teach the book", but there is an unfortunate tendency to make them teach "according to the book". They are not to be trusted outside the chosen system. They must keep to the rails.

This is a poor outlook. It means that teachers will become tied to *So-and-So's System* for life. It may be advisable for untrained teachers to keep fairly closely to a course if they are themselves very weak at English. But it is essential for trained teachers to grasp the principles on which language textbooks and systems are built, or they will become mere blind mechanics.

The aim of this book is to give teachers of English an understanding of the principles of language teaching, and enough language background to be able to teach English well without being the slaves of a single course or particular system. It will help them to know which is the best series of textbooks for their purposes, and to understand why, in that series, certain things are taught in a particular order; it will help them to judge when it is unwise to alter what the book



offers, and when it may be safe or sensible to supplement or adapt the lessons. In South-East Asia adaptation is frequently necessary.

This book is written above all for teachers of English in South-East Asia, whether they are teachers of large classes or of only a small group of private pupils. It is particularly intended for training colleges.

In some parts of South-East Asia teachers are below the standard of the Overseas Cambridge Certificate. They should study Part 1, *What English Teaching Means*, and Part 2, *How To Succeed In Teaching English*, and then go on to Chapter 22, "*Know Yourself*". This makes fifteen chapters in all, which can conveniently be divided into five per term in a three term year.

Most teachers in training colleges, however, have passed the Cambridge Certificate examination, and will profit from Part 3, *How To Help Children To Think Clearly*. It deals with grammar, a much-abused subject. Schoolmasters, as Sir Philip Sidney pointed out nearly four hundred years ago, have done the English language much harm by trying to force English grammar into a Latin mould. Our new knowledge of East Asian languages with their grammars of position may help to redress this wrong.

Those who study the whole book can conveniently take one of the three parts each term, which means seven chapters per term, and read the final chapter at the end.

It is particularly important that the reader should not miss out the questions which follow each chapter, which are collected under the heading TEST YOUR READING. These questions will show him which parts of a chapter he should read again, for few readers assimilate everything in a chapter at a single reading. Learning to be a good language teacher is not easy, but the work is of the greatest importance for South-East Asia.

There are many languages in South-East Asia, and naturally a boy or girl's first love should go to the mother tongue. But there are very few people holding responsible positions who can afford to be without English as their second or third language.

That is why it is vital that English should be taught as well as possible in the shortest possible time and without boredom. The main cause of boredom in class is due to "preaching". The best antidote to preaching is discussion. The questions which follow each chapter under the heading TEST YOUR READING are intended to provoke discussion. There is often no *correct* answer. It may be a matter of

opinion, or it may require a small experiment to find out the facts. But the questions will help to develop careful reading and a full understanding of the book. If teachers under training do not take part in class discussions they are unlikely, when their training is ended and they return to the classroom, to be able to get their pupils to discuss. The time to start reading with a view to discussion is *now*.

The method of using this book with a teacher training class might be as follows. The lecturer studies the chapter in advance and gets the outline and main points clearly in mind. He then introduces his class to the chapter, giving them the argument point by point in his own words, and drawing their attention to the relevant paragraphs, but *not* reading the chapter page by page. When the chapter is completed he will ask them to read it carefully in their own time, with a view to discussing one or more of the questions given under TEST YOUR READING when the class next meets. For example, after Chapter One the class might discuss Question 3, *Why children may at first be unable to pronounce a foreign word correctly*, and consider how to deal with the problem. When the class meets they could write out the answers to the questions, correct them in class and hold discussions either as the questions are corrected or afterwards. The lecturer could then refer back to the book for further study, and ask the class, as home study, to do the exercises which come at the end of each chapter. Some chapters may require three periods, some only one and a half.

The course of training which this book provides will not produce a mechanical teacher, but one who will be able to judge for himself the value of different theories and methods; he will become not a mechanic in a language factory but a skilled craftsman. He will learn to make up his own examples and to adapt lessons for himself rather than to follow blindly word for word someone else's idea.

Such independent teachers will never be intimidated by that ancient "expert"—the wandering sophist, who in this century perambulates the world under international auspices, ranging from country to country and conference to conference, his wisdom contained in a course which must be rigidly followed.

It is a twentieth-century folly to think and speak of teachers as "technicians" operating the "educational process" on children who are the "educable material" in the "mass-production of literacy"! Least of all can we think of children in South-East Asia, where life is so individual and full of variety, as the raw material in a process.

What is wanted is a teacher who is not only hard-working, but

resourceful, supple and inventive. No book can make a teacher other than what he is, but books can be a stimulus to change from within. Is it too much to hope that an increasing number of weak teachers will receive the stimulus of books and learn from the example of others, so that in the end every lesson they give becomes not only a success but a pleasure?

PART ONE

*What English Teaching Means*



## CHAPTER ONE

### ABOUT LANGUAGES IN GENERAL

THE purpose of this book is to help teachers of English to recognise and deal with some of the chief difficulties of their subject.

Teachers are practical people, and have a difficult job to do. In a language book they want ideas that can be used. Some ideas may seem very theoretical, but at least teachers should be able to put the theory into practice in the classroom. If principles are to be explained they should be principles which can be applied. If there is to be historical background, then the background of the past should give fresh interest to the present. Above all such a book should be written in everyday language such as one hears in an ordinary staff room, and not in the private language of "experts".

The first part of this book is mostly to do with the *why* of language teaching—the historical background of languages, some language theory and a survey of what there is in a language that has to be taught. The second part is the *how* of language teaching; it suggests ways of getting the solid part of a language taught with increased success.

\* \* \*

The sort of questions which a good language teacher will have asked himself at one time or another may include these:

*Why are some words easier to remember than others?*

*Why are some words almost the same in nearly every language?*

*Why are some languages very like each other, while others are quite different?*

*Which is the easiest language to learn?*

*Which is the most useful language?*

*How many words do you need to know in a language?*

Perhaps you have wondered about these questions yourself.

As soon as you begin to think about questions of this sort you

realise that they cannot be answered just as they stand. For example, you cannot say why some words are easier to remember than others until you know who is doing the remembering. In Singapore, in Malaya as a whole, and in fact in most of South-East Asia, there are many races living side by side. Each race has its characteristic names, such as Ramchandani, Yusof, Chong See Thong or Smith. A person will generally find the names of his own people easier to remember than foreign-sounding names. Some of the foreign names he may not even be able to pronounce. A Chinese, for example, may get no nearer to Smith than "See-mee". Mr. Smith himself would probably find Yusof easier to remember than the other two foreign names because it is rather like the name Joseph which he already knows. With Ramchandani, on the other hand, he would have to rely on the rhythm and the sound pattern alone, whereas another Indian name—Jesudason—would present little difficulty once he knew it meant *das*, the slave or servant, of Jesus.

It will be worth while as an introduction to the first part of this book to look at the principles involved in remembering these few names and to see how they can be applied to class teaching.

*First. It is easier to remember words which remind you of words in your own language than to learn strange new words; e.g. chocolate won't give any difficulty if in your own language you call it chokolat.* In teaching a class of mixed races remember that for this reason there may be wide variations in the difficulty of the lesson.

*Secondly. It is easier to remember new words if you can find some way of linking them with words which are familiar; e.g. Joseph can be linked with Yusof, and at a more advanced level arc can be linked with arch, or officer with office.* But the way in which these links are formed must be carefully planned; the different senses of words must be introduced in such a way as to prevent the learner getting the wrong idea. An *officer*, for example, is not necessarily a person who works in an *office*, but is a person who holds a certain rank or *office*. So the word *officer* should not be taught until the second meaning of *office* has been learnt. The planned introduction of the different senses of words is called "grading", and is a very difficult and expert job. Very few language books attempt it beyond the most elementary level, with the result that a tremendous amount of children's brain-power is wasted. It is as if factories were run on old-fashioned Puffing-Billy type steam engines. That might not matter too much with machinery if you have plenty of cheap coal. Children, however, are not machines,

and they do not have so much mental energy that we can waste it. In South-East Asia, where multi-lingual policies are in force and children have to learn several languages, there is no energy to spare.

*Thirdly. Difficulty in pronouncing a word makes it difficult to remember.* This will be either because we have not heard the word clearly enough to pronounce it, or because our tongues are not trained to make those sounds. Children must be taught not only to speak but to *listen*. Associating the sound we hear with the correct movement of the tongue muscles is an aid to memory.

*Fourthly. Rhyme, rhythm and the music of speech is a great help in language learning.* All teachers know the value of songs and of repeating words to a good rhythm. The danger to be guarded against is of using foreign rhythms, particularly when the class are all speaking together like a chorus. In English it is particularly important to watch the placing of stresses, since a stress in the wrong place immediately gives a word or phrase a foreign sound. For instance, an Englishman says, "Good mórning." If you say, "Go'od morning" people will be surprised, because it suggests that you expected it to be bad!

*Fifthly. New words should be given meanings which are clear-cut. They should be explained in the language which is being learnt as early as possible.* Learning a language should be like making a net. As each new word is learnt it should be tied up with the rest so that it has a position in the network. When children learn a new word in their own language they spend a lot of time finding out what other words will go with it. Fixing the meaning of a word by using others to explain it is *definition*. As soon as possible children should use an English-English dictionary. To explain a word by translation is not always very useful. It is rare to find two words in different languages which have exactly the same meaning. Some words are so obvious and direct that there is no difficulty in understanding their meaning by translation, as when we say that a *pencil* is *ch'ienpi* in Kuoyü. But such words can be understood simply by pointing, showing pictures, etc. Difficulties arise when we come to a word like *honest*. The meaning in the two languages is no longer exactly the same. The Chinese term is *laoshih*. Its inner meaning is to do with being old and of solid worth. The inner meaning of the English term is to do with honour and with good reputation. Even such a simple phrase as "to make an honest woman of her" can be very puzzling to a person who learns



words by translation only, without properly knotting them into the network of the language.

*Sixthly. When talking or writing do not choose complicated words and constructions if simpler forms are as good.* In the early stages of building up vocabulary it is easier to learn compounds formed from words which are already known than to learn a new and quite unconnected word. For example, *parasol* takes more learning than *sunshade* if you already know the words *sun* and *shade*.

\* \* \*

The principles set out above may help to make language learning and teaching more efficient, but by far the most important factor is interest. If a child or, equally, an adult does not want to learn a language and is bored by the whole procedure, he will not learn very much. If the learner believes that it is important for him to learn the language, and in addition he finds it interesting and it is well taught, his progress will delight his teacher.

There should be no difficulty in helping every learner to see the importance of English. It is the most used language in the world wherever people of different nations come together, and is spreading rapidly. In the United Kingdom there are over 50,000,000 people who speak it as their mother tongue. But it is the mother tongue of a far larger number of people who have never been to Britain or spoken to an Englishman. In 1948 English was the mother tongue of about 240,000,000 people. In 1960, allowing for natural increase, 250,000,000 would be a conservative round figure. Moreover, these English speakers are not all concentrated in one corner of the world where you may never go. They are distributed all over the world, so that you are almost certain of meeting English speakers wherever you may travel.

The number of people who speak English as their mother tongue is nevertheless only a fraction of those who use it in one way or another for business or pleasure. Millions read it though they may be poor speakers. No scientist can keep up-to-date in his special subject if he cannot read what is being done by his fellow scientists in the English-speaking world. Few business men with world-wide contacts could do trade without the help of English in their correspondence. International organisations, air-lines, telephone and postal systems, military defence groups and so on would not be able to do their work quickly without its help. Tourists depend on it. Smaller countries