

READING AND "FA'A SAMOA"

Teaching in a Bilingual Culture

by Jeannette Veatch

As a Title III professor emeritus at the American Samoa Community College at Pago Pago last spring, I was asked to improve the teaching of English to native Samoans. The thrust in the island towards a bi-lingual society is probably irreversible as use of English in school and in daily life has been sufficient to set this in motion. A Samoan, however, rarely speaks English outside of the classroom, where he has been taught in English from first grade up. But that is another story. Not surprisingly the greatest motivation towards bi-lingualism is the strong desire to come to the USA mainland or get a bi-lingual job on the island.

Through a set of circumstances too long to go into at this time, we began a testing program for incoming students at the college level for summer session 1977. We found only 38% of them, on Stanford and CELT, had an English competency at about the 6th grade level. Approximately 30% were below the 3.5 level and the rest were in between.

At the beginning of the semester in January a program called English Language Institute (E.L.I.) was added to the usual traditional "bonehead" English courses. Both E.L.I. and the English classes were typically and totally based upon textbook lessons, xeroxed, teacher-made exercises and grammar drill. There was no element of language experience, no original writing of any kind, nor any free reading of library books. In fact, the drop-out rate of 30% to 40% says it all. Those who did not drop out were bitterly disappointed as revealed in an evaluation by the students. This writer was a visiting fireman, so to speak, and thus was asked to help improve these offerings. She had little success in spite of the support of the Director. In short, the situation, insofar as learning the English language was concerned, was so dismal that the head of the English Department, separate from the E.L.I. program, admitted

that nothing was working and so was willing to try anything new and different. The president of the college set up a task force, chaired by this writer, to make specific suggestions for an improved curriculum. The result was a set of recommendations based upon the use of library reading, creative writing, and spontaneous oral activities. The report specifically recommended the elimination of all text book materials and printed workbook drills based upon grammar and usage. In short, as you will recognize, the recommendations were in line with what is known to be psycholinguistic practice. Yet the term psycholinguistics, as well as the term individualized reading, and the language experience approach were unknown and unused on the island.

It is in this connection that the term "fa'a Samoa" comes into focus. It can be variously translated, although its direct meaning is "the Samoan way." But "the Samoan way" can be pejorative, analogous to *mañana*, meaning inefficient, lazy, non-operative. But it can also denote the positive elements of pride in culture, in tradition, in self, in the *aiga* (i.e. the family) and in love of ancient ways, including language.

The reason this phrase is included in the title is because it became the basis of all our teaching. We used the love of family, the pride in the *aiga*, the respect of self as a Samoan to promote the development of the English language in these students. If the term language experience means anything, it means "fa'a Samoa." For that is what we did.

To make a long story short, this writer offered to teach a summer session class of as many students as possible, provided there were no restrictions as to how it was taught. The College had nowhere else to go and the offer was accepted.

Thus 42 young adults with a competency level of 4th and 5th grade enrolled in a six week session. The writer was alone for the first week with minimal help from a native Samoan (to help translate ideas not language). The second week three contract teachers joined the staff as trainees. They continued after the writer left at the end of the fourth week. Thus the class was a staff training project as well as, for the American Samoa Community College, an experimental activity in teaching English to native Samoan speakers.

The results were spectacular. After six weeks, the last two of which, you remember, were conducted without the presence of the writer, the mean gain of the students was six months. That is, a month a week. The drop out rate was 7%, or 3 out of 42, and the attendance was at acceptable levels. While morale cannot easily be measured, it is interesting to note that the demands for fall term enrollment in "that reading and writing class" surprised advisors.

In addition, during the summer, the pressure for enrollment was so great that a second class in the afternoon was set up the second week along the same lines and taught by one of the three staff being trained in the morning. Even though this class met for only five weeks, the testing revealed their gains only slightly less than the full six week morning class.

Earlier, when the task force was discussed, the faculty of the college agreed, unanimously (to show how bad the situation was as far as English competency was concerned), to accept the enrollment of any student testing above the 6.2 level on Stanford and CELT. When individual scores of our class were examined, it was found that over half, that is 51%, had lifted themselves above the magic 6.2 figure. Among that group, at least four had gained dramatically a year or more in the six week session. On the other hand, a full one quarter of the student showed little or no gain. The statistician wondered if the activities used were more suitable for the more able as their gains were so sharp. This writer tends to believe that those at the less able level simply need more time. Six weeks is not very long, even if spent in a most pleasant fashion.

Surely we were doing something right, and a detailed description of the daily sessions should be useful to those interested. We met three hours each morning, in what was called the Music Room. There were no windows and only one very decrepit air conditioner. However, although called the "summer" session, it was "winter time." (Samoa is 14 degrees south of the Equator.) The room size dictated the class size. Forty-two and eventually 39, were all that could fit into the space, although 150 students were eligible. More than 42 would not have been possible, as far as comfort was concerned, at any other time of the year.

We met from nine to twelve each morning, with about a twenty minute break. The class was about equal as to men and women. Among the men there were at least six, thoroughly macho ex-service men. But no one read above the fifth grade level. A few had been in the

Jeannette Veatch, Professor Emeritus from Arizona State University, taught at American Samoa Community College in 1977. She is the author of numerous publications in her professional specialties: elementary education and the teaching of reading.

traditional English classes, and two had immigrated from Korea the previous year. Although they were highly motivated ladies, their English was barely at the acceptable level for our class.

In general the teaching was directed in three different modes: 1) individualized reading using six hundred paperback books, 2) the use of oral English in some fashion, and 3) writing originally, spontaneously, creatively, as well as practically. All text books were eliminated. No drills on printed exercises other than needs *specifically* arising from the writing were allowed. Grammar, as such, divorced from actual writing, was avoided. At no time during the six weeks were words like "subjects," "predicates," "prepositions," "nouns and verbs" mentioned. Knowledge of such parts of speech are not helpful to promote communication and were avoided. Perhaps

these quotes from "Notes to the Staff" might help in the understanding of what went on:

Teaching When Necessary

... when you have clear evidence that a student needs to learn something important (like periods, or capital letters) **TEACH HIM!** Importance is defined by something that improves communication. Nouns and verbs do not. Under no condition are such useless items to be taught. Only when a student needs to say something he wants to say is he taught how to spell etc.

Time For Drill

... There might be a time when drill might be useful. Say "You aren't making your K's right. Why don't you practice more so that they look like K's?" In this way the student is practicing on something he knows he must do to send that letter, or write that story

However, the most important contribution this paper might make is detailed description of the various activities carried on.

Writing Activities

Perhaps the most successful of all activities was that of creative writing. It was surely the more important as it was central to the development of language. The writing was the juice, the power, the electricity that drove the wheels of learning for each member of the class. In order to have it as a major part of the class, a set of procedures was followed. These were designed to convince each student that his head was full of ideas, and that the ideas were worthy of writing. Put another way, the writing activity was structured as to its process, but not as to the content of what was written.

The first writing session was different than those that followed. The teacher made sure everyone had a good pen or pencil. Then the class was casually asked "to write

something". As expected, these writings were short, mundane and uninteresting in the extreme. "Draw a line now," the teacher continued. "When I say a word, I want you to write the first thing that pops into your mind very fast. Write without stopping until your hand hurts. Write whatever comes into your mind. Don't stop until I tell you to. I will give you three minutes. Ready? "GREEN!"

In this way the students were put in a pressurized writing situation where they were urged to write anything fast and furiously. After three minutes they were stopped and asked to read back silently what they wrote. Next they were asked to underline only those words that referred to "green". In all cases the students had written many other things, not in the slightest related to 'green'. This the teacher picked up on:

See how much you had in your mind compared to what you wrote first. Perhaps there was something you started that you would like to finish. Maybe there was an idea you had that you didn't have time to write about. I will let you write now for as long as you wish about those ideas you liked but didn't get a chance to put down.

Thus the students were set on their way as far as writing was concerned. Pressurized writing was not used again. Only encouragement, suggestions, and support were necessary. For whatever reason these Samoans seemed not to write as freely as I've seen, yet the class loved to write. As the days went by, the teacher made generalized suggestions designed to trigger recollections, experiences, emotions and memories. It worked. Not a day went by but this kind of free and spontaneous writing occurred. They wrote pages to the astonishment and pleasure of the faculty. Once in a while one student would not have an idea, but more often each had clearly been thinking about what might be written and would even ask "Are we going to write about our memories today?" They loved it and many an hour was passed as they wrote.

Mechanics were handled in various ways. Usually in one-to-one conferences on a piece of writing chosen by the student

every sixth day. The recognition of the role of periods to express thought units produced an interesting lesson to the staff. The teacher asked six people to come up front and read their stories to the class. This is a highly successful activity on the mainland, but Samoans do not "show off" in this way. It embarrasses them. Sensing that this oral reading of personal writing was not working, the teacher had to use other material. She read from a story and asked the class to click their tongues when they heard her voice drop at the end of the sentence. Then, as a whole class, she asked that they read their own writings and see where the "clicks", i.e. the periods, belonged on their own papers. Note that this was an activity in which the whole class was able to work individually.

Students were asked, but not required, to let the staff read their writing each day. Often a casual perusal *without grading or correction*, would reveal several of the group needed teaching on some specific item, usually having to do with a tense or number. These students were asked to meet with a teacher who gave a brief lesson to correct the errors. In this way teachers did not need to spend time on actual corrections of papers, but still were able to spot the problem among the students who actually had *that* problem and help them recognize their mistakes for future reference.

Along with these whole class and small group sessions, students were asked individually to choose *one* piece of writing from the preceding five days and bring it to one of the staff to read aloud and learn how to make it better. One significant occurrence in these individual conferences was that most of the students were able to correct most of their errors when they *heard* themselves reading their writing. If there were some things that were missed the teacher would explain and demonstrate, even ask the student to do a drill on whatever it was that was needed.

Thus the writing mechanics were covered in three types of sessions, whole class, group, and individual. The reward that proved very desirable to most was, when they had corrected their writing,

to have it typed. Work-study typists in the office would copy the story for posting on the wall. The desire to have their writing typed was considerable and many an individual labored hard to make legible copies so that the typists could read them.

Other writing activities were developed. A huge and greatly admired wall newspaper took a whole wall and a whole morning to complete, but the results were worth it. Maybe these Samoans did not want to read their stories aloud, but they certainly admired their efforts posted on the wall.

Writing on acetate for the overhead projector worked well also. Darkening the room and reading silently and aloud what was written—jokes, sayings, what have you, were enjoyable. Suggestions as to improvement or correction were not resented, and many an error was spotted.

Letter writing appealed to some, and promises of stamps got others going. A longer time might have allowed for setting up a pen pal project to friends across the ocean.

The class members were asked to fill out an evaluation form daily in which they listed what they had done, something they had thought about, and how they felt about the day's events. These were thoroughly perused by the staff, returned with written comments, (NOT corrections) each morning. They seemed to enjoy getting these evaluations back, reading them with absorption and filing them in their folders. Here is one example:

While I was walking along the way to the forest, I heard the birds sweetly singing in the shade trees. I was very happy for my hunting because that day was a shiney day. When I arrived under the big tree, I had a little rest.

Later on a far more accurately written piece came to us:

As I strolled on the beach one day, I imagined the sea water had been swallowed up from nowhere. In that time I think I was walking into the empty space and sea creatures were dying.

Although I was very afraid I became

curious of what stands beyond. While I was walking along the beach, I saw the cruel unkind waves crushing at me. Suddenly a roaring sound interrupts my dreams. I ran and ran faster, but I can't make it, not very long (after) I feel free like a bird in the sky. I was on an unknown planet so dark and cold."

While this is indeed awkward to the native English speaker it is a fine example of how ideas provide the driving force for writing. The absorption of the class in their daily writing was unprecedented, and occasioned many visitors to come and see for themselves. We worked away at the main problems which were tense and number. These seemed to be insoluble, even for clerks in the bank who had to be bi-lingual to hold a job. I felt justified in not insisting on absolute correctness in our class when I received my final bank statement from Pago Pago with the following message:

On your Saving Account the balance was xxxx dollars . . . we lessed our charge xxxx dollars. Hopefully, you enjoy our services . . .

They loved to write and wrote copiously. It was rewarding to us all.

Oral English Activities

The second major activity was centered around many ideas that required the use of spoken English. As there were three native English speaking staff, the *palagis*, we took turns reading a story in English to the whole class. There was a problem in finding materials that were adult enough and yet not so obtuse as to be unintelligible to the listeners. I thought the *Telltale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe would be a dandy. They couldn't follow it and I had to do a simplification of the language as I read along. I am sure Poe spun in HIS grave. Over and over we tried to find suitable stories with very little luck. This seemed to me, then and now, that this is a great void for those who teach bilingual students. They should hear good literature read by native speakers that they can understand at their level, as was stated earlier, easy fifth grade. Stories at that grade level too often were juvenile and had little appeal

to most of the class, especially for our macho ex-marines.

Along with this oral reading by *palagis* of stories in English, we xeroxed simple plays in sufficient quantities so that the class could be divided up in casts and the plays read in turn. This was whoopingly successful, and much in demand. In each case the *palagi* staff would close the activity by reading the play aloud as the students would follow along in their copies.

Another activity was improvisation. One staff typed up short situations and asked for volunteers. For example:

"Your boss has just caught you asleep on your job."

or

"The wife has been playing bingo all afternoon. She has not had time to make the supper. The husband comes home hungry."

These were acted out by successive casts. Comments were made as to the different ways certain phrases might be said. As we stated earlier, these Samoans rarely spoke English outside of class, thus to volunteer to act out such a situation indicated they were willing to expose their English weaknesses for the sake of the fun of the activity. The staff felt that this might have been the most productive activity for spontaneous English, as we noticed a marked increase of the use of that language during class hours.

Spelling proved to be of little concern. Perhaps because the Samoan language is so phonetic and alphabetic (i.e. many letter names can be heard as a word is pronounced) and no letters are silent.

But the main problem of the entire student body was their confusion on tense and number, as you could see from my quote from the bank clerk. To get at this we conducted a whole class activity in which the teacher performed certain actions and the students wrote down what they saw. This is a familiar strategy to teachers of bi-lingual students.

The class was asked to write down what they saw the teacher doing. For example, the teacher would drop a book

on the floor. The student would write "Jeannette dropped a book on the floor," or "The book was dropped on the floor," or "The book fell to the floor from Jeannette's hands." Anything that was in correct English was allowed.

Another action might be on going such as jumping up and down. The student was to write "Jeannette is jumping up and down." This form proved to be the hardest English of all for them.

This activity was carried out frequently and entailed about ten actions. It must be emphasized that papers were *never* graded. On the contrary they were usually asked to swap papers with a partner and see if they agreed on what they wrote. Or sometimes they chose partners and one would do the writing. That meant that they would have to talk it over to see if they agreed on what to write. All of this was using English and testing out without fear of punishment—beyond their own shame, which was sometimes considerable, even if private—or embarrassment. We all felt that these sessions were fun and highly instructive.

Vena, our one Samoan staff member, was a gifted teacher as well as a ham at heart. One of his most popular and effective activities was beginning a story and then asking various class members to continue it to some logical, or illogical, conclusion. He was able, more than the rest of us, to break through the cultural shyness of the Samoan personality.

The morale of the situation was high and often produced activity that was not required, as when Repeka fell in love with words. Each morning she would come rushing in all aglow and want to know what "acquisition" was—or "performance" or some other long word. Her only requirement was that the word be a long one! Repeka gained two years in those six weeks. Probably her daily search for long words, anywhere she could find them, had much to do with her dramatic gain.

Other less frequent but interesting activities involved the use of telephones scrounged from heaven knows where. We used the tape recorder in several ways, but 40 people and one tape recorder that kept breaking down did not lend to much of a

taped language activity.

Individualized Reading

While everything I believed in worked, the most comforting of all was self-selection in reading. Nothing worked so dramatically as reading books, and having individual teacher-pupil conferences with staff.

We began with about six hundred paper back books from the "Reader's Choice" Catalog of Scholastic Press. These were daily spread out, face up, on two or three tables. While the College faculty had long laughed about the fact that they could always leave books around without fear of them being taken, in this case our books disappeared by the dozens. Frequent pleadings would bring some returns as the supply dwindled, but we were frankly delighted that they seemed so worthwhile to the students. They were permanently "borrowed." Many remarked on the unprecedented sight of our class members sitting, standing, belly flopping on the grass, **READING**. It was a most heartening sight indeed.

This free reading was begun with a training session of the Rule of Thumb. Each student was asked to demonstrate that this rule was understood and followed. The following quote from "Staff Material" illustrated how our reading period proceeded.

1. Make sure they use the Rule of Thumb.
2. Make sure they list the book in their notebooks.
3. Make sure they are ready for your attention. Never confer with an unprepared student.
4. Follow these four steps:
 - a. Explore their personal interest in the book.
 - b. Does he "get it"? If not, explain.
 - c. Work on the hard words in profitable ways.
 - d. Hear him read aloud. Help guide. Give him a proper model for oral reading.

Each student was asked to have a conference with one of the staff as often as possible. This turned out to be a problem

as there were too many pupils and too few staff. No different than most they LOVED the individual conference, and some had to be watched that others not be deprived of the opportunity. The delight of this activity was universal. The still room. The giggles over good stories. The vying for a certain staff conference all led to a most productive reading period.

In short, it can be seen that our mornings never dragged. Three hours flew. The morale was such that attendance was good. Even on mornings following some celebration, they came in. They might have been a bit hung over, but they came in. The look on Lei's face as he struggled to say in English how he enjoyed coming to class. It turned out he had a bleeding ulcer, but he was there. It should be stated that we never took roll, and we never gave grades on anything. We knew them and they knew us. Joyita might write about the girl who moved in with him and would not go home, but he wrote.

I was less well known on the island than the other staff, not having lived there as long. But I was frequently startled on campus and in the stores to be met with the warmest of greetings by total strangers. They were young and had to have heard about me from class members.

As to the out-of-class time that was spent by the staff, it was barely 30 minutes a day. The demands of the writings and the comments to be made thereon were shifted from one to the other. But rather than a chore we soon found it more of a privilege to be asked for. Why? Because the writings were fun to read! And the gains were so obvious they were sometimes quite an ego trip for the one doing the reading.

Each day ended with a staff planning time. One staff member was terrified to teach in front of the rest of us, but she found an activity she so enjoyed doing that her fears did not materialize, and her teaching performance was charming. Thus activities were set and the one to "run" them decided upon. I can recall that at no time was there any reluctance. We all enjoyed being there and teaching our class.

Along with our satisfying statistical

gains, I cannot close without mentioning the profound personal satisfactions. Over a career of several decades I have taught in many situations, but never in a markedly different culture. This was new territory to me in every way. Yet, while trying to throttle a continual feeling of isolation, (it is 5000 miles from my home), and discomfort, (the climate is NOT idyllic, *Time* magazine notwithstanding), I was continually exhilarated by the evidence that everything I believed in *worked*. I used their own speech and they learned. I respected their choices of topics to write about, their own choices of what books to read and they grew intellectually. I taught them the skills they need to know from within their own cultural patterns and personality. "Fa'a Samoa" was the bottom line. We all came out better people and smarter people, and most certainly happier people. It was a magnificent exercise in how learning takes place. I can only hope that the lesson is not lost in the future years to come. But who knows? "Fa'a Samoa" has other connotations, too.

POSTSCRIPT

Much more could be written about American Samoa and the South Pacific. It is not Bali Hai by any matter of means, with political corruption wasting much of the 44,000,000 dollars sent there by Uncle Sam each year. But the purpose of this paper was to present some of methodology that this writer used to improve the English competence of a group of incoming college students. Those who might wish to know more about the cultural and political situation are referred to the July and August issues of *Gourmet Magazine*, 1977, Part VII of the *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, October 23, 1977; Nicholas von Hoffman, *Tales From The Margaret Mead Tap Room* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward 1976) an amazingly accurate description allegedly done without leaving the bar in the Rainmaker Hotel; *Time Magazine*, January 16, 1978, p. 21; and last but not least by any means, Margaret Meads's *Coming of Age in Samoa*. This last, for some reason, seems to infuriate most Samoans. But that is another story.